

THE VIEW

RICHARD HARRIS

Disappearing act

The flight of human capital amid worries over the 1997 handover has left Hong Kong with a shortage of men problem unlike any other city

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single Hong Kong woman in possession of a good fortune does not need a man. Apologies to Jane Austen – but why should she, when she has everything?

Many young professional women in Hong Kong have a great education, a great job, a great car, and great friends – so a gentleman is surplus to requirements. This might result from the fact that our city has a most unusual population distribution (see the United Nations website: www.populationpyramid.net).

The world of 7.4 billion people is dominated by the young and growing developing world with a population pyramid that looks like a space rocket with a fat bottom, a thinning upper section and a sharp narrowing as death still takes too many, too young. There is a slight predominance of males up to the age of 50 but the stronger of the species then starts to dominate as the men fade away.

The mature developed markets are ageing quite differently. The United States has a population distribution evenly distributed at all ages until it begins to shrink from the age of 55, with a long peak representing longevity.



Women have filled the gap in the city's workforce. Photo: SCMP Pictures

Britain looks podgy with bumps revealing post-war baby boomers and 1960s immigration. Germany looks like a body builder, with wide 50-year-old shoulders and the steep falls in birthrate typical of an industrial economy, while Japan (with one of the oldest demographics) displays population surges reflecting the post-war recovery and the boom times of the 1970s. The imbalance caused by the loss of young men in battle is dying out.

China has a confused pyramid with birth surges at 25, 45 and 60 years of age, reflecting periods of historical conflict and birth irregularities caused by the one-child policy. The period of the policy

neatly corresponds with boys significantly outnumbering girls. China's birth rate was genuinely out of control from the end of the war, with growth peaking in 1970, but future ageing means that the demographics will become more like Germany or Japan in the next two decades.

Yet it is Hong Kong that has the most interesting population pyramid, shaped in a way like no other. Between the ages of 25 and 59, we have a significant dearth of men – it looks like we have been ravaged by war or the ritual sacrifice of the firstborn son. There are nearly 1 per cent more women than men between the ages of 30 and 35; and between 35 and 60, there are 5 per cent more females – significantly more than in other countries. Both younger and older age groups are more balanced and, like most other regions, have slightly more men in the younger age groupings and more women of pensionable age.

Yet we have had relatively few shocks to our booming economic growth in the past 50 years, no great changes to our prosperity or importance on the world stage, no dramatic adjustment of government policy. There was no significant gap in our menfolk before 1992 when 25-year age group males began to decline; yet by 1995, men in their 30s are disappearing in numbers. By the famous 1997 date, the differential had

stretched from 25 to 40 years and at the millennium the gap was from 25 to 50.

All of those male "astronauts", who left to set up a new life in the Americas, Australia or Europe because of worries about 1997, just never returned. Immigration of female maids only comprise 2 per cent of the population across all working ages. In the past 10 years, the millennials, below 25, now provide a small majority of males.

But has it really made any difference? The implication is that women have successfully filled the gap in the workforce, especially at professional levels – and they have been very successful. Yet even though the depopulation of males only occurred for a short few years, the disparity will continue to exist for decades. It has obviously contributed to the very low birthrate in Hong Kong and impacted personal relationships. And in 10 years, many of these women will reach retirement age and will outnumber working men, which could result in a very inexperienced workforce.

As time goes on, elderly demographics will be heavily biased towards women and their requirements. Although I'm happy to say, looking on the bright side, by 2047 when I am 90, there will be a lot of spare women my age.

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