

# Re-negotiating Fatherhood: Divorced Fathers in Hong Kong Experiencing and Resisting Stigma

[Mario Liong](#)

## Introduction

1. In the twenty-first century, the heterosexual, monogamous, life-long married, two-parent family is undergoing transformations and new family forms are emerging. Parenting outside marriage has increased to a large extent in Europe<sup>[1]</sup> and in the US.<sup>[2]</sup> Even in Asia, where the prevalence of single parenthood is relatively low compared to western countries, the number of single parents has increased over recent decades.<sup>[3]</sup> These changes in family life are enmeshed with changes in social conditions. Women's increased participation in the labour market makes them less economically dependent on men, pushes men to increase their participation in household chores, and reduces barriers for ending unhappy marriages. However, the conventional heterosexual, two-parent family remains the major form of family in the West as well as in Hong Kong.<sup>[4]</sup> Changes in family practices are often considered undesirable and as breaking the moral code, particularly in Asia, where patriarchy still has a substantial impact on marriage and family.<sup>[5]</sup> Despite the marriage rate declining and the divorce rate increasing in Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and urban areas of China and Southeast Asia due to the rise of individual autonomy and self-realisation, and more and more women are no longer willing to endure gender inequality and constraints inherent in existing marital and familial structures, the hegemony and importance of marriage persists.<sup>[6]</sup>
2. In Hong Kong, the heterosexually married two-parent family continues to enjoy hegemonic status and only heterosexual monogamous marriage is legally recognised in Hong Kong. Therefore, the heterosexual nuclear family is the only family form that is legally protected, carrying with it implications for what is considered 'natural' and 'normal' for childbearing in society.<sup>[7]</sup> This form of family is considered to be the ideal environment for children's healthy development.<sup>[8]</sup> Single-parent families, for example, are explicitly constructed as vulnerable and problematic in the welfare policy in Hong Kong where they are categorised as 'families with special needs.'<sup>[9]</sup> Even the multigenerational family is losing its popularity as grandparents are regarded as out-dated in their childrearing methods, unable to provide intellectual stimulation to children, and likely to spoil the child.<sup>[10]</sup> The hegemony of the married two-parent family is legitimated by political and religious leaders, as well as the majority of the society that consents to the dominance of this family form and thus grants it superiority over other family forms, including divorced and single-parent families.<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, in this context, it is hard to openly refute the moral superiority and orthodoxy of the heterosexual nuclear family.<sup>[12]</sup>

3. In this article, I aim to elucidate on divorced fathers' experiences and practices within this social context. Previous research shows that divorce disrupts paternal involvement with children and weakens their relationship quality.[13] However, at a time when fathers are expected to be increasingly involved in their children's lives,[14] it is therefore of particular importance to examine how divorced fathers negotiate their parenting strategies. To provide a contextual background, I first discuss the existing family discourse in Hong Kong, in particular the discourse constructed through the work of the recently established Family Council. I then present previous research on stigmatisation of divorced families and parents in Hong Kong. Before concluding, from in-depth interviews with divorced fathers, I analyse the ways in which men negotiate their parenting practices in relation to the stigma of divorce.

### **Family discourse in Hong Kong**

4. Since the colonial era the Hong Kong government has believed that the family, as a caring unit, serves to maintain a stable society.[15] It has adopted the ideology that the family belongs to the private realm and family members are responsible for each other's well-being, and thus the government provides minimal welfare assistance to the family; only offering help when the family is unable to carry out its normal functions.[16] Paradoxically, although the government claims not to be intrusive in imposing a particular family form on society, its measures (including both policies and investment in social services) implicitly reinforce the hegemony of the two-parent family model[17] and stigmatise separated and divorced families. Within social welfare policy, single-parent families are considered to be vulnerable and a burden on the welfare system.[18] Moreover, the complex bureaucratic procedures in the social service system in Hong Kong create difficulties for divorced parents.[19] For example, for those families living in public housing, government policy requires that the non-custodial parent must leave the apartment after divorce. If the non-custodial parent has financial difficulty in finding other accommodation, he or she has to apply to stay in interim housing while waiting for another public housing apartment. Furthermore, the mixture of the fault and no-fault model of divorce retains the notion that divorce is sought when 'marriage has broken down irretrievably,'[20] which implies the problematic nature of divorce.
5. Although Hong Kong does not have a coherent, consistent, and explicit family policy, a family discourse exists that derives from, and echoes, government policies and decisions. It constructs and reflects the normative and ideal status of the heterosexual, monogamous nuclear family, and perpetuates discriminatory notions and social inequalities towards non-conforming families and individuals.[21] Based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, people subconsciously accept the domination of the social structure in a particular social field through internalising and embodying the social structure, and hence acting and thinking according to the dominant notion.[22] The family discourses derived from the works of governmental bodies, such as the Family Council, are the results of this symbolic violence which is shared by both policy-makers and the public, and which further perpetuates the hegemony of the heterosexual nuclear family.
6. The Family Council is an advisory and consultative committee established in 2007 to assess

the impact of government's policies on the family and to coordinate works to promote the importance of family harmony to reduce social problems. Its adoption of the existing legal definition of the family as a unit bound by marriage or blood relation, rather than taking on the inclusive understanding of the family proposed by the United Nations, [23] demonstrates its conservative stand on the family. In the discussion paper FC 1/2013, it states:

As regards the definition of 'family', we will not attempt a strict definition, but continue to adopt a common sense understanding of the concept of family. Such a concept may be defined primarily with reference to relationships that pertain to or arise from blood, marriage, adoption or affinity, all of which are regulated by law or customs. [24]

In Paper 2/2009, it cites the example of family-friendly guidelines in New Zealand to evaluate state policy, which clearly consider the diverse forms of family by evaluating whether a particular government policy is encouraging or discouraging marriage or divorce. [25] Yet this approach was omitted in the final discussion during the meeting of the Family Council, and the existing definition of family was uncritically adopted. [26]

7. The Family Council's definition of family ignores family diversity, and thereby stigmatises divorce and single-parent families. Divorce is considered to be a potential threat to the conventional family form and the 'attitude on divorce was an issue warranting special attention.... Not only would it lead to disintegration of families, it would also create irrevocable damages to family.' [27] Moreover, in the report prepared by the Sub-committee on Family Support of the Family Council, the single-parent family is attributed to be one of the factors leading to social problems, such as youth drug abuse and child neglect:

Youth drug abuse: most of the factors causing the problem are related to unstable family background, such as dysfunctional families due to unstable family condition (e.g., poor marital relationships, family crisis, parent divorce, single-parent families).... Single-parent families, especially deprived families, are particularly prone to child neglect. [28]

In the Family Council's family education materials—such as the videos *18 Handy Tips for Family Education*, *Families with Newborn Babies*, and *Marital Relationship* [29]—all families appearing in the stories are heterosexually married, two-parent nuclear families. [30] In particular, in Episode 4, *Marital Relationship*, which describes an extra-marital affair, the professional advice is that divorce is not the best solution as it harms the development of the children. These educational resources idealise the married, two-parent family as a caring and harmonious unit fuelled by Confucian familial ethics. [31]

8. Even research studies commissioned by the Family Council reflect the problematisation and stigmatisation of divorce and single-parent families. For example, the study entitled 'A study on the phenomenon of divorce in Hong Kong,' commissioned by the Family Council and conducted by the University of Hong Kong, implicitly suggests that divorced families are problem-prone. The research report states that 'divorce creates damage which must be minimized' and it also mentions that:

Children respond negatively to parent's marital conflicts, and in the longer term, some get easily anxious, less happy and less confident. Parents and school professionals should take note of the academic and emotional impact brought forward by divorce on the children. [32]

The report acknowledges that it is marital conflict that brings about negative consequences, yet it continues to attribute the negative effects to divorce *per se*.

9. Another research report conducted by the Family Council, 'Family Survey 2013,' explicitly points out that divorce is problematic. Although the report presents statistical data that appear to objectively reflect public attitudes towards family matters, it clearly associates divorce with a 'potential adverse impact on children.'<sup>[33]</sup> The recommendation in the report clearly promotes heterosexual marriage and disapproves of divorce:

In view of the increasing number of divorce cases and the potential adverse impact on children of divorced families, as well as declining fertility rate in Hong Kong, such ready acceptance of divorce and singlehood warrants closer attention. Educational workshops on parenting skills, marriage enrichment and marriage counselling are desired.<sup>[34]</sup>

By problematising divorce and divorced families, the Family Council reproduces the dominant family ideology in Hong Kong. According to this ideology, single-parent families are considered by the public, and by single parents themselves, to be 'broken' and 'incomplete.'<sup>[35]</sup> Even though the government does not explicitly label divorced families as such, the stigma produced is an 'unintended consequence' of government policies.<sup>[36]</sup> In other words, families that cannot fulfil the ideal expectations are deemed problematic.

10. According to a more egalitarian notion of marriage, usually associated with 'modern' societies, <sup>[37]</sup> it is normal for couples that are no longer in love to separate. In recent years the Hong Kong government has begun to take small steps to encourage cooperative and caring parenting in post-divorce families. For example, in 2000 the Mediation Co-ordinator's Office was established within the Family Court to provide resources for mediation services to discuss post-divorce arrangements between parents. In 2014, the government also launched an educational campaign to promote co-parenting after divorce by putting up posters in public transport networks and distributing DVDs and information sheets to frontline social workers and couples considering divorce.<sup>[38]</sup> In November 2015, a public consultation process was begun on the recommendations made by the Law Reform Commission to put in place legislation for continuous parental responsibility that emphasises children's rights in post-divorce families.<sup>[39]</sup>
11. These initiatives may seem to serve as the beginning of the effort to normalise non-conventional families but the emphasis on teaching and assisting divorced or separated couples to deal with their parenthood risks contributing to stigmatising divorced families. This 'deficit model' of divorced or separating couples neglects the fact that couples that remain in a marriage can also be highly conflictual, which is already a sufficient condition to bring about detrimental effects on children.<sup>[40]</sup> Therefore, these initiatives are indeed far from an effort to normalise divorced families.

### **Impact of stigmatisation of divorce**

12. The institution of the family in Hong Kong has undergone substantial changes over recent decades. Fertility rates have dropped from 65.2 live births per 1,000 women in 1981 to 35.9

per 1,000 women in 2014<sup>[41]</sup> and the number of divorces in 2013 increased more than ten-fold from that in 1981 (2,062 in 1981 versus 20,019 in 2014). The percentage of single parents in the total population nearly doubled in 2011 compared to that in 1996 (0.7% versus 1.2%).<sup>[42]</sup> Moreover, strains on the conventional family include cross-border marriage and extra-marital affairs in mainland China, as well as greater mobility in employment and a widening poverty gap as a result of the globalisation of the world economy.<sup>[43]</sup> In Hong Kong society there is also evidence of growing individualisation, accompanied by de-standardisation of the life course, and delinking marriage from parenthood, with diverse relationships and family forms replacing the conventional family model.<sup>[44]</sup> Despite these substantial transformations in family life, marriage is still exalted as the foundation of a stable society because of the strong belief in family harmony and the value of a married two-parent family, as discussed above. Individuals are therefore urged to preserve their marital relations.<sup>[45]</sup> Divorce is considered harmful to society,<sup>[46]</sup> and social stigma, exemplified in words such as 'broken,' 'problematic,' and 'incomplete,' continues to be attached to divorced families.<sup>[47]</sup> The general public often sees single parents and their children as deviant, as abusing social welfare, and as having personality or psychological problems.<sup>[48]</sup>

13. With the hegemony of the two-parent family, single parents suffer from the stigma that they are inadequate and problematic.<sup>[49]</sup> In many parts of Asia, governments perpetuate the stigma on single-parent families.<sup>[50]</sup> After all, familism considers any challenge to marriage a social hazard.<sup>[51]</sup> Studies show that it is the social stigma on the divorced family, rather than divorce *per se*, that worsens the parent-child relationship, the well-being of children in single-parent families,<sup>[52]</sup> and leads to a sense of personal failure and feelings of shame among single parents.<sup>[53]</sup>
14. Apart from the experience of stigma, the literature has documented the structural obstacles divorced parents in Hong Kong face. The majority of single parents, including mothers granted custody of their children, have to move out of their original accommodation after divorce and suffer from worse living conditions, frequent moves, economic hardship due to accommodation expenses, and discrimination from landlords and neighbours as a result of their single-parent status.<sup>[54]</sup> As a consequence of the conventional gender division of labour that assumes work and family to be separate domains, single parents reported that they had less time and more difficulty in taking care of their children and household chores than two-parent families, as many of them had to manage both work and family.<sup>[55]</sup> In addition, as most single parents in Hong Kong have a lower education level, and are therefore more vulnerable in the labour market, they do not benefit much from economic growth, resulting in a widening poverty gap between single parent and two-parent families.<sup>[56]</sup>
15. Divorce appears to have different impacts on mothers and fathers. For many women, divorce is a serious threat to identity in Hong Kong due to the ideology that marriage and motherhood are central to women's happiness,<sup>[57]</sup> although research shows that women have lower marital satisfaction than men.<sup>[58]</sup> Many single mothers are therefore reluctant to disclose their single-parent status.<sup>[59]</sup> Moreover, as the caregiving role is central to maternal

identity, single mothers, both working and middle class, feel either regretful for not being able to take better care of their children or they strive very hard to achieve both work and caregiving, putting their health at risk and placing strain on their familial relations.[60]

16. Divorce may also bring about a crisis of masculinity within the familial domain because marriage is perceived as the foundation for the 'complete family,' which is important to Chinese manhood. The 'complete family'—a nuclear family consisting of heterosexual parents and children—is upheld as the ideal family form in Hong Kong. A harmonious relation between all family members is considered crucial to make the family 'complete.' Traditionally, Chinese manhood is defined as refining oneself through cultivating intellectual and moral qualities, forming a family and keeping it in order.[61] Thus, divorce signifies the failure of a man to demonstrate the virtues of keeping his family harmonious and intact. Moreover, previous research indicates that because of the inferiority of caregiving and the stigmatisation of social security recipients as lazy and dependent on the general public, single fathers, especially those who have to live on social security in order to stay at home to take care of their children, suffer from the stress of being primary caregivers because, according to gender conventions, they are supposed to be breadwinners.[62] They are more likely to perceive themselves as 'losers' because they have been unable to keep their wives and have to take up the feminine work of caregiving.[63] In addition, as custody is usually granted to the mother—with the father having only visitation rights[64]—divorced non-resident fathers[65] can only assume a peripheral role in their children's lives.[66]
17. Many of the difficulties that divorced parents face are structural. Western research studies show that even when divorce is found to bring about depressive symptoms, social isolation, and health problems for divorcees, it is not the divorce status *per se* that causes these problems; rather, the decline in living standards, the strain of lone parenting, the loss of daily contact with children and social networks, the loss of companionship, economic security, and a regular sexual partner—all conditions that accompany divorce—are responsible for these negative effects.[67] After the initial crisis period has passed, and the divorcees have adjusted to their new roles and situation, they do not differ from single people in respect of their health and psychological well-being.[68] Moreover, meta-analysis shows that the effects of divorce on children's conduct and emotional problems, and on academic performance and social relations, are only moderate and are much weaker when the children's living standard remains the same and their parents maintain a positive relationship after divorce.[69] In addition, studies have reported some positive aspects among divorced parents. For example, Yuk King Lau reported that divorced parents can maintain close bonding with their children after divorce;[70] Ching Man Tse indicated that single-parent families are agents that can make use of social resources to carry out functions similar to two-parent families;[71] and Suet Lin Hung discovered that divorced women expressed positive gains in life, such as personal growth, better emotional well-being, and increased social support.[72] Hence, as Tse points out, categorising divorced families as problematic ignores the quality of familial relationships other than that between husband and wife and cannot lead to an accurate understanding of the family.[73]

18. In the following section, after describing the methods and data used for the empirical analysis, I will present the findings from in-depth interviews with divorced fathers.

### **Methods: Qualitative interviews with divorced fathers**

19. A total of thirteen divorced fathers aged between forty and fifty-eight from diverse class backgrounds were interviewed. Six were middle-class professionals; seven were of working-class background. Six were single fathers who had custody of their children and lived with them, six were non-resident (not living with the child) fathers, and one was a non-resident father who had remarried. The former spouses of these non-resident fathers had the custody of their children.
20. The interviewees were recruited from two research projects. One was an ethnographic study of Chinese fatherhood with participant observation and in-depth interviews with fathers participating in a men's centre run by an NGO that promoted caring and involved fatherhood. The second project was commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission, Hong Kong, to investigate men's situations and difficulties in relation to their gender. Interviewees of the latter project were recruited through referrals from social service centres, seminars discussing men's situations, and advertising on the Internet. It is important to point out that informants recruited for these two projects might have greater concerns and reflections about their fatherhood and conditions than other men, and they might be inclined towards being more caring. Their decisions and behaviours could be different from other fathers who do not reflect much on their gender identity and fatherhood. Interview questions addressed their fathering practices, spousal and parent-child relationships, and divorce experiences. Each interview lasted for about two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Informants were ensured confidentiality and pseudonyms were assigned to each of them to retain anonymity and to protect their privacy. In the data analysis process, open codes were created through repeated reading of the transcriptions. Common themes were then extracted.

### **Negotiations and practices of divorced fathers**

21. In the following section, I present how divorced fathers negotiate their parenting in the midst of the stigma attached to them and their families within the context of the continuously reproduced hegemony of married, two-parent families.

#### ***Being blamed and taking the blame***

22. As a consequence of the prevalence of social stigma on divorce, divorced fathers often reported being blamed by others for wrongdoings, such as extra-marital affairs or domestic violence that led to their marital breakdown. [74] In the present study divorced fathers also reported similar experiences. According to Carl (52, teacher, resident father), his friend and his daughter's teacher judged him based on his divorcee and single father status. They thought that he must have done something wrong that had resulted in his divorce. Carl felt

that few people understood him:

When I told Martin, who was my secondary schoolmate [about my divorce], he immediately asked if I had gone to the brothel. I could have done so but I had not!... After my wife left me, I first talked to my best friends and asked for their advice. They all said that I must have done something bad to my wife (Hong Kong, 5 March 2006).

Another situation revealed that his daughter's teacher showed reluctance to help him because his divorcee status signified his wrongdoing as a husband:

When my daughter had a bad relationship with me, I sought help from the teacher at her school. But the class teacher thought that I had done something wrong so that my wife left me. So the class teacher did not help me (Hong Kong, 5 March 2006).

23. The moral condemnation of divorced fathers depicted here reflects the hegemonic construction of divorce as inferior to the married, two-parent normative model. Under the stigmatised notion of divorce, divorce is associated with the wrong-doings of the husband, such as extra-marital affairs, physical abuse, gambling habits, and lack of concern for the children. [75]
24. The idea that divorced families are dysfunctional and in need of help is widespread in Hong Kong society, and even divorced fathers themselves tend to believe that their divorce had resulted in a negative impact on their children. [76] With this belief, some of the divorced fathers had delayed their decision to separate from their spouses and were willing to endure marital conflicts until they became unbearable. Keith (56, clerk, non-resident father) said that he knew that his ex-wife was not taking good care of their daughters and had even planned to sell their daughters to cover her loss in an investment. He often quarrelled with her over the children's care and educational issues but still did not want to divorce her. It was only after he was physically assaulted by his ex-wife in a quarrel, which had frightened his two daughters and left him in hospital, that he realised it was time to file for a divorce. He told me his worry about the impact of divorce on his two daughters:

My friends told me to divorce my wife long ago but I just didn't want to do so. My two daughters would grow up in a single-parent family. Their psychological development would have problems. They would be discriminated against by others and have low self-esteem (Hong Kong, 27 October 2005).

Even after the domestic violence, Keith still believed in the notion of the 'complete' family. Although he knew that he could no longer reconcile with his ex-wife, he wanted his two daughters to have care from two parents. He showed sympathy to his ex-wife by not fighting for the custody of the two daughters because they were her only hope. In this way, Keith maintained a harmonious relationship with his ex-wife. The two daughters stayed in a children's home run by an NGO during the week and stayed with their mother at weekends. At weekends, Keith spent time with his two daughters, taking them to interest classes, looking after their schoolwork, and playing with them in the park. Sometimes they had lunch together with his ex-wife. He wanted his daughters to feel that they still had an 'intact family.'

25. Keith had accepted the symbolic order and the dominance—using Pierre Bourdieu's terms—of the hegemonic two-parent family and he had internalised the stigma of divorce. [77] The



case of Keith exemplifies that when this symbolic order and dominance has been embodied in an individual's habitus—which operates by exerting control over one's embodiment, including feelings and emotion—it is then considered natural and difficult to refute. [78]

### ***Compensating for divorce***

26. Other divorced fathers showed a similar sense of inferiority towards their single-parent status, which led them to adopt different strategies to compensate for the 'harm' done by the divorce, as suggested by the mainstream discourse. Burt (46, construction worker, non-resident father) believed that his sons were sad about his divorce and thus wanted to keep the happy memory of the 'complete' family for his sons. He did this to help his sons to feel safe and familiar when they came to his home:

My wife and sons took only some clothes and identity documents as well as some money [when they left]. They didn't take my sons' toys. There are still several boxes of them at my home. The furniture at my home has been there since my sons were born. The toys were to be thrown away but my sons missed them very much. So they are still at my home. Even the drawing pad they played with in their childhood is still there. So they can still be in touch with the environment in which they grow up. They won't feel strange (Hong Kong, 24 May 2005).

27. Divorce also encouraged the fathers to take good care of their children to make up for the loss of maternal care in the family. Tim (41, home-maker, resident father) became a single father after his wife divorced him because of her extra-marital relationship. He admitted that if his wife had not left him he would have continued to focus on his work and would not have taken part in caregiving. But as a single father, through taking care of his two sons, he wanted to compensate his children for the loss of their mother:

I prepare breakfast for them, take them to school and back home, help them with their homework, play with them at the park.... It is tiring to do all the household chores but seeing my children happy and obedient, my efforts are worth it (Hong Kong, 26 June 2005).

Through taking care of his two sons Tim enjoyed a close relationship with them:

My young son always hugs me after school. Then he gives his school bag to me. It is his psychological need. Hugging me has become his habit. For my elder son, when I hug him, he laughs. He is older, so I have to explain to him that I hug him because I care about him (Hong Kong, 26 June 2005).

28. Even though Tim felt good about his close relationship with his two sons and was satisfied with himself being a responsible father, he still regarded himself a failure because of his divorce. The absence of the mother and the sense of inferiority among some of these single fathers pushed them to be involved with their children as a strategy to compensate for the 'negative influences' of being in a single-parent family. Tim mentioned that he often took his two sons to play in the park after they finished their homework to make them happier:

I help them with their homework after they come back from school. Then after dinner I take them to the park downstairs to play. They are happy when they play in the park. If they stayed at home they would think of why their mother left and might feel sad (Hong Kong, 26 June 2005).

29. Likewise, after the divorce Carl became very involved in his son's life as a compensation for the loss of his mother. He described how he treasured every chance to participate in his

son's school activities, and also went camping with him to build more intimacy between them. He spent more time and cared more about his son because he thought that he had a failed marriage:

You have to accept that you are a loser because of your marital problem. Face it, and after you have been through all the suffering you can grow up.... If I had a healthy, complete family, my son would be alright. Now I have divorced and I have to care more about him; otherwise he could still grow up but have to suffer more hardship.... When I return from work, even though I am very tired, I have to spend time talking to my son. I have to listen to him no matter how tired I am and I have to listen with heart (Hong Kong, 5 March 2006).

These fathers paid more attention to their children with the desire to protect them and to help them feel loved to make up for their differences from the married two-parent norm. [79] It is important to note, however, that the fathers described above were involved fathers who put their children's needs above their own needs and not every divorced father is involved with his children, just as not every father in a two-parent family is involved in their children's lives.

### ***Cooperative relations with former spouse***

30. Some divorced fathers maintained a cooperative relationship with their former spouses, which enabled them to stay involved with their children after divorce. For example, William (43, writer, non-resident father) wanted to maintain a harmonious relation with his ex-wife in order to stay involved with his daughter and therefore did not fight with his ex-wife for custody of their daughter. This cooperative relationship allowed him a high level of involvement in his daughter's life. He could discuss with his ex-wife which secondary school their daughter should attend. He visited his daughter at least twice a week, enjoying a close relationship with her:

Now I see her twice a week. Usually I see her once during the week, and once on Saturday. I take her to piano lessons on Saturday. We walk around [after the lesson]. There's a [café] near the place where she attends piano lessons. We go there for some drinks and have some cakes. Then we will go home for dinner or have dinner with her mother. We chat a lot (Hong Kong, 17 May 2006).

31. Fred's (56, unemployed, non-resident father) ex-wife was often worried that he would engage in an extra-marital affair as he frequently worked in mainland China and she kept proposing to divorce him. Because of the discrepancy in economic conditions between Hong Kong and mainland China, men from Hong Kong are considered attractive to many Chinese women; and these Hong Kong men, being physically apart from their wives, are believed to develop extra-marital affairs when they work across the border. [80] With the ideal of a love-based monogamous marriage, Fred's wife told her husband that she worried he was being unfaithful to her. Fred tried to convince her that he was loyal to her, but she did not believe him. According to Fred, she could no longer stand the worry and insisted on filing for a divorce. To avoid the situation developing into an irretrievable relationship, Fred agreed to divorce on the condition that he would have a high degree of involvement in his son's life. He said:

We did not fight over custody. I just followed what she wanted.... If she wanted to divorce, then we divorced. Separation is just the situation on paper. In reality it's a different story. I insist we have to maintain some relationship, no matter whether it is friendship or ex-husband. I must see my son. I must be able to talk with him. Now actually [my son and I]

have quite a close relationship. [My ex-wife] sometimes asks me for advice about her work. We did not fight after the divorce and I see my son more often than before.... My son and I are very close. I think he doesn't even know [my wife and I] have divorced (Hong Kong, 26 October 2011).

32. The narratives of William and Fred demonstrate that divorce does not necessarily distance the non-resident father from his child(ren). A dedicated father can enjoy a close relationship with his children. This challenges the notion that post-divorce families are problematic and that children are deprived of the parental involvement of one of the parents in the post-divorce family. However, the narratives point to the fact that in order to maintain a cooperative relation with their ex-wives, the father considered it necessary to forgo custody rights. This seems to suggest that the norm of mothers as prime caregivers is internalised, and that the notion of equal rights and responsibilities among parents has not permeated the fathers interviewed in this study.

### ***The happy divorcee***

33. Divorce can also be a way for some fathers to be relieved of constant spousal conflict. According to these fathers their relation with their ex-spouses became more harmonious because they no longer had to confront the relationship problem. Lewis (47, artist, non-resident father) felt the manner in which his ex-wife taught their son was restrictive. He observed that his wife just wanted their son to obey everything she said and scolded him harshly even when he committed minor mistakes. This reminded him of his own childhood when his mother did the same to him. From his own experience he believed that this way of parenting would have a bad influence on their son. Therefore he always argued with his wife over how to educate their son. Their relationship conflicts became more and more intense and eventually Lewis's wife assaulted him. However, after divorce, they had a smoother relationship:

Now we no longer have any communication problem because I think...take a step back, we changed the way of communicating. We are more polite now. First, it is to avoid trouble and to show the son that dad and mom can talk. Second, children suffer most when their parents fight. Now the relationship with my son is good. He always wants to come to my place. He is happier now. It's possible that our improved relationship changed him.... For me, I feel much happier now. No stress at all. I don't need to live with a person I hate (Hong Kong, 30 June 2011).

34. Divorce is a way out for conflicting couples to end their unhappy relationships, which can reduce their conflict and even improve their relationship with the children. Research in the US has shown that inter-parental conflict is detrimental to the well-being of children. For example, a meta-analysis indicates that children with divorced parents tend to have better well-being than their counterparts in high-conflict married families.<sup>[81]</sup> Children can benefit from the divorce of parents if it reduces or even eliminates inter-parental conflict.<sup>[82]</sup> Although the present study does not examine the effects of divorce on children, the finding that some divorced fathers demonstrated higher involvement and closer relationships with their children when they were freed from conflict with their former spouse can provide some support to the above studies that claim a reduction of inter-parental conflict can benefit children. As Scott Coltrane and Michele Adams suggest,<sup>[83]</sup> divorce can bring about fulfillment and happiness to both the parents and the children in later life; stigmatising

divorce as a moral and social problem would not only discourage couples in conflict from separating, in turn prolonging the inter-parental conflict, but would also bring stigma and negative impact on parents and children from divorced families.

35. Even among men who do not have a satisfying relation with their ex-wives and children after divorce, divorce is still a relief for them. For example, Jason (58, unemployed, non-resident father) used to be a civil engineer and construction business owner who spent much of his time on his work and neglected his wife and children. After the failure of his business he was unable to earn money and he suffered from humiliating comments from his wife. Their relationship became very bad and they decided to divorce. Jason gave all his money to her and went abroad to live alone. He felt relieved after divorce:

I can do whatever I like. I can go to the library if I like to read. I can buy whatever food I like at the market and cook it myself. I don't need to listen to some disrespectful comments (Hong Kong, 20 October 2011).

To Jason, divorce is also a turning point to reflect upon his distant relation with his children. Although Jason felt at ease with his divorcee life, he was regretful about focusing too much on his work and not being able to build a close relationship with his children when they were small. He said:

My breadwinner role was my source of pain. I cannot have the joy from the family. My relationship with my children has been very distant and there is no love between us. (Pause) That's my problem now. (Weeping) I really wish we could care for each other. I wish to travel abroad with them to build our relationship. But that's impossible now (Hong Kong, 20 Oct 2011).

36. For many men, divorce is not only a way to end the unhappy marriage but is also an opportunity to reflect upon distant fatherhood and to begin to treasure the relationship with their children. This reflection can be beneficial for men to practise a more caring and involved fatherhood if given a chance.

## Conclusion

37. The idealisation of the married two-parent family remains prevalent in Hong Kong society and is reproduced through the family discourses constructed by the Family Council and various government policies (e.g., public housing policy). This discourse perpetuates the stigmatisation of divorce that brings about moral condemnation of divorced fathers and a sense of inferiority among these men, as found in the present study based on thirteen divorced fathers. Some of the interviewed fathers postponed their divorce until their marriage was unbearably painful and the relationship with the mother had become irretrievable. This reduces the chance of developing co-parenting, as advocated in a recent government campaign, and makes it difficult for fathers to engage in highly involved parenting after divorce.
38. However, divorce does not necessarily distance fathers from their children and may even serve as an opportunity for distant fathers to reflect upon their fatherhood. Fathers who feel responsible for their children's well-being try their best to maintain a high involvement with

their children and to build close relationships with them. Social stigma and moral condemnation of divorce and divorced fathers, therefore, cannot be justified on the grounds that divorce equates with a loss of paternal involvement.

39. Divorce may be a way to halt the conflict and negative consequences. However, with the social stigma attached to divorce, it is not divorce *per se* but the stigma that negatively impacts on children. Zheng Wu and colleagues found that when cohabiting parents separated, the children displayed fewer behavioural problems compared to children with divorced parents.<sup>[84]</sup> This finding indicates that the dissolution of marriage carries with it much greater social stigma. In addition, research shows that children's development can benefit from reduced stigmatisation towards divorce.<sup>[85]</sup> Therefore, instead of perpetuating the hegemony of the two-parent family and allowing the stigma on divorced parenting to exist, a family discourse and policy encouraging and enabling both paternal and maternal involvement with children should be promoted regardless of the parents' marital status.

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