

Perception and responses to employment risks of workers in Hong Kong

Rapid social changes in Hong Kong in the past decade has led to increasing risks and problems in employment, such as unstable employment, unemployment, casualization of work, low income and long working hour. In response to these problems, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has tried to adopt a workfare approach, in which emphasis is placed on enhancing workers' competitiveness, skill in job seeking, and motivation to work. There are heated debates on workfare in UK and other Western countries, while debate on this in Hong Kong is scarce. Hong Kong is dominated by neo-liberalism and New Public Management philosophy that workfare strategy is taken-for-granted by policy makers without much disputes. Although this strategy may help some workers to get a job, this also contributes to individualize the problem and put the responsibility of risk on individual workers.

This paper is based on the findings of a research on employment risk in Hong Kong, conducted by the authors in 2006-07. The aims of the research is to explore how Hong Kong people perceive unemployment risk, how they cope with these risks, and how effective is existing social policy in helping them to face these risks. The research consists of both quantitative data from telephone interviews and qualitative data from in-depth interviews. Research findings showed that the coping ability of workers varies significantly among different social sectors. In general, the low income groups are less likely to benefit from workfare oriented social policy; and individualized strategies such as employment retraining and private insurances on labour and health are unlikely to solve their problems. This paper contributes to the debates on developing effective policy to deal with employment risk in a rapidly changing society.

Dr. Kam-wah Chan
Associate Professor
Department of Applied Social Sciences
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Email: sskwchan@polyu.edu.hk

Dr. Lai-ching Leung
Associate Professor,
Department of Applied Social Studies
City University of Hong Kong
Email: sslc@cityu.edu.hk