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Dr. Kenneth W.K. Law

Family Networks in Later Life: Guangzhou and Hong Kong¹

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Social networks in later life have always been one of the most popular areas of sociological investigation in elderly studies. They have always been seen as an important variable affecting people's chances of achieving successful aging. A social network serves a number of functions, both to the individual elderly person and to society. It provides old people with both emotional and instrumental support in later life. With proper social support from the individual's social network, not only may later life become more socially desirable, but the potential public burden in the provision of social welfare and services for elderly citizens may also be lightened. As the number and proportion of elderly people in the population increase and as life continues to extend, there is a growing interest in both academic and applied studies in the issues and problems relating to the maintenance and change of social networks in later years, in particular, those among family networks.

Social gerontologists and sociologists have consistently demonstrated that, apart from social welfare and service needs, older people also need different persons, such as family members, relatives, peer groups, and neighbours, to fulfil their needs for intimacy, emotional security, sociability and identity (Cohen and Sokolovsky, 1980; Cohen et al., 1985; Gupta and Korte, 1994). The presence and maintenance of social network were also found to have strong associations with various dimensions of well-being in later life (Glenn and Weaver, 1981; Depner and Ingersoll-Dayto, 1985). For example, the presence and maintenance of social networks were found to be functional in the reduction of loneliness, life stress and depression in later life. Older persons with a greater number of relatives and close friends or with a more stable social network were less likely to experience, and with lesser frequency, feelings of loneliness or depression.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association on 8-11 June 1997 at Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland of Canada

They were also more likely to have less life stress and fewer depression symptoms (Ward et al., 1984; Cohen et al., 1985; Krause and Jay, 1991; Biegel, Magaziner, and Baum, 1991; Dykstra, 1993).

Findings of a number of research studies on health conditions in later life indicate that there is a positive relationship between social networks and health status and a negative relationship between social networks and mortality risk for the elderly. Older persons with living siblings and more stable social networks tend to have better physical and mental health and have lesser chances of cardiovascular mortality (Levitt et al., 1985; Lubben, 1988; Rakowski et al., 1991; Olsen et al., 1991; Shye et al., 1995). In addition, social networks were also found to have a positive relationship with life satisfaction in later life. Old people living with their spouses, adult children, and grandchildren who have more close friends and neighbours are more happy than those who are single, living alone and socially inactive (Levitt et al., 1985; Kart and Longino, 1987; Bowling, 1990; Bury and Holme, 1990).

A social network is a kind of social linkage in which individuals can seek instrumental support (for example, help with housework, transport, shopping and provision of direct services and care) and emotional support (such as the provision of emotional comfort, empathy and trust in times of illness, loneliness and stress). Generally speaking, social networks in later life are composed of four major types of network: family networks, kinship networks, friendship networks and neighborhood networks. Much of the literature on social networks in later life consistently shows that old persons receive regular support from all these four types of network (Shanas, 1979a; Stroller and Earl, 1983).

Among these four types of network, research has conventionally focused on the range of support functions fulfilled by the family network in later life adaptation (Chappell, 1983; Krause and Markids, 1990). The importance and contribution of family networks in later life adaptation are undeniable since the family is, indeed, a fundamental social organization in which higher frequency of interaction and higher degrees of intimacy and intensity in relationships among members are most probably found. However, as societies modernize, the structure and functions of the family as well as the pattern of relationships among its members have been modified.

More and more younger couples prefer nuclear family life rather than living with their parents after marriage. They also often prefer to have smaller rather than larger families.

Divorce, remarriage and singleton rates have risen and, at the same time, fertility rates have declined. Family relationships shift from consanguinal to conjugal. As a result of these changes, family networks, intergenerational ties in particular, may become weakened and unstable and most older parents have to live in a household with an "empty nest". In fact, most grandparents would not expect to have the chance to live with their children and grandchildren for any significant period of time (Greven, 1970; Demos, 1970). It is, therefore, not surprising to learn that early gerontological studies on the social network in later life tend to picture old age as accompanied by a reduction of the frequency and intensity of social contact of an individual with their family members (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Shanas, 1977; Harris and Associates, 1975; Atchley, et al., 1979).

Is old age inevitably accompanied by a weakening family network? Let us look at some figures. Research findings in the western world consistently show that a significant proportion of elderly people are suffering from the so-called "empty nest" syndrome. For example, in Great Britain, more than one-third of the people aged 65 and over are living on their own, almost half with their spouse alone, and only around 10% live with siblings, sons or daughters (Tinker, 1992: 18). Respective figures in the United States are quite similar (Cockerham, 1991: 28). Furthermore, the percentage of older people living alone and residing in institutions increases with age. For instance, the percentage of American older citizens residing in nursing homes increases from approximately 1% for ages 65 to 74 to 24% for ages 85 and above (Aiken, 1995: 312). In Great Britain, the percentage of elderly people living alone in the age group of 65- 74 is around 27% whereas the figure for the age group of 75 or above is 50% (Tinker, 1992: 18).

Based on the above figures, it is not difficult to gain the impression that family networks weaken with age. While these figures may indicate some changes of living arrangements in old age, however, they could not sufficiently substantiate that old age is inevitably accompanied by a weakening family network. This is because there is no significant relationship between co-residence and family relationships. More recent studies on the social networks or family networks of elderly people show that those elderly persons with living adult children not residing with them tend to reside at a short distance (approximately an hour's travelling time) from their adult children's homes. They are visited by at least one of their adult children once a week (Shanas, 1979b; Sundstrom, 1985; Cowgill, 1986; Mercier et al., 1989; Frankel and DeWit, 1989). Other research studies also indicate that, despite the fact that face-to-face interaction and visits decline as the geographical distance between elderly people and their adult children increases,

the quality of the relationship between older parents with their adult children does not deteriorate (Frankel and DeWit, 1989; Uhlenberg and Cooney, 1990).

More recent sociological and gerontological research also suggests that a reduction in face-to-face interaction between older parents and their adult children does not necessarily affect the closeness of their relationship. For example, Uhlenberg and Cooney (1990) found that face-to-face interaction and visits can, to a certain extent, be replaced by phone calls and writing letters. They found that, as face-to-face interactions and visits dropped with increased geographical distance between older parents' and their adult children's homes, phone calls and letters between them increased.

With regard to the "empty nest" and an increased percentage of older old living alone, many studies have demonstrated that these phenomena have no associations with the decline of family networks in later life. Some sociologists and gerontologists argue that living alone in later life is more often a personal choice rather than a product of social pressure. For example, in a cross-national study of a number of economically developed and developing countries, Wolf (1990) found that rising income, rather than declining family networks, is the primary vehicle that allows older parents to maintain households apart from their adult children. In addition, the death of spouses, husbands in particular, was also found to be a major factor causing elderly people to live alone (Cooney, 1989). Apart from income and the death of spouse, other variables also found to have significant effects on patterns of living arrangements in later life include privacy, cultural norms, availability of living children, marital status, and gender (Martin, 1988; Cooney, 1989; Kinsella, 1995; Huyck, 1995).

A brief review of studies to date of the living arrangements of the elderly reveals that family networks may not necessarily be weakened with advances in age and as society becomes modernized. Recent research on social and family networks in later life, on widowhood in particular, suggests that a shift in the relationship style or pattern of social contact rather than a decline of the intensity of the social relationship is more likely to take place. To cope with the death of husbands or close relatives, most widows may try to seek emotional support from their living children and grandchildren, if any, as well as from their close friends. They may also enlarge their social circle by making some new friends and/or they may increase social contact with their neighbors. In other words, most elderly people tend to reorganize the composition of their social network when any part of it (such as the family network) is under pressure.

The above discussion is primarily based on research material and findings from studies

set in western cultures. Does the family network in Chinese societies differ from the western model? Based on the research findings of a comparative study on the social and economic life of elderly people in two Chinese societies², namely Guangzhou and Hong Kong, this paper tries to derive a general picture of family networks in these two societies. This paper poses two research questions:

- (1) Are there any changes in the family networks of old people in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, in terms of network size, frequency of interaction, and relationships among family members, as they have aged or retired?
- (2) What are the implications of such changes, if any?

Family networks of elderly people in Guangzhou and Hong Kong

Family networks in later life mainly include systems of interaction between older people and their spouses, adult children, and grandchildren. Before proceeding to discuss the family network of elderly people in these Chinese societies, let us outline some of their demographic characteristics of the respondents.

demographic characteristics of the samples

The sex distribution and marital pattern of the elderly in the samples of these two Chinese societies are quite similar, though minor differences exist. Both samples have more female than male respondents. Female respondents comprised 52.2% of the total respondents in the Guangzhou sample and 54.5% in the Hong Kong sample. The majority of elderly respondents, aged 60 or above, in both Guangzhou and Hong Kong were married (Guangzhou, 63.2%; Hong Kong, 57.6%), with only 3% and 4% remaining single respectively (Table 1). There is, however, quite a significant proportion of respondents who were widowed, 30.3% in Guangzhou and 38.4% in Hong

² The research was conducted in 1990. It was a joint research project between the Faculty of Social Sciences of Lingnan College in Hong Kong and the Sociology Department of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. 198 older residents and 201 older residents in Hong Kong and Guangzhou were interviewed respectively. Please see Law (1994) for details of the sampling method of the research.

Table 1 Marital status by sex and age (%)

	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Divorced</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>(n)</i>
<i>Overall</i>					
Guangzhou	3.0	63.2	3.5	30.3	(201)
Hong Kong	4.0	57.6	0.0	38.4	(198)
<i>By Sex</i>					
<i>Guangzhou</i>					
Male	3.1	79.2	3.1	14.6	(96)
Female	2.9	48.6	3.8	44.8	(105)
<i>Hong Kong</i>					
Male	3.3	82.2	0.0	14.6	(90)
Female	4.6	37.0	0.0	58.3	(108)
<i>By Age</i>					
<i>Guangzhou</i>					
60 - 69	2.6	75.4	2.6	19.3	(114)
70 - 79	4.5	46.3	6.0	43.3	(67)
80 or above	0.0	50.0	0.0	50.0	(20)
<i>Hong Kong</i>					
60 - 69	5.3	68.4	0.0	26.3	(114)
70 - 79	0.0	47.8	0.0	52.2	(67)
80 or above	11.8	23.5	0.0	64.7	(17)

Kong. It is not surprising to see that the percentages of widowed elderly are higher in older age groups and there are more widows than widowers in all the elderly age groups in these two Chinese societies. There are, however, more widowed and more widows in the Hong Kong sample, principally because Hong Kong has a longer life expectancy than Guangzhou¹.

As shown in Table 1, the proportion of widowed respondents rises from 19.3% in the age group 60-69, 43.3% in the age group 70-79 and reaches 50% in the age group of 80 or above in the Guangzhou sample. The respective figures in the Hong Kong sample are 26.3%, 52.2% and 64.7%, relatively higher than that of the Guangzhou sample. Data in Table 1 also shows that, among the male respondents, around 14% were widowed in both samples. The figures, however, rise to 44.8% among the female respondents in the Guangzhou sample and 58.3% in the Hong Kong sample.

The predominance of the females in widowhood in both the Guangzhou and Hong Kong samples is not a unique phenomenon. This can be explained by the conventional wisdom that females tend to have lower mortality rate and higher life expectancy and they are used to marrying men older than themselves (Zopf, 1986; Cockerham, 1991; Aiken, 1995).

Only 7% of the Guangzhou respondents and 6.1% of the Hong Kong respondents were childless. Most respondents of the two samples were living with family members, spouses or adult children. Fewer than 10% were living alone (Guangzhou, 9.5%; Hong Kong, 8.6%). Apart from this, the living arrangements of the elderly in Guangzhou and Hong Kong were quite different. More Hong Kong respondents (59.1% versus 23.9%) were living with their spouses and/or unmarried children (nuclear family) while more Guangzhou respondents (66.6% versus 32.3%) were living with their married children and/or grandchildren (extended family).

network size and frequency of interaction

Traditionally, many gerontologists have tended to accept the view that ageing is a

¹ The life expectancy at birth of Hong Kong was 75.1 years for males and 80.6 years for females in 1991 (Law, 1995:124), whereas the respective figures for China were 68.8 years for males and 72 year for females (World Population Data Sheet, 1991).

process of social disengagement. Ageing is seen as a restrictive process of social interaction and relationships. Old people are at high risk of losing job related friends, frequently due to mandatory retirement. They are also more likely to experience a change in their social lives resulting from deterioration of health, decrease in income and death of family members and friends. On top of these, the increasing trend of the nuclearization of the family and neolocal living after marriage also increase the likelihood of having an "empty nest" in later life. All these changes in later life will, in turn, narrow the social network size of many elderly to a small number of people (Rowles, 1978; Goldman, 1971). Widowhood has always been cited by gerontologists as a landmark of such a restrictive process of social network and relationship.

Findings of some more recent research on social network in later life, however, suggest a contrasting view that old age may be a time for old people to have new social experiences, an opportunity to enlarge and enrich their social lives and social networks and a period to invest in new friendships as well as to reinvest in existing family relationships. Old age is thereby seen as a golden time for people to accomplish things that they had no time to do when they were young, particularly for those elderly people in reasonable health and with adequate financial resources (Adams, 1987; Aiken, 1995; Atchley, 1995;). More and more sociologists and gerontologists are convinced that many differences found between elderly people and younger adults (such as contractions of social network) reflect cohort differences or methodological biases in cross-sectional study rather than age effects (Green, 1981 Chappell and Havens, 1985; Adams, 1987; Levin, 1988; Kart, 1994; Thorson, 1995; Law, 1995a).

Have the family network sizes of elderly people in Guangzhou and Hong Kong changed? The present research findings suggest that the family network sizes of the majority of the elderly respondents in these Chinese societies have not changed much as they aged. Data in Table 2 indicate that most elderly people in Guangzhou and Hong Kong maintained regular face-to-face contact with at least one of their living sons, daughters and grandchildren. The percentages of the elderly respondents in Guangzhou with no regular contact with their living sons, daughters and grandchildren were only 13.1%, 10.7%, and 17.2% respectively. The respective figures in the Hong Kong sample were even smaller, 9.1% for sons, 5.1% for daughters and 12.1% for grandchildren.

With regard to the size of the family network, the majority of the elderly respondents in both samples kept in touch with one to two of their living sons, daughters and grandchildren regularly. Moreover, more than half of them have one to two living sons

and have the same number of daughters visiting them in every two weeks time. The elderly people in the Hong Kong sample tended to receive more frequent visits from their sons and daughters than the elderly respondents in the Guangzhou sample. In the Guangzhou sample, slightly more than one quarter of elderly respondents stated that they were not frequently visited by their children (once in alternative weeks; 27.5% for sons; 26.4% for daughters) or grandchildren (26.9%). The respective figures in the Hong Kong sample were only 13.5%, 12.7% and 21.0% (Table 2).

Table 2 Number of persons in interaction (%)

	Guangzhou				Hong Kong			
	0	1-2	3-4	5 or more (n)	0	1-2	3-4	5 or more (n)
<i>Keeping in touch</i>								
son	13.1	56.9	25.5	4.6 (153)	9.1	61.0	23.2	6.7 (164)
daughter	10.7	60.4	24.8	4.0 (149)	5.1	65.1	24.7	5.1 (158)
grandchild	17.2	39.3	21.4	22.1 (145)	12.1	34.2	20.8	33.0 (149)
<i>Frequently meet</i>								
son	27.5	57.0	14.8	0.7 (149)	13.5	62.6	19.4	4.5 (155)
daughter	26.4	56.1	15.5	2.0 (148)	12.7	61.3	21.3	4.7 (150)
grandchild	26.9	40.7	17.9	14.5 (145)	21.0	35.5	18.8	24.6 (138)

To detect whether there is a change in the number of family members interacting with the elderly respondents in later life, respondents in the two samples were asked to compare the number of children and grandchildren interacting with them before and after they reached old age or retired. Figures in Table 3 indicate that most respondents in both samples stated that the number of sons, daughters and grandchildren with whom they kept in touch was about the same before and after they reached old age or retired. For example, the respondents giving the answer "similar" in the Guangzhou sample was 74.2% for sons, 70.2% for daughters and 63.2% for grandchildren. In the Hong Kong sample, the figures increased to 91.2%, 88.9% and 71.5% for sons, daughters, and grandchildren respectively.

Table 3 Self-evaluated changes in social interaction in later life (%)

	<i>Decreased</i>	<i>Similar</i>	<i>Increased</i>	<i>(n)</i>
<i>No. of persons keeping in touch</i>				
Guangzhou				
son	5.8	74.2	20.0	(155)
daughter	6.0	70.2	23.8	(151)
grandchild	6.6	63.2	30.3	(152)
Hong Kong				
son	2.0	91.2	6.8	(147)
daughter	4.9	88.9	6.3	(144)
grandchild	3.1	71.5	25.4	(130)
<i>Frequency of interaction</i>				
Guangzhou				
son	7.4	65.8	26.8	(149)
daughter	4.0	67.1	28.9	(149)
grandchild	4.6	62.1	33.3	(153)
Hong Kong				
son	7.9	78.1	13.9	(151)
daughter	7.5	78.9	13.6	(147)
grandchild	7.3	69.1	23.6	(123)
	<i>Declined</i>	<i>Similar</i>	<i>Improved</i>	<i>(n)</i>
<i>Closeness of relationship</i>				
Guangzhou				
son	2.0	71.5	26.5	(151)
daughter	2.8	72.9	24.3	(144)
grandchild	2.3	69.2	28.5	(130)
Hong Kong				
son	3.3	73.7	23.0	(152)
daughter	2.0	73.5	24.5	(151)
grandchild	4.8	75.2	20.0	(125)

It is worthwhile to note that there were more respondents in both samples reporting "increased" rather than "decreased" interaction. The percentage of Guangzhou respondents with the answer "increased" interaction was 20.0% for sons (versus 5.8% "decreased"), whereas the figures for daughters and for grandchildren were 23.8% (versus 6.0% "decreased") and 30.3% (versus 6.6% "decreased") respectively. In the Hong Kong sample, the proportion of respondents reporting "increased" frequency of contacts also outnumbered those reporting "decreased" contacts (6.8% versus 2.0% for sons; 6.3% versus 4.9% for daughters and 25.4% versus for grandchildren).

Concerning their frequency of interaction with family members in later life, respondents of the two samples were also asked to compare their frequency of contacts with children and grandchildren before and after they reached old age or retired. As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents in both samples stated that the frequency of contacts with their sons, daughters and grandchildren was about the same before and after they reached old age or retired. For example, the proportion of respondents answering "similar" in the Guangzhou sample was 65.8% for sons, 67.1% for daughters and 62.1% for grandchildren. In the Hong Kong sample, the respective figures increased to 78.1%, 78.9%, and 69.1% for sons, daughters, and grandchildren.

It is worthwhile to note, again, that there were also many more respondents in both samples who gave the answer "increased" rather than "decreased" contacts. In the Guangzhou sample, the percentage of respondents with increased frequency of contact with their sons was 26.8% (versus 7.4% decreased), whereas the respective figures for daughters were 28.9% (versus 4.0% decreased) and 33.3% (versus 4.6% decreased) for grandchildren. The proportion of Hong Kong respondents stating an increased frequency of contact also outnumbered those reporting "decreased" contacts (13.9% versus 7.9% for sons; 13.6% versus 7.5% for daughters and 23.6% versus 7.3% for grandchildren).

family support and relationship

The importance of family network in later life depends upon the quantity and quality of instrumental and emotional support that the elderly person obtains from his or her family members. Conventionally, these are measured by asking elderly respondents about their major sources of help seeking, their subjective evaluation of the quality of care and services provided by their family members and their degrees of satisfaction

with their relationships with their spouses, children and grandchildren.

The majority of respondents (over 40%) in both samples tended to seek help from their sons or daughters when they faced economic difficulty. 26.5% of respondents in the Guangzhou sample would seek help from their sons, whereas 15.9% of them would seek help from their daughters. In the Hong Kong sample, relatively similar figures were observed, with 30.3% seeking help from their sons and 10.6% from their daughters. There was a comparatively low priority placed on seeking help from other sources, such as relatives (5.5% in Guangzhou and 0% in Hong Kong), governmental welfare agents (6.7% in Guangzhou and 4.3% in Hong Kong) and friends (9.3% in Guangzhou and 2.7% in Hong Kong). This may indicate that most respondents value their relationships with family members (Table 4).

Table 4 Agent for help seeking (%)

	<i>Economic difficulty</i>		<i>Emotional problem</i>	
	Guangzhou	Hong Kong	Guangzhou	Hong Kong
<i>spouse</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.2
<i>son</i>	26.5	30.3	22.2	14.1
<i>daughter</i>	15.9	10.6	15.3	4.9
<i>son or daughter</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.9
<i>grandchild</i>	0.0	0.0	1.7	1.6
<i>friend</i>	9.3	2.7	24.3	15.1
<i>relative</i>	5.3	0.0	5.6	6.5
<i>neighbor</i>	0.0	0.0	8.5	3.2
<i>social service agent</i>	6.7	4.3	5.1	0.0
<i>won't ask anyone</i>	34.4	34.0	15.8	43.2
<i>others</i>	2.0	18.1	1.7	2.2
<i>(n)</i>	(151)	(188)	(177)	(185)

However it should be noted that quite a significant proportion of the elderly respondents in both samples (about 34%) claimed that they would not seek help from others when they encounter economic difficulties. Among them, the majority were male elderly respondents in both samples. This phenomenon is perhaps more likely a cultural product of male dominating societies rather than a product of poor family support.

When encountering emotional problems, respondents of these two societies did however react quite differently. In spite of the fact that they shared the same preference in talking to family members (including spouses, sons, daughters and grandchildren) rather than friends, more respondents in Guangzhou than in Hong Kong would choose to talk with their friends (24.3% versus 15.1%), relatives (8.5% versus 3.2%) and neighbors (5.2% versus 0%). There were also more Guangzhou respondents (5.1% versus 0% in Hong Kong) choosing to seek comfort from social service agents. However, more Hong Kong respondents (43.2% versus 15.8%) chose "not to talk with other persons at all" (Table 4). Do these differential reactions reflect a difference of social organization between these two societies? Further research is recommended.

When respondents were asked how frequently their children would help them doing housework, only a small proportion of respondents in both samples answered "never" (16.3% for Guangzhou; 22.9% for Hong Kong). The majority replied that their children will help them to do housework, though with different frequencies (Table 5). As demonstrated in Table 5, most respondents, Hong Kong respondents in particular, reported that they are occasionally invited by their children to go out for lunch or dinner and receive gifts from them quite regularly.

Table 5 Care and services from children (%)

	<i>Guangzhou</i>				<i>Hong Kong</i>			
	none	seldom	sometimes	always (n)	none	seldom	sometimes	always (n)
<i>housework</i>	16.3	18.1	38.6	27.1 (166)	22.9	24.6	27.4	25.1 (175)
<i>dining out</i>	16.8	18.1	45.6	19.5 (149)	6.3	13.8	35.1	44.8 (174)
<i>buying gifts</i>	13.2	19.2	46.1	21.5 (167)	9.1	23.4	44.6	22.9 (175)

More important is the fact that the majority of respondents in both samples reported that they were satisfied with their present relationships with spouses, children and grandchildren. Table 6 indicates that only about 5% of respondents in both samples were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their relationships with spouses, children and grandchildren. 56.2% of respondents in the Guangzhou sample were satisfied with their relationship with spouses, while another 10% stated that they were very satisfied with such. In the Hong Kong sample, the respective figures were 70.6% and 10.1%. Quite a similar pattern of answers was found in their evaluation of their relationships with children and grandchildren, with 54.9% of respondents stating "satisfied" and 12.8% stating "very satisfied" in the Guangzhou sample and 66.7% and 13.2% respectively in the Hong Kong sample respectively.

Table 6 Self-evaluated degree of satisfaction with family relationship (%)

	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>	<i>Dissatisfied</i>	<i>All right</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Very Satisfied</i>	<i>(n)</i>
<i>Relationship with spouses</i>						
Guangzhou	0.8	4.6	28.5	56.2	10.0	(130)
Hong Kong	0.9	1.8	16.5	70.6	10.1	(109)
<i>Relationship with children</i>						
Guangzhou	1.8	3.0	27.4	54.9	12.8	(164)
Hong Kong	0.6	3.4	16.1	66.7	13.2	(174)

When respondents were asked to compare their relationships with sons, daughters and grandchildren before and after they reached old age or retired, the majority of respondents in both samples again replied that their relationships with them had not changed. Only a very small percentage of respondents answered "declined". Furthermore, the proportion of respondents with the answer of "improved" significantly outnumbers that answering "declined".

Data in Table 3 showed that over 70% of respondents in both samples replied that their relationship with sons was "similar" (71.5% for Guangzhou and 73.7% for Hong Kong), with more than 20% expressing "improved" (26.5% for Guangzhou and 23.0% for Hong Kong). Very few stated the relationship had "declined" (2.0% for Guangzhou and 3.3% for Hong Kong). Similar patterns of answers were found in their evaluation of their relationships with daughters and grandchildren. In the Guangzhou sample, 72.9% of respondents answered that their relationship with daughters was "similar", with 24.3% answering "improved" and only 2.8% answering "declined". The respective figures in the Hong Kong sample were 73.5%, 24.5%, and 3.3%. Concerning their relationships with grandchildren, 69.2% of the elderly in the Guangzhou sample replied "similar", with 28.5% answering "improved" and only 2.3% answering "declined". In the Hong Kong sample, the figures were 75.2%, 24.5% and 4.8% respectively.

Discussion and conclusion

Findings of the comparative study on the family networks in Guangzhou and Hong Kong tend to suggest that most elderly respondents in these two Chinese societies may most probably be able to retain their family networks in later life. Some of them even increased their interaction with family members and improved their relationships with them. Only a minority of respondents suffered from decreased interaction and decline in relationships with their family members.

In terms of network size, most respondents in these two societies stated that the number of family members with whom they kept in touch was about the same before and after they reached old age or retired. With regard to their relationships with family members, the majority of respondents in these two societies expressed the view that they were satisfied with their present relationships with family members. When respondents were asked to compare their relationships with family members before and after they reached old age or retired, again, the majority in both samples replied that their relationships with family members had not changed. Only a very small percentage of respondents reported a decline in relationships with their family members.

As mentioned earlier, there are controversial views on the relationship between ageing and social networks. Findings of the present research tend to argue against the suggestion that old age always lead to a weakening of social ties and relationships, at

least in the context of the family network and relationships among the elderly respondents in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. On the contrary, retirement or old age may more likely be an opportunity for old people to enlarge and enrich their social lives and social networks and be a period for them to invest in new friendships and also to reinvest in existing family relationships. The finding that a much higher proportion of respondents noted an increase rather than a decrease in frequency of contacts and improved rather than deteriorated relationships with their family members can be treated as empirical evidence to support the latter assertion. In other words, old age is more likely to be a golden time for people to accomplish things for which they had no time to do when they were young.

Cross-sectional sample surveys have always been the most popular research design in the sociological and gerontological study of elderly people. Researchers used to compare respondents of different ages on the same characteristics (such as the frequency of contact with family members and friends) in order to detect age-related differences. The average differences among different age groups (for example, the young versus the old) in turn suggested conclusions or generalizations about the changes that can come from advancing old age. However, by employing such a research design, it is always very difficult for both researchers and readers to decide whether the differences found among different age groups merely reflect cohort differences or real age effects.

A review of the research on elderly people in Hong Kong revealed that most studies involving elderly research in Hong Kong were cross-sectional sample surveys (Law, 1995a, 1995b). Findings of such studies research tend to support a negative association between old age and frequency of social contacts and between intensity of social network and relationships. One of the major pitfalls of such research is that researchers seldom take the cohort effect into account. For example, respondents were seldom asked to compare their present life situation with that when they were younger (Law, 1995a). By asking respondents to compare their frequency of contacts and relationship with family members before and after they reached old age or retired, quite a different conclusion has been reached in the present research. This may suggest that a more critical review on the previous findings of elderly research in Hong Kong is needed so as to provide readers with a more accurate picture of later life.

The present paper does however have a number of limitations. First, the respondents of the comparative study on which the data of the present paper is based were mainly drawn from the residents of two districts in Hong Kong and four districts in Guangzhou

City. Despite the fact that the social and economic characteristics of these districts are quite comparable with those of Guangzhou and Hong Kong respectively, further research with more representative samples is needed.

Secondly, the areas of study of the comparative study were too large to enable a comprehensive study of the family network in later life. Many missing variables are to be seen. Further research on the effects of living arrangements, health status, income sufficiency and other socio-cultural variables on family network are highly recommended. Being limited by sample size and data, this paper is therefore quite descriptive and exploratory.

Last, but not the least, a family network is only a type of social network. Research on social networks in later life has indicated that there are interrelationships between family networks and other types of social network, such as friendship networks and neighborhood networks (Adams, 1987; Wenger, 1990; Felton and Berry, 1992; Patterson, 1995). With the absence of an analysis of the interrelationships among these various networks, no conclusions can be drawn as to whether there will be a shift in patterns of interaction and relationships in later life. Further research in this area is also recommended.

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Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan College

APIAS has a number of objectives:

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- *to assist in the strengthening of undergraduate, postgraduate and professional training in areas related to health and welfare of elderly people, demography and epidemiology.*
- *to enhance knowledge, awareness and understanding of ageing in society amongst students, professionals and the wider public.*
- *to encourage cross-cultural research and co-operation on ageing in the Asia-Pacific region*

APIAS aims to achieve these objectives:

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