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MOBILITY AND WELFARE:
THE FAMILY STRATEGY OF MAINLAND WOMEN COMING TO AND GIVING BIRTH TO CHILDREN IN HONG KONG

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Executive Summary

The surging number of Mainland women coming to Hong Kong to have their children born here in recent years has caused much public concern. Based on information collected from in-depth interviews with 31 families, this study conducts a detailed analysis of the characteristics, motives and strategies of Mainland families which have chosen to have their children born in Hong Kong, as well as the social implications of the phenomenon.

Mainland women giving birth in Hong Kong generally come from families with the following characteristics: mostly having two children; both husband and wife being registered residents of the city they come from; relatively well-educated with higher occupational status, and in the middle or upper middle class; and mostly having at least one child born in the Mainland and the child born in Hong Kong being the second or third child. The reasons for these families to have their children born in Hong Kong include, in order of priority: to evade Mainland’s “one child” policy; to acquire Hong Kong citizenship for their children; and to enjoy quality maternity services. When asked about the regulations governing the Hong Kong permanent resident status and the benefits associated with that status, the respondents specifically mentioned two points: first, the Hong Kong resident status enables their children to enjoy visa-free arrangement when going abroad for studies; second, the medical benefits and healthcare services enjoyed by Hong Kong permanent residents are superior to those available in the Mainland. Without exception, the families interviewed had all brought their Hong Kong-born children back to the Mainland. Half of these families have not considered or have no plans at the moment for sending their children back to Hong Kong for education, while the other half may do so, most likely when their children are old enough to be admitted to secondary school and take care of themselves. For children whose fathers are Hong Kong permanent residents, their families will consider sending them to Hong Kong when they reach the age for primary education. Mainland parents basically will not choose to live in Hong Kong as guardians or visitors to take care of their children or keep them company.
Judging from the knowledge, motives and strategies of these families, it seems not to be their primary objective to come to live in Hong Kong and acquire PR status by having their children born in Hong Kong. Rather, they seek to maximize their welfare within the two systems of Hong Kong and the Mainland. The comparative benefits arising from the differences between the two systems can only be gained by moving from one place to another; remaining in either place would mean that such benefits cannot be realized. For this reason, these families have to adopt flexible strategies. Having due regard to such factors as their financial means, family care and support, restrictions, and availability of information, these Mainland families usually adopt the following family strategies: (1) seeking support from their relatives in both places; (2) sharing information and resources by forming social networks or Internet communities with similar families; (3) acquiring the services needed (but not the full package of services) through commercial intermediaries; and (4) adopting a diversified and expedient approach towards the education of their Hong Kong-born children, including completing education in the Mainland, studying in Hong Kong as cross-boundary students, attending schools in Hong Kong starting from the secondary level, and studying abroad.

Mainland families with children born in Hong Kong have increased the diversity and complexity of Mainland society. The various options available to these families when planning for the future of their Hong Kong-born children have led to greater uncertainty about the paths which they will take. While their original intention of having their children born in Hong Kong was to have more children, the fact that there are Hong Kong-born children not only invites these families to consider taking advantage of the welfare gap arising from the differences in the two systems, but also increases the possibility of actually reaping such benefits. This prompts these families to weigh the pros and cons of leaving and staying, and staying together or be separate from each other. In these families, there are two different identities among their members, who become differentiated in terms of social status and experiences. The difference in identity among siblings adds to the complexity of family relationships. The communities wherein there are these families are also more differentiated and heterogeneous.
In Hong Kong, there is tension between Mainland and local pregnant women. There is also tension at the community level, between Hong Kong people and Mainlanders. Expectant Mainland women can more or less feel the tension, but they find it difficult to understand. They believe that they actually do good to Hong Kong because they not only duly pay the fees charged but also spend lavishly here. So they are puzzled by the blame put on them by Hong Kong people.

Children born in Hong Kong to Mainland families become a mobile population group that stays in the Mainland on a long-term basis but enjoys the Hong Kong permanent resident status. Normally, the welfare burden, on Hong Kong, of these people living outside the territory on a long-term basis should be lighter than if they reside in Hong Kong. These Hong Kong-born children can help rejuvenate Hong Kong’s ageing population if they return to Hong Kong when they grow up. Educated in the Mainland for a certain period of time, they will naturally be more knowledgeable about Mainland society than their local counterparts. They can contribute to the development of certain areas or industries in Hong Kong and the Mainland. In the short term, however, Mainland women coming to Hong Kong for delivery may strain local medical services, and the return of a large number of Hong Kong-born children within a short period of time may put pressure on education, healthcare, employment and housing. Hong Kong Government needs to consider measures ahead of time to cope with the situation. There should also be studies of the social and demographic implications of such a population.

Mainland women giving birth in Hong Kong has brought into existence a cross-boundary population. Mainland families with Hong Kong-born children are a community straddling two societies. It has roots in both Hong Kong and the Mainland but is not fixed to either one.

There is a saying, “Blood is thicker than water.” This describes very well the long-existing blood ties and geographical proximity between Hong Kong people and Mainlanders, and points to the need to resolve differences and problems through accommodating and better understanding each other.