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A Study on New Arrivals from the Mainland

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SUMMARY REPORT

1 Introduction

The Court of Final Appeal (CFA) delivered its ruling on the issue of right of abode on 29 January 1999. The judgement has given rise to much controversy and expressions of deep concern. Worries were expressed that the judgement would result in an influx of a large number of people from the Mainland who would then exert a great strain on the resources of the HKSAR. Following the CFA's ruling, the estimated number of persons who are, or will be, eligible for the right of abode in Hong Kong is as yet unknown. The concerned authorities are now assessing in greater detail the implications of the judgement from the perspective of providing various services and facilities. These include the impact on, among other things, education, housing, medical and social services. Through in-depth case interviews of newly arrived families from the Mainland, we hope to increase our understanding of the issue, which can only then lead to suitable directions for the formulation of policies and services in the future.

2. Methodology

A qualitative case study was employed for this exploratory study. It was conducted through in-depth case interviews among new young arrivals from the Mainland and their families. The young interviewees, aged 29 or below, had entered Hong Kong legally on the "one-way permit" after 10 July 1997. An interview guideline with open-ended questions was directed to solicit respondents' opinions. Twenty in-depth family-case interviews, with a total of 22 new young arrivals and 36 parents were conducted from 19 February 1999 to 18 March 1999. The analysis contains a synthesis of both the qualitative data from the respondents, as well as an extensive review of the literature.

3. A typical picture of families with members from the Mainland

The study analyses the characteristics of families with members from the Mainland through the compilation of various government statistics and survey data. The profile drawn below is a result of immigration policies, based primarily on family unification.

From 1989 to 1997, those classified as “children” and “wives” of Hong Kong local residents continuously constituted over 90% of the migrant population to Hong Kong. In 1996, the majority (41.2%) of One-way Permit Holders entering Hong Kong were aged 0-14. Another 30.8% were aged 15-34. As time is needed to settle down and adapt to a new environment, their economic dependency means great immediate stress and hardship to the fathers/husbands.

As revealed by a survey conducted by the Home Affairs Department in 1998, the most common types of housing for arrivals who had been in Hong Kong for less than a year, were “public rental housing”(45.3%) and “sublet rooms, bedspaces or cocklofts”(26.0%). New arrivals are not eligible to apply for public housing as a result of their short duration of residence in Hong Kong, therefore the survey reveals that families with members from the Mainland lived in rather crowded or poor accommodations.

Can the families become economically self-sufficient? Almost half (47.0%) of the new arrivals had received a secondary/matriculation education, according to the results of the 1996 Population By-census. However, they tended to take up less skilled jobs: 25.3% with “elementary occupations”, and 22.0% as “service workers and shop sales workers”. Their median monthly income was \$6,500 in 1996, which was significantly lower than the \$9,500 average of the rest of Hong Kong’s working population. Their situation worsened during the Asian financial crisis of late 1997, which brought the unemployment rate to a new high. The availability of jobs in low-skilled areas dropped drastically in September 1998, making competition with local employees more keen.

According to the general household survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department in January 1997, out of the 171,000 respondents who had resided in Hong Kong for less than 7 years, some 48.3% cited difficulties in integrating into the Hong Kong community. The most common difficulty was

“crowded or poor conditions of living areas”. Four other frequently cited difficulties, in descending order, include: (1) insufficient earnings to support daily expenses, (2) difficulty in seeking jobs, (3) inability to speak fluent Cantonese and (4) high rents. A more recent survey conducted by the Home Affairs Department in 1998 shows similar results. Among the 6 difficulties specified in the survey, the most commonly cited was again living conditions. Difficulties in finding jobs and family income rank second and third respectively.

In short, a typical picture of families with members from the Mainland can be summarized as follows: The families have to live in crowded or poor living conditions after the wives and young age children enter from the Mainland. Those family members who sought to enter the labour market, tended to take up less skilled jobs, or were unemployed. Their median monthly income was significantly lower than that of the whole working population in Hong Kong. Subsequently, they require substantial assistance from the Government in order to integrate comfortably into Hong Kong life.

4 Respondents’ Profile

The following is the profile of respondents in 20 in-depth family-case interviews:

- a) Out of the 22 young new arrivals aged between 7 and 22, fifteen were aged below 15. Nineteen were students, 1 was an apprentice and a further 2 were unemployed. 20 of them came from Guangdong Province. All their fathers were permanent residents of Hong Kong and all their mothers resided in the Mainland at the time of their birth.
- b) Their experiences and process of family unification in Hong Kong were very heterogeneous. The duration of waiting for approval to reside in Hong Kong varied from half a year to sixteen years. Some respondents came to Hong Kong alone, as being children of Hong Kong residents, they had the right of abode. Some were brought by their mothers, whose applications to reside in Hong Kong were approved. Two respondents came to Hong Kong under the excuse of “looking after their seriously ill fathers”. Most of them settled in Hong Kong after their arrival, while only one person traveled to and fro and resided on both the Mainland and in Hong Kong.

- c) Out of the 20 families interviewed, only 6 have all their family members together in Hong Kong. Seventeen mothers, aged between 34 and 49, received approval to reside in Hong Kong. Among them, 14 had either primary education or no schooling, while 14 were housewives. Apart from one father who was deceased, 18 other fathers lived in Hong Kong, with another residing on the Mainland. Among the 19 fathers, 10 were aged 60 or above. Thirteen had either primary education or no schooling, 5 had junior secondary education and 1 was educated to the tertiary level. Six fathers were working.
- d) Most families were living in sublet rooms, bedspaces or cocklofts and only 2 were living in public housing. Twelve families have members receiving Comprehensive Scheme of Social Assistance, usually as a result of the fathers' unemployment, old age or illness. However, it should be noted that as the samples were referred by our two neighbourhood level New Arrivals Projects which serve the grassroots mainly, the welfare dependency ratio should not be generalize to represent the public.

5 Discussion

5.1 To most of the respondents, “having opportunities to climb up the social ladder” is the major attraction of Hong Kong. Some were so determined to come to Hong Kong that even though the main breadwinners were unemployed, retired or ill, with a concomitant decrease in the family’s economic condition, they still persisted their application.

All respondents had chosen Hong Kong, instead of other cities on the Mainland, as places for family re-unification. There are three major reasons for this choice:

1. Hong Kong remains very attractive. Most of the respondents indicated that there were “more opportunities” in Hong Kong as compared to their places of origin on the Mainland. These included nine years of free universal education, better accreditation of education qualifications, a greater variety of better-paid jobs, a more fascinating city life and easier opportunities to go

aboard. These reasons provided a favorable platform for them (especially the young children) to climb up the social ladder.

2. As family breadwinners were residing and working in Hong Kong, all other economically dependent family members should join them.

3. Owing to traditional patriarchal advice that “children and wives should follow their fathers/husbands wherever they go”, children and wives living in the Mainland should move to Hong Kong and not vice versa.

A majority of respondents indicated that “choosing Hong Kong as the place for a family re-unification” was decisive. Some of the respondents were so determined to come to Hong Kong that even though the breadwinner living in Hong Kong was unemployed, retired, or ill, and hence the family’s economic condition deteriorated drastically during the time they were applying for a one-way permit, they still persisted with their application. This attitude reflects the fact that they were not seeking immediate materialistic gratification. Instead, they longed for a secure future and were prepared to undergo certain hardships. They believed that by studying/working hard and making good use of the opportunities in Hong Kong, they could have better lives in the long run. Many of them expressed that they would like to stand on their own feet and were prepared to take up low-pay tough jobs. However, at the same time, they worried that the competition in the labour market was too keen for them to be employed.

5.2 Most respondents indicated that they would not reside in the Mainland while enrolled by educational institutes, employed or accepted as recipients of Comprehensive Social Services Assistance. The “safety-net” that comprised of a series of public welfare services, was the major factor that encouraged respondents to stay in Hong Kong after their arrival.

Some new arrivals, for various reasons, eventually go back and reside on the Mainland once they have finished with their abode procedures in Hong Kong. Theoretically, their needs for social services were fewer as compared with those who tended to stay in Hong Kong. This case study has tried to look into the considerations involved in choosing places of residence.

Most respondents indicated that they would not reside on the Mainland while enrolled by educational institutes, employed or accepted as recipients of Comprehensive Social Services Assistance. Some respondents stated that they would consider residing on the Mainland only if: (1) the situation of Hong Kong become too bad, (2) when one gets enough money to do business in the Mainland, or (3) when one retires. One respondent replied, “Preferably, I would like to find a job in Hong Kong and spend money in the Mainland during holidays. But if I cannot find a good job here, I might go back to the Mainland. But wherever I reside, I will apply for public housing in Hong Kong once I become eligible to do so.”

Of course, as the arrivals already surrender their census registers of their places of origin (this is a pre-requisite for obtaining the one-way permit issued by the Mainland authorities), going back to Mainland means a much higher cost of living, education, medical care and housing. However, the above findings further reflect that the availability of a “safety-net” in Hong Kong, which comprised of a series of public services, including education, retraining, employment services, social welfare, housing, medical services, etc, is a crucial factor that encouraged respondents to stay in Hong Kong. It is also noted that these services remain attractive to those who return and reside on the Mainland.

5.3 Opinions vary regarding the impact on Hong Kong by the influx of a large number of people from the Mainland. However, it is noted that the quality of the incoming population will be the determining factor.

Throughout its history, Hong Kong has been a city of immigrants. In 1996, 61,179 one-way permit holders entered Hong Kong, which accounted for a 40.4% population increase that year. However, following the CFA’s ruling, the estimated number of persons who are, or will be, eligible for the right of abode in Hong Kong, though is as yet unknown, is expected to be very huge. Some papers even expected it to be over one million. What will be the impact of such an influx of a large number of people from the Mainland? The study has done an extensive review of the literature.

Since the size and composition of the population is still unknown and that

the judiciary, economic, social and political fabric will be affected, and many other public opinion towards the impact of this large influx remains diverse.

For those who believe that the influx would have a positive effect on Hong Kong, they cite the easing of an aging population. This would mean that the rate of dependency ratio would thus slow down, and at the same time, the aggregate demand for goods and services of the society would increase, which would be good for an economic revival. With respect to the possible effects on the employment and wages of domestic workers, this group estimates that in the long run, it would be unlikely to have a very large effect on earnings.

In contrast, for those who believe that the population would have a negative effect on Hong Kong, the expressed worry is on the fiscal consequences of admitting such a large number of economically dependent or unskilled people. Fiscal impacts is typically measured through estimates of the difference between taxes from immigrant households and the cost of government services and benefits to those households. Noting that the development of an “intelligent workforce” is a must to Hong Kong over the next century, diverting huge amount of resources to help an influx from the Mainland to settle down, would in turn mean a barrier to aggressive development. With respect to the possible effects on employment and wages of domestic workers, the group recognize that the population may mean “competitors for rice bowls”. They warn the Government to note the social cost of deepening opposition to new arrivals.

Currently, a consultant paediatrician at Princess Margaret Hospital and head of the team assessing immigrant children’s health, has stated that those children he has examined have a poor vaccination record, high blood levels of lead, higher rates of worm infestation, higher rates of being hepatitis B carrier, and some unusual conditions doctors are unlikely to see in local children. This reflects that the “investment” on the health of children from the Mainland would be greater than on local children and that this should not be underestimated by the Government.

In short, as there are complex and delicate relationships among the variables, such as immediate financial commitments, internal consumption patterns, per capita income, dependency ratio, and most important of all, economic conditions of Hong Kong as a whole, it is difficult to say definitely whether the population see an influx in a positive or negative way. However, it is noted that the

quality of the population will be the determining factor of whether this change is for good or not.

5.4 “To attract the talented” and/or “to limit immigration growth to a level with which society can cope” are the necessary considerations on developing strategies to accept the influx.

The above findings reveal that respondents were determined to reunify their families in Hong Kong. “Opportunities to climb the social ladder” was their major attraction. Some families would even disregard their deteriorated economic circumstances, which were not self-sufficient. The social “safety-net” that comprised a series of public welfare services was reflected as the major factor that would encourage respondents to stay in Hong Kong after their arrival. All these issues imply that their demand for various social services is great. They need a great deal of support from the Government in order to be integrated into the community and become independent. It is also noted that the quality of the population will be the determining factor of whether change is good or not. How, then, can the Government make a balance between the unlimited desire for public goods and limited resources (within the existing tax base) to develop a population of a high quality? Should welfare rules be tightened? Should immigration priorities be given to reunify families, regardless of the number of family members involved? In general, no matter where the migrants come from, there are four necessary considerations on developing strategies to cope with a population influx:

- a) To attract persons with the required talents that would benefit the future development of society;
- b) Measures to avoid social disunity;
- c) To balance socio-economic conditions and limit of growth to a level with which the society can cope; and
- d) To shoulder minimal social responsibility and to strike a balance between welfare rights and the preservation of motivation to stand on one’s own feet.

6. Recommendations

In view of the above discussion, the Federation will recommend:

- 6.1 Since the CFA's ruling, the growth pattern of the HKSAR population will inevitably be changed significantly in the near future, and that the government must respond to this as soon as possible and formulate a proactive population policy that could prepare Hong Kong for the next century. Strategies to receive the population influx should help to attract persons with required talents that benefit the future development of Hong Kong through a precise and concise assessment based on a systematic workforce data base. This should also tie-in with the socio-economic conditions and limit growth to a level with which society can cope, so as to avoid social disunity.**
- 6.2 In recognizing the trend that a large number of people from the Mainland would continuously enter Hong Kong, the Federation recommends that the authorities concerned should assess this movement of people and their inclination towards consuming social services in a greater detail. It is advisable to map this out to a level with which society can cope, in terms of education, housing, medical facilities and general social welfare arrangements, and to plan and regulate the flow of people in a proactive manner.**
- 6.3 As already mentioned, the quality of the population will be the determining factor in having a positive long-term impact. In view of the profile of people from the Mainland as shown above, the Federation recommends that the concerned authorities should consider strengthening the linkages between formal and informal education, employment services, retraining and adult education. Better co-operation among various training services will be more effective in terms of enhancing the competitiveness of the workforce, and integrating the new arrivals into Hong Kong society.**