

CHAPTER 6 HOUSEHOLD HISTORY AND MIGRATION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The impact of industrialization cycles on the household economy has been the subject of much writing in recent years. The focus of historical demographers, social historians and historically-oriented sociologists and economists concerns the theoretical and empirical issues involved in the household economy. These issues include the role of the household as a production and consumption unit, the sexual division of labour, the relationships between patriarchy and the capitalist mode of production, the domestic labour debate, and household adaptive strategies.

In the 1970s, a number of peripheral economies achieved high growth rates through rapid industrialization under an emerging NIDL. This was based on the redeployment of capital to specially-created export-processing zones in the periphery where cheap labour was used to produce goods for export. As we saw in the previous chapter, this cheap labour was usually drawn from the surrounding rural areas or urban surplus population. The incorporation of rural-urban migrants in the new labour force constituted a process of social transformation of major importance in recent times.

This chapter uses the household approach as a prism to separate structural processes which impinge on the migrant. It had been argued that an analysis of the migrant, isolated from his original household context provides only a limited understanding of a complicated process. Through the household approach, whether focused on the structural aspects of the household such as the family demographic structure and household economy, or focused on processes such as household adaptive strategies and practices, the various forces at the different levels of the international, national, regional and local, are brought together within the microcosm of the household.

Two major issues are dealt with in this chapter. The first concerns the decision to migrate in the context of the household economy. The second is central to this thesis. It is the preservation or dissolution of the two-circuits which can be examined through the migration of the factory worker, the links she maintains with her family and the effect of the retrenchment, seen as cycles of the electronics industry and the world economy.

Concerning the decision to migrate, which has been dealt with more superficially in the

previous chapters, this chapter examines why the person in the particular household became an outmigrant. In other words, what were the demographic features such as sibling order, sex order, and timing of different events of other members of the family that influenced that act of moving. What were the broader socio-economic forces affecting the household that led to outmigration?

When the single worker is completely absorbed into the urban economy, through processes of new family formation, the subsequent migration of the original household, or other factors, the incorporation process of this new labour force will be completed. If the process is incomplete, owing to instability as a result of the lack of labour commitment by both the multinationals and the workers, then several conservation processes will operate including circular mobility of labour, return migration, and the persistence of rural-urban links through household processes.

It must be remembered that a retention of rural links and support should not be seen as an inadequate dissolution of the two-circuits. As more evidence accumulates with the upsurge in historical demography associated with early industrialization in developed countries, it is becoming clear that circulation was a common transitional phenomenon and that in the early stages of industrialization, rural links were preserved by outmigrants. Such was the experience of early industrialization in America (see for example, Hareven, 1982). Therefore, the preservation of rural links among urban migrants should not be seen as an inadequate form of urbanization. It will only be a matter of time before those links disappear, if the urbanization process is complete and permanent. What is more relevant in the study of this new phase of rural-urban migration is whether there is dependent urbanization and rural subsidization of industrialization and TNC activities if the rural household becomes the major source of refuge for retrenched workers.

These questions may be most fruitfully studied through household processes since the impact would be determined by the nature and type of the household, its stage in the family life-cycle, the structural links of the household to the local economy, etc. Thus, the processes and structure of particular types of households through time will determine the nature of labour participation and reproduction within the context of overall household adaptive strategies to changing social and economic situations.

As shown in the previous chapter, the single worker may be displaced through a series of labour-shedding strategies adopted by TNCs under recessionary conditions. The

pertinent questions which are of interest are: how do these girls cope with the situation, were they reabsorbed, and if so, into what type of work (formal or informal, rural or urban), do they go back to their rural households and, what is the impact on the rural household during such crises, especially as they have become used to the economic contribution by this factory worker. Some of these questions were raised in Chapter 5 and were partially answered. The essential difference between this chapter and the previous one is that such questions, especially the reasons for migration, educational options, household labour strategies, etc. will be dealt with as household processes.

This chapter begins with a theoretical examination of the relations between industrialization and the household economy, followed in Section 3 by case studies of individual migrant workers within the family context. The next section reviews a methodology of analyzing household histories as applied to the life-history data using life-course analysis to study migration and other related household behaviour.

The Penang case study described here is a culturally-specific experience of the impact of macro-social processes on the household economy in the periphery. These case studies and family life-courses are used to highlight, and to empirically reflect some of the issues on household and individual responses to migration and industrialization. The variety of household practices suggests, not only the cultural and local specificity of the household economy in the production process of the whole economy, but also the different ways they articulate with the broader processes. The concluding section considers the usefulness of the household approach to the study of migration.

6.2 INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY: A REVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL ISSUES

The concern in this chapter is with the relationship between industrialization and the household economy in a transitional economy (see Young and Kamal, 1990).¹ The issues revolve conceptually around the changing forms of the family during the capitalist transition (see for example, Levine, 1977; Harris 1983: 185). This involved a transformation from an agrarian economy in which the household is a production unit to one in which the household is linked to the productive process only through the wage labour of the male (Beechy, 1978 cited in Harris 1983: 196). Around the same time, the domestic domain had become a major focus of theoretical attention. Redclift

¹ Parts of this chapter have been taken from Young and Kamal (1990) "Industrialization and household response: a case study of Penang", in Drakakis-Smith, David W. (ed.) *Economic Growth and Urbanization in Developing Areas*. Routledge, London: 125-70.

(1985: 93-5) identified three issues in this debate: the first traces the development of the argument concerning the persistence of pre-capitalist subsistence production based on the household in less industrialized countries; the second, the informal economy under advanced capitalism; and the third is centred on the domestic domain covering the question of the sexual division of labour and the role of patriarchy in explaining the subordination of women in the capitalist mode of production.

Based on the above arguments, the household is a significant unit for the study of societal change. Not only is it the most common and basic socio-economic unit but "... the interplay of its size and structure with economic and demographic development, make up an intricate adaptive mechanism ..." (Laslett, 1969).

According to Netting (cited in Netting *et al.*, 1984: xiii), in a peasant agrarian economy the household is perhaps the most flexible and responsive social grouping, sensitive to minor, short-term fluctuations and finds means by which individuals adapt to the subtle shifts in opportunities and constraints that confront them.

How do we define the household and the family? Without going into the complicated cultural contexts and debates (see for example, Netting *et al.*, 1984) it is sufficient to note that the major difference between these two closely related concepts is that the household is a task-oriented residential unit while the family is a kinship grouping which may not be localized. However, it is through the commitment to the concept of family that people form households to enter into relations of production, consumption, accumulation, transmission, and socialization. Thus, households are

"a primary arena for the expression of age and sex roles, kinship, socialization, and economic cooperation where the very stuff of culture is mediated and transformed into action. Here, individual motives and activities must be coordinated and rendered mutually intelligible ... Decisions emerge from households through negotiation, disagreement, conflict, and bargaining. The decision to marry, to build a house, to take in a relative, to hire a maid, or to migrate are seldom made or acted on by isolated individuals, because such decisions necessarily affect household morphology and activities" (Netting *et al.*, 1984: xxii).

In this study, we extend the household concept to that of the household economy, incorporating family members who do not co-reside (in a household) if they remit money and/or services regularly to the household. These are usually outmigrant working children who may or may not be married. This concept is associated with "income-pooling" as a mode of household organization (Wallerstein, 1982). The

notion of income-pooling represents a distillation of household practices that have come to be known as household adaptive strategies, and which emphasizes the empirical dimensions of the study of the household.

Historical demographic studies on the family and household in Europe and the eastern states of North America, based on family reconstitutions derived from censuses and parish records have shown how family structures have changed owing to the interplay of the processes of mortality, nuptiality, timing of marriage, marital fertility and migration (see Laslett and Wall, 1972; Levine, 1977; Lee, 1977; Hareven, 1978b). These basically quantitative studies have been complemented by the research of social historians in France (Aries, 1962; Flandrin, 1979) and England (Stone, 1979) who have shown how the system of values and norms within families, as represented in the roles of parents, strength of kinship and family ties, and the prolonging of childhood leading to the importance of the role of the family in education, have changed as the authority of the patriarchy, church and state shifted. Stone (1979: 424) concluded that family change is the ebb and flow of the battle between competing interests and values represented by various levels of social organization, from the individual to the national.

Another group of research has shown how families, within the constraint of the family cycle and the life-course, adapted to a rapidly changing economic environment. Hareven and Langenbach (1978) in their compilation of oral histories in Amoskeag, New Hampshire, and Hareven (1982) in her study of the New England families responding to industrialization showed how these families functioned as crucial intermediaries in labour recruitment, and acted as an active agent in its interaction with the factory system. There was evidence of how families allocated labour, investment and resources to cope with the vicissitudes of changing industrial needs. Depending on the stage of the family life-cycle, decisions were made as to whether members of the family were to be sent out to work, remain in school, or forced to stop school so that they could look after younger siblings at home in order that their mother be released for factory work. As more children entered the labour force and could contribute to the pool of family income, older siblings were allowed to marry and form their own households.

The argument for a household approach is a clear indication of the disenchantment with the individual approach. The household approach asserts that decisions, and consequently actions, are not isolated events but are part of family decisions where different members are part of a collective unit. To take this concept one step further, to

argue for a life-course approach, defined as “the changing pattern of interdependence and synchronization among the life-histories of family members” (Elder, 1978: 17) is to accept the view that the family is not a static unit but a changing entity over the life-course of its members (Hareven, 1978c: 1). Rather than view the family life-cycle as cross-sectional stages in the development of the family, the life-course examines both the individual and collective family development as a meshing together of roles and decisions. Consequently, rather than identifying stages, the life-course approach examines transitions and individual’s movements through different family configurations, and analyzes the determinants of the timing of such movements. Thus, the life-course examines the interactions between four types of time (see Hareven, 1977; 1978c for an elucidation of these concepts).

“Individual” time concerns the life-history of an individual, from birth to death, as he passes through the major biological and cultural events of his life, assuming different roles, responsibilities, etc. “Family” time is closely associated with the family development cycle. Family and individual decisions affect the timing of transitions such as leaving home, entering the labour force, marrying, setting up new household, child-bearing, launching children from home, and widowhood. Crucial to this concept is the processes of family adaptation and change over time, the timing, arrangements, and duration of events in the life-course. How the family responds and adapts to changing circumstances is constrained to some extent by the family-life cycle. For example, parents may be at their most solvent when their children have grown up and are contributing to the household income. Similarly, they may be at their poorest when their children are still too young to work or when they themselves are too old to work and have no children remitting money to them. “Industrial” time refers to the trade and demand cycles of an industry, for example, in this study, the swings of the electronics industry. Finally, “historical” time is synonymous with chronological time which concerns the forces of history and society on the household. An understanding of how these “times” interlock, that is how individual time within family time which, during industrialization is also affected by industrial time and encompassed by historical time representing the major economic, political and social processes, provides insights into the dynamics of social change.

Tilly and Scott (1978) approached the issue of family change in France and England through the analysis of women’s work as part of the changing family functions which were identified in this progression: subsistence family economy (where members of the household produced solely to maintain themselves, such roles being defined by sex

and age), family wage economy (where members of the household were engaged in wage employment), and finally, the family consumer economy (where the role of the married women as mother and housewife is paramount, and husbands and unmarried children were the main family wage earners).

What these diverse studies show is that the evolution of the family faithfully reflects the broader economic, political and social conditions in a country. Thus, the household, as a unit of production, consumption, accumulation and socialization is a decision-making unit which mediates between the individuals collectively and the forces outside. As such, the household in its process of change becomes an adaptive unit, a microcosm of the broader structures at the village or community level, from the regional to the national and the international levels. But the relationship between the family and the outside world is a dialectic one. While the households change as a result of socio-economic transformations, so too do households themselves contribute to the macro-forces and themselves are evidence of the transformation.

Demographic processes operating within the context of the family may also be seen as household adaptive strategies. On a macro-level, population pressure sets in train a number of responses in agricultural households (see for example, Boserup, 1970). On a micro-level, declining mortality within the household has changed the practice of nuptiality, caused delayed marriages, increased celibacy and led to declining marital fertility in Japan during the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Smith, 1977). Also in Japan, parents used infanticide as a means to regulate child spacing and the sex of children in response to decreasing land sizes (Smith, 1977; Hanley, 1977). These processes were reversed when there was land availability resulting in high fertility rates (McInnis, 1977). Similarly, the practice of different inheritance systems, especially that of partible and impartible land in Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, have caused peasant households to respond differently (Berkner, 1977). Thus, where the inheritance system is partible, the number of households increased, as does population. Where impartible inheritance systems exist, there is increased outmigration and celibacy practised by non-heirs. Families adapt inheritance systems to their own needs as evidenced in the divergence between inheritance customs and practice (see Berkner and Mendels, 1976, cited in Hermalin and van de Walle, 1977: 10).

We might conclude here with Pahl and Wallace's (1985: 224) restraint, that on the basis of their work on detailed empirical studies on the household and household work

strategies on the Isle of Sheppey,

“sharply undermines the more optimistic scenarios of those ... who see people being able to liberate themselves from the tyrannies of markets, exchange values and the capitalist relations of production to something more productive and satisfying in the cocoon of the so-called “domestic economy” ... The whole burden of our argument rests on the reality that there is only one economy and that a household’s position in that is fundamental in determining its positions in other economic spheres.”

6.3 CASE STUDIES IN HOUSEHOLD PRACTICES

We have selected two typical electronics workers in the FTZ as case studies to illustrate household practices as discussed above. They have been chosen from about 40 girls working in semiconductor companies which were part of the Household Response to Industrial Change Study (see Appendix D). These case studies are based on individual life-history narration, or the story-telling technique which is more loosely structured and therefore, less quantitative in comparison with the life-history matrix. However, the technique does capture the atmosphere, nuances and subtleties of their experiences, often lost in the highly structured life-history matrix method as used in the previous chapter.

6.3.1 Narrative Study of Two Women: Mak Teh and Yati²

The two case studies of Mak Teh and Yati were chosen because they represent quite typical examples of immigrant production workers in electronic factories in the FTZs of Penang. As discussed in the last chapter, we know these workers are female, mostly Malays aged 16-25 years with at least six years of formal education. They migrated from rural areas where their parents were involved mainly in the *padi* and rubber sectors. They sought jobs commensurate with their education which they could not get in the villages; were recruited in walk-in interviews and recruitment drives by the companies in the villages; they lived in high-density rented rooms with a sprinkling in hostels, and with very few urban services available to them (see Kamal *et al.*, 1985). Many maintained close links with their households by remitting income and visits.

A body of information on these factory girls has been accumulating since the late

² Derived from intensive interviews between 1984 and 1986 by Chin Siew Sim, research assistant for the Household Response to Industrial Change Project.

1970s, usually concentrating on the effects of the new factory environment and the urban milieu had on them (see Blake, 1975; Jamilah, 1978; Fatimah, 1985), worker consciousness (Heyzer, 1988) and their participation in trade unions (Rohana, 1985). However, no one has attempted to use the household approach by linking the following issues to the structures and processes of the households. The issues are the girls' reasons for migrating to work in a factory; their impact on their households in terms of their financial contribution and how that is used; what happens when they are retrenched; and finally, their future as permanent immigrants to cities.

Mak Teh belonged to the earliest intake of workers in the FTZ. She had been working for 12 years and therefore, had experienced some of the previous recessions in electronics. We were able to gain insights into her relatively long experience as a worker, and a working daughter, with all its ramifications on the household she had physically left behind in the *kampung*, but of which she still felt so much a part. In contrast, Yati had had only four years work experience as she was incorporated into the Penang workforce in the early 1980s. From these two individual case studies narrated below, we will draw out the issues pertaining to their life-course, such as sex and sibling order; aspects of gender in the division of labour within the domestic domain; how and why these girls left their homes for wage work; the nature of their links to the household in terms of income, services, and obligations; their role and impact in the household economy; and finally, some of their hopes for the future and fears of retrenchment during the time of the study.

Individual Case Study 1: Mak Teh

Mak Teh, aged approximately 36, twelve years as a production worker in a semiconductor factory.

Aptly known as Mak Teh to everybody, she looked and behaved like a mother. She was a plump and quiet lady in her mid-thirties. Many people would think that being an unmarried woman at this age, in a Malay context, would cause an identity crisis in her life. Perhaps there was one, but her crisis was more mundane – it was that of keeping her aged parents and dependent siblings well-fed and well-looked after. Consequently, her real fear was that of retrenchment.

Her Work

Mak Teh finished her primary schooling and left to "*jaga adik dan anak saudara*"

(look after brothers and sisters and their children) before coming out to work. She joined Monolithic Memories Inc. (MMI) in 1974, two years after it was set up in Penang. She remembered those days when MMI had a fleet of only two factory buses compared to the present fleet of over 40. She started with a daily wage of about RM2.70 and her take-home pay per month came up to about RM60-RM70. Rent only cost about RM3 in the beginning and through the years it had spiralled to RM30 a month. "It (wage) was enough then since prices of things were lower – food, bus fare, and even things like *sarungs* and clothes. I remember how I used to wear the new *sarungs* across the ferry so that I won't be taxed." She reminisced about those early years of working life when Penang was a free port. "I was scared of the city then but now it's ok", Mak Teh said on her adaptation from the *kampung* to the city.

She worked at the wire-bonding section which consisted of about 13 girls who had been in service for about seven years or more. They were the experienced hands and had been in this section ever since they started work in the factory. There had not been much automation in this section. Basically their work were still the same as before, old machines were replaced by new ones. She was not sure if these were upgraded machines. "The target level has not changed much, over 100 per day (can't remember the exact number) because we do the wire-bonding manually".³

Because of her long work experience, she remembered other bad times. There were brief spells, lasting only two to three months in 1974/5, 1977, and 1980. The year 1986 was the worst she had ever experienced. Her present daily pay was slightly above RM20 and so she could still cope with pay-cuts and forced holidays. "We just have to spend less and cook more often instead of eating out."

Mak Teh's Family

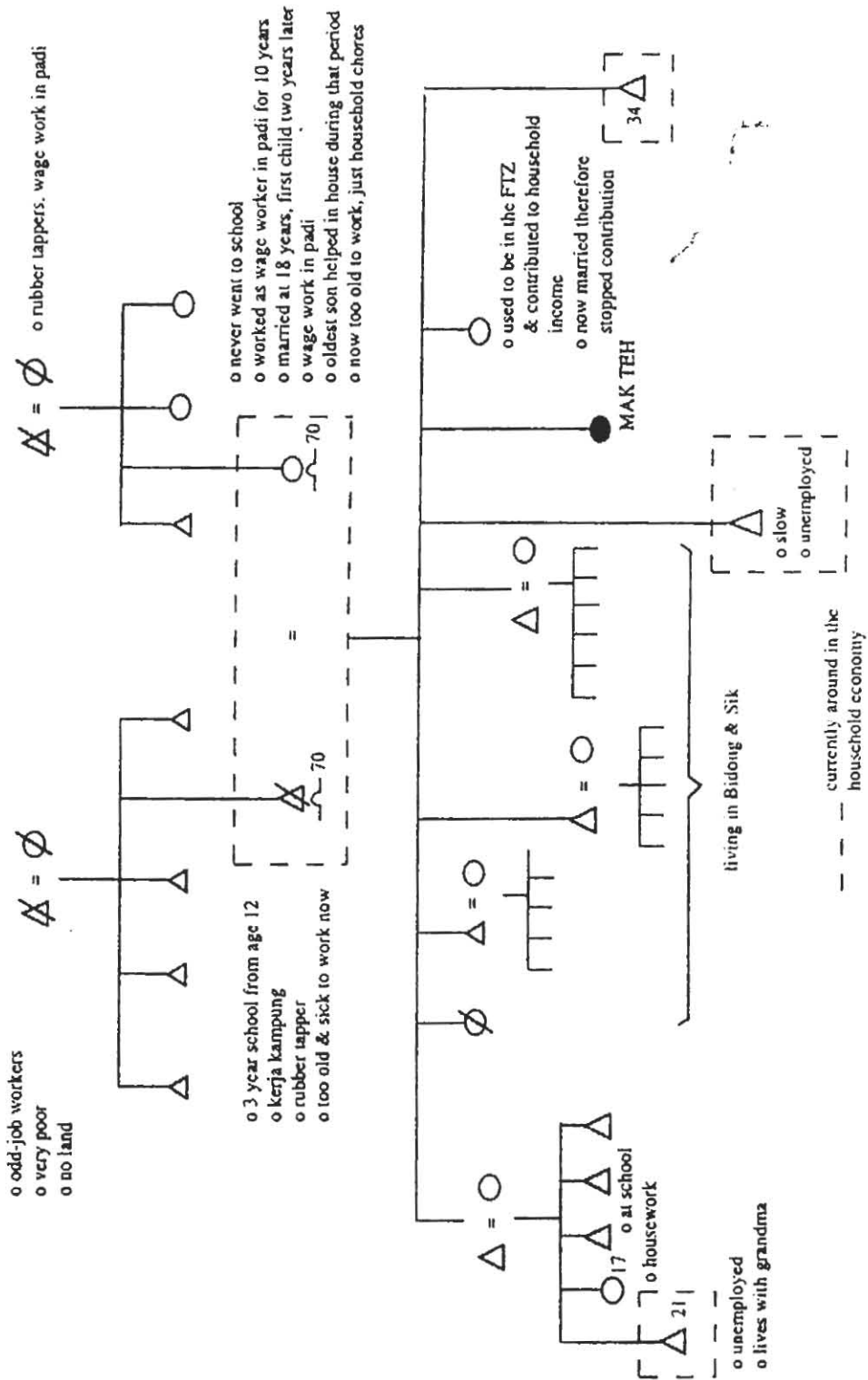
a) Ayah and Mak

Both Ayah and Mak were about 70 years old but Mak looked older than Ayah. They were married at the age of 18 or 19 and had lived in the same *kampung* ever since. A simple family map of Mak Teh's family is shown on Figure 6.1.

Ayah was very thin, almost just bones and wrinkled skin, clad only in a *sarung* during the day. When it rained, his bones hurt him so much that it made sleep impossible. He

³ In fact, by 1987 automation in wire-bonding had become quite advanced. That Mak Teh was vague about the machines and the impact on production is quite typical of the factory girls.

Figure 6.1
Mak Teh's Family Map



Source: Household Response to Industrial Change Surveys, 1985-87