

When is Daddy Coming Home?

“I wish there’d been some kind of warning – that Hong Kong is a graveyard for expat marriages. If we hadn’t come here I don’t think the divorce would’ve happened.” Linda Baker, a European housewife, has been left scarred by Hong Kong. She has now separated after 30 years of marriage – although she and her two teenage children remain in their beautiful home on the Peak, with the seaview, swimming pool, and tennis courts.

Incomes that exceed 100,000HKD a month, share options, property, domestic helpers, chauffeurs, luxury flats, paid home leave and school fees may protect the affluent from the gritty reality of Hong Kong’s streets, but they don’t guarantee the integrity of their marriages. Baker is not alone. Last year there were more than 13,900 divorces from a Hong Kong population of 6.7 million. Foreigners constitute less than 500,000 of the total, and Western expatriots form some of the smallest groups: British nationals number 25,000, United States citizens 14,000, and Australians 9000. The number of expat divorces is so small the Family Court does not even tabulate the figures, and many couples file for divorce in their home countries, meaning the effects of Hong Kong on married are almost impossible to assess. “It takes a strong marriage to come here to Hong Kong,” says divorce lawyer Bebe Chu of Stevenson, Wong and Company.

Divorce among Hong Kong’s expat elite may simply reflect high divorce rates in their home countries. But the difference between Hong Kong and London or Hong Kong and Washington DC, says Marissa Vidaurre of St. John’s Cathedral counselling service, is in the high rate of “infidelity as the precipitant to divorce. The social acceptance of infidelity in this region contributes to that.”

It is a story of economics, ego, and expectation. One Canadian man going through a divorce says, “I believe marital infidelity will happen anywhere. It takes that individual to step out. People who go overseas are of a certain type. I think I’m pretty much an alpha male. I tried to push to do things, and often this is the kind of person who does better here. If there isn’t balance within the relationship that power dynamic gets exacerbated.” New clinical psychologist Dr. Melanie Bryan tells a familiar story: “the working spouse in Hong Kong often enjoys elevated status, higher than they had in their own country. They are treated in a way they are not used to. Frequently in a long-term marriage they do not want to go home to a spouse who really knows them for who they are. The working spouse often has an intense travel schedule: work pressure plus temptation. Part of the business culture here is dinner, drinks, then Wanchai, and there are plenty of possibilities and opportunities. It sets the stage, and if the working spouse does not participate, they may be looked down on. The trailing spouse has no support network. They feel disenfranchised and isolated. Some use this time in Hong Kong to start a business, a new career, or travel. Others simply feel culture shock.”

Jack Anson 40, an analyst from Australia is single, but knows what some married men are here for. “Some guys know what it’s about here,” he says. “They are married yet they are here for two years to party. These men come from conservative societies and professions. Temptation is absolutely huge and you are being tempted with things you may not have experienced before. The women may or may not be prostitutes. But Western men are viewed as cash cows and their

looks are not as important.” Statistics bear out his conviction: at the time of last year’s census the average income of a local manager was 26,000HKD a month; his American counterpart was making 75,000HKD.

Many embroiled in divorce or separation blamed the “smoke and mirrors” of the Hong Kong of illusion, and its obsession with wealth and status. Mary Newton, 55, suffered her husband’s infidelities for years, and while her marriage is now back on track she is blunt about the realities. “A good call girl here may be US \$50 Hong Kong \$390 and night; a comparable call girl might be \$3000 in the states. When you can get a call girl for \$50 you do not have to be rich to have access to prostitution some women are aggressive. They want to marry these men and be in the position you are in. But there are also those who are desperate: they need to feed their families. Educate their children. They may have whole groups of extended family members dependent on them. If you have the option of making 200 to 500 and night or \$.50 from working all day, what option will you take? And how can I get mad at a woman struggling to get out of where she is? Everybody gets hurt and sometimes there is a child involved. Hong Kong women face the same problems we expat women do.”

The number of expats seeking the services of counsellors and support groups has increased in the last few years. DivorceCare is a nondenominational support group that began last autumn in the Union Church, Kennedy Road, in response to a growing need for marital counseling. The group’s Gillian Horsely says most participants have been married for more than 15 years, and that the demand for services has been overwhelming.

Also in response to the lack of community services, particularly for English speakers, divorcee Andrea Gutwirt set up Soul Talk, a free, 24-hour relationship hotline operating from her home. In operation for 10 years, the service attracts more than 200 calls annually. Resource The Counselling Centre in Dudell Street, Central, has been offering professional counseling and mediation for people of all cultural backgrounds for almost 30 years. As mediator Maureen Muller, one of a staff of about 20, says: “when you divorce you won’t be able to have two houses on The Peak. Mediation agreements help couples get organized; mediators might advise counseling. But mediation is not legal advice.”

New legal costs are another source of bitterness because at the end of the divorce case the wife, with comparatively little income, may be left to face financial ruin. “People become upset with lawyers fees because they do not understand my role is to provide legal options. They often expect lawyers to create wealth or sense when there has been no wealth or sense,” says divorce lawyer Sharon Ser of Hampton, Winter and Glynn. “It is important for people not to use lawyers as best friends or counsellors. My obligation is to give them legal advice; we are not here to change conduct.” Wanchai bars and Mainland mistresses, call girls and glamorous professional women; all may find their way into the life of the overworked husband who spends more time in airports than at home. But what about the role of the company in preparing employees for their new lives?

“The only thing the company did was have a one day cultural training session with a few American-born Chinese who had visited Hong Kong a couple of times,” says Hilary Monroe, 45,

an English woman in the throes of divorce. “They told us about typhoons, taxis and small. Then they ordered Chinese food so we can practice using chopsticks.”

Dr. Andreas Bruech of Siemens human resources division, Munich, says that although Siemens for example, offers a series of seminars to executives and their families heading overseas, the sessions are not compulsory. “It is usually the people who are interested in other cultures who adjust best. If they are only going for career reasons they adjust poorly. The sessions would cover standard Asian business practices and forms of entertainment,” he says.

Another familiar tale is that of a boss who meets a young woman during a job interview. One such woman, 37, from Taiwan claims for the past 10 years her relationships have been exclusively with married men. “Usually it is their first affair,” she says. “I never expect the men to leave their wives. I don’t think I caused the breakup. What I create is a disturbance within themselves: they feel younger, they recognise something within themselves they had forgotten about.”

The tale may be titillating, that is some divorces reveal, the reality can be nervous breakdowns, heart attacks, strokes, financial ruin, emotional abuse, and, in extreme cases, physical brutality, rape, and HIV infection. The numbers of expat divorces may be small and the parties may be wealthy, but try telling them their story is insignificant.

The availability of prostitutes, long working hours and extensive traveling all prohibit a normal family life. As Monroe says: “My husband traveled constantly. My equation is this: distance equals divorce.” Baker adds: “It’s easy to say in hindsight, but we didn’t even have a single dinner together, just the two of us, without the children, without the company.” Newton adds, “Women say, oh no, I am a modern woman this will not happen to me. This is because they base their view on the society from which they came. But it’s different here. You may have a husband who is conversant, whom you are close to, who would never do this. But stay involved in what he is doing. Be outspoken. We are all human.”

Margaret King, 34, a working single mother, says, “Rather than have tons of cash I feel it is more important to be in control of my life. I always thought of myself as a working mother. I took six weeks off after the birth of my child, then slotted back into a senior position. Now I know if I hadn’t done that I would not have been able to support my child. You don’t want to tell women to be negative, that divorce could happen to you. But thank God I kept my career, otherwise where would I be now?”

Not all counsellors blame lay the blame for marriage failure squarely at Hong Kong’s door. As Gutwirth comments: “I’m not a believer in Hong Kong as a source of marriage problems. It’s what’s going on with you and how you create your own life. Some people, even 15 years in, say they have problems, when in fact right at the beginning, they should’ve realized things weren’t right and that they had just decided to stay together for whatever reason.”

CASE STUDIES

20s

Maria Bulander, 27, is a Filipina professional who works as a financial analyst. Now separated from Fritz, 36, her German husband of two years who works for a textile company, they married after a courtship of 10 months, a year after her arrival in Hong Kong. Like many going through divorce they are living in the same flat.

“Several counsellors say perhaps it was the cultural difference or stereotypical expectations. You know those stories of the Caucasian couples – their marriages fall apart when they get to Hong Kong because he finds he’s attracted to Asian women, thinking they have all those submissive qualities. Although I’m not Caucasian, I think this is similar to what happened to me. I think now he thought of me in that way, but that it was a little better because he could talk to me. I went to Germany the first year of our marriage to meet his family and his uncle said, ‘Oh, I see you found a beautiful girl from the tropics,’ and another one who got drunk started to touch me. So I think sometimes Caucasians have strange ideas about Asian women. For me, race does not matter at all. I just have to be more careful in the future.

“Before we were married I asked, for health reasons, if he had ever been with a prostitute. He denied it but I found out later it was true – and it was the lying that got to me. I could have been in danger. Then when I went overseas once he told me on the phone that he had been to get an erotic massage and had had a hand job. The last month we were together we were fighting: it turned out that he had been sexually involved. I demanded an HIV test – I told him I had the right to know.

After nine months of marriage we started to go to counseling, but he didn’t believe in it. I had asked if he was willing to share responsibility, not just for the rent, but if he would change his schedule if we had children, and he said absolutely no. He said if I wanted to work or stay home it made no difference, but it would be my responsibility to care for any children. He is more sexist than he would admit. He does not want to compromise his career because, he says, ‘I am a man.’ He paid the rent but I asked him if I could pay my share, and I transferred money into his account every month. He never paid for shopping or brought presents, only on birthdays. I am sure if I’d married one of my Filipino boyfriends we would not be breaking up after two years. I put my marriage first, but it wasn’t the same for him. If we had the support from families in Germany or in the Philippines it would have been different. Here the focus is on work and money.

30s

Margaret King, 34, is a working single mother with a young child, who came to Asia at 18 from the United States to work as a model. She designs her own line of exclusive fashion accessories and speaks French and Cantonese. Her former husband is an American-born Chinese. They divorced after 10 years.

“We met when we were both quite young and new to Hong Kong,” she says. “I think that when we had nothing, when we were on our local junior packages making 10,000HKD a month, that was when we were really happy. I wish Hong Kong was not so money orientated: there is immense pressure here for men to make lots of money.

Our families had no problems with our different backgrounds. His mother used to joke that I was more Chinese than he was. Like me, he learned to speak Cantonese here. I had to learn Cantonese for work and I really made a concerted effort. He was rising fast on the career ladder and was always competing. It was about power: money, restaurants, designer label clothing, the latest car. It always became a matter of keeping up. He was obsessed with the image of power. You start to give in to keep the peace. He was in control of everything and I just followed. Because he was Asian, maybe he felt he had to go in to the Asian male role as head of that household.

“Because of his work and travel I realize I needed to make my own way, and start, and you start to grow apart. After work I will go home to take care of my child and put him to bed, then I wanted to unwind, so I might have met a friend for a drink. But he felt I should be at home even when our son was asleep, and while [my husband] was away.

“I don’t think we had the problem of affairs – not to my knowledge. Occasionally he would accuse me of having affairs but how do you find the time with a full-time job and a child? There is a lot of resentment with the divorce. He was concerned with what other people would think. He said it was a blow to his image that I would divorce him. When people would ask why we were divorcing, he would say, ‘I don’t know.’

“It was a very difficult time for me. It was a struggle to find a job and move out, and to do it all secretly. But you find a way if you have to. Being a single mother is a terrible stigma here. I still believe in marriage but I do not feel people should stay together simply because of their children. I think many people do that to save face in expat and local communities. They live different lives in different bedrooms and stay together unhappily. That is damaging to each other. You can do it on your own if you need to. I was always told that I could, and that I didn’t need to rely on anybody else for support. I was told by my parents I could get an education, get a job, and be responsible.”

40s

Hillary Monroe, 45, from Britain, and her investment banker husband of 25 years are divorcing, after having lived in Hong Kong since 1995. Monroe has an antiques business and considers Hong Kong her home, but believes couple should be warned about what might happen to expat marriages in Asia.

“Before coming here I had a great job. I’ve always had a job or had my own business,” she says. One day he came home and said, ‘We are moving to Hong Kong.’ My reaction was, ‘How often are you going to be able to come home and visit?’ He said the company would pave a golden path for us. I saw it as good for my husband and child. We moved.

“Before moving our marriage wasn’t perfect but it was very good. We were together two-thirds of the time. Occasionally I travel with him, but his trip started getting longer then he stopped asking me to accompany him. Travel is hard on marriages. When somebody travels you find you have to make your own way and often you grow apart; by the time you get back together what do you have in common?”

“For the first two years I felt okay. My husband was reaching what he always wanted to do and hitting the top of his profession, and I could still see my child’s world expanding. I was still in adjustment phase when my child left for university. I started having panic attacks and depression, and with the medication I was on I gained almost 14 kg. My husband shut down. He began to feel like he’d always been conservative and that he was missing out on life. He started to tell me there were things he wanted to do before he got too old.

“One day he told me I simply wasn’t attractive to him anymore. It was the weight gain. I said “I thought our marriage vows were for better or worse, in sickness and in health. It didn’t matter. Although I was depressed, I knew no one was going to make me happy and I was going to have to make my own happiness I began making plans to start my own business.

“That was when I realized he was starting to see hookers, although he could’ve been seeing them before. I looked in his address book and got the names and numbers. I contacted a lawyer back home and started setting myself up for divorce. I think my husband thought we would continue as we had been – a couple of nice vacations a year, business functions I could accompany him to – divorce was unexpected for him.

“There were no infidelities for him before he came here. I think companies need to be aware of this cultural issue in Asia – that there are millions of women searching for a man with money and a passport, and that they are readily and cheaply available.

This happens across cultures. But I think there is a great temptation here since it is acceptable among most men’s colleagues. I know many other women dealing with the same thing.

I know women who have become HIV-positive because of their husbands – one with small children. These women don’t want to talk. They can’t. Sex is an easy thing to get here and it is cheap. It destroys marriages and families.

The profile of a man who does this is that of one who is very naïve. Maybe one in a long-term marriage with no children, or children about to leave home, may be married for 10 years. This is the only place I know where you might have a dinner conversation and people say so-and-so has left his wife or his mate and she’s pregnant, or so-and-so has a new hooker.

When I see older men in Bangkok with stupid grins on their faces, and there they are with some 17-year-old girl, or there’s a 20-year-old Filipina, Chinese or Thai, and there’s this old man pushing a pram...I know there is a wife who went through hell and a family that was destroyed.

My husband was shocked when I asked for divorce. Then we started reconciliation but I overheard a conversation on the phone. He claimed it was his business associate. The next morning I was wandering around Central, sitting on Pedder Street, crying. My therapist came

and got me. I had a nervous breakdown. I don't remember much about it. I found myself in hospital. My friends, my family, everyone I knew was telling you to go home, but I wasn't interested in moving back to Britain. I would not move home unless my lifestyle drastically declined and I was forced to. Hong Kong is my home.

50s

Mary Newton, 55, and her husband Harold, from Canada, had been married for more than 35 years and have four children. They have lived on the mainland and in various parts of Southeast Asia, and spent 10 years in Hong Kong. They remain married although she admits to being not a survivor but a "casualty" of the Hong Kong lifestyle.

Hong Kong is my home. This is where my friends are. This is where my doctors are, the person who sells me groceries, the person I know down the street," she says. "I've opinions about the harbor and what goes on with the government. My son speak Cantonese and Putonghua. My husband speaks Putonghua, I speak some Cantonese. My son married a Hong Kong girl and we have an Amerasian grandchild.

"The locals are very open contrary to what people say. They are very patient with us expats. You cannot limit yourself to friends within your own race and background; I have Chinese friends, Jewish friends, Indian friends, German friends. If you cannot open yourself up you never experience anything, because you never leave home.

"Our relationship before coming to China was very strong. We had been married for 20 years before coming and were in our 40s. For a woman Asia can be a very confining place. She's used to being independent. For a man, Asia is a place of adoration. There is always someone to get your coffee, your briefcase, drivers who wait on you. We do not wait on people in the West in the same way.

"Marriage does change. It is gradual. People become dissatisfied; you can find fault with anything. The woman may become too grey, too old, too fat, then how do you compete with the 21-year-old? You cannot compete. Especially if you have kids. And to leave would mean everyone would lose. Your priority must be your children. It becomes a silent hell. You do not tell your friend; you keep quiet and you put on a happy face, because if he loses his job you all lose, and most importantly your children lose. The problem is, it is expected the husband will engage in this type of behavior. If a wife tells you she didn't know he was being unfaithful she is lying. They change. You notice things, hear things. If you confronted there is something wrong with you. You try pleading, crying, trying to understand, and you pray. He says, you do not know what you are talking about. You are being suspicious and silly and I would never do that.

"He took a mistress in China. I didn't say anything. When it happens you feel like you are the only one. You assume everyone else's life is wonderful and yours is terrible, and it is humiliating. You think if you could be just a little better, be a little more kind, a little more good, this would not happen. But it is not the woman's fault. The responsibility is his. The girls are easy to come by, it is the price, the company, and the US dollar. Where else do 18-year-olds

think you are the most wonderful person that ever existed when you are twice their age? Barf. Nobody thinks will happen to them. It happened to me.

“Suddenly he looks in the mirror and he’s not Santa Claus, he’s Tom Cruise. He does not have to suck in his gut and he is handsome and wonderful and smart. And she tells him his gray hair is distinguished. And his potbelly? That means he’s prosperous. And his wife? She is a mean old woman he lives with. This is a man’s world.

“The children were kept out of it and didn’t know because I am not a screamer or a yeller. But I am not a martyr either. I simply don’t yell, but it affects your health when you internalize it. The stress proved to be almost fatal to me. I was internalizing everything in keeping quiet and smoking too much. I became really ill. I had a stroke.

“You like to say after all this you are a survivor. But if you are honest you’ll say you are a casualty. You don’t want to come across as a victim, but your decisions about what you need to do are your own. Even with good men affairs do happen. Now it is a different marriage. We are more cautious. My husband doesn’t take me for granted. I might not be here forever. You look at someone differently when you start to think about life without them. I was fortunate in finding friends to talk to. There are things you can do. Be outspoken. Get involved. Don’t be silent.

60s

Karen Marsot, 60, has lived in Hong Kong for 20 years. She is not divorced, but her husband, once a highly sought after management consultant, has not been seen or heard of for more than 10 years. She recently retired and plans to return to Europe.

“Our marriage was fine before coming to Hong Kong. I was doing an MA, I was working full time and I was busy with my daughter. Our marriage would have survived had we not come to Asia. In one sense there is more pressure to behave better at home. I think there might have been the odd punch, but nothing like the abuse here. Here I was totally isolated. But I sought counseling because he was manipulative and I was made to feel inferior.

“When he left Belgium I was ill. We had also bought a big house there that needed lots of work. But he was off. Because of my background I was very old-fashioned and I went along with what he said. I was not supposed to coming, although I didn’t really want to come right then. Within six weeks of going to Hong Kong he was living with somebody. It took me four years to recover my health, renovate and let the property. During that time he came back to Belgium twice, the second time to buy a house for his mistress.

“Here in the 80s there was so much money. And he was like a child in a candy store. He was pampered and highly paid in Hong Kong. He loved the lifestyle, the adulation that came with being the boss. It was a power trip. He had a chauffeur, his holidays were paid. He was totally packaged, he didn’t have to answer to anyone.

“His first mistress dumped him after we came out to join him. His next was a Burmese alcoholic. A businesswoman. When I came out I was aware he had changed. He was traveling. He said to

me, “You have been useful. You brought up my child for me and sorted out my properties. I don’t need you now; all I need is food and f**** and you can get them anywhere in Hong Kong.

He will go to functions on his own. So you are isolated from the people of the company and don’t know what is going on. He said, ‘I’m going to make bloody sure you’re going to have nothing to do with the company.’

He was a marathon runner and was violent. He is 1.8 m tall. I recently had to have a hip replacement because of the physical abuse. I was once hospitalized for three weeks. His company knew. They sent the wife of the personnel person to see me.

He wouldn’t let me work. He wanted me to be totally dependent so he could abuse me. He even told me, “I discovered the worse I treat you, the better you behave.”

“I had problems, so I had to have a hysterectomy. I told them, ‘Don’t let me out of the hospital and so you know I’m okay because I’m being abused.’ The day after the hospital let me out there was a tradesman in the house. When the tradesman went out for lunch my husband locked the door and rate me. He said, “I wanted to test if the works are still working.” I got an infection and for three weeks he ignored me. When I saw counsellor he said it was the worst case of expat wife abuse he’d seen.

“I began to work but had to do it without him knowing. I had not divorce for religious reasons, and because I had a child. I felt very strongly about that. The turning point was when our daughter had a breakdown. He came back for six weeks. Even then I was going to keep my vows. I didn’t think divorce was appropriate.

“In 1993 he said to me, ‘I’m going to disappear.’ He went out one morning. He left everything in the house. But he had control of all the money. We had bank accounts in Europe, but later I found out he had about 10 bank accounts and took all the money.

“There is a desperate need for women to be aware of their legal rights. I didn’t know anything about property or deeds. I lost a lot of money to lawyers. I went to see seven, and not one of them help me get my money.

“I was afraid to confront him because of the physical abuse. He still has control of the property, but I can come and go when I want and I am not battered. I never want to remarry. I have a lot of nice friends. I have a very fulfilled life. Hong Kong’s artificial: I still feel I’m on a holiday. But I couldn’t afford to be here long term. This is not a place to be an old *gweilo* woman on your own.”

Some names have been changed.

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