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SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND MIDDLE CLASS FORMATION IN HONG KONG

by

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SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND
MIDDLE CLASS FORMATION IN HONG KONG

Annie H.N. Chan
INTRODUCTION

Interest in the expansion or “emergence” of the middle classes in east and south-east Asia is fast becoming an important research site (See e.g. Hong 1983; Hsiao 1989, 1993; Koo 1991; Robison and Goodman 1996). Compressed and rapid economic development in these countries has led to the erosion of old lines of social cleavage and the appearance of new forms of power distribution, which has led to much discussion regarding the role of the middle classes in these societies’ social and political development (e.g. Hsiao 1993; Roden 1996). The question of whether or not there is a “middle class culture” in formation in these societies, however, does not appear to rank high on research agendas.\(^1\) Similarly, the literature on Hong Kong’s middle class primarily revolves around the middle class’s role in Hong Kong’s political development before and after the “handover” on July 1 1997 (Cheung et al. 1988; Scott 1989; So and Kwitko 1990; Lam and Lee 1992; So and May 1993; Chung 1994). More recently there have been efforts to measure the class structure and social fluidity of Hong Kong society (Wong and Lui 1992; Tsang 1992, 1994; Chan 1994; Chan et al. 1995), and there is some consensus regarding the socio-demographic level of Hong Kong’s middle class formation. As for cultural and normative aspects of Hong Kong’s middle class, there are some survey findings regarding the middle class’s normative orientations regarding the endorsement of capitalist values, consumption knowledge and practice, education and post-materialist values, but rarely do these findings extend to discuss their implications on the middle class’s social reproduction and formation (Wong and Lui 1992; Choi 1995; Ng 1995; Wong 1995).

In this paper I adopt a fresh starting point and explore the degree of socio-cultural formation of Hong Kong’s middle class.\(^2\) in terms of the criteria they use in evaluating a

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\(^1\) One exception is a forthcoming volume on patterns of consumption amongst the “new rich” in Asia (Chua, forthcoming in 1998).

\(^2\) I use the term ‘middle class’ interchangeably with ‘service class’, i.e. those in service class I and II jobs in Goldthorpe’s class scheme. The term routine non-manual workers will be used interchangeably with the term intermediate class (class III in Goldthorpe’s class scheme), and small
person’s desirability or “worthiness” Using semi-structured in-depth interviews, I examine the criteria with which a sample of sixty service class and intermediate class respondents use to evaluate the desirability or worthiness of other people. I argue that the contents and rigidity of these symbolic boundaries drawn by members of the middle class between themselves and others are important for (1) understanding the basis of certain types of social networks; and for (2) examining the normative formation of the middle class in terms of their cultural styles, value systems, and subjective identities.

SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND NORMATIVE CLASS FORMATION

There is now a comprehensive body of literature on the effects of social networks on social mobility and status attainment (see e.g. Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994). There is little doubt that social networks are a major source for accessing all kinds of valuable resources for social advancement, including job information, referrals, promotions, and informal support (See e.g. Granovetter 1974; Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990; Lin 1990, 1991; Burt 1992; Podolny and Baron 1997). Some have even argued that social networks are “a more powerful source [of cultural resource] than class itself” Erickson (1996:217). But what are the bases of social networks? Why do some people have big networks, or many “structural holes”, while others have few? What criteria do people use in deciding who is to be included or excluded in their networks? Worthiness is closely related to the amount of regard we have for others, and regard is a priceless good. How much regard we give to others depends on how “worthy” we consider them to be. Regard plays an important role in facilitating and ensuring the efficiency of exchange (Offer 1996), and is also an important basis of social networks. How we judge the worthiness of other people is one of the fundamental basis on which networks are established and consolidated.

Proprietors with or without employees are those in class IV. By the middle classes I refer to those in class I to IV jobs in the Goldthorpe class scheme, or all non-manual workers.
One’s position in the social structure provides opportunities for coming into contact with people (e.g. in the family, at school, at work), and hence shapes our social networks. But we do not form ties with everyone we come into contact with, nor do we provide information, friendship, assistance, services or support to everyone in our networks. Research on the impact of social networks on mobility and status attainment tend to neglect the basis upon which people form and utilize their networks. People’s discretionary powers must not be taken-for-granted. It is ultimately up to agents to decide whether to provide or withhold resources from others in their networks. Research has found that what motivates people to exchange is far more complex than simple principles of. Other factors such as initial attraction (Clark and Mills 1979) and friendship (Berg 1984, Tornbolm and Fredholm 1984) have been found to be significant in whether people decide to cooperate or exchange. We also know that people have the tendency to associate with those who are similar in relevant respects to themselves (Emerson 1972; Marsden and Friedkin 1993). Communicating with someone sharing the same code (or cultural style) strengthens a social tie, and this tie in turn strengthens the code itself (Kanter 1977; Apple 1982; Hirsch 1987; Jackall 1988). It is much more likely that we will help out people to whom we owe a favour, people towards whom we feel affinity and closeness rather than people whom we despise; the more valuable the information, resource, or service, the more likely we will be selective in who we give it to (Foa 1973). We are much more likely to form social networks which matter the most with people whom we regard highly. Although we do not necessarily have to like somebody to include them in our social networks - for networks can be completely instrumental - it is less likely that we will pull strings or go out of our way to do favours for people whom we despise, whom we show little interest in, or whom we have little in common with.

A recent study attempts to answer these question by examining people’s criteria of interpersonal evaluation (Lamont 1992). Using semi-structured interview data, Lamont
compares the cultural styles of a sample of one hundred and sixty French and American white upper-middle class males in terms of the “symbolic boundaries” they draw - i.e. the criteria they use to judge the worthiness of a person. Symbolic boundaries are manifestations of conceptual boundaries, mental maps, stereotypes and prejudices which reflect our more fundamental and deeply held values and beliefs. If the level of socio-cultural formation amongst a particular group is high, not only would the substantial contents of symbolic boundaries evoked be distinguishable from those of other groups, these boundaries are also unlikely to be easily permeable.

Symbolic boundaries between self and others are a form of social exclusion which can be seen as analytically distinct from symbolic exclusion. Social exclusion refers to “a process of social selection that is based on a previously determined set of cultural criteria” and “occurs at the level of social relations”, whereas symbolic exclusion is “the source of those “previously determined cultural criteria”, and depicts the subjective process that orders those social interactions - i.e. taste” (Bryson 1996). In short, symbolic boundaries enable symbolic exclusion, which in turn constitute social exclusion. Symbolic boundaries reflect our self-schemas and shape our actions towards others.

Lamont’s study is based on the assumption that in France and the United States, white upper-middle class men - whom she defines as businessmen, academics, professionals, managers and administrators - have the powers to hire and fire, to set the standards of scientific and intellectual excellence, and influence policies which affect the lives of many. Since they have more control over the distribution of valued resources than other classes or social groups do, how these men evaluate the “worthiness” in others, she argues, directly affects how valued resources are allocated (in this case, valued resources include informal resources such as social networks and shared cultural styles). In short, symbolic boundaries, manifest as criteria of interpersonal evaluation, engender the differential allocation of resources. Lamont constructed a typology of three types of symbolic boundaries - moral,
socioeconomic, and cultural - and found systematic differences in the type of boundaries her respondents draw along a number of cleavages, such as national culture, geographical centrality, intergenerational mobility trajectory, and employment sector. Cultural exclusion, which was the most prominent form of exclusion in France, was considerably less important in the US, where symbolic boundaries based on material success were paramount. Moral exclusion was equally salient in both societies, and stronger in the provincial cities than in Paris or New York.

Lamont made a strong claim about the powers of symbolic boundaries when she said that socioeconomic excluders - i.e. those who judge others on the basis of socioeconomic success - make “direct and unmistaken” contribution to the reproduction of inequality because

the high status signals that they value most unequivocally select people on the basis of their social position. By taking into consideration financial standing, class background, or power when evaluating whether people are interesting or desirable, socioeconomic excluders directly penalize working and lower class people (Lamont 1992:175).

The claim that symbolic boundaries have the inherent power to “directly penalize” those who fall outside of those boundaries is problematic. It is flawed to say that one who values socioeconomic signals by definition excludes those who are not successful, wealthy or powerful, for it is not unreasonable to think that socioeconomic excluders may respect and appreciate those individuals who, despite being less successful and less powerful than themselves, aspire to the qualities which they value, i.e. power, achieve and socioeconomic success. A senior manager who highly values career success may be reluctant to promote a subordinate who lacks ambition and motivation, but may well promote someone who expresses an eager enthusiasm and devotion to socioeconomic success, or someone who aspires to become - but is not quite yet - the next Donald Trump/Bill Gates. Similarly, an accomplished musician may despise those who are not bothered to cultivate an interest in music, but may be happy to meet someone who has little training but eager to learn. That is to say, if working or intermediate class members share the upper-middle class's definitions
of what makes one interesting or worthy, then symbolic and social exclusion is by no means the necessary outcome. It is only when socioeconomic excluders are reluctant to associate themselves with the socioeconomically "unsuccessful" (rather than those who do not draw socioeconomic boundaries themselves) that the implication of symbolic boundaries on social inequality and social reproduction would be as "direct and unmistakable" as Lamont had claimed.

Different social groups are likely to share similar symbolic boundaries if the resources for the construction of these boundaries are more or less equally available to all. The kind of symbolic boundaries we draw depend on our positions in the social structure and the kind of cultural resources available for the construction of boundaries - such as national cultural repertoires, messages diffused through the educational system and the mass media. The nature of symbolic boundaries is therefore firmly social in nature. Hence, they should be accounted for in terms of social structures and people's experiences therein. But in analysing the resources for boundary work, she opts for an explanatory model in which

...the drawing of boundaries does not consist of voluntaristic processes guided by autonomous individual moral or existential programs, but of processes that are largely shaped by culturally available accounts of what defines a worthy person and what behaviors are reasonable... I am also fairly critical of approaches that consider boundary work to be mostly determined by the experience, interest, life history, or social position of individuals, because in their boundary work individuals routinely rely on the cultural rules that are provided to them by their larger environment (Lamont 1992:135, added emphasis).

Lamont has provided little evidence to demonstrate how her respondents are more shaped by culturally available accounts (which I take to mean broad cultural factors), or how they "routinely rely on" these "cultural rules" rather than on their personal experiences and life histories. By turning to broad structural factors and national cultural repertoires (e.g. "pragmatism" in America, "Cartesian" intellectual influence in France) in explaining symbolic boundaries, one gets the impression that supra-individual "culturalist" explanations

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A Jungian, who regards symbols as psychic, i.e. pre- or even non-social, would disagree with me here. Here I refer only to symbolic boundaries which are meaningful only in a social context. Such symbolic boundaries are effective in not only influencing subjective thought and conduct, but more importantly, in influencing others.
are favoured, and that her expressed concern for the role of human agency in the active construction of social reproduction and social change is somewhat betrayed.

Understanding how middle class people evaluate others elucidates the basis on which their most significant social networks are built. Whether or not middle class members share similar criteria in evaluating others also indicates the middle class's level of normative formation. Although the normative level of class formation is important both theoretically and conceptually, it is also the one level of class formation where information is most lacking in class analysis in general (Lockwood 1995). The normative aspect of class formation refers to "the extent to which a class shares common values and beliefs that are manifested in specific norms and forms of behaviour", which is in turn closely related to the relational level of class formation, meaning "the extent to which a class can be identified through its more or less exclusive patterns of informal social interactions, of which the principal indices are intermarriage and informal association" (Lockwood 1995:7). These two levels of class formation are necessarily inter-related, reinforcing one another. For instance, our normative orientations, values, and beliefs shape who we choose to befriend or marry, while people in our social network could also shape our values and beliefs. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the normative or socio-cultural formation of Hong Kong's middle class in terms of the type of symbolic boundaries they draw.

METHOD, DATA COLLECTION, AND DATA ANALYSIS

The target population of the study are Hong Kong's middle classes, including those in service class and intermediate class jobs. Including a wider range of "middle class" subjects allows for comparisons to be made across occupational class, occupational sectors, and employment statuses. The sample was selected from the list of respondents successfully surveyed by the Social Indicators Project (SIP) in Hong Kong during 1992-93.
The target population of the SIP are all adults age eighteen or above living in Hong Kong, excluding non-Chinese speaking households. A target of two thousand respondents were randomly selected from a multi-stage cluster. The SIP questionnaire consists of a set of core questions applicable to all respondents as well as six sub-modules of special topics applicable to six randomly chosen groups from the sample. My sample is selected from successfully interviewed respondents in two of the six sub-modules. Corresponding response rates of successful interviews for these two sub-modules in the SIP survey were 51.0% and 54.1% (or three hundred and five and three hundred and eight cases) respectively. This leaves a valid sample size of six hundred and thirteen individuals from which respondents can be selected for my study. Since my target population is Hong Kong’s middle classes - understood broadly as encompassing all those in non-manual occupations - respondents who are classified as class I, II, III and IV\(^6\) were selected from these six hundred and thirteen cases. A total of two hundred and twelve respondents satisfy the criteria.\(^7\)

These two hundred and twelve prospective respondents were sent a letter of introduction briefly explaining the nature of the study. They were invited to participate, and were told

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\(^4\) A stratified systematic sample of 5,003 addresses were selected from a sample of the Computerized Frame of Quarters (COM-Q). A sample from the COM-Q was stratified with respect to area and type of housing and then systematic sampling was adopted in selecting the addresses. The sample of living quarters selected is of the equal probability of selection method (EPSEM) type. In stage two, interviewers called at each selected address where one household would be selected randomly. For each selected household, the list of all those eligible for inclusion in the sample (i.e. age eighteen or over and residing at the selected household), and one respondent would then be selected to respond to the questionnaire according to a Kish grid.

\(^5\) The Social Indicators Project (SIP) is a bi-annual survey which covers a wide range of topics. It is a joint project undertaken by several tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. I was allowed access to the sampling list of sub-modules administered by the University of Hong Kong. These two modules include questions on popular culture, religion, and economic culture. Valid sample sizes for these two sub-modules were five hundred and ninety-eight and five hundred and sixty-nine respectively.

\(^6\) Self-employed machine operators (such as taxi drivers, minibus drivers), and those without employees were excluded.

\(^7\) One hundred and sixteen and ninety-six from the two sub-modules respectively. This small number of eligible respondents is mainly due to the fact that the target population of the SIP study includes students, the unemployed, as well as the retired.
that I will contact them shortly (either in person or by telephone if numbers were available)\(^9\). A second letter was sent a few days later to remind respondents of my visit by specifying the date and time at which I intended to call at their addresses. Batches of introductory letters, sorted by geographical district, were sent out at two week intervals, and at least ten telephone calls and three personal visits were made in attempt to contact a respondent before s/he was declared a non-response. At the end of the eight month field-work period sixty-three interviews were successfully conducted.\(^9\) The profile of these respondents is comparable to that of Hong Kong’s middle classes; they are predominantly younger, locally born, and have achieved considerable intergenerational mobility compared to their parents (see appendix one for detailed socio-demographic characteristics). Unlike Lamont’s sample, which consists only of white upper-middle class men, my sample allows for comparisons to be made between sub-groups within a broadly defined middle class, such as that between men and women, and between service class and intermediate class people.

\(^9\) In the SIP study, after the completion of each interview, respondents were asked to give their telephone numbers for the purpose of cross-checking. Most but not all respondents were cooperative in this regard, hence some prospective respondents cannot be contacted through the telephone, and I can only approach them in person.

\(^9\) The low response rate (30%) can be attributed to a number of reasons. Respondents who were unemployed or had undergone significant downward mobility since the SIP survey were excluded. Failure to contact a prospective respondent was one of the main reason for low response rate. A large number respondents reside in accommodation equipped with security systems which make direct access to the prospective respondent difficult, especially those whose telephone numbers were not available. Visits frequently resulted in contact with security staff, or other members of the prospective respondent’s household, who often declined the invitation to participate in the study on their behalf. There were also a large number of cases where the respondent could not be contacted even after numerous visits, a problem which might have been overcome had more manpower resources been available. Another reason for the low response rate is that given the time span between the original survey and the present study (a gap of two years), some prospective respondents had changed address. There are also some respondents who declined to be interviewed after successful first contact. Many of whom stated their willingness to fill in a questionnaire, but declined to participate in an in-depth interview. In a handful of cases respondents were put off by the tape recorder. Three interviews were discarded because the respondent failed to cooperate fully during the interview (e.g. refusing to disclose certain information, or giving what I judged to be insincere answers). There are in the end sixty valid cases to be analyzed. Despite the low response rate, these respondents are precisely locatable in the social structure of Hong Kong, with reference to the wider survey analysis (SIP), thus allowing a judgment to be made on whether they can be considered “typical” members of various categories.
I began each interview by inviting respondents to talk about their present jobs, followed by their worklife mobility, family and educational background and a number of other areas before they were probed regarding their symbolic boundaries. It is therefore only after respondents had talked about a range of areas of their lives before they were asked to describe people they consider to be “worthy” of their respect and attention. Interviews lasted from one and a half to three and a half hours, and were recorded on audio tapes. A textual analysis software was used to analyze the data. A constant comparative method of analysis which entailed sorting and coding data into increasingly refined categories was used (Glazer and Strauss 1967).

FINDINGS

Like Lamont, I am only concerned with the type of symbolic boundaries that people draw between ourselves and others. They are also bases on which people say they like or dislike a person. The three types of boundaries identified in her study are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>socioeconomic boundaries: those which are drawn on the basis of judgments of people's social position as indicated by wealth, power, or professional success;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>cultural boundaries: those which are drawn on the basis of education, intelligence, manners, tastes, command of high culture; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>moral boundaries: those which are drawn on the basis of moral character, centered around honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, and consideration for others (Lamont 1992:4).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although this classification is by no means exhaustive, it provides a useful typology as a starting point. Essentially what interests us are the substantial contents of these boundaries.

10 The interview schedule consists of questions of eight major themes: present job, work and career, work history, work and people, education, family, friends and people, and Hong Kong society. In this paper, only their views on symbolic boundaries are reported (i.e. work and people, friends and people).

11 HyperResearch 1.4 was used.

12 Criteria of interpersonal evaluation are, of course, by no means the only type of symbolic boundaries. Musical tastes, for example, can also constitute symbolic boundaries (see Bryson 1996).
I found it useful to distinguish between two aspects of socioeconomic boundaries - the use of wealth and power alone as the basis of interpersonal judgment, and the use of professional credentials and achievement for that purpose; the latter is centered around achievement, whilst the former is not necessarily so. Also, I find it useful to further break down cultural boundaries into those based on behaviour such as manners and etiquette, and epistemic boundaries based such as those based on intelligence and knowledge of high arts.

Criteria Of Worthiness And Unworthiness: Judging Others

All sixty respondents talked about the types of people whom they like and dislike. The frequencies of the criteria by which worthiness in other people is judged are summarized in tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1 Criteria of "worthiness" (frequencies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. good heart, good to others, not calculating</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. something in common</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. honest, sincere, trustworthy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. successful in career</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. possessing characteristics relating to success</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. down-to-earth, easy going, contented</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. hard working/industrious</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. non-conformist, analytical abilities</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. &quot;interesting&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. strong character</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. &quot;easy-going&quot;, sociable and friendly</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. self-reliant</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. observe tradition</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. fulfill responsibilities, respectful towards family</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. can benefit me</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. &quot;studying material&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. good manners</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Criteria of "unworthiness" (frequencies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. materialistic, money-minded</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. dishonest, untrustworthy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. &quot;all talk and no action&quot;</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. lazy, no ambition, no ideals</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. manipulative, instrumental</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. irresponsible</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. &quot;low moral types&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. superficial, ignorant, narrow world view</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. &quot;bad heart&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. &quot;fake&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. think they are better than they really are</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. mainlanders</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. use illegitimate means to reach goals</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. bad manners</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. no respect for others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 As pointed out by Bennett Berger, all symbolic boundaries - as criteria whereby someone's worthiness is judged - are essentially moral in nature for they are fundamentally about good/desirable and bad/undesirable; because of this, he suggested that symbolic boundaries should be more appropriately regarded as different kinds of 'moral vocabularies' (Berger 1995:99-100).
More than one-third of all respondents mentioned having some “something in common” as important in considering whether or not they like someone. In fact, four respondents could not come up with specific criteria of interpersonal judgment other than having something in common with the other person. Coming from similar family or educational backgrounds, having similar life experiences, interests, lifestyles, and outlooks were mentioned. Being of a similar age group or same sex was also mentioned as the basis for possible affinity. Although similarity in itself does not tell us much about the form and content of symbolic boundaries, its popularity goes to show that people do prefer to interact with like-minded people, or people they have something in common with.

The most popular criteria of interpersonal evaluation amongst my respondents are what Lamont calls moral boundaries, i.e. criteria of judgment based on moral soundness, integrity, honesty, and kindness to others. Socioeconomic boundaries or criteria of judgment based on socioeconomic success and achievement, somewhat surprisingly, are not nearly as common as moral boundaries. Cultural boundaries, i.e. those drawn on the basis of cultural sophistication and refinement, intellectual and analytical ability - so prominently featured amongst the French upper-middle class respondents in Lamont’s study - rank rather low for our Hong Kong respondents. I now turn to look at the substantial contents of each type of boundaries.

*The Salience And Content Of Moral Boundaries*

Lamont had found that moral boundaries are of roughly equal importance in both France and the United States for her sample of white, upper-middle class men. I found that moral boundaries are equally if not more important in Hong Kong. Seventy percent of all respondents evoked criteria of worthiness which can be called “moral” in character. However, the substantial contents of these moral boundaries deviate significantly from those
found in Lamont’s study. The emphasis on trustworthiness and notions of “brotherhood” are much more pronounced for my respondents than it is for French and American upper-middle class men.

About one-third of all respondents draw moral boundaries exclusively, eight of whom simultaneously expressed strong disapproval for money-orientedness and materialism. These strong moral excluders are mostly men, and all but three are married. There are only four respondents who did not evoke any kind of moral boundaries at all, and generally have higher educational attainment than those who draw moral boundaries exclusively.15

The importance of trustworthiness

Respondents’ definitions of moral soundness include having a “good heart”, kindness and generosity, having a sense of responsibility, and being respectful to others. These are traits which all suggest the capacity of giving assistance to others regardless of rewards. However, respondents’ descriptions of people who have a good heart are often abstract and highly generalized. Often they failed to give concrete examples of what exactly they mean by a good heart, or what entail a sense of responsibility. In contrast, trustworthiness emerges as a dominant and recurring theme in respondents schemes of interpersonal evaluation, and aroused much greater intensity in respondents’ accounts than when they talked about notions such as “kind-heartedness”. Most respondents were able to recount personal experiences whereby trust had been betrayed, or how trust forms the basis of some of their most significant interpersonal relationships. Being trustworthy is often mentioned in conjunction with being reliable, responsible, and honest. In many cases it is also the defining essence of a true friend.

14 Lamont found that honesty in general and intellectual honesty in particular are the prevailing criteria of worthiness for many of her respondents (Lamont 1992:24-33)

15 They are cases 2, 7, 32, 51. All four are in service class positions with two who are degree holders, and two having reached matriculation level.
Honesty to self and others is the opposite of being “fake”, pretentious, deceitful, and manipulative - all of which are traits that are widely deplored amongst respondents. Trust is crucial if reciprocity is to be honoured and its effectiveness maintained. Mr. Thirty-seven, a lecturer in mechanical engineering in a technical institute, for instance, likes people who are sincere, hardworking, and down-to-earth. He believes that “there are too many people who are too clever, not enough who have both feet on the ground”. And why is it so important that people are “good” in this sense?

[because]...you can trust them more, and that’s the most important thing in the quality of a person, whether or not you can trust them, how sincere they are. If they are down-to-earth, they are usually people whom you can trust, because these people, they don’t pretend to be something they are not, and they are also more “true” towards other people, they tell you what they think and they can give you straight forward answers to your questions.
(Case 37, lecturer, age 36, married, tertiary non-degree)

Mr. Thirty-seven also thinks that it is important for people to be good to their friends and take their family responsibilities seriously, because people who can do these things “can’t be too bad”. People he dislikes are those who are overly ambitious but do not have the talent to achieve things.

People who talk but don’t achieve anything. I’m not saying that it is bad to be ambitious, like my brother, and many of my friends, I consider them as pretty ambitious. But at the same time they also got the stuff to achieve what they want. They work hard and in a way they are down-to-earth people too because you know you can trust them and they only say what they mean. So it’s not ambition alone that makes someone’s quality lower or higher.
(Case 37, lecturer, age 36, married, tertiary non-degree)

The importance of trustworthiness is illustrated by the fact that even for respondents who claimed they do not use any particular criteria to judge other people, trust is often retained as the bottom line. Ms. Fifty, for example, claimed that she does not have very high demands about people, but still stressed the importance of interpersonal trust, “in the last instance”:

if I can get along with someone then I will like them, as long as you don’t try to do things to harm me. If you don’t harm me, I don’t harm you...I don’t like to be on guard all the time, always have to be careful whether or not you are trying to cheat me. Trust is very important. I like people whom I can trust....Do your own thing, do what you like, but don’t try to cheat me.
(Case 50, sales representative, age 34, married, junior secondary)

The opposite of trustworthy people are those who are “cheat” you, take advantage or you, or “stab you in the back”; the meaning of trust here refers specifically to “trust that you won’t
harm me”, rather than “trust that you will keep a secret” or “trust that you will remain loyal”. Many respondents expressed great contempt for people who are “back-stabbers”, people who betray their friends, and those who have no sense of “brotherhood”; closely associated are those who are disrespectful to others, self-centered, and irresponsible. In short, there is much aversion towards people who use others for their own ends, with no regard for the other person’s interest or their relationship with the other person.

Why is trustworthiness so highly valued by respondent regardless of occupational class, age, sex or educational attainment? One possible explanation is that this may be a consequence of high density and stressful living, which characterize life in contemporary Hong Kong. It has been found that Hong Kong people are generally more cautious of one another compared to people in the USA and China, and that education does not seem to have much effect on the degree to which Hong Kong people trust one another. However, the old of Hong Kong and China have a more favourable perception of others than their younger counterparts. More importantly, those who have low level of interpersonal trust also tend to, as well as perceive themselves to have, a smaller acquaintance network (Ho and Kochen 1987).

In a society where interpersonal trust is low, where people constantly feel the need to be “on guard”, where dishonesty is seen as increasingly prevalent and acceptable16, someone who is trustworthy and honest becomes more valuable. The difficulty in finding someone who can be trusted is summarized by Mr. Thirty-six:

If you meet someone new now, it’ll take a long time to get to know the person. And frankly speaking, if you are not useful to them, you’ll ask yourself, why is this person being so nice to me? He must be up to something. People now are very cautious, [there are] many different kinds of people, and you have to protect yourself.
(Case 36, age 23, accounts clerk, single, senior secondary)

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16 A recent survey of fifteen to twenty-nine year olds found that more than one-fifth of respondents said they would ‘give bribes’ if it would solve an immediate problem. (‘Honesty only brings poverty say youngsters’ South China Morning Post, 16th July 1997).
Apart from the competitive and stressful nature of life in Hong Kong which is experienced across social divisions, another reason why respondents, regardless of socioeconomic status, equally draw upon moral boundaries could be due to the fact that compared to socioeconomic and cultural boundaries, they are relatively costless to evoke. It is easier to criticize other people as morally unsound or untrustworthy than to criticize their lack of wealth, power, or cultural sophistication. This is because indications of one’s moral integrity is less obvious than that of one’s wealth, power, or cultural sophistication. While I do not need to justify my own moral integrity when I criticize others, criticizing others for being unsuccessful or having no culture is more difficult if I was unsuccessful or have no culture myself.

*All Talk And No Action: “Time Wasters”, “Phonies”, And “Fakes”*

A second category of unworthy persons mentioned by my respondents are not dissimilar to Lamont’s description of “phonies”. Phonies are “people who are not sincere; who pretend to know more than they do, or to be something they are not; who have no substance and judge a book by its cover,... they try to put on a show...the non-phony is a doer and not a ‘big mouth’” (Lamont 1992:26). These are people who do not “keep their feet on the ground”, do not mean what they say, do not have the “stuff” but try to give off the impression that they have. Although they have high ambitions, they rarely put in real efforts to achieve them. Instead, they spend their time bragging about their own achievements, which are not always true, and engaging in futile exercises of impression management by talking about their great plans, great schemes, great opportunities and great networks.

...some people I really dislike, and there are many of them in Hong Kong, are people who are "mo lieu" [haven’t got the stuff] but pretend to be “yau lieu” [got the stuff]. Like, people who are fake to others, smile at you and once you turn round they stab you in the back. These people are very frightening. A fox wearing sheep skin. These are the worse. .....I feel sorry for them. They could change into a better person but they don’t want to, and sometimes I feel I despise them.

(Case 41, merchandiser, age 25, degree)
The kind of people who live with their heads up in the air, chasing fame and fortune, but they don’t look in the mirror and see what they are like. Their hearts are high up but they don’t keep their feet on the ground, not working solidly to get what they want…there are many people like that, and they will be scared if people knock on their doors in the middle of the night, because they have probably done something bad to others, that’s why they will be scared. But me, I am not afraid of anyone or anything… I can face up to the sky and the earth and my own conscience, I have nothing to fear. For me, one is one and two is two, I don’t like to live my life muddling through. I believe in the importance of principles, that’s the most important thing for a human being.
(Case 16, restaurant manager, age 42, senior secondary)

Underlying this animosity towards “phonies” and “chancers” is a belief in the meritocratic principle - that people are worthy of respect only if they truly deserve what they get. Respondents who expressed contempt for this category of people are more commonly found amongst those in class III and IV occupations, as well as those with medium level of educational attainment (i.e. senior secondary level).

The opposite of phonies and chancers are people who put in real efforts. Although industriousness was mentioned by some respondents as a desirable trait, it is not necessarily considered to be related to success.\textsuperscript{17} For the ten respondents who hold hardworking people in high esteem, industriousness is often seen as a way of making oneself useful and productive, Hard work is seen as a good in itself rather than as a means to some end. These respondents’ also have a work ethic which is strongly moral in character. This shows that industriousness is used to judge not only themselves but others as well. In short, how we evaluate others’ worthiness is also likely to be how we evaluate ourselves.

\textit{I’m Better Than You Because You Think You’re Better Than Me : Snobs, etc.}

Some respondents expressed dislike for people who feel superior to others, in particular those who think that they are better than they really are. Not many people like being looked down upon or made to feel inferior:

\textsuperscript{17} Industriousness was seldom mentioned as the key to success. Instead, qualities like “smartness”, “quick mind”, “luck”, and “determination” regularly cropped up. While this might mean that personal ability is seen as important, and that the competition for success in Hong Kong follows the rules of meritocracy, a few respondents did mention the importance of having “rich parents.”
...people who talk too much, um, people who are always talking about themselves, how good they are... when they are not really... people who think that they have achieved a lot, think that they are rich and so they are better than others, that they are up there and you are down there... I don’t like people like that... [like my boss’s wife], she talks all the time, bossing people around is her specialty. Always showing off.

(Case 9, clerk, age 37, senior secondary)

Respondents who dislike people who make them feel inferior often refer to people who are in positions of greater power or wealth than themselves. Mr. Three described his dislike for some of his clients, who are generally the more highly educated, the professionals. But there are other people too. Because horrible people come from all classes. Some of those “tai tais” [i.e. rich married women], usually these people think that they are better than you are. If it’s just a little working man, they are usually nicer. It’s only those who think that they are better than you, those who don’t have much respect for other people who are horrible.

(Case 3, insurance sales supervisor, age 32, senior secondary)

Being made to feel inferior is not a welcomed feeling, and aversion against those who look down upon others on the basis of wealth, knowledge or power is strong amongst some respondents. This demonstrates that boundary work does exist in a real sense and is felt strongly by some respondents. This also goes to show that once boundaries are made public or are made to be felt, the result is usually increased reciprocal animosity.

*Low Moral Types: Criminals, Adulterers, “Pill-Poppers” And “Perverts”*

One very specific category of unworthiness refer to people who are “low moral types” - ranging from criminals (e.g. “rapists”, “murderers”, “drug dealers”), to the morally unsound (e.g. “adulterers”, “womanizers”, “pill poppers”, “perverts”), to those whose behavioural patterns are considered undesirable (e.g. “talkative”, “flirtatious”). Amongst the seven respondents who expressed contempt towards these “low moral types”, five are female routine non-manual workers, while the two men are both proprietors. Their educational levels are relatively low compared to the sample as a whole - only one respondent reached matriculation, with three who reached only senior and junior secondary respectively.

The reason why more women appear in this category of moral excluders is because they frequently expressed distaste towards “womanizers”, “adulterers”, men who keep mistresses,
and women who are flirtatious. The reason why we do not find any highly educated respondents or service class workers in this category may be due to the fact that these type of traditional definitions of morality - in terms of “normal” or “acceptable” and “deviant” or “criminal” - may be simplistic for them. The highly educated are likely to have a larger and more complex vocabulary of morality. For respondents who have less education, these “low moral types” are obvious choices for what they consider to be “undesirable” or “unworthy” people. This again suggests that educational level may be an important resource from which boundary work draws upon.

"Mainlanders": Lazy, Uncivilized, And Greedy

Apart from “low moral types”, another distinctive category of “undesirables” are mainland Chinese people. For these respondents, “mainlanders” epitomize much of what they consider undesirable and distasteful. Ms. Fifty-four was convinced that after July 1997, Hong Kong will be “swarmed” with mainlanders, who are:

not only greedy for money, they have no concept of the law. These people will do anything....They are already everywhere, look around you, if you see someone spitting in the streets, dressed badly, smells, and stares at you blatantly, they are usually mainlanders.
(Case 54, financial controller, age 41, matriculation, born in Hong Kong)

Mr. Two gave mainlanders as an example when I asked him why certain people are, according to him, shallow and “don’t know much”:

...many mainland Chinese, I dislike them because of their educational background, the way they look at things are not civilized enough... appearance, politeness, things like that, maybe it has something to do with how much they study.
(Case 2, environmental engineer, age 29, postgraduate, born in Hong Kong)

Hong Kong people’s prejudices against mainland Chinese are not new. Mainlanders are an easily identifiable and stigmatized group, and respondents’ attitudes towards them reflect the well surveyed fact that there are more Hong Kong people who identify themselves as “Hong Kongers” rather than “Chinese” (Lau and Kuan 1988; Ang 1993; Wong 1996). The division between new immigrants and established Hong Kongers is not a new one, and it is likely to
intensify in the future.¹⁸ The division between mainlanders and local Hong Kongers more often than not cross-cuts class division - many newly arrived Chinese migrants have little education and can only take up low paid jobs. While the cultural differences between Hong Kong and more affluent parts of China has been greatly reduced in the past decade or so, many Hong Kong people still feel strongly about immigrants, and this is reflected in some of our respondents’ views. It appears that second generation Hong Kong born service class are most unsympathetic and feel superior to mainlanders.

Material Success And The Ability To Achieve - Socioeconomic Boundaries

The second most frequently evoked criteria in interpersonal evaluation is what Lamont calls socioeconomic boundaries. Although there are thirty-four respondents who summoned forth this type of boundary, only two did so exclusively. Socioeconomic boundaries are most frequently evoked alongside moral boundaries, but their substantial contents differ slightly from that of Lamont’s. For her American and French white upper middle class male respondents, socioeconomic excluders “define desirability on the basis of social position as read through professional prestige, race, financial standing, class background, power, and visibility in prestigious social circles. Typically, people who fall in this category feel inferior to ‘highly successful, highly aggressive people’...they might be envious of people who ‘succeed very well and very strongly’...In short, people who draw socioeconomic boundaries are attracted by success” (Lamont 1992:63). However, in her book, there is little in-depth

¹⁸ Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR)’s mini-constitution, the Basic Law, grants right of abode to all mainland children with at least one parent who is a Hong Kong resident. Conservative estimate of the number of such eligible children is around 100,000. It is therefore expected that the numbers will continue to rise. Much controversy surrounds the ongoing supreme court case in which the government’s decision to repatriate these eligible children is being challenged, and opinion polls consistently reveal that most Hong Kong people support repatriation.
discussion on the definitions of success *per se*. Most socioeconomic excluders expressed admiration and affinity towards people who are successful in their careers, such as people who have achieved a high position within a short period of time, or those who have made a lot of money “with their two bare hands”. They should perhaps more appropriately be called *achievement* excluders. These achievement excluders also mentioned a number of characteristics which are related to success, such as being “smart”, “got the stuff”, “got guts”, being “driven” and ambitious. They have much contempt towards people who have no career goals, “don’t plan for themselves”, and those who are “not progressive” or lazy. There is generally less emphasis on the actual amount of wealth and power one has; only a handful of respondents said they admire people who can make money regardless of how the means employed. It is much more widespread that respondents stress the *ability* to succeed, rather than the actual material and socioeconomic gains that success yields. My data shows that money making is acceptable by these respondents only if it is done the right way. Blindly going for money is frowned upon. It is achievement itself and not the consequences of achievement that gains admiration amongst many of my respondents. Mr. Thirty-six below, for example, likes people who “made it”, by which he means:

...people who are successful...is to go from rags to riches, just with their two bare hands. That is successful. I think many people in Hong Kong are like that, because they have high motivation to succeed, and they have good business ideas, and they are smart and their minds turn quickly, so they can be successful.
(Case 36, accounts clerk; age 23; senior secondary).

A high value placed on socioeconomic achievement again reflects a strong belief in equality of opportunities to succeed, and belief in a society which rewards individuals on the basis of meritocratic principles. The fact that it is not poverty or low socioeconomic status itself but the lack of will and determination to strive for success that generates contempt by no means suggest that money is not important for our respondents. In fact, all respondents

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19 I also probed respondents on their definitions of success, and there is by no means a clear consensus. While most respondents can say what success means in Hong Kong, this does not necessarily mean that they agree with that meaning personally. It is very common for respondents to
acknowledged the importance of money. But it is only those who made money with their own efforts who are most worthy of respect.

**Materialistic, Money-Oriented, Calculative, And Workaholics: “Typical” Hong Kongers**

Despite being frequently described as a materialistic society where money and crude status symbols such as luxury goods are highly sought after (Cheng 1996), there are seventeen respondents who expressed contempt towards people who are materialistic or use money as a yardstick for most things. Anti-materialism does not contradict the value which some of them place on the importance of socioeconomic success, for they are not the same as a rejection of this-worldly success. The type of unworthy people in question are those who boast about their wealth and possessions, and those who are single-mindedly money-oriented. Only in one extreme case did the respondent make an across the board remark and claim that most rich people are “bastards”. Much more common is the expression of contempt for people who put money above all else. Ms. Fifty-six for instance, claims that

> it’s very good if you can make a lot of money, but that’s not very important...doesn’t mean you are a good person.[I dislike] people who only think about money whatever they do, people who put money very high up...

(Case 56, employment agency consultant, age 32, senior secondary)

Her dislike for people who are concerned about money can be traced back to her father, whom she described as

> a very stubborn man...he cares a lot about money. Really concerned about how much money he had put on us and how much we are giving him, that’s all he could talk about, money. Even when I was a kid, if he caught my mother giving us money, he would get really worked up and said “what was that for!”, “how much you gave them!”, “why didn’t you ask me first!”, even if it was only five dollars or something. I really dislike him for that. He is so petty.

(Case 56, employment agency consultant, age 32, senior secondary)

Ms. Fifty-six’s account of why she hates people who only talk about money is revealing. Although she blamed her father’s money-mindedness for having caused fights in the family and for leaving a bad “childhood shadow” on her, she also admitted that if her family had

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have several definitions of success - e.g. the meaning of success in society, the meaning of success for oneself, and the meaning of success in terms of one’s roles in the family or in the workplace.

22
been richer these problems would not have existed. Her dislike for money-minded people
does not exclude the belief that money can indeed solve many problems. Ms. Forty-four is
another respondent who expressed animosity towards people who boast about their wealth, or
use money as a yardstick to measure their own and other people’s worth:

people who boast all the time [...] tell the whole world, have to be the first in everything, the best.
Even if it’s not them who’s bought this or done that, if it’s someone they know, then they speak
as if it’s themselves. Ha! They think they’re so brilliant. I think to myself, who do you think
you are anyway, and if you are really so rich or so great, why do you have to tell everyone, am I
right? It’s because you haven’t got it that’s why you have to raise your voice. [...] If they like to
boast, I let you boast as much as you like, just let them be. They’ll eventually meet people who
are really better than them, know better than them, then they’ll lose face...[what do they boast
about?] oh, all sorts...like, how much their flats cost, how many houses they have in Canada, how
beautiful Europe is, how much money their kids are making, things like that.
(Case 44, typist, age 40, senior secondary)

Ms. Forty-four’s dislike of people who boast about their riches might not be entirely
unrelated to the fact that she herself does not own any flats, nor has she ever been to Europe.
Drawing anti-materialist boundaries of this sort is perhaps the result of real differences in
wealth rather than some underlying morality. It is not unlikely that she might feel less
dislike for such people if she herself had been to Europe, or that her children make a lot of
money.

Fourteen out of the seventeen respondents who draw anti-materialistic boundaries, are
routine non-manual workers, and they fall into two categories: on the one hand are
respondents who dislike people who put money before all else; on the other hand are those
who boast about their wealth, so as to make others feel inferior. The three service class
respondents who draw anti-materialist boundaries, on the other hand, more commonly
regards materialistic people as shallow.

I didn’t say money is not important. Only if you blindly chase after materialistic things, it is not
good. As a person...happy three meals a day, well maybe five, sixteen! (laugh) then that ‘s okay.
[What do you mean by blindly going after materialistic things?] Some people, they don’t really
know if they like one thing. Because it is famous, because it is expensive, many people have it,
so they buy it. There are lots of people like that. [...] like, this someone I know, who bought
these bags, I asked whether s/he likes it, and s/he couldn’t answer. I asked why you buy it in the
first place? And the answer is, because many people own one.
(Case 2, environmental engineer, age 29, postgraduate)
Some respondents have more elaborate theories about why people are materialistic or money-oriented. For Mr. Thirteen below, it is all about the need to conform to social expectations, and the importance of “face” in Hong Kong society.

your average man in the street,...I think they are very preoccupied with their own lives, and their own little world, and they worry about money a lot, always thinking about how to make more money, and they like to measure things with money, every things that are by definition not measurable by money...[such as]love and marriage children....marriage is not about love or having your own family, their preoccupation is about the mortgage and the financial benefits of getting married, and Hong Kong people love to have face, even if they cannot afford it, they have to splash out a banquet of forty tables in a hotel, spending unnecessary money, and these things have nothing to do with marring someone you like. But I see my friends getting married, I ask them why do you do this if you can’t afford it? They just everyone does it, of course it has to be done....they just do thinks because every one else does it...if they don’t they will lose face. It’s showing people that you have the money to do that kind of thing.
(Case 13, age 24, sales supervisor, senior secondary)

Mr. Thirteen’s views on face are very similar to Mr. Five’s, who think that there are many people who “slap themselves in the face to make themselves look fatter” (case 5, self-employed dentist, age 41, degree). Those who feel compelled to “keep up with the Chans” are seen as shallow and unworthy of respect.

Also noteworthy are respondents who draw anti-achievement boundaries, i.e. they express distaste and contempt towards people who are “workaholics”, people how “only think about how to succeed”, those who “put their career before everything else”, as well as people who are “too serious about work”. There are six respondents who think that being career-obsessed is unhealthy and somewhat meaningless. These six respondents did not show much career ambition for themselves when talking about their values and attitudes towards work and career, and none of them are in service class occupations. This demonstrates that self-conceptions and the substantial contents of the kind of symbolic boundaries one draws are intimately associated, and that one’s proximate conditions of life affects both boundary qua self and boundary qua others.
Not One Of The Crowd - Cultural Excluders

Even though it is generally believed that conformity is a cultural trait in Hong Kong and in east Asian cultures in general, and that some of our respondents indeed described the "typical Hong Konger" as lacking in individuality, there are a number of respondents who place a high value on non-conformity and individuality. These respondents like people who stand out amongst the crowd. They often associate non-conformity with superior intellectual and analytical abilities, possession of a wide base of general knowledge, and being generally "interesting". One-third of all respondents evoked cultural criteria in assessing the worthiness of others, although only one did so exclusively. It is much more common that cultural refinement, intellectual abilities and individual style are evoked alongside moral or socioeconomic boundaries than on its own. The following examples illustrate the contents of cultural boundaries drawn by my respondents.

Mr. Twenty-four was born in Beijing and came to Hong Kong with his family when he was only four. After graduating from Hong Kong university he did a masters' course in a British university. Like his father, he is a civil engineer, and is married to a systems analyst with a three year old son. His flat is tastefully decorated in Chinese style and is spacious by most Hong Kong standards. He is a keen reader who enjoys both Chinese and English contemporary literature (unlike his father, who has a passion for Chinese classics) - at the time of the interview his reading material was a three volume Chinese historical novel. He likes to "keep the brain cells working, and read about new things and new ideas that are happening in the world". In his spare time he enjoys writing news commentary, book reviews, but claims to be "not very good". He and his wife like to organize dinner parties with friends, or maybe take the company yacht out for a trip to the outlying islands for seafood during weekends. He likes people who
dare to be different, not just for the sake of being different, but because they dare to move away from the crowd and be themselves, because most people are not like that. Most people, they don't really think differently, they like to be like everyone else. [I like people with] strong characters, [people who] stand out from the crowd, people who have their own minds.
(Case 24, civil engineer, age 39, postgraduate)
Mr. Twenty-four is similar to Ms. Forty-one, who is also a strong cultural excluder. Ms. Forty-one is a university graduate who is ambitious, articulate, and shares Mr. Twenty-four’s high regard for people who have their own opinions. She thinks that one’s educational level has a lot to do with whether one is intellectually independent or not. Although her friends all come from different family backgrounds, it is their common experience in university that binds them together. More importantly, they are all “smart people, the kind who have always been very good at school”. She emphasizes intellectual ability and rational thinking traits which she warms to:

I like people who are clever, people with a good brain and can use their brain. This kind of people, they stand out from the crowd. They are different. You can spot them very easily, from the way they look and the way they talk...just the whole person, is at ease with themselves and very comfortable, and you can feel that they are sincere about what they say, and even if they don’t agree with you they will be polite about it. Like explain why they don’t agree with you...this kind of people...they make you feel comfortable when you are around them...people who have their own opinions on things, not just following what other people have said. Many people, they say things without thinking first, and that is very annoying.....I’m very argumentative. If I think you are wrong I want to know your reasons why...most people they can’t answer. People who can give you a good answer, I really admire [them]. Even though I might not agree with their opinion...but if they can tell me their reasoning, why they think like that, then I’m willing to accept defeat. ...this kind of people are quite rare. But I love talking to them....sometimes a good conversation is better than many things.
(Case 41, age 25, merchandiser, degree)

Respondents who draw cultural boundaries of this type are typically highly educated, are mostly in service class occupations, and often contrast their friends and themselves to “typical” Hong Kong people. Another common characteristic of cultural excluders is that most of them emphasize the intrinsic values of education. While nearly all respondents agreed that education is important, cultural excluders tend to play down the instrumental value of educational qualifications, and stress instead on how education (university education in particular) develops one’s analytical and organizational abilities, and trains one’s independence and individuality. They also tend to feel superior to people who see education as “only a piece of paper”. Cultural excluders with lower educational attainment tend to place less emphasis on intellectual abilities and rational thinking; they are more inclined to value people who are “interesting”, people who had “seen the world”, people whom they
could learn from. In addition, their views on the meaning and value of education also tend to be more instrumental in orientation.

In contrast to Lamont’s findings, where many cultural excluders do not feel superior to people who are “philistines”, knowledge and appreciation of high arts do not seem to be that important for our cultural excluders. This is hardly surprising given the marginal status of the high arts in Hong Kong. Taste as reflected in lifestyle was mentioned by some cultural excluders, but far less prominently when compared to Lamont’s respondents. The actual contents of cultural boundaries drawn by my respondents are generally less varied than those found amongst French and American upper-middle class men.

SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND THEIR DISTRIBUTION

So far I have described the contents of the three types of symbolic boundaries evoked by my respondents. In this section I compare their distribution amongst respondents in terms of educational attainment, occupational class, age cohort, and gender, and discuss the implications for social network formation and normative formation. In her study, Lamont gave a quantitative score of one to five to each of her respondents along the three dimensions of moral, cultural and socioeconomic boundaries, as an indication of respective “strength” of these three types of boundaries in each case. I used a different coding system, which only takes into account the types of boundaries evoked, regardless of their “strength”. I do so because of two reasons. Firstly, unlike Lamont who has research assistants to cross-check the reliability of codes assigned to each respondent, I have no such help and relying on my own judgment to assign codes would be subject to a reliability problem. Secondly, even if there were assistants to cross-check coding for reliability, the degree of arbitrariness in assigning a quantitative code to each interview is enough to throw findings into doubt. To avoid these shortcomings, I adopted a coding method that is less judgmental and more straightforward. For each respondent who evoked moral criteria in evaluating the type of
people they like or dislike, they are described as a “moral excluder”. If they further evoke other types of boundaries, such as socioeconomic or cultural, they are also taken to be socioeconomic or cultural excluders. Although this method of coding does not tell us qualitative differences in terms of “strength” of each type of boundaries for each particular case, it does tell us the exclusiveness of different types of boundaries. These results are summarized in tables 3a and 3b below.

### Table 3a Symbolic boundaries by educational attainment, (n)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Moral</th>
<th>Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Moral &amp; Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; Cultural</th>
<th>Cultural &amp; Socioeconomic</th>
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<th>Total</th>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>12</td>
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### Table 3b Symbolic boundaries by educational attainment, collapsed categories, row % (n)

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<th>Cultural</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>senior secondary or below</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of respondents are either exclusively moral excluders (nineteen cases) or use both moral and socioeconomic criteria (also nineteen cases) in evaluating other people’s worthiness. There is also a considerable proportion of respondents who evoked all three types of boundaries (twelve cases), of whom the highest concentration is amongst degree holders. On the contrary, none of the exclusively moral excluders are degree holders. In fact, degree holders are much less exclusive in terms of the type of boundaries they draw. Only one degree holder evoked any one type of boundary exclusively (cultural) - the others all draw upon more than one criteria in their assessment of other people’s worthiness. Tertiary non-degree holders, on the other hand, all draw some kind of moral boundaries, but none of them draw upon cultural boundaries. Those with medium level of educational attainment are more exclusive - five out of eleven matriculated respondents and just under
one-third of all senior secondary respondents are exclusively moral excluders. Those with junior secondary or below level of education are also predominantly moral excluders, although socioeconomic achievement are also important for many of them. Table 4b shows that respondents with senior secondary or below level of educational attainment all evoked some kind of moral criteria in assessing other people's worth. What this suggests is that respondents with lower levels of education are more prone to use moral criteria in interpersonal evaluation, whereas those with higher levels of education are more likely to use multiple criteria in their boundary work. Next I look at the distribution of boundaries evoked by class.

Table 4a Symbolic boundaries by occupational class (n)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Moral</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; cultural</th>
<th>Cultural &amp; socioeconomic</th>
<th>All three</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4b Symbolic boundaries by occupational class, collapsed categories, row % (n)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Moral</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; cultural</th>
<th>Cultural &amp; socioeconomic</th>
<th>All three</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I+II</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III+IV</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>(60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution of the types of boundaries drawn are less obvious along class lines. Those who draw upon moral boundaries exclusively are well represented in all four classes, as are those who draw upon all three types of boundaries. While thirty-one percent of all class III+IV respondents evoked cultural boundaries, all did so in conjunction with the other two types of boundaries, and amongst them there is a higher proportion who evoked moral boundaries together with socioeconomic boundaries than service class respondents. Table 5 gives a better view of the proportion of respondents of different classes educational attainment who evoked a particular type of boundary.
Table 5 Symbolic Boundaries by class and education (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Moral excluders</th>
<th>Socioeconomic excluders</th>
<th>Cultural excluders</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I+II</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II+IV</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matriculation or above</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior secondary or below</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see that while all class III and IV respondents evoked some kind of moral boundaries, and most class I and class II respondents did the same, the case is slightly different for socioeconomic and cultural boundaries. A slightly higher proportion of intermediate class respondents evoked socioeconomic boundaries than service class respondents did, and a much greater proportion of service class respondents evoked cultural boundaries than intermediate class respondents did. In terms of educational attainment, all respondents with senior secondary or below mentioned some kind of moral criteria in evaluating other people, compared to slightly fewer who reached at least matriculation level (87%). Cultural excluders are most highly concentrated amongst those with matriculation or above educational attainment, while socioeconomic excluders are slightly more likely to be found in the intermediate classes and amongst those with senior secondary or below education.

Apart from class and educational attainment, age cohort is also likely to make a difference on the type of boundaries drawn, since the type of resources available for boundary construction changes over time. Do respondents from different age groups draw boundaries differently?

Table 6 Symbolic boundaries by age group, row % (n)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>age group</th>
<th>Moral</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; socioeconomic</th>
<th>Moral &amp; cultural</th>
<th>Cultural &amp; socioeconomic</th>
<th>All three</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40s+</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>(60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because of the high concentration of respondents in their twenties and thirties within the sample, it may not be all that meaningful to look for age differences in boundary work. In our sample, however, some clear lines of cleavage can still be found; most obvious being that
the overwhelming majority of respondents who evoked cultural criteria in interpersonal evaluation are in their twenties and thirties. It also appears that younger respondents are likely to draw multiple boundaries based on not only one type of moral discourse. In addition, there are slightly more older respondents who draw moral boundaries than there are younger respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7 Symbolic boundaries by sex, row %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of sex, the differences in types of boundaries evoked is not that great, although all respondents who only draw socioeconomic boundaries are men, while there is a higher proportion of female respondents who draw upon moral criteria along with cultural or socioeconomic criteria in interpersonal evaluation. This may be a reflection of the societal expectations of importance of career and socioeconomic achievement for men rather than for women.

CONCLUSION

The fact that symbolic boundaries are not randomly distributed suggests that social networks are not only shaped by our positions in the social structure, but also shaped by the criteria with which we evaluate ourselves and others. What does the distribution of symbolic boundaries tell us? What are the implications for social network building and middle class formation?

Firstly, the widespread use of moral boundaries suggests that moral criteria are least likely to be monopolized or exclusively deployed by any one class or social group to construct social boundaries. Having said so, there are still fewer service class respondents and those with higher educational attainment who evoked moral boundaries. The fact that intermediate class respondents and those with low to medium educational attainment more
frequently evoke moral boundaries also mean that being trustworthy, honest, responsible and generous are more important to them than it is to the service class and highly educated people. In other words, service class people are less likely to form significant interpersonal relationships with people just because they are morally sound.

Secondly, the fact that highly educated respondents are more likely to draw cultural boundaries suggest that they are most likely to associate with other highly educated people. Although non-degree holders also tend to draw cultural boundaries, the contents of these boundaries differ between degree and non-degree holders - the former are much more insistent in the intellectual benefits of a college education, and distance themselves from “ordinary” or typical Hong Kong people, whereas the latter are more interested in people with good general knowledge and are “interesting”.

Thirdly, unlike Lamont, who argued that socioeconomic excluders are most likely to disadvantage those who are unsuccessful or poor, I found that there are actually more intermediate class respondents and those with lower educational attainment who evoked socioeconomic or achievement boundaries. What this means is that achievement and socioeconomic success is probably just as valued by intermediate class people as it is by service class people (as well as those with varying levels of educational attainment). As seen earlier, the type of socioeconomic boundaries evoked are not so much about actual wealth or power, but more about the will and determination to achieve, in particular for those come from modest family backgrounds. In short, people who “make it” on their own are held in higher esteem than are people who were born with a silver spoon. It is people who do not want to succeed who are seen as unworthy. This means that crude economic wealth, power and prestige are not the most important basis on which people are judged. Anti-materialist boundaries also show difference between the highly educated and the less educated. The highly educated tend to regard materialistic people as shallow, whereas the less educated tend to regard money-orientedness as offensive and boastful.
If symbolic boundaries are to be effectively utilized in social exclusion and inclusion, then they must not be equally accessible by all. My findings suggest that the highly educated section of Hong Kong’s middle classes are likely to be most exclusive and most successfully in generating mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion - being unsuccessful or less educated does not necessarily mean that one will be considered unworthy by moral or socio-economic excluders; being “typically Hong Kong”, having little training in analytical and intellectual abilities, however, implies that one is unlikely to form friendship associations with cultural excluders.

In a recent review, it was pointed out that the growing importance of credentials for entry into service class positions is likely to have the long-term effect of enhancing cultural homogeneity within the new middle class (Lui 1997:213). My findings provide support for this argument. The distribution of the three types of boundaries suggests that highly educated respondents more readily draw cultural boundaries than other groups, even though they are also less likely to draw exclusive boundaries than other groups.

In Hong Kong, it is generally believed that the most commonly accepted and widely acknowledged high status signals are pecuniary. Hong Kong people are also infamous for their high per capita consumption of luxury goods such as X.O. cognac, European sports cars, jewelry, seafood delicacies and so on. This is a city where people supposedly “work hard and spend hard”. Icons of contemporary Hong Kong are successful businessmen and industrialists, pop stars and movie stars who can make millions in minutes. Traditional forms of high status signals in the west, such as the high arts, remain remote and irrelevant to most people. Give that there is little “old money” in Hong Kong, social status is generally seen as achieved rather than ascribed. From respondents accounts of what they consider to be worthy in a person, I find that such generalizations and clichés are not all applicable to the middle class. Achievement, rather than brute wealth and power alone, are the real yardsticks of success; moral integrity, in the form of trustworthiness, remains central to many people’s
mental maps; intellectual powers are strongly valued by the highly educated. These findings may be preliminary, but they do invite us to take a closer look at the various cleavages that are in formation within the normative and symbolic sphere of Hong Kong’s middle classes.

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