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THE PERSISTENCE OF PATRIARCHY:  
THE PSEUDO-EMANCIPATION OF FUJANESE WOMEN  
IN HONG KONG

by

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Working Paper #110  
April 1986

Abstract: The necessity for diachronic study of changing patriarchal family structures is borne out by this study of the Fujianese Chinese community of Hong Kong. In the mid-1970s, the community appeared to be in the midst of a profound revolution in family structure and gender status. Female-headed households were seen to presage an imminent rise in the status of women as female self-reliance in the absence of overseas husbands increased. More recent research, however, has revealed how premature this conclusion was. Upon the maturation of the sons of those husbands and wives, the family situation "corrected" itself to a patriarchal focus. The seeming female emancipation of the early fieldwork is seen as but a passing and superficial reflection of a peculiar social, economic and demographic situation. Such female gains as there were, proved tenuous and fleeting; thus offering a cautionary word on the persistence of patriarchal structures and ideology.

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Studies of migrant populations and matrifocal households (Abadan-Unat 1977; Brown 1970; Levine 1966; Quinn 1977; Rosen 1973; Sanday 1974; Yanagisako 1977) have reported that these situations are associated with an increase in the social and economic status of women but rarely is follow-up work carried out to determine whether these changes are long-lasting. The assumption is that, once women have improved their position relative to men, they will simply hold on to their "gains." Although some researchers (Clignet 1980; Gonzalez 1970; Nash 1958; Parish and Whyte 1978; Salaff 1976) have cast doubt on this facile supposition, far too often progress towards sexual equality (in terms of decreased deference to men and increased prestige for women) is assumed to be inevitable and, like the cultural evolutionary schemes of old, to allow for no backsliding.

Some studies (e.g., Yanagisako 1977:207), furthermore, have made a point of stressing the tendency for a matrifocal emphasis to arise in "groups committed to bilateral kinship norms." But what of groups with unilineal kinship? Among the clearly patrilineal Fujianese (Fukienese)<sup>2</sup> Chinese resident in Hong Kong, for example, female-headed have also emerged because of the emigrant nature of the community. After fieldwork in 1974-1975, I concluded (Guldin 1977:passim) that the Fujianese women, like their sisters in bilateral systems, had achieved a significant increase in personal autonomy and prestige (necessary but not sufficient prerequisites of matrifocality; Tanner 1974:137.)

Follow-up research in 1978, 1981, and 1982 in Hong Kong, however, revealed how premature such conclusions of female gains can be. Within only a handful of years, the presumed trend towards matrifocality had not only halted but reversed itself. Among the Fujianese, female-headed households had led not to sexual equality<sup>3</sup> but to a "pseudo-emancipation" of Fujianese women wherein equality was more apparent than real. Even a decade or two of relative autonomy for women proved insufficient by itself to overcome deep-rooted patriarchal biases in the culture. When a husband returned permanently to live with his spouse and children or when a son matured, the "old ways" of patriarchy and patrifocality (androcentricity) reemerged.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, I had mistaken a transitory stage in the adaptation of an immigrant group to new social and economic circumstances for a long-range trend. This was a chastening lesson in the errors of a researcher and suggested a possible cause for some of the disagreement over the permanence/impermanence of changes in women's status among migrant populations. In addition, my successive field studies provided me with a far better understanding of the subtle dynamics of male/female role behavior and a strengthened appreciation of the resilience of patriarchal and patrifocal systems.

#### History and Demography of the Community<sup>5</sup>

The Fujianese community in Hong Kong's North Point neighborhood is a product of the Cold War. With the Communist triumph on the mainland in

1949-1950 and the subsequent outbreak of the Korean War, the American-sponsored isolation of the newly proclaimed People's Republic of China (PRC) cut off the mostly male overseas Chinese of the Philippines and elsewhere from their families back home in the two southeastern coastal provinces, Fujian and Guangdong, that had long been the source of the overwhelming bulk of overseas Chinese.<sup>6</sup> For the primarily Fujianese overseas Chinese of the Philippines, the situation was improved slightly in the mid-1950s when China loosened emigration restrictions and Fujianese were permitted to leave the PRC. Unfortunately for the Fujianese, however, the Southeast Asian countries maintained their barriers both to new Chinese immigration and to their Chinese residents visiting their Chinese homeland. The result was the emergence of the British colony of Hong Kong as the only available middle ground where these families could rendezvous.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Hong Kong, and eventually North Point's "Little Fujian" neighborhood, emerged as the locus of a Fujianese community with strong ties to both the Philippines and Fujian Province itself. The typical strategy during the 1950s was for a woman to leave Fujian for a brief stay in Hong Kong while her husband applied for permission from the government of the Philippines (or elsewhere) to issue a temporary exit visa for a Hong Kong visit. Initially intending a short Hong Kong visit, many Fujianese women saw their stay in Hong Kong extended as it took months for their husbands to unravel Filipino red tape with the aid of "pull" and bribes. Given the difficulties in travel even on the two operative sides of the Fujian-Hong Kong-Philippines triangle (travel on the third leg--between Fujian and the Philippines directly--was impossible), many women opted to "stay on a while longer in Hong Kong," or at least until the husband's next trip. Such a decision usually made the stay in Hong Kong a semi-permanent one as the children learned the language of the local Guangdongese (Cantonese) majority and the women themselves adjusted to their new life situation. Unlike women in other migration streams who followed their husbands and, therefore, remained in the patriarchal shadow (Connell 1976; Thadani 1984:44), Fujianese women entered the Hong Kong scene as seemingly independent actors.

This history has caused Fujianese households to differ significantly from those of their Guangdongese neighbors. Their age structure, for example, is unusual compared with the Guangdongese norm. Fujianese in their twenties and between 40 and 54 years of age each make up about a fifth of the population, a percentage far higher than that among the Hong Kong population at large. The proportion of those Fujianese under the age of 20 is correspondingly lower than and in great contrast with that of the Guangdongese (See Table 1).

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Table 1

Hong Kong Fujianese and Guangdongese Age Structure

|              | <u>0-9</u> | <u>10-19</u> | <u>20-29</u> | <u>30-39</u> | <u>40-54</u> | <u>55-64</u> | <u>65+</u> |
|--------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Fujianese    | 19%        | 19%          | 19%          | 10%          | 21%          | 8%           | 4%         |
| Guangdongese | 15%        | 31%          | 13%          | 10%          | 17%          | 7%           | 4%         |

Sources: Department of Census & Statistics, HK 1971; Guldin 1977b  
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While the Fujianese age distribution can be considered somewhat abnormal, the sex ratio in relation to age group is even more so. Although females constitute a majority in both groups (54.1% for Fujianese and 50.6% for Guangdongese [Guldin 1977b]), the sex ratio varies considerably between the two groups (See Table 2). The most remarkable set of figures in Table 2 is that showing Fujianese women outnumbering men by 3 to 1 in the 40-54 age group. This predominance of women extends the group in their thirties as well as to those over 55. By contrast, only in this most elderly category do Guangdongese women outnumber men.

Table 2

Hong Kong Fujianese and Guangdongese Sex Ratios (in % M:F)

|              | <u>0-14</u> | <u>15-24</u> | <u>25-39</u> | <u>40-54</u> | <u>55+</u> |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Fujianese    | 54:48       | 58:42        | 47:53        | 23:77        | 33:67      |
| Guangdongese | 51:49       | 51:49        | 54:46        | 51:49        | 40:60      |

Sources: Department of Census & Statistics, HK 1971; Guldin 1977b

The overwhelming predominance of women in the over-30 population, the bulge of Fujianese, especially men, in their 20s, and the low proportion of, and near equal sex ratios, of Fujianese children are all explained by reference to the typical Fujianese emigrant pattern; the older men have remained in the Philippines or elsewhere in Southeast Asia while their wives arrived in Hong Kong with their children. Only among the youngest Fujianese, those under 14 years of age and, thus, mostly Hong Kong born, does the ratio approach the Hong Kong norm although even among these Fujianese the ratio is slightly distorted; young males in Fujian still retain first call on chances to go "overseas" to Hong Kong and/or to the Philippines.

Yet another Fujianese-Guangdongese difference is in family-centeredness. Traditionally, the two provinces of Guangdong and Fujian have been known for their powerful clan organizations (Freedman 1958; Pitcher 1912). Although the tsu or clan was not primarily a kinship organization but functioned essentially as a political and economic organization, on the lower levels it was composed of lineages or sub-lineages which were often organized along patrilocal and extended family lines (Freedman 1958:2; Amyot 1973:31). The lineage-village heritage exists for both Guangdongese and Fujianese in Hong Kong but, because Fujian has always been the more traditional and clan-oriented province of the two and because the Fujianese are more recent arrivals to Hong Kong, the old patterns are stronger among them. These two southern Chinese groups have also undergone different socio-political experiences, and these experiences have yielded differences that are evident in attitudes and commitment to the family.

"To the Fujianese, the family is the center of life," one of my younger informants observed to me. He did not mean to imply that Guangdongese felt that family life was unimportant; indeed, for few Chinese would this be so. Rather, he was simply pointing out, and quite accurately, that life for Fujianese in Hong Kong revolves more around the needs and desires of the family than it does for non-Fujianese. Fujianese families are also closer-knit than Guangdongese. Children, for instance, represent absent adult members of their families at celebrations to a degree unusual for Guangdongese.

Hong Kong Fujianese thus have a household and family structure that is in sharp contrast both to the Guangdongese majority and to traditional Fujianese standards. The arrival in Hong Kong of a woman with her children but without her husband limits the physical size of the domestic residential family unit. Moreover, the tendency for Fujianese to have fewer children (the father being over 1000 miles away and possibly also raising a Filipino family) as well as the continuing arrival of single Fujianese males in their mid-20s, who often live alone, both limit the mean Fujianese household size in North Point to only three persons in contrast to the Guangdongese average of slightly over four (Department 1971:Table 45; Guldin 1977b:127). Because they are small and also want to keep Hong Kong expenditures low, Fujianese households are much more likely than Guangdongese units to rent a room rather than buy or rent an entire flat.

#### First Appearances: A Seemingly Emancipated Female Community

That rented room, moreover, is quite likely to be within an apartment composed largely of other such female-headed households. When a Fujianese woman first arrived with her children in North Point, she would rent a room in an apartment owned or rented by kin or non-kin from her own home county. Frequently such apartments were occupied entirely by such female-headed households, allowing Fujianese women to draw on each other for support to a substantial degree.

Prior to her arrival in Hong Kong, for example, a Fujianese woman would often contact female members of her own patrilineage already living in Hong Kong and ask to stay with them initially. Her husband's kin might well be scarce or nonexistent in the Colony, so the woman would naturally seek out whatever kin or county ties were available to her; the existence of such ties might even act as a magnet to bring her to Hong Kong. Attention to women's activities and female networks has revealed that this reliance on female support is nowhere as rare a phenomenon (in China or elsewhere) as once surmised.<sup>8</sup> It is certainly by no means unknown in Chinese history. In traditional China, "several organizations were common among women who had to make a living outside their homes, particularly in the South" (Yang 1961:60). In Guangdong, "old maid houses" were set up and "Golden Lotus" societies flourished, especially in the silk centers of Shun De county (Topley 1978). Such developments both then and in modern Hong Kong<sup>9</sup> reflect the fact that, when kinship ties are limited, fraternal groups (such as clan associations) for men and sororal groups for women are likely to play an active role in the social life of part of the population (Yang 1961:60).

What is striking about Little Fujian is the existence of such female-centered systems among a community of married Chinese women. The circumstances of their arrival in Hong Kong emphasized the need for an adjusted adaptational pattern. Graves (1984:370-1) talks of urban migrants in New Zealand pursuing adaptive strategies that are either self-reliant, kin-reliant, or peer-reliant. Fujianese women in Hong Kong were simultaneously kin- and peer-reliant; these women's proclivities to rely on nonkin county-mates when necessary is a female counterpart to the overseas Chinese male's reliance on clan or district associations. Accompanied only by their children and often without close male kinsmen in Hong Kong who would look out for them, these Fujianese women usually bore the responsibility for adapting to the alien world of Hong Kong and often turned to other Fujianese women to help them make the transition.

Fujianese women, however, were not totally unprepared for the long hours of work, loneliness and anxiety they often experienced in Hong Kong. They had not been pampered to a life of ease back home; quite the reverse was usually true. Women in Fujian often had to do much of the family's chores in the fields as well as in the home, especially if their husbands lived overseas. Nor was it uncommon for Fujianese women to have actually lived with their husbands for a total of only two or three years out of some 20-odd years of marriage. The greater responsibilities and tensions borne by many Fujianese women in Hong Kong were, thus, an intensification of, and not a completely new shift to, a pattern of female support. Women had relied on other women back home in Fujian and they did so again in the new circumstance of Hong Kong.

What made the Hong Kong situation novel for these women, however, was the near total absence of males in positions of authority over them. In Fujian, even if her husband and his brothers were overseas, a woman was still under the close watch (if not direct control) of her other in-laws (both male and female). Perhaps free from the direct and constant control of men (and in-laws) for the first time in their lives, many Fujianese women grew to appreciate their position in Hong Kong even though life in the colony had more than its share of hardships and anxieties. As one Fujianese son in Hong Kong put it:

Mama only thinks about her husband and us children. She doesn't want to return to the old village even though the rest and peaceful environment would do her good because she likes being in Hong Kong where she can see her husband on occasion and where she can take care of us three kids as she likes. But she never ceases gabbing and I long to escape.

Fujianese mothers have a well-established female support system to help them shoulder the burdens of raising a family in Hong Kong alone. The Fujianese mother, whether widowed or with her husband overseas, finds herself one of many women in a similar position. This has helped to establish one of the key bonds that tie Little Fujian together, the mother-to-mother friendship.

Relatives, of course can also be part of this female support system and often are. For many, however, relatives in Hong Kong are scarce, and this was particularly true in the early days of Little Fujian's existence. Even today, a woman's relatives tend to be back in Fujian while her husband's may live in Fujian, Hong Kong, or in the Philippines. A husband's relatives who do live in Hong Kong, moreover, often do not maintain the level of closeness with the daughter-in-law that theoretically should exist. Even under "normal" and "traditional" circumstances, a woman's acceptance into her husband's family was tenuous and dependent on her subservience, on her (male) child-bearing capacity, and on the personalities of her new household. Without the husband physically present in Hong Kong, it is not surprising that a woman's ties with her husband's family are much looser than they would be "normally." In fact, we find that a woman's own relatives are often favored at the expense of her husband's and assume quite an important role in her Hong Kong family's life.

One male Fujianese factory worker felt this matrilineal bias was quite contrary to "what should be." He explained Fujianese in Hong Kong often have most of their relations with maternal relatives:

due to kids living with mother while father is in the Philippines. The children thus absorb her influence when she talks up her relatives and puts down her husband's. This is only natural since as a daughter-in-law she is often oppressed by the husband's family and seeks to avoid them whenever possible.

This struggle between the patrilineal ideal and the pull of actual maternal relations is a serious one in many Fujianese families in Hong Kong.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond this context of kinship, there is yet another source of support for these female heads-of-households: the local Fujianese temple. Chinese folk religion helps ease these women's passage through life by providing psychological support. Women form the overwhelming bulk of temple worshippers in North Point and, if there is any formal "religious instruction" at home (how and when to burn incense; when to go to temple and with what offerings, etc.), it is these women who give it. Most prayers or requests offered up to Guan Yin (Kuan Yin) and other other-worldly beings deal with what these women hope for: that husband's job or business will not suddenly disappear in some anti-Chinese frenzy of the Philippine barbarians, that he will remain in good health and soon come to Hong Kong to visit, that the children will do well under difficult conditions, that she herself will find a job or a better-paying one, and that the relatives back home in Fujian have a prosperous and happy New Year. In addition to offering psychological support, temples serve as practically the place outside the home where women can meet with other women to talk awhile about their families and lives.

A Fujianese woman's control over her children is greatest in the years preceding her eldest son's marriage. Because of her relative isolation from and suspicion of Hong Kong society as well as the absence of her husband, a Fujian woman is anxious to keep tight control over her family. She wants to protect her children from the lurking evils of Hong Kong and, because of the

ethnically enclosed nature of most Fujianese social networks, the effort is largely successful. Fujianese point to their strong family and community sense to explain the fact that few Fujianese are criminals and that relatively fewer numbers of Fujianese are engaged in robberies, muggings, rapes and other such activities that captivate certain sections of Hong Kong's youth population.<sup>12</sup> Living without fathers for long periods of time, Fujianese children and young adults are seen as naturally closer to their mothers. Their personalities are believed by many Fujianese to be affected by this situation; they are said to be softer and gentler than others and not overly proud or quick-tempered.

Younger Fujianese women spend much of their time at home, and, by the time they are seventeen or eighteen, their mothers begin to pay careful attention to who they go out with or what friends they make. Unlike their Guangdongese sisters, they are not allowed, such outings as going to the movies with male friends. Fujianese child-rearing techniques, furthermore, help maintain this sex-related restrictive pattern. Younger Fujianese women in Hong Kong still spend most of their time at home and, unlike their brothers, their friends are restricted to school or workmates.

Sex role differentiation is seen as quite pronounced among Fujianese; Fujianese men are "liberal" and "open" in contrast to Fujianese women who are "traditional" and "close-minded." Fujianese women are also known to be more accommodating to men than are Guangdongese women are in high demand in Hong Kong for the following traits as listed by one satisfied husband:

they use up little money, are anxious to do work, listen to their husbands and have good tempers. My wife knows how to suffer and doesn't bother me with ideas of female equality, demanding this and that and to go out with her girlfriends. She stays at home, takes care of the kids and has ample opportunity to rest.

The assumption is widespread, furthermore, that Fujianese social relations, in general, are quite "feudal."<sup>13</sup>

These perceptions relate closely to an urban/rural dichotomy in which new immigrants, both men and women, are perceived as the most "feudal" in their concepts and behavior. With new male arrivals to Little Fujian, one must be careful not to joke about a new wife or too freely discuss sex and women; such talk is "dirty" and in poor taste. Older male residents of Hong Kong are less inhibited.

Economic pressures on these women, furthermore, have continued to increase over the last two decades. Large families and the ups and downs of the Philippine peso and economy have forced Fujianese women to look for sources of income other than remittances from abroad. Most Fujianese women who are not completely engrossed in raising young children are thus working outside their homes, usually in factories. Grandmothers work as long a shift as young women and both seek to save up enough money not only to use in Hong Kong but to send home to Fujian.

Their hard-working and frugal behavior, born out of economic necessity and non-Hong Kong-oriented goals, has gained for Fujianese women a reputation for "loving to do work even when they don't have to." This image contrasts strongly with the Fujianese stereotype of the Guangdongese woman who would rather stay home and fritter the day away playing ma jiang. This hard-work has also allowed women to supplement their husband's remittances from abroad and has given them an independent source of income. The combination of these wages and the income, if any, from older children's (mostly part-time) jobs provides the potential basis for economic autonomy.

On Second and Third Glance, However, Was That Really Emancipation or Matrifocality?

Thus by the early 1970s, Fujianese women had begun to work outside the home, and not rely totally on remittances from abroad. This, coupled with their day-to-day freedom from male authority, would seem to mean that a rise in women's social status in the public as well as domestic domains (cf. Sanday 1974) was imminent if not already underway. Domestic relations seemed to have undergone a profound shift from traditional patriarchal patterns toward an ill-defined "female autonomy" as the Fujianese community in Hong Kong developed along increasingly matrifocal lines. Or, at least, this is what I concluded after my first field trip. Return visits to Little Fujian over the succeeding decade have enabled me to reexamine the scene, however, and what seemed apparent before is quite doubtful now.

Not all was a chimera. The women of Little Fujian are unquestionably more independent than their sisters back home; they are freer from the day-to-day "instruction" of male and female relatives; they do share apartments with other female-headed households; they do display a matrilineal bias when dealing with kinfolk; they have formed their own women-centric social networks in the temples, homes, and markets of their neighborhoods; and, in the past fifteen years or so, they have even begun to work outside the home in factories. Even so this increasing "freedom" and "independence" is more apparent than real. Time has brought not a consolidation of these "progressive" changes but the reemergence of patrilineal, patrilineal, male-centered patterns.

The crucial shift that occurred is that the young sons who arrived with the woman in Hong Kong in the 1950s and early 1960s, came of age, married and began their own patrilocal households. This is the key change, for much of what we discussed above about the Fujianese family can be understood on the analytical level as a struggle between two key Chinese principles of dominance: age and sex.<sup>14</sup> The traditional Confucian norms of elder over junior and male over female have long served as guidelines for stability in a patriarchal and hierarchical Chinese culture<sup>15</sup> that is even now in People's China only gradually yielding to change.<sup>16</sup> Among the Fujianese of Hong Kong these principles have been pitted against each other. As we have already seen, there is built into the demographics of Little Fujian a situation whereby people in a formally subordinate category, women, have assumed the superordinate roles of men in their absence. When sons mature, however, the authority and power of older women is challenged by younger men. By the time of the son's marriage and the birth of his first child soon after, the challenge is usually successful.

Yet this is not what other studies of migrant communities have led us to expect.<sup>17</sup> Why do these women so meekly yield to the reinstallation of patriarchal authority and male dominance? Why do they not continue the behavior which they acted out before their sons matured? Reinterpretation of the data reveals that, despite their increased self-reliance when the men were away, the women were never really free of patriarchal fetters; their "emancipation" was always largely superficial. Patrilocality and the patriarchal ideal were never absent even though the relative scarcity of males in the community certainly made male dominance less visible.<sup>18</sup> Male goals and male decision-making operated below the surface and from a distance although the surface structure displayed a seeming matrifocality. Here the addition of time depth to a community study becomes crucial, for only in the shift from the early 1970s to the early 1980s does the turn of generations reveal the community's true dynamics as a closer examination of women's status before the maturation of the sons reveals.

First, despite their increased self-reliance, Fujianese women even today remain mostly cloistered - spatially, socially and psychologically. Most Fujianese women have not moved out into the larger society and it is still common to meet Fujianese women who after twenty or more years of residence in Hong Kong can understand little more in Guangdongese than the numbers one through ten. That this is so despite their entrance into the job market speaks to the ethnically-enclosed nature of Hong Kong's Little Fujian. When Fujianese women get jobs it is usually through their women friends and it is usually at a Fujianese-run factory. Working in a Fujianese environment at the factory or, just as commonly, taking home fabric to do piecework, Fujianese women can earn money without having to speak Guangdongese or deal with the larger Hong Kong world other than to use its public transportation.

"Overseas" and in an alien environment, it is the men (when they are present) who conduct relations with the outside world (with the "foreigners") and who are most concerned about links to the native village. It is the women who, often straight from the countryside, "stay behind the curtains in their room and leave making money, finances, and family decisions to men."<sup>19</sup>

Even when husbands were away, the importance of the male to the family remained central. While girls were carefully monitored and their activities outside the home severely restricted, young sons gained experience in dealing with the Hong Kong world and who by their late teens were far more sophisticated and adapted to urban culture than "straight from the countryside" mother. The sons start out giving "advice" to mother about the day-to-day decisions of life and soon end up making the decisions themselves. This gradual transfer of decision-making authority is paralleled by the practice of sons increasingly representing the family at banquets and ceremonies as they grow older and mother recedes from the position of family head.

The adaptation that the Fujianese women had made to Hong Kong was a real but restricted one. They did indeed, from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, take on alone the day-to-day responsibility for raising a family in Hong Kong but they did that behind the symbolic "curtain" of the Fujianese women's support

network. This network paralleled but did not intersect with the larger Hong Kong society. Sons, by their active participation in both the Fujianese and non-Fujianese worlds, were thus in a position to view their mothers as parochial and unschool in Hong Kong's ways despite their long years of residence in Hong Kong.

What happens when a woman only has daughters with her in Hong Kong? In such circumstances the daughter may assume family leadership, especially if she is more alert than her mother and better acquainted with the Hong Kong scene. With a son present, however, a daughter's only way to validate a claim to family leadership is to receive a salary far in excess of her brother's. Then her opinions and advice may be listened to.

In most situations, though, boys earn more or at least the same as young women and it is the son who takes over. Male children, furthermore, are favored throughout childhood in education and opportunities and, thus, have a structural advantage in the competition for employment, outside experience, and family leadership. By their mid-twenties, sons have usually superceded their mothers as the head of the household and if they make a lot of money early on, the changeover takes place even sooner.

Before the son's maturation, then, the mother potentially receives funds from four sources: her own wages; husband's remittances; son's support; and daughter's support. She uses this money for rent, for children's school fees, for the daily necessities of life, and for her own needs and projects (such as gifts for the folks back home or for hosting visiting friends or relatives). Mother decides the day-to-day allocation of funds and, before her son enters his twenties and gets married, decides questions encountered in the daily routine of Hong Kong. As we saw, however, with the son's gradual maturation her field of decision-making is continually narrowed.

Even before her son reaches his age of majority, a woman's decision-making powers do not formally extend to the "really important" decisions of life. The decision of which flat to rent or buy, for example, is not made by the woman but by her husband (and later her sons). In fact, for all the big decisions - such as permission for the children to marry, or to return home to Fujian to visit or to live, or to leave school - it is the men overseas who have the final word. When a man writes of such a decision, his wife must listen. Perhaps because it is written, the command may be less visible to the outsider, but it is surely no less real to the people involved simply because the man is not actually present.

Yet, even though the man retains de jure authority over these life decisions, the woman's physical presence in Hong Kong often allows her to manipulate people and things to her liking. More often than not, the overseas husband's wife is his main source of news from Hong Kong and this leaves the man vulnerable to his spouse's using him merely to formally ratify her decisions. Female reliance on males to validate female opinions or decisions has been widespread among Chinese (Wolf 1974:163).

Furthermore, this period of time before the son matures is the peak time of female informal control over her Hong Kong family's life. Before her son

has replaced her husband, a woman does have much leeway in carrying out the husband's instructions, at least more leeway than if he was present. Thus, even though Fujianese women overtly accept the propriety of male dominance and a patriarchal authority structure, they nevertheless often seek to bend circumstances to their liking when their husbands are not around. This bending, however, does not occur without some stress. Tensions that in a patriarchy are usually submerged surface more regularly in the absence of males.

Nothing brings out these tensions more than mother's matrilineal bias toward her own relatives. Enculturated to a patrilineal standard, children often feel uncomfortable as they get caught in a struggle between lineages.<sup>20</sup> In this inter-lineage dispute, father's side has a strong ally in the ideology of the patrilineage - the normative side of the family. When a son uses the patrilineage argument to demand that more resources be sent to father's family in Fujian ("as is only right and as father wants us to do"), his mother has little to fall back on ideologically.

Not surprisingly, men are thus more oriented to the concepts of lineage, home village, and the ties to one's native soil than are women. Furthermore, when asked why they lived in North Point, Fujianese males almost to a man mentioned ethnicity ("I want to be closer to other Fujianese") but women never did. They instead enumerated various practical considerations: "It's conveniently close to work;" "My friends live here;" "My husband lives there." Ethnicity and lineage, as concepts per se on the ideal level, are more important to Fujianese men than to women - more important because they bolster male authority.

We might also consider the possibility that this patrilineal-matrilineal tussle represents a lineage battle for the Hong Kong socio-economic niche; both sides want to make the most of the potentialities of the colony. Amyot (1973:173) points out that in Manila most Chinese households have a complement of single dependents who are kinsmen. Usually these are agnatic relatives of the household head, rarely are they affinal kinsmen. Given this situation, it is not unrealistic to assume that a woman would seek to aid her own kin to come to the only "overseas" spot perhaps available to them, Hong Kong. Especially if the agnatic links or contacts it had as an overseas-oriented lineage were broken or exhausted, the lineage might well seek to utilize the only other outside contacts it had, its married-out women. A woman in Hong Kong would then be forced to carry on the fight for her home lineage against the "rights" of her husband's and, because of the peculiar situation in Hong Kong, a woman's relatives may indeed get preferential treatment.

Since many of the problems arise around the rights and obligations toward paternal and maternal relatives, the norms of patrilineage and kin solidarity are constantly evoked in these situations by the men and evaded by the women. The younger, married sons never cease to recall the injunctions of father and "what should be" during discussions of how much money should be sent back to whose relatives in Fujian or of whose relatives should stay for how long in their Hong Kong flat. The result of the contention is not always conventional male-dominant solutions. Even years

after the supposed shift from "age" to "sex" dominance at the son's marriage, older women in a family continue to exercise considerable influence although they are far less successful than they were previously in turning family decisions their way.

Nevertheless, when the men do return (either literally in the flesh or figuratively upon the maturation of the sons), women do resume their subordinate position. Seemingly matrifocal households once again turn overtly patrifocal and male-dominated. The new male heads of household reassert the rights of their patrilineage, thereby "correcting" the admittedly unusual pattern of the past few decades. Although allowances have been made in the culture for women to work outside the home, or to take on a range of decision-making far greater than was theirs in the past, they retreat to the older, more circumscribed, feminine sex role when adult men are again present in the family. Then once more will women yield places at the dinner table to male guests and once more will women defer to men in a thousand subtle ways.

Paradoxically, then, the Fujianese woman has found herself in a situation where she has indeed acquired "more freedom" but she has not acquired an increase in status. Even her recent move to greater economic autonomy through factory labor has not proved significant in the long-run since she has continued to remain dependent on the steady flow of remittances from her husband abroad or her mature son in Hong Kong. By the time of her son's maturity she has failed to significantly lessen her degree of deference to men or increase the level of prestige attached to her person - both key measures of increasing female equality. Her only advance has been in the area of greater personal occupational choice with a related increase in control over minor (not major) economic decisions. Twenty years or so of limited autonomy have proven too fleeting and too insecurely based and the phase of her pseudo-emancipation comes to a close. Patriarchy and male-centeredness have returned - if indeed they were ever gone.<sup>21</sup>

### Concluding Note

The experience of Hong Kong's Fujianese women should serve to caution researchers about the inevitability of a purported trend in social behavior. Some researchers (Strauch 1984; Sweetser 1966; Vatuk 1972), for example, maintain that the world's patrilineal societies are now tending to "bilateral balance" as wage labor opportunities increase the choices open to women and this in turn leads to an "improvement" in women's lives (Strauch 1984:74-5). In many ways, this is undoubtedly occurring; Hong Kong's Fujianese families are also displaying patterns new for Chinese social relations. Yet the process is by no means occurring with all patrilineal groups nor can we even assume that once such "gains" or "improvements" have been made that they are permanent successes in the struggle for female equality.

There may indeed be such a general trend afoot in the world but, like the earlier reported demise of the nuclear family, the process may take far longer and proceed more intermittently than first assumed. Gallin & Gallin (1982) have shown us how the joint family has remained alive, though under

changed circumstances, in industrializing Taiwan; the patrilineal and patriarchal aspects of such families may prove just as resilient. To paraphrase Andrew Greeley (1975:189), "Weep not for patrilineality, patriarchy and the extended family; they are very much with the Chinese."

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The term "matrifocal" has been used variously to describe a household where the husband-father is absent (US Census usage or Kunstadter 1963) or to refer to households or families where the wife-mother is central or dominant whether or not the husband-father is absent (Geertz 1961:78-9); Lamphere 1974:109; Tanner 1974:133). This report will use matrilocality to refer to those situations where the significant male is absent and in his absence women exercise greater personal autonomy and household decision-making than would otherwise be the case. Note that this definition stops short of necessitating the structural, cultural and affective centrality and social legitimacy of the mother's role and concentrates instead only on situations where the wife-mother is "structurally central" -- that is, she "has some degree of control over the kin unit's economic resources and is critically involved in kin-related decision-making (Tanner 1974:131-2).
- 2 Unless otherwise specifically noted, all Chinese words will be given in their Pinyin Mandarin rendering. However, upon first usage the perhaps more familiar Wade-Giles form will follow in parentheses.
- 3 "Equality" here refers to women achieving status with men in both the domestic and public domains. See Sanday (1974) for a clarifying discussion of female status.
- 4 Laura Klein (personal communication) reports similar circumstances among the Native North Americans when men are off the reservation and women are active politically.
- 5 For this section of the paper, 1975 is the ethnographic present.
- 6 Up until 1950, Fujianese immigrants were mostly true to the classic description (Smith 1984:22) of the Asian immigrant: a young adult male, usually 20-24 years old, who was pushed off the land in rural areas by population pressure or who was attracted to the opportunities of the city. With many Chinese, the city they left for was overseas.
- 7 For a fuller history and discussion of the emergence and development of Little Fujian and North Point see Guldin (1977b:1980).
- 8 Wolf (1972), Young (1973), Sidel (1973), and Witke and Wolf (1975) all document this phenomenon for China.
- 9 Topley (1978) has chronicled the continuation of the marriage resistance movement and other female-centered organizations in the contemporary Hong Kong.
- 10 In this context, the reader would also do well to consult Margery Wolf's (1974) article on Chinese women's mastery of social and political skills in the domestic context and their subsequent PRC extension of skills to the public arena.

- 11 Pratt (1960) showed a similar tension for Hakka village in Hong Kong's New Territories with substantial male out-migration leading to deviations from the patriarchal ideal.
- 12 Although crime records are not broken down ethnically, barristers at one of Hong Kong's Municipal Courts corroborated these subjective accounts.
- 13 "Feudal" is the term used by Fujianese and other Chinese as a shorthand for "traditional," or "backward" or "reactionary." Ever since the rise of modern Chinese nationalism and the application of the terminology of the modern ideologies of liberalism and Marxism, the social structure, customs, and beliefs of the old society have been denounced as "feudal." As used in this context, the term "feudal" thus has little to do with the concepts or structures of European feudalism.
- 14 Baker (1979) maintains that generation is the third key principle and that it takes precedence over age and sex but this did not seem to occur with my informants in Little Fujian. The maleness of the young sons granted them family power despite the senior generation status of their mothers.
- 15 See C.K. Yang (1961:passim), among others.
- 16 See for example Parish and Whyte (1978).
- 17 Sanday, (1974), Connell (1976), and Graves (1984), for example, when discussing changes or "improvements" in women's status in their rise in self-reliance and status, do not consider the possibility of a reversal in these trends.
- 18 Nash (1958) makes a similar point writing of Guatemalan peasants.
- 19 In traditional Fujianese households curtains are hung over the doorway to a woman's bedroom to protect her modesty from even accidental male viewing. To many younger Fujianese this curtain is a symbol of their women's traditionally inferior status and Fujianese "backwardness."
- 20 Strauch (1984) reports that in today's Chinese patrilineal family women especially are experiencing a growing conflict of interest as they retain more ties to their own parents.
- 21 What the next turn of generations may bring is unknown. Whether increasing outside the home employment will lead to higher female status among the current generation of Hong Kong-raised Fujianese wives or not is something only yet further study can reveal. Nor can we as yet fathom the effects that Hong Kong's pending reintegration with China in 1997 will have on this overseas-related group.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT: The Women in International Development Publication Series are partially funded by a Title XII Strengthening Grant.

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