

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

Professional Practice in the Hong Kong Cultural Context

Edited by

Katherine P.H. Young and Anita Y.L. Fok



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The image shows the Chinese characters for '香港大學' (Hong Kong University) written in a highly stylized, square-format calligraphic style. The characters are arranged vertically from top to bottom: '香', '港', '大', '學'. Each character is contained within a square frame, and the overall composition is balanced and aesthetically pleasing.

Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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Rethinking Marriage

KATHERINE P.H. YOUNG

Social Changes and Marital Changes

Social scientists analyzing marriage and inequality in Chinese society point out that, from the classical period on, continuities in marriage customs and practices have been remarkable (Ocko 1991). In China, there were few significant changes in marital conventions until the *Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China of 1950*. It declared marriage to be based on free choice, monogamy and equal rights; prohibited bigamy, concubines, child betrothal, interference with the remarriage of widows; and included provisions for divorce (Meijer 1971). Hong Kong followed with the *Marriage Reform Ordinance* in 1971, restricting marriage to one husband and one wife, and formally abolishing the practice of concubinage. In 1972, no-fault divorce was instituted. After centuries of little change, the last few decades have been remarkable for the tremendous changes in expectations, attitudes, and the very ideology of marriage.

It could be said that, during these years, the ideal of the companionate marriage was established as the norm in Hong Kong. The promulgation of the *Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China of 1950* followed by the *Hong Kong Marriage Reform Ordinance* in 1971 provided a legal framework that encouraged the transition from the traditional to the conjugal marriage. At the same time, the modern industrialization

of Hong Kong and its accompanying lifestyle contributed to the development of conjugalism (Wong Fai Ming 1972). Consequently, by the 1990s, studies on young people's attitudes to marriage reflected expectations of the sharing of love, care, mutual help, support, encouragement and companionship in intimate relationships (Yeung and Kwong 1998).

Yet, Hong Kong's demographic trends from the 1980s reflect greater marital and family instability, mounting divorce rates and increasing numbers of single-parent families, marriage at a later age, and later child bearing. These cannot be ascribed merely to higher expectations in marriage. The last few decades were a period of accelerated socio-economic-political change, policies such as equal opportunities in education and employment affecting not only our social structures but also leading to changes in the social expectations and position of women. At the same time, changes in the perception of marriage occurring in Western societies have been felt in our society. Alternative lifestyles have been increasingly accepted, based on short-term, performance-based and contingency commitments. In addition, the opening up of China during these years, and the increased communication with the Mainland, not only at the commercial but also at the personal levels, has introduced further ambiguities into the marital equation. It would be true to say that anyone involved in marital work in present-day Hong Kong is likely to be involved in extraordinary situations which variously could involve an intermix of traditional and modern concepts and of imported ideas and indigenous attitudes. As we begin the new millennium, these trends call for a review of our perceptions of marriage and its place in society, and a reassessment of the ability of marriage and the family bond to serve as the relational context of adult living.

Common Philosophical and Theoretical Perspectives

The articles in this collection offer the means to rethink marriage, through examining the various processes by which husbands and wives cope with the stresses and strains and changing life circumstances that affect their relationships yet find the strength to work through the trauma and pain of these difficult experiences.

For a small collection, the topics cover a wide range. As standardized guidelines for all to follow could be inhibiting, it was left to each author to develop the discussion in a manner most appropriate to his or her experience and thinking. Although there was no prior agreement on a

common approach in presentation or in the theoretical and philosophic stance to be adopted, it should be noted that four common trends run through and link the clinical and research chapters. First, the discussions reflect a conceptual stance that we live in interaction within a number of systems. Second, we construct meanings of what happens in our lives from our personal experiences, shaped by beliefs and values that underpin our cultural legacy. Third, counselling or therapy is a process of exploration of meaning, of a search for alternatives and new meanings to determine what is important and significant to each of us. Fourth, self-realization and self-growth come from meaningful relationships with others.

Potential for Therapeutic Work from Systemic and Cultural Perspectives

The authors share a systemic perspective, that human beings are part of many systems, from biological to family to societal systems, which reciprocally affect each other, so that what happens in one system has implications for the others. The chapters also reflect and share the perspective that human beings make meaning of what happens to them. The meaning they make of these experiences is derived from the cultural heritage developed from the family and societal context in which they live. Cultural beliefs and values determine how we define our experiences. This systemic and culturally assigned stance offers both assessment and therapeutic possibilities. It allows the counsellor/therapist, together with the client/couple, to explore the many systemic and cultural implications of what they have to deal with. It allows intervention at various points of the systems and consideration of alternative cultural constructions of meaning to increase life choices for the person to move forward towards growth.

Therapeutic Work and Research Orientation

Whether the therapeutic work involves family-of-origin exploration, working with survivors in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse, tackling the intrinsic dilemma of extramarital affairs, or empowerment work with divorced women, the therapeutic process itself is one of facilitating an exploration of constructive as well as disruptive experiences. This exploration enables clients and couples to gain access to what is significant for them, to search for and create shifts in meaning so that they can better understand themselves and respond to the demands and

dilemmas confronting them. The approach is subtle and can perhaps be described by a phrase graphically used by two of the authors “順水推舟” (to push the boat along the current). The current is life circumstances and cultural imperatives, now and from the past, which move the boat/client along the course. The counsellor eases the momentum of the boat so that the client is enabled to steer in the direction of choices available to him or her.

The research studies also reflect the processes by which men and women give meaning to their experiences, in or out of spousal relationships. The chapters on research reflect the growing trends and interest in the uncoupling process and the aftermath of marital separation. They recount the struggles of men and women as they strive to define and understand the meaning and implications of marital separation and their striving towards recovery and reconnections. The reconnections could be through remarriage, cohabitation, or single life with or without a regular partner. As in many aspects of marriage, gender makes a difference. The importance of and respect for gender differences are addressed in various chapters.

This collection is presented by marriage counsellors or researchers, out of professional interest, generally in association with colleagues sharing similar interests. None of them has been funded by their employing organizations. Thus, limitations of time and a shortage of support personnel have allowed the evaluation of only small caseloads and samples. Putting pen to paper has not been easy for busy professionals with heavy and demanding workloads. Our hope is that the sharing of ongoing endeavours in exploration and experimentation can lead to a further quest for understanding and development in these areas of interest and concern.

Overview of the Chapters

Clinical and Research Presentations

Our lives and our stories start with our family of origin. Spouses bring to a marriage their own unique early experiences of growing up, their own dreams and struggles, their vulnerabilities and their strengths, and their formulations of what it means to live in a family. In “Discovering the Spouse’s Other-ness through Family-of-Origin Explorations and Reinventing Partnerships in Marriage”, Laurene Man and Natalie Law worked with a couple to review and reconnect with their past, to discover

and accept their own idiosyncrasies and those of the spouse. This chapter emphasizes that marriage is very much the intermeshing of the needs and propensities of the self and of the other, within a close and caring partnership. In the intimate sharing of daily life, some of our propensities could be complementary, meeting affiliate needs and reinforcing the sense of togetherness; some have to be adjusted and negotiated; some have to be tolerated and endured by each other in the context of the emotional bond; some could continue to be irritating and conflictual. This balancing of the self and the other within the relationship is an ongoing process, shifting and adjusting in response to changing life circumstances in the couple as well as in society. The fluid nature of this adjustment process enables the discovery of new and different qualities in the partner at various points of the couple's life course together. While this may introduce elements of friction, it also adds excitement and interest to the relationship and could reduce tedium and over-familiarity in the long run. The search into the past with this low-key approach is itself innovative and, as shown, does lead to change.

On the subject of traumatic childhood experiences, Grace Chan examines "Long-Term After-effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Married Life: Implications for Practice". She emphasizes the significance of establishing a sense of safety and security in working with survivors who have experienced repeated betrayals of trust in their upbringing. Using a distinctive approach in counselling, she has evolved a method that takes into account the impact of these after-effects. She draws our attention to the effects of childhood sexual abuse on the married partners of the survivors. The partners are also affected by their spouse's traumatic past, and their responses can contribute greatly to the healing and recovery process. However, involving the partner in the therapeutic process is a delicate matter and requires careful assessment of risks and preparation, which Grace Chan discusses with many case examples. Her chapter has much to offer those engaged in marital work, as she helps us appreciate the importance of tuning in and respecting the subtleties and nuances underlying the privacy of spousal living. A particular aspect of her article which should be highlighted is her careful work in preparing a husband to deal with flashbacks during sex, so that he becomes the resource *in situ* to reassure his spouse that she is safe and supported in the current context of their marriage.

What if the loss of trust arises in the marriage from the marital partner? In "Tackling the Intrinsic Dilemma in Marital Infidelity", Anita Fok suggests that the essential dilemma in decision-making lies with the partner involved in the affair working through relational issues in

conjunction with the other spouse. In Hong Kong, it is generally the other spouse who seeks help, whereas the partner in the affair avoids engagement in counselling. From her clinical experience, Anita Fok proposes an approach in couple work which focuses primarily on the partner engaged in the affair, at specific phases of the counselling process, and supportive work with the other spouse keeping pace, in a combination of individual and couple work. Selecting a case example of a husband in an affair, she takes him through a personal reflection in an overall review of what he would like to obtain from his life journey. Through these deliberations, he generally reaches an impasse, what Anita calls a "blank" of what to do next, which is accepted and respected. To shift from this, a marital review is suggested, and this is conducted in a fair, neutral, non-coercive manner, the ground rules negotiated with all partners concerned. If this revisiting of the marriage generates relational commitment, the final phase dwells on marriage rebuilding with farewell rituals and recommitment pledges. As marriage counsellors, how often have we in counselling come across this "blank" and not known how to continue? It is from her extensive clinical experience that the author identifies this aspect as part of the process of working through difficult choices of the affair dilemma. Though we all deal with marriage reviews in couple work, the review process proposed in this chapter has many innovative techniques built in which address personal and inner struggles as well as interpersonal and interactional struggles.

The Chinese holistic approach to healing postulates that we forgive not just for the sake of the other but for ourselves, as forgiving frees us from bitterness and liberates energy for growth and transformation. How does this philosophical stance interface with psychotherapeutic propositions, and Christian or other religious beliefs? Wong Lai Cheung, in "Forgiveness in Marriage", addresses these issues in the context of intimate relationships in which hurt can be mutually escalating and interactional. In the course of everyday life, disagreements, abrasive behaviours, being put down, and not being listened to can lead to negative effects in close relationships. Lai Cheung discusses these irritants as well as chronic and serious transgressions devastating and destructive to the relationship. She crystallizes her clinical experiences by presenting various phases of working through hurt and pain in forgiveness work. According to her, the crux of forgiveness work is the sense of freedom from letting go of resentment and anger. Relationships then can be rebuilt, not by suppressing but by assimilating the experience as part of the past, to free energies to relating differently in the future.

In "Reaching the 'Point of No Return': Tracking the Pathway to

Making the Decision to Divorce”, Anita Fok takes us through the processes by which a number of wives come to the painful realization that their marriages are no longer retrievable. Anita suggests that uncoupling is a process of disenchantment, punctuated by a series of significant events that call for a re-appraisal of the meaning of the relationship. This evaluation of events in the context of the marital experience may lead the spouses to conclude that there has been a violation of self-identity, of core beliefs and values, of life themes of paramount importance. If this is so, it gives rise to a sense of need for a reconstruction of the self and the rebuilding of a sustaining worldview, outside the relationship. Anita proposes a form of divorce decision therapy to enable spouses in this frame of mind to review their relationships systematically from their experience at the historical level of the marriage, the interactive level, and at the personal internal process level. This highlights for them their own values, needs, expectations, conflicts in the decision-making process and their own priorities. If the client then chooses to reconsider and to save the marriage, the counselling would shift to marital work. If the client is firm about the decision to divorce, then uncoupling counselling or mediation may be appropriate.

For divorced women in a Chinese society, their sense and experience is very much that of a boat without any moorings, adrift in the tide of life. Recovery is thus a case of re-establishing a sense of self and in finding moorings and directions for steering. In “Rediscovery of the ‘Self’: Culturally Sensitive Intervention for Chinese Divorced Women”, Cecilia Chan, Shirley Hung and Winnie Kung have adopted a body-mind-spirit approach, based on holistic health concepts from Chinese medicine, to design and conduct empowerment groups for divorced women. These groups promote the re-establishment of a sense of self and the reformulation of the meaning of life in the context of life outside marriage. Through experiential exercises and various group processes, and through re-evaluating aspects of the Chinese culture that help or hinder healthy living, the divorced wives are empowered to let go of their pain and anger. They are also encouraged to redefine for themselves alternative meanings of what has happened to them, to free their energies for possibilities in the future. This empowerment approach highlights how a reconstruction of meaning can lead to a reconstruction of life experiences.

Whereas the previous two chapters examine the pain and trauma of divorce for women, the next chapter presents the other side of the picture: the stress, the sense of loss and of failure experienced by their counterparts, the husbands. Suggesting that the husbands’ needs may be overlooked as they tend to present a strong posture hiding their

vulnerability, in "Ambivalent Exit and Ambiguous Entry: Ten Hong Kong Men's Perceptions of Spousal Relationships In and Out of Marriage", Roger Kwan examines the perspectives of divorced fathers on remarriage. To what extent are they affected by the experience of the divorce process, or by their explanation of the marital breakdown, or by the nature of their post-divorce involvement with their children and ex-wives? An interesting finding is that the divorced men in the sample showed themselves to be active fathers with a high regard for the welfare of their children, which influenced their decisions regarding their own future and that of their children. This could be due to the cultural expectation that they meet their obligations to ensure family lineage, or that they wished to maintain the affectionate bond that they had with their children before divorce, or that this particular sample showed a bias. Whatever the reason or combination of reasons, it was clear that time, effort and resources were invested in preserving the father-child relationship following divorce. This is a feature at variance with practices in some cultures in which many children grow up fatherless. This raises another important issue for debate: What sort of ethos is needed in Hong Kong, to actively promote continuing and dynamic father-child connections following parental divorce?

Just as the chapter on divorced fathers draws attention to the importance of children in maintaining the divorced spouses' post-separation relationship, children are also found to be important in shaping the remarriage relationship of their parents. In "The Making of a Second Spring: The Experiences of Remarried Persons in Hong Kong", Lianne Tai describes how children take on various roles within the self-spouse-child triangle characteristic of many second marriages. This chapter discusses the emotional change and redefinition that spouses in their second marriages make of their experiences, which enable them to build resiliency, take constructive action to learn from the past, adapt to challenges, hence to grow and mature. Lianne points out that these endeavours would be greatly facilitated if social support were available and if there could be some revision of cultural perspectives unsympathetic to the remarried state. She suggests that, for stepfamilies and second marriages, what is reflected in the "eyes of others" can help or hinder efforts to establish a viable lifestyle. This contribution draws our attention to a need in our society for a rethinking and revision of the labels and negative attitudes that are displayed towards remarriage. The imagery that remains vivid from this account is that of Mrs Koo sitting in her kitchen, writing in her diary, reading the newspaper, listening to music, smoking a cigarette, drinking some beer ... reflecting that "the kitchen is my place".

This scenario suggests simple and sustaining possibilities for recharging and developing resiliency in the course of everyday life.

In "Gender Considerations in Couple Work: Reflections from Social Workers Involved in Marital Counselling", Timothy Leung, Monica Ng, Yeung Ka Ching and Ivan Yau address the widespread difficulty of reaching out to husbands to elicit their engagement in marital work. Observing that men seem to have a higher tolerance for relationship problems, the social workers in focus groups raised a number of creative suggestions to encourage couples to attend counselling and marriage enrichment groups together and find ways and means to maintain their participation. Some of these approaches may sound somewhat like going the extra mile to "give face" to the men while curbing the women's "pursuing" tendencies. Given the patriarchal legacy that Hong Kong retains, this awareness and tuning into gender differences may be essential in working with marriages at this time in our society. Nevertheless, further revision and reinterpretation of the concept of face in the context of the interpersonal system as embodied in the triad of face, favour, and fate (面子, 人情, 命運) would contribute importantly to a re-examination of another facet of cultural traditions which continue to influence behaviour and beliefs among Chinese people. This could lead to a deeper understanding of the Chinese sense of self as shaped and reshaped by interactions with and reflections from others (Chan 2001; Jia 2001). Drawing from research and clinical findings, local and overseas, and from the accumulated experiences of the social workers who have contributed to this study, the authors query the effectiveness of communication training which promotes mainly talking skills to help couples make changes towards more satisfactory relationships. They draw our attention to the prospect that promoting positive interaction and care-giving in order to facilitate validation and affirmation between the spouses is more likely to contribute to marital cohesion and well-being.

The Societal and Cultural Context

Whatever goes on in marriages, such as the endeavours of spouses to explore, re-evaluate, redefine or restructure their own identity or their relationships, has to be appreciated in the context of our societal and cultural circumstances. Whereas the early chapters are clinical and research oriented, the final two chapters provide conceptual overviews. The discussion on the changing nature and ideology of marriage reviews the marital and family forms evolving over time from various migrations from China and considers the challenges confronting Hong Kong into

the future. The final chapter, which develops many of the themes introduced here, critically examines traditional values for their contemporary relevance as the philosophical underpinnings of our cultural heritage.

In the "The Changing Nature and Ideology of Marriage in Hong Kong", Lam Chiu Wan, Lam Wai-Man, and Timothy Leung take us through a carefully documented review of diverse marriage and family patterns, as well as legislative reforms in Hong Kong, which reflect changing socio-economic circumstances and values since World War II. They propose a framework of three principles for debating expectations of marriage as we contemplate the possible challenges into the next millennium, suggesting that any discourse on the future of marriage should take into consideration the principles of "continuity" reflecting historical trends; "feasibility" in serving essential functions of socialization and care-giving; and value choice, indicating what as a society we consider to be "valuable" in contributing to living a good life. The authors offer much food for thought in inviting us to study the concept of "critical familism" based on equal regard, commitment, communication and mutuality to ponder moral and political issues related to marriage. They advocate Hong Kong develop a family policy that respects family resiliency and recognizes the growing diversity in family forms as well as paradigm shifts in perceptions and expectations of marriage.

In "Reconstruction of Traditional Values for Culturally Sensitive Practice", Julia Tao engages in a dialogue with each of the authors. By bringing in some of the cultural dimensions that underlie what goes on in marriage and families in Hong Kong, she draws our attention to the subtle interplay of traditional attitudes and modern concepts involved in so much marital work in Hong Kong. In the process, she examines the importance of striving for a balance in reconciling intimacy, forgiveness and harmony critical for achieving and sustaining relationships, with autonomy, justice and fairness, critical for achieving and sustaining self development and self-identity. The struggle to maintain harmony with others as well as fairness to oneself involves a delicate balance of sensing what and how much to surrender to preserve the relationship, and how to protect fairness to oneself. In identifying the human dilemmas at play in maintaining close relationships, Julia invites us to ponder the complexities and subtleties of personal choice.

By re-examining and reconstructing classical Confucian norms and moral imperatives for contemporary relevance, this final chapter challenges us to search out some of our cultural roots to discover for ourselves the extent to which they give meaning to present-day concerns.

The Search for Meaning

A common thread that runs through the chapters on clinical practice and research is a search for meaning. As the spouses recount their experiences that continue to cause pain, they and the social workers, whether in counselling, research, or through the group process, explore a range of possible interpretations of what has happened in their lives. This representation of experience is a process of "constructing history in the present" (Anderson and Goolishian 1985, 37), whether this is a family-of-origin experience, childhood trauma, or sense of loss and deprivation from infidelity or divorce. The recall and review facilitates the emergence of new meanings to reorient the individual, and to "open up new courses of action more fulfilling and more adequately suited to the individual's experiences, capacities, and proclivities" (Gergen and Kaye 1992, 175).

A Search for the Self within a Relational Context

This discovery-oriented process in the search for meaning leads to a reconfiguration of the sense of self. The Chinese self is embedded in a network of relationships, and meaning is derived from interaction and reflection from this network in interface with the acculturated self (Hall and Ames 1998). The self is perceived as carrying a personal history and a unique cultural legacy. It is dynamic, holistic, and open to multiple influences, which in the Chinese context have to harmonize with others in a close relational complex from which one derives status and a sense of belonging. However, in this emphasis on relatedness, the self can become submerged. In a society that maximizes responsibility and empathy for others, and minimizes self-needs and interests, the development of the individuated self is often underplayed.

A recurrent theme and the essential thrust of clinical intervention in many chapters is the recovery, rebuilding, and reconstruction of the self. Facilitating growth, through differentiation, and the establishment of a self-directed, autonomous, integrated person with unique strengths and vulnerabilities, promotes self-definition. Personal growth requires the development of self-definition integrated with the development of interpersonal relatedness, which facilitates the capacity for more mature loving and intimacy that can be sustained in circumstances of adversity and ambivalence (Blatt 1996). Rather than a static entity, the self, though stable and constant in some aspects, is continuously evolving, and there are many possibilities of who the self can be and can become. This is a

perspective that echoes the Confucian idea that self-transformation and self-cultivation are ceaseless (Tu 1985).

However, while close relationships enhance self-esteem and can be sustaining, they can also give rise to pain and suffering and open us to risks of vulnerability and hurt (Noam 1996). In this context, it is worth noting the extent to which the spouses in these accounts struggle to repair and protect their relationships while preserving a sense of self-dignity.

Harmonizing the Self with Others

Endeavours to harmonize the self with others can be achieved through various pathways. One is through reflective self-transformation and self-cultivation, calling forth and developing personal resources and resiliency in dealing with everyday life concerns, as revealed by the remarried spouses in their adaptation to their "second spring". A relational pathway is possible from partners helping each other to overcome old vulnerabilities, as portrayed by the husband reassuring his wife disturbed by flashbacks of early sexual abuse. Another pathway could be facilitated in therapy or in research by the unfolding process of recall and review, paying attention and focusing exploration on a variety of possible viewpoints of the same incident. This moment-by-moment reliving of experiences is illustrated through the family-of-origin exploration and the painful process of letting go and reclaiming self-harmony in forgiveness work. Another approach is to encourage a bottom-up exploration by the spouses, the therapist stimulating the process rather than directing the creation of meaning (Young 1997, 197–200). This is somewhat different from the top-down authoritative diagnostic assessment so critically debated in a soul-searching triologue by Hoffman (Gergen, Hoffman, Anderson 1996). Yet another pathway would be the sharing of experiences in similar peer groups, thus expanding appreciation of the range of possible meaning from other people's perceptions, allowing for revision or reaffirmation of one's own perspectives, as in the empowerment groups designed for divorced women.

Cultural Determination of Meaning

The thrust of this publication is to ask questions and to raise debate. It could well be asked how it is that social workers, trained in casework and problem-solving and familiar with systems and varied theories of the personality, carefully avoid imposing their own views on the client. Instead, they adopt a therapeutic approach focused on facilitating the

client's search for meaning, an approach that promotes the emergence of alternative meanings more conducive towards adaptive responses in their particular circumstances.

My sense is that this has been in response to the clients who present their dilemmas and difficulties in terms of the meaning that these have for them. And the meanings that they make of their experiences are highly coloured by cultural considerations. It is difficult for a Chinese person to appreciate the extent to which our beliefs and behaviour are affected by the strength of our cultural conditioning. Whether we accept, oppose or reject certain cultural mores and norms, they contribute importantly to our construction of meaning. This is clearly brought out in the analysis on traditional values and norms, in the discussion on gender perspectives, in the discussion on divorced women's and divorced men's marital experience, and in the debate on men's and women's differences in participation in counselling and enrichment groups. In the context of this compelling acculturation process in Chinese society, the theoretical position of constructionism offers an approach for reconstructing beliefs and values to liberate from their constraints and to generate more creative sets of meaning appropriate to our experiences. This is not a rejection of our culture. Our culture constitutes our survival kit. It is the accumulation of generations of learning and wisdom, and highly prized. By activating and inhibiting us in various ways in our response to life demands, our cultural guidelines enable us to adapt to changing circumstances. However, certain aspects can become irrelevant, some can be limiting in the way they reflect the dominance of our patriarchal past, and require revision calling for a search to reconstruct meaning in a way more helpful to a person at a specific point of time.

In this regard, the articles presented here reflect a gradual shift towards a viewpoint that meaning is multifaceted, relational, contextual, and constantly evolving in social interaction. This theoretical stance that meaning is socially constructed and that the self is constructed and reconstructed in relationships throughout life is integrated with our cultural formulation that also views the self as embedded in relationships with others.

"Wishing to establish oneself, one establishes the other,
Wishing to enlarge oneself, one enlarges the other".

己欲立而立人

己欲達而達人

Indeed, it is our relationships with others that offer diverse pathways through which we can search out a way of life to be lived within various relational connections.

The Search for Direction

The final two chapters on marriage ideology and traditional values constitute the background context for a rethinking of marriage and relationships. Lam Chiu Wan and his team discuss the mindset helpful for reviewing various possibilities. Julia Tao reminds us of the traditional norms and moral imperatives deeply embedded in the Chinese culture. Any debate on the future of marriage in Hong Kong will need to take these aspects into account.

This collection of articles on marriage examines three main themes in a search for direction. The first is to invite a redefinition of the values and ideology of marriage to reflect the many possibilities of different lifestyles and relationship arrangements more suited to the pluralism of modern life. The second is a call for the development of social policies and a societal ethos that reinforces the aspirations that promote continuing close relationships. The third is to encourage theoretical innovations and creative evolutions in marital work that facilitate growth, whether through marriage, divorce, or remarriage, and how these can assimilate different perspectives and new paradigms building on the family and kinship bonds which we still have in Hong Kong.

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