

# The Experiences of Hong Kong Chinese Divorced Wives in Facing the Cancer Death of Their Ex-Husbands

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**Abstract**—With the surge of divorce rate and male cancer onset/death rates, the phenomenon of divorced wives in the facing cancer death of their ex-husbands is not uncommon in Hong Kong. Yet, there is a dearth of study on the experiences of bereaved-divorced wives in the Hong Kong cultural context. This project fills the knowledge gap by conducting a qualitative study for having interviewed four bereaved ex-wives, who returned to ex-husbands' end-of-life caregiving and eventually grieved for the ex-spousal's death. From the perspectives of attachment theory and disenfranchised grief in the Hong Kong cultural context, a 'double-loss' experience is found in which interviewees suffer from the first loss of divorce and the second loss of ex-husbands' death. Traumatic childhood experiences, attachment needs, role ambiguity, unresolved emotions and unrecognized grief are found significant in their lived experiences which alert the 'double-loss' is worthy of attention. Extending a family-centered end-of-life and bereavement care services to divorced couples is called for, in which validation on the attachment needs, ex-couple reconciliation, and acknowledgement on the disenfranchised grief are essential for social work practice on this group of clientele specifically in Hong Kong cultural context.

**Keywords**—Changing family, disenfranchised grief, divorce, ex-spousal death, marriage.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Significant Statement

As working as a palliative care Medical Social Worker, an increasingly uncommon phenomenon that some divorced wives are paying much effort on taking care of their ex-husbands who suffer from terminal cancer, accompanying them during the dying phase, and experiencing grief reactions of losing their former spouses who passed away eventually has been observed.

With exploring those ex-wives' subjective experiences, a "double-loss" grieving process is identified. The first loss was caused by marital bitterness resulted in divorce, which triggered traumatic experiences in the post-divorce family. Subsequently, with having reunion with ex-husband who was in need of end-of-life intensive care and followed by his cancer death, ex-wife was facing the second loss of grieving the ex-spousal death.

The "double-loss" experience of ex-wives is anguished but concealed. Yet their winding life path is worthwhile for studying as it is usually unnoticeable and unrecognized in the hospital, and even in society.

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### B. Knowledge Gap

Researches on the bereavement experiences of attached or socially identifiable relationships, such as married couple, were commonly studied. However, the grief experiences of the death of ex-spouses have been depreciated by scholars and society. Particularly in the Hong Kong local context, the experiences of Hong Kong Chinese ex-wives facing the cancer death of ex-husbands are neglected in local research study. This phenomenon touches off my curiosity on exploring the social and emotional ambivalence of this group of clientele specifically in the Hong Kong context.

Taken into reference from overseas literature, it is increasingly uncommon to see divorcees turning up at hospital bedsides of their mortally-ill ex-spouses and grieving at dying moment [25]. Doka [10] emphasized that divorce itself has been already an experience of loss and grief, while the subsequent death of ex-spouse probably adds complications to the pain and desperateness in the bereavement process owing to the residual feelings and ambivalence with the ex-spouse [10].

The concepts of attachment theory and disenfranchised grief, putting in the Hong Kong local cultural context, are adopted in analyzing and understanding the phenomenon. The former theory is drawn on exploring the potential relationship complications about post-divorce pain, and searching for the motives of why ex-wives returning to ex-husbands for end-of-life care. The latter concept is considered for surmising the reasons and impacts of the unacknowledged ex-spousal bereavement.

### C. Research Question

Chief questions: What are the experiences of Hong Kong Chinese divorced wives in facing cancer death of their ex-husbands?

Subordinate questions: In answering the above chief research question, the following two subordinate questions are considered because the decision of ex-wives' returning to ex-husbands' care and their intense grief to ex-spousal death play significant roles in understanding a comprehensive picture of the chief research question. The two subordinate questions are:

1. What are the contributing factors to ex-wives' motivation to return ex-husbands for end-of-life caregiving?
2. What are the factors which complicate to ex-wives' intense grief of ex-spousal death specifically in the Hong Kong context?

#### *D. Potential Implication to Practice*

With the findings from overseas literature, it is expected that Hong Kong Chinese bereaved-divorced spouses may face the complexity and ambivalence in their grieving process which contributes to significance in their psychosocial needs. With the consideration on the specific cultural context of “East-West mixture” in Hong Kong, the social concept of ex-spousal loss of bereaved-divorced women is expected to be re-conceptualized to other alternate perspectives—probably both the acceptance of the Chinese traditional value of womanhood for extended grieving to the deceased ex-husband, as well as the acceptance of resolving grief for those ex-wives who opt for marital disengagement or settlement after divorce.

By re-conceptualizing with other possibilities, services of social work intervention may need extension of bereavement care on those bereaved divorcees who are intensely grieving. An early social work intervention on relationship reconciliation for resolving residual marital guilt and promoting adaptive grief experience before the impending death of divorced individuals may also be essential.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *A. Background*

The past decade has seen a surge of both the divorce rate and male cancer occurrence/death rates. According to the HKSAR Census and Statistics Department [16], the number of divorce cases in Hong Kong had increased 42.7% from 2004 to 2013. On the other hand, the number of new cases of male cancer in Hong Kong, with onset aged since 45, had increased 66.9% from 2004 to 2014; while the number of death cases of male cancer since aged 45 had increased 16.5% from 2004 to 2014 [17]. With the soaring rate of both divorce rate and male cancer occurrence/death rates, this research topic highlights the coexistence of these two phenomena which are both increasingly prevalent.

The first loss of divorce: With the surge of the divorce rate in Hong Kong, divorce has become more socially accepted, yet its significant impacts on divorced individuals and post-divorce families still bring about scholars' attention.

Divorce is regarded as a personal failure full of shame and regret. The major psychological distress is the experience of an enormous disorganization of self-identity [18]. Especially for women, divorce is usually experienced as a kind of loss, which includes the loss of family, relationship, face, money, and housing, etc. [19]. Divorcees are usually associated with stigmatization and problem-prone [32]. They may suffer from prolonged grief and frustrations, and residual resentment and guilt [8]. In viewing the subjective stories of some divorcees, the processes of divorce and post-divorce relationship have been contributing to miserable and even traumatic life experiences [37].

Return to ex-husband's end-of-life caregiving. According to overseas literature, divorced ill-health men being cared for by their ex-wives during their end-of-life journey is getting more likely to occur [25]. The state is named as “quasi-wife” who performs a caregiving role as if a married spouse [13]. Meeting

own feelings and needs for continuing love for ex-husband, responding to children's feelings and needs, and manifesting moral code or generic compassion are the common motives of returning to the role of caregiving and “quasi-wife” [9].

The “quasi-wife” faces role ambiguity including self-doubting about her caregiving role, ruminating conflicting emotions between the current caregiving effort and the past marital bitterness, feeling hurtful of being commented as “crazy”, being judged and confronted for the role appropriateness, and others viewing ex-husband as completely undeserving [9].

The second loss of ex-spousal death: Subsequent death of ex-spouse adds complications to the pain and desperateness regarding the residual feelings of resentment, unresolved guilt, and ambivalence [10]. The state of “quasi-widowhood”, as described by Foltyn [14], experience frustrated, insecure, and conflicting grief reactions, which deserves normalization and recognition on their grief process as losing a significant one in their life journey [28].

With a value of “let go it” and “moving on” after divorce, it is not just a process of “uncoupling” and “get the procedure done”. More realistically, divorce is a change of relationship, rather than termination; and, terminal illness or death further re-changes the relationship [33], in which significance between the post-divorce relationship and the post-death continuing-bond is worth studying. Therefore, it is worth looking into the experience of “double-loss” in facing both divorce experience and ex-spousal death. Also, with the oscillation between surviving ex-spouses “to grieve” or “not to grieve”, the psychological process and the significances of emotional ups and downs should be explored and addressed.

### *B. Theoretical Framework*

#### 1. Attachment Theory

##### General concept

Bowlby [5] stated that “human's attachment system remains active from cradle to grave”. It is our innate need for searching a proximity with our primary caregivers since infancy, with developing an attachment style according to the emotional responsiveness of the caregivers. Those include secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and anxious/preoccupied attachment, which speculate the way of adult romantic love in maintaining an attachment bond with our spouse [1]. In other words, there are significant similarities between the infant attachment and the adult attachment [29]. Furthermore, according to attachment theory, the interaction consistency between children and the primary caregivers shapes our “internal working model” for how we view on self and others in relational context [3]. For instance, experiencing inconsistent and abandoning interaction with parents, a child may develop an internal working model to view his/herself to be unlovable and unrecognized, while consider others as not welcoming, unreliable, and even antagonistic. Such internal working model developed at childhood also operates in adult romantic relationship. For example, a wife with negative internal working model may view herself as unlovable and thus, she

longs for excessive reassurance and recognition from her husband [35].

#### How Attachment Theory Views on Divorce

From the divorce's point of view, salient similarities are also found between the divorcing process and child's separation from his/ her primary caregivers [34]. The loss of marital relationship is regarded as the most distressing part of divorce, in which it implies the loss of attachment figure [4]. Such separation distress can be described as the intolerance of failure in accessing the attachment figure [34] and the loss of affectionate bond [6]. Particularly, a poor post-divorce adaptation is found for those divorcees who are having anxious/preoccupied attachment style. They are hypervigilant to separation and place over-attention on the ex-spouse, while adopting a negative view of self and others with respect to their internal working model [24]. A strong desire to maintain commitment and companion with their ex-spouses is also reported [36].

#### How Attachment Theory Views on Spousal-Death

Spousal-death is also associated with the disruption of attachment bond [20]. The way and intensity of grieving to the death of attachment figure are attributed to the attachment style [31]. In other words, adult bereavement complications or even pathological course can be predicted by the childhood attachment orientations. Particularly, people with anxious/preoccupied attachment tend to suffer from protracted grief and clingy reliance to the attached deceased [23].

#### 2. Disenfranchised Grief

According to Doka's definition of disenfranchised grief: "The grief persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" [11]. In a voluntary and mutually consensus-reached divorced relationship, the former spouse becomes a non-valued and unrecognized person in his or her life and family system. Thus, divorced couples are valued as a kind of socially insignificant relationship [12].

Scholar studied that the grief reactions over ex-spousal death are often unrecognized and misunderstood by the society, and even blocked and avoided [30]. It is learnt that surviving ex-spouses seldom receive support and sympathy from relatives and friends, and even counselors [28]. When grief is being inhibited and unsupported, empathic failure which causes troubles of meaning making to the loss is observed [22]. This disenfranchisement of grief potentially results in mental health problems in view of the disallowance and suppression of grief emotion [21], in which helplessness, powerlessness, hurts, guilt and shame are induced and worsened [2].

The application in Hong Kong cultural context: The adoption of attachment theory is not universal across cultural variations. Studies showed that cultural context plays a significant factor in affecting the perceptions, interpretations, and predictions of different attachment orientations [26]. Furthermore, the cultural values or society rules shape the commonly expected ways of grieving [15]. This explains the prevalence and the scope of disenfranchised grief are also shaped or even governed by a

specific cultural context or social norms.

After all, how do the concepts of attachment theory and disenfranchised grief bring about new insights on the experiences of ex-wives who face the cancer death of their ex-husbands under Hong Kong cultural context? This study area is disregarded by scholars and researchers as seen from the above literature review. The following part of this report is going to fill the knowledge gap and contribute to some new insights in this area.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Literature Review on Methodology

Doka [10] and Scott [28] conducted empirical studies by in-depth interviews with respectively, eight and 79 divorced individuals, whose former spouses had passed away. Both studies found that divorced spouses did experience a grieving process upon the ex-spousal loss by death [10], [28]. Their most common emotional reaction was regret and guilt, and kept on imagining what might have been if they were not divorced [10]. Also, bereaved ex-spouses reported physical and psychological symptoms which were with similar extent to those experienced in widowhood. Major physical symptoms such as sleeping disturbances and fatigue, and psychological symptoms including depression and anxiety were reported from the study [28].

Moreover, Sapphire [27] wrote a book "The disenfranchised: stories of life and grief when an ex-spouse dies" which illustrated the subjective experiences of the bereaved divorced spouses through narrative process. With sharing their narratives of ambivalent mourning, the complexity and difficulty in facing the loss of a former and failed spouse were acknowledged and even surmounted with hope [27].

Therefore, it is expected that the use of in-depth interviews for narrating the journey of bereaved ex-spouses is helpful in understanding their lived experiences, psychosocial needs, and beneficial to their bereavement coping.

#### B. Sampling

##### 1. Study Design

A qualitative approach with using in-depth interview is designed to facilitate the study subjects to narrate their lived experiences of facing the cancer death of ex-spouse.

##### 2. Study Subjects

Inclusion criteria: Cantonese-speaking, literate, and mentally-sounded Hong Kong Chinese divorced wives whose ex-husbands aged 50-75 years who died from cancer three to 12 months previously were recruited.

Exclusion criteria: Living outside Hong Kong, non-Cantonese speaking, illiterate, and mentally incapacitated bereaved ex-spouses will be excluded.

##### 3. Sample Size and Rationale

There were 15 divorced-terminally-ill male patients referred to Medical Social Worker of Palliative Care Program from Jan-Dec 2016.

Eight ex-wives were seen providing end-of-life care at

patients' bedsides. Some of them were not fit for the inclusion criteria or refused, the remaining four were recruited for interviews three to 12 months after the patients died.

### *C. Data Collection*

#### *1. Purposeful Sampling*

A purposeful sample of four divorced wives whose ex-husbands aged 50-75 years died of cancer three to 12 months previously were recruited. Subjects were identified among the cases known to Medical Social Workers who are working in Palliative Care Unit in United Christian Hospital.

#### *Initial Phone Contact*

They were invited to participate in the study by an initial phone contact, with the objectives, procedures, expected benefits, potential risk, ways of handling personal data, and ethical issues of the study were explained over the phone. They were then offered minimum time of three days for consideration on participating in the study or not. With their verbal consent, a home visit for conducting an in-depth interview was scheduled.

#### *Home Visit*

When meeting the subject during home visit, the complete content of the Informed Consent Form was clearly explained. Interviewees were invited to narrate their lived experiences by semi-structured interviews after they had signed the Informed Consent Form. During the process of in-depth interview, the data was collected by a native Chinese speaking researcher, and the content was audio-typed and transcribed.

#### *Follow-up Phone Calls and Member Check*

Two phone calls were made to the interviewees two weeks and one month respectively after the interview to conduct a member check to see if the researcher had interpreted their meanings correctly. Also, the phone calls helped assessing if interviewees presented exacerbated emotional distress or even psychiatric symptoms. Follow-up counseling sessions or services referral would be offered if needed.

### *D. Data Analysis*

At first, the contents of the in-depth interviews were audio-typed and transcribed for doing open coding to generate initial codes. Member check was conducted to check the accuracy of the codes interpretation. Second, potential themes were searched by collating the codes and, third, the themes were reviewed by checking if they were related to the codes extracts and the entire data set. Eventually, coherent patterns of themes in relating to the literature review and theoretical framework were formulated. As a result, a thematic map was generated for doing thematic analysis [7].

### *E. Limitation of Data Collection*

The heterogeneous post-death duration might present variations on the bereavement experience. For instance, the grief adjustment of an ex-wife whose ex-husband just died three months ago was probably different from the one who died 12 months ago. Furthermore, there were worries on the

traditional Chinese women who might be reserved in talking about shameful experience like divorce, or be uneasy in speaking openly about in-depth grieving emotions.

### *F. Major Ethical Issues*

In conducting a qualitative study with in-depth interviews involved bereaved ex-wives in sharing their lived experiences, their voluntary consent was respected and their completion of the Informed Consent Form was needed.

An interview guide with semi-structured interview was designed to facilitate the narratives of their lived experiences, feelings and perceptions subjectively. With the clinical experience of the researcher who has been working in specialized bereavement counseling service in Medical Social Service of United Christian Hospital for over six years, potential emotional reactions of the interviewees were handled empathetically and appropriately by the researcher.

To guarantee the principle of confidentiality and anonymity, the full names, HKID, and any other identifiable personal information of the deceased patients and their family members were not mentioned in the interview process, audio records, presentation, and report writing. All interview records will be destroyed after the project completion.

### *G. Approval from Research Ethics Committees*

This research has already received the approval from both Research Ethics Committee of Hospital Authority and Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee of Chinese University of Hong Kong on 16 Dec. 2016 and 2 Feb. 2017, respectively.

## IV. RESULT

### *A. Interviewees' Particulars*

Four in-depth interviews were conducted for respectively with four ex-wives who were all around middle-age, having children born with their ex-husbands and non-remarried after divorcing from more than 10 years of marriage. The four ex-husbands of the interviewees all suffered from terminal cancer and received palliative care service, while the interviewees returned to their mortally-ill ex-husbands for committing an intensive caregiving period which lasted for three to 10 months. Eventually, the four ex-husbands, aged in their 50s to 70s, died from terminal cancer in hospital. The four interviewees were invited to interviews upon their ex-husbands passing away three to 12 months prior. Table I shows the interviewees' parameters.

### *B. Interviewing Process*

Though a semi-structured interview guide that was prepared for facilitating the in-depth interviews, the four ex-wives were happy in narrating the lived experiences of their life journey: starting from their family-of-origin and childhood experiences, to how they stepped into marriage; subsequently, the occurrence of marital disappointments which led to divorce; and eventually, their post-divorce life, followed by caregiving to ex-husbands as being a quasi-wife; and finally, presenting as a quasi-widowed upon the death of ex-husbands.

TABLE I  
INTERVIEWEES' PARAMETERS

Nickname	Age	Occupation	No. of child	Re-married?	Year of Married-Divorced	Ex-husband's dying illness	Period of pre-death caregiving	Date/ Age of Ex-husband's death	Duration between death & interview
1 Mdm. Fung	60	Massager	2	No	1977-1997 (20 years)	Lung Cancer	5 months	Feb2016/ 72	12 months
2 Mdm. Ching	62	Housewife	2	No	1979-1993 (14 years)	Lung Cancer	3 months	Mar2016/ 62	10 months
3 Mdm. Pang	55	Hospital kitchen	2	No	1982-2003 (21 years)	Rectum Cancer	4 months	Sep2016/ 58	6 months
4 Mdm. Lau	48	Cleansing worker	1	No	1990-2005 (15 years)	Colon Cancer	10 months	Dec2016/ 55	3 months

The following part will illustrate the thematic analysis over chronological life stages: 1). Family-of-origin and childhood experience; 2). Marriage and marital life; 3). Marital problem and divorce; 4). Post-divorce life; 5). Quasi-wifeness of caregiving to ex-husbands; and 6). Quasi-widowhood to the deceased ex-husbands.

### C. Thematic Analysis

#### 1. Stage 1. Family-of-Origin and Childhood Experience

Theme 1.1. Traumatic childhood experience

Theme 1.2. Insecure attachment with parents

Theme 1.3. Strong drive for recognition

Theme 1.1. Traumatic childhood experience: The four interviewees had grown up in traditional Chinese family in poverty and scarce resources. In addition to the social emphasis on “valued boys more than girls”, interviewees revealed traumatic childhood experiences of abandonment.

“My father valued boys more than girls and he always hit me as a corporal punishment. My family was poor, and I knew my father wanted to abandon me for selling me to others as a slave. Luckily my mother stopped him from doing so...”—Mdm. Ching.

“I grew up in Hunan. My father expelled me from home because I was a family-loss without any contribution. He urged me to get married for leaving home...”—Mdm. Lau.

Theme 1.2. Insecure attachment with parents: Interviewees experienced ambivalent parenting style since they were young. They acknowledged parents’ loving care for bringing them up, while recalled their experiences of inconsistent parent-child bonding.

“My mother treated me well and allowed me to go to school. After my mother’s death, my father neglected me and I came to HK illegally when I was 15...”—Mdm. Fung

“My parents cared me well and at least I was not starved. Yet my fate was bad...I had no one to rely on and even my parents did not expect me to depend on them...”—Mdm. Pang.

Theme 1.3. Strong drive for recognition: Personal feelings of self-devaluation and urge for toughness were presented, showing a sense of “I’m unlovable” and “I need to be strong” for seeking attention and recognition from others.

“Even though I behaved better than my brother and studied hard, I believed my parents still commented I was inadequate. That’s why I learnt to be strong and

hard-working.”—Mdm. Pang.

Brief summary of stage 1: To sum-up the Theme 1.1-1.3, interviewees subjectively experienced unfavorable growing process, which included poverty, ambivalent parenting style, abandonment, and identity devaluation. These reflected their traumatic childhood experiences, which were associated with the unfeasibility to maintain proximity with their primary caregivers and receiving inconsistent emotional responsiveness from parents [5]. An inclination to an anxious/preoccupied attachment orientation was reflected from the interviewees, who presented a relatively negative internal working model for viewing self as unlovable.

#### 2. Stage 2. Marriage and Marital Life

Theme 2.1. Longing for attachment

Theme 2.2. Longing for validation

Theme 2.1. Longing for attachment: Interviewees reflected their eagerness to marriage, which was even seen as a life resort for “saving” from their traumatic childhood experience and a pursuit for attachment.

“I met him in Shenzhen and he treated me well. He married me and applied HK residence for me. He gave me a home and I was really happy to be homed. I could get rid of the maiden family’s pain” —Mdm. Lau.

Theme 2.2. Longing for validation: The responsibility of childcare and maintenance of family household chores were associated with interviewees’ sense of competence. Having paid much effort on a family caregiving role, they enjoyed being appreciated and worked harder to be validated by their husbands.

“...my husband appreciated my ability to sustain family well. He felt relieved to let me work for it...”—Mdm. Fung.

“...I was satisfied by caring the family and children well. I felt like rewarding my husband in this way...”—Mdm. Ching.

Brief summary of stage 2: To sum-up the Theme 2.1 and 2.2., interviewees longed for marriage and were eager to search for a safe haven and validation from husband. Their childhood attachment orientation had shown predictions to the adult romantic love attachment [29], which were probably anxious/preoccupied with seeking spousal attention and spending much effort on seeking further validation.

#### 3. Stage 3. Marital Problem and Divorce

Theme 3.1. Insecure attachment with husband

### Theme 3.2. Devaluation of self

Theme 3.1. Insecure attachment with husband: Marital bitterness was reported from interviewees, who experienced husbands' betrayal including extra-marital affairs, drug abuse, battering spouse, and gambling. Harboring disappointment, anger, and hurts, interviewees experienced an insecure spousal attachment, and eventually, resorted to divorce.

"He told me he had an affair and a son with the mistress.

I was furious and decided to divorce. He even asked me to lend him money to support them." —Mdm. Pang.

Theme 3.2. Devaluation of self: Some interviewees did not fully condemn their husbands as the only evil men for destroying the family. Instead, they even took account of their own mistakes and attributed to personal inadequacy for being unable to fulfill their husbands, eventually leading to divorce.

"I couldn't satisfy his sexual need and I rejected his sex request... perhaps that's why he had to develop affairs with other women for fulfilling his sexual need..." —Mdm. Ching.

"He took heroin... I was angry and couldn't accept... maybe this was caused by my failure to help him withdraw drug, and I was impatience..." —Mdm. Lau.

Brief summary of stage 3: To sum-up the Theme 3.1 and 3.2., interviewees subjectively experienced insecure attachment with husbands who rejected and abandoned the marital relationship. The perception of regarding personal problems as part of the causes of divorce reflected interviewees' negative internal working model of viewing self as "I'm unlovable" [5].

### 4. Stage 4. Post-Divorce Life

Theme 4.1. Loss of attachment

Theme 4.2. Separation guilt

Theme 4.1. Loss of attachment: Interviewees experienced post-divorce psychological pain and depression owing to the separation with the significant attachment figure. Senses of loneliness, failure, grief, and even suicidal ideation were shared.

"I failed to stop him from drug addiction and I finally failed to save the marriage. I lost him, feeling lonely as if losing a part of body flesh. I felt meaningless to continue my life and the family was broken..." —Mdm. Lau.

"I had thought of jumping from height after divorce because he really treated me so badly. I was depressed and so much wanted to give up myself because of the unhappy and painful experiences." —Mdm. Pang.

Theme 4.2. Separation guilt: Though seeking divorce as the final resort, post-divorce adjustment was complicated with a sense of guilt. Interviewees recalled their inner feelings of regret and self-blaming as being incapable of sustaining the marriage as far as possible.

"I self-blamed myself as being impatient to him. In fact, I realized he was not too bad to hit me. We might not end up divorce if I could be more patient..." —Mdm. Fung.

"Sometimes I thought we might be better if hadn't divorced. Though he was a drug addict, I should not divorce...finally I left him. He lacked care and finally got cancer..." —Mdm. Lau.

Brief summary of stage 4: To sum-up the Theme 4.1 and 4.2., interviewees reflected their post-divorce life was filled with residual negative feelings [8] and they suffered from prolonged grief of losing an attachment figure [4]. Also, their post-divorce guilt was contributed by the traditional Chinese value of forbearance and forgiveness. The failure of accomplishing the women virtues was associated with their self-blaming post-divorce experiences.

### 5. Stage 5. Quasi-Wifhood of Caregiving to Ex-Husband

Theme 5.1. Reconnection of attachment

Theme 5.2. Regaining validation

Theme 5.3. Traditional Chinese culture of women virtue

Theme 5.4. Role ambiguity

Theme 5.1. Reconnection of attachment: The divorced-couple reunited when the mortally ill ex-husbands called for interviewees' caregiving support. After the loss of attachment upon divorce, returning to ex-husbands' end-of-life journey was seen as reconnecting the attachment which satisfied interviewees' attachment needs.

"I felt happy when he asked me for care. It seemed to lose and win back him. I wanted to reward his care for me over the years. I am his life-long wife and I still loved him..." —Mdm. Ching.

Theme 5.2. Regaining validation: Being needed by ex-husbands who urged for care assistance, interviewees experienced a sense of competence. The extension of the life-long wifhood responsibility helped their self-identity being validated.

"I felt blessed to take care of him when he was sick. At least I could perform a wife's responsibility, and felt myself useful as he needed me." —Mdm. Lau.

Theme 5.3. Traditional Chinese culture of women virtue: The beliefs of life-long wifhood and traditional Chinese value on women virtue were significantly influential to interviewees who made decision to return ex-husbands' end-of-life care.

"One night of marriage means hundred nights of gratitude. I am still his life-long wife despite divorce. I should follow the traditional value... for taking care of husband as an unalterable principle... I came from rural motherland where emphasized three obedience and four morality..." —Mdm. Lau.

Theme 5.4. Role ambiguity: Being a quasi-wife received comments and judgements from others for the role inappropriateness in providing care assistance to ex-husbands who were mostly seen as deserving.

"I didn't know what I wanted. My sisters thought I was crazy to care for this bad guy. I felt myself disgraced..." —Mdm. Pang.

"Many people judged my foolishness for still caring about him. Yet they didn't understand how important he was to me..." —Mdm. Fung.

Brief summary of stage 5: To sum-up the Theme 5.1-5.4, returning to ex-husbands for performing a quasi-wifhood had met interviewees' needs for resuming attachment bond and desire for validation [9]. Given their anxious/ preoccupied attachment style, they wished to maintain commitment and

companion with their ex-husbands [36]. Also, the Chinese traditional value on women virtue also played a significant guiding principle for interviewees' decision making to return ex-husbands' end-of-life care. At the same time, interviewees experienced confrontations and misunderstandings from others, as well as self-doubting and ruminating conflictual emotions on their role appropriateness.

#### 6. Stage 6. Quasi-Widowhood to the Deceased Ex-Husbands

Theme 6.1. Disenfranchised grief

Theme 6.2. Grief complications

Theme 6.1. Disenfranchised grief: The grief reactions towards ex-spousal death were unidentified and unrecognized by others. These were reflected from interviewees' concealed mourning and ambiguous role in funeral.

"Nobody cares about how I grieve for my ex-husband's death. My friends even believe that I am set-free and settled. Yet no one knows I am missing him. I am afraid of telling others who must tease me. I know my own sadness..." —Mdm. Ching.

"I should be cut-off from him after divorce and I was inappropriate to take part in funeral arrangement... I hid myself from crying as I was afraid of others who might notice my tears at the funeral..." —Mdm. Lau.

Theme 6.2. Grief complications: Interviewees experienced uneasiness to openly express their residual resentment to ex-husbands who had passed away already. This was related to a moral standard in which "counting the sins of the deceased" was immoral in the traditional Chinese culture. Their way of disguising the unsettled emotions had complicated the bereavement adjustment process.

"I became nearly mad when thinking of his bad things done on me. Yet he is dead already. So what can I do? How can I expose his misconducts around? I have to keep my mouth shut down... even though he was a bad guy, I should not bad-mouth him after his death. I even need to glorify him..." —Mdm. Pang.

"...I have never imagined how grieved I can be, seems everything with him is over and nothing is left. I could never know the reasons of his betrayal until his death... I am still angry with him, yet I missed him so much." —Mdm. Fung.

Brief summary of stage 6: To sum-up the Theme 6.1 and 6.2., interviewees' grief reactions towards ex-husbands' death were unrecognized in their relational context and misunderstood by others, resulting in avoidance and blockage of their grief expression [30]. They self-contained inner feelings and the rights to grieve their deceased ex-husbands was disenfranchised [12]. Furthermore, with respect to the traditional Chinese culture, the unfinished wishes of resolving residual resentment and marital discords became in vain upon ex-husbands' death. These caused complications to the grief adjustment of interviewees [28].

## V. DISCUSSION

### A. Limitations

The above narratives were only collected from ex-wives after their ex-husbands' death. The voices from ex-husbands were inaccessible and thus, the findings were only collected with respect to a female's perspective. Also, interviews were conducted during interviewees' grieving stage, in which their grief emotions might be too overwhelming for affecting the clarity of responses.

Despite of the limitations acknowledged, the following part comes to the discussion on the above results in response to the research questions given.

### B. Summary of Findings

Along the life journey, starting from childhood to quasi-widowhood, interviewees' lived experiences acknowledge the attachment need and identify the disenfranchised grief. Table II sums up the findings along the chronological life stages of interviewees.

TABLE II  
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

	Life stages	Major findings (Theme)
1).	Family-of-origin and childhood experience	T1.1. Traumatic childhood experience T1.2. Insecure attachment with parents T1.3. Strong drive for recognition
2).	Marriage and marital life	T2.1. Longing for attachment T2.2. Longing for validation
3).	Marital problem and divorce	T3.1. Insecure attachment with husband T3.2. Devaluation of self
4).	Post-divorce life	T4.1. Loss of attachment T4.2. Separation guilt T5.1. Reconnection of attachment T5.2. Regaining validation
5).	Quasi-wifehood of caregiving to ex-husbands	T5.3. Traditional Chinese culture of women virtue T5.4. Role ambiguity
6).	Quasi-widowhood to the deceased ex-husbands	T6.1. Disenfranchised grief T6.2. Grief complications

### C. Discussion on the Subordinate Research Questions

1. What Are the Contributing Factors to Ex-Wives' Motivation to Return Ex-Husbands for End-of-Life Caregiving?

Based on the research findings, interviewees' motivation to act as quasi-wives for providing care assistance to their terminally-ill ex-husbands can be illustrated from a perspective of attachment theory specifically applied in the Hong Kong cultural context. In other words, putting the lens of attachment theory in the Hong Kong cultural context plays a role in explaining the findings in response to this research question.

From the attachment theory perspective: Attachment theory highlights the significance of early relationship between a child and his/her primary caregivers, for shaping the attachment style which also operates in adult romantic relationship [29]. From the findings, the interviewees experienced traumatic childhood experiences (T1.1.) with having developed an insecure attachment with parents (T1.2.), according to the inconsistency of emotional responsiveness and even abandonment from their family-of-origin. They viewed their "self" as "unlovable",

according to their internal working model, and thus longed for reassurance and recognition from others [35]. Insecure attachment and devaluation of self were also found from the interviewees during their stages of marital problems and divorce (T3.1.) (T3.2). Therefore, a probably anxious/preoccupied attachment orientation was observed from the interviewees who presented a strong drive to seek recognition from others (T1.3.), as shown from their hard-working and well-behaved personality since a young age. This kind of character trait substantiated their motives of returning their ex-husbands for end-of-life caregiving—by doing excessive care-seeking behavior to look for reconnecting attachment, regaining validation from ex-husbands, and fostering a sense of competence (T5.1.) (T5.2).

From the Hong Kong cultural context perspective: According to the findings from the interviewees, their major subjective belief behind regaining ex-husbands' validation and fostering sense of competence was the accomplishment of traditional Chinese women virtue. The conviction of "one night of marriage means hundred nights of gratitude" and "three obedience and four morality" served as guiding principles for performing a good womanhood (T5.3). In this instance, accomplishing these principles, which in turns, further confirmed interviewees' determination of caregiving devotion to their ex-husbands in response to their strong desire for attachment and validation based on their anxious/preoccupied attachment orientation.

In conclusion, the perspective of attachment theory in the Hong Kong cultural context illustrated interviewees' lived experiences, which included their insecure attachment style developed since childhood and eagerness to seek for attachment and validation; while at the same time, the fulfilment of traditional Chinese value of women virtue matched their fulfillment of attachment needs as well. This combination of both attachment theory and Hong Kong cultural context perspectives explained why interviewees eventually returned to be "quasi-wives" for taking care of their mortally ill ex-husbands.

## 2. What Are the Factors Which Complicate to Ex-Wives' Intense Grief of Ex-Spousal Death Specifically in Hong Kong Context?

Both Eastern and Western cultures constitute Hong Kong specific cultural context, which played a part for the interviewees' grief complications towards their ex-husbands' death. In other words, disenfranchised grief was displayed in the mixture of "East meets West" cultural context in Hong Kong.

The influence of Western individualism: Judgements and confrontations received from friends and society on the role ambiguity of quasi-wives (T5.4.) reflected a social belief of post-divorce disengagement. As a general and common notion, quasi-wives were seen as "crazy" while ex-husbands were seen as underserving. This manifested a Western individualism culture for regarding the relationship of divorced-couple was insignificant, non-valued, and unrecognized [12]. Owing to the socially-disapproved relationship after divorce, grieving to the

ex-spousal death is not publicly allowed. This could be reflected by the interviewees who concealed their way of mourning, covered up their tears, and even had no role in funeral (T6.1). With their grief being disenfranchised, interviewees avoided grief ventilation, experienced no rights to grief, and seldom received social support for bereavement adjustment. The need of "grieving secretly" had complicated the grief reactions of the ex-wives in facing the ex-spousal death.

## 3. The Influence of Traditional Chinese Culture.

As talked in the previous part, the way of grieving is shaped by society rules and cultural values [15], and thus, the prevalence disenfranchised grief is also shaped by a specific cultural context or social norms. Regarding the traditional Eastern value found in Hong Kong culture, the importance of full respect and even glorification to the deceased is regarded as a moral standard (T6.2.). Interviewees who abided by this moral standard were inhibited from open expression on their residual resentment to the deceased ex-husbands. In other words, the obedience of traditional Chinese moral standard had shaped the disenfranchised grief of the ex-wives, whose unfinished relationship discords, misunderstandings, and ambivalence remained residual (T6.2.). Eventually, their grieving process towards their deceased ex-husbands remained unresolved, complicated, and intense [28].

In conclusion, the coexistence of both Eastern and Western cultures in Hong Kong context comprises the social norms for shaping the disenfranchised grief for the bereaved ex-wives. With the Western belief of post-divorce disengagement overlapping with the traditional Chinese belief of glorifying the deceased, ex-wives experienced unrecognized relationship with the ex-husbands and unacknowledged grief to the ex-spousal-death. These contributed to the factors of complicating the intense grief of the "quasi-widowed" in going through their bereavement process.

## D. Discussion on the Chief Research Question

What are the experiences of Hong Kong Chinese divorced wives in facing cancer death of their ex-husbands? From the above discussions on the two subordinate research questions, the experiences of both "quasi-wifeness" and "quasi-widowhood" were illustrated with respect to the attachment theory, disenfranchised grief and the application in Hong Kong cultural context. These helped in answering the chief research question in achieving a more comprehensive understanding on the ex-wives' "double-loss" experiences.

The first loss of divorce was illustrated from interviewees' lived experienced of post-divorce pain and suffering, which included the loss of attachment (T4.1.) and separation guilt (T4.2.). Additionally, with going back to see the interviewees' desire of attachment and validation at the stage of marriage (T2.1) (T2.2.), more evidences were provided to understand the loss of attachment upon divorce was traumatic because attachment was something which had been very much longed for since the stage of marriage. Hence, regarding divorce as a significant loss in ex-wives' life which involved an enormous



disorganization of self-identity was in fact, not surprising [18].

The second loss regarding the death of ex-husbands was illustrated by the disenfranchised grief and the loss of attachment with respect to Hong Kong cultural context. The lived experiences of the interviewees reflected their unresolved intense grief, which were constituted by the unrecognized divorce relationship (T5.4.), followed by the unacknowledged grief (T6.1.) (T6.2.). Hence, divorce followed by ex-husband's death reflected a "double-loss" experience, which added complications to the pain and desperateness of ex-wives. Being overwhelmed by residual feelings of resentment, unresolved guilt, and ambivalence [10], ex-wives' experiences of "double-loss" had to be addressed.

#### E. Contribution to Social Work Practice

Given the increasing prevalence of divorce and male cancer occurrence/ death in Hong Kong, scenarios of ex-wives taking care of mortally ill ex-husbands, followed by their unresolved bereavement are becoming non-uncommon. With understanding the "double-loss" experience from the perspectives of attachment theory and disenfranchised grief in the Hong Kong cultural context, social work intervention on this area is strikingly needed.

According to the above findings and discussions, the "quasi-wifeness" experience inspires social work care on ex-wives' psychological needs on their role ambiguity. By exploring their growth history of family-of-origin and attachment orientation in the given cultural context, their attachment need and decision of returning to ex-husbands' end-of-life care can be more empathically understood, supported, and validated. Additionally, with understanding ex-wives potential psychological distress of harboring unresolved conflicting emotions towards ex-husbands, an early social work intervention on the pre-bereavement relationship reconciliation is suggested. Though there are many incompatible stances between the couples and it is too idealistic to pursue complete forgiveness, a pre-death joining and reconnection can potentially resolve the unsettled ambivalence between the two, in which hopefully, a more holistic end-of-life care for ex-husbands and a more adaptive bereavement adjustment of ex-wives are promoted.

The above findings and discussion also highlight the "quasi-widowhood" which complicated with the disenfranchised and unresolved grief given in the Hong Kong cultural context. Social work practice also plays an important role in this area. By recognizing the unrecognized relationships and enfranchising the disenfranchised grievers, ex-wives' grief emotion can be listened, permitted, and supported, which in turns promotes a more positive bereavement adjustment and mental health.

After all, a re-conceptualization of "family" is needed. A "family-centered" social work intervention is not only legally-bounded or marriage-inclusive. The concept of "family-centered" has to be extended to divorcees who are still taking part in the family system. Therefore, an extension of family-centered end-of-life and bereavement care services to divorced couples is called for, specifically for the local social

work fields in medical setting or family services.

## VI. REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Disenfranchised grief denies the beauty of grieving, which involves actively reacting and experiencing the loss, suffering, and devastation; and at the same time, affirming the wholeness and resilience in life. Whenever a group of clientele and even our relatives and friends are disenfranchised to grieve, they are in fact, disenfranchised in experiencing the constructive and positive aspects of grieving and personal growth.

Bereaved ex-wives, who experience "double-loss", deserve enfranchisement in recognizing their traumatic experiences of losing both marriage, and subsequently, their former husbands. Given the view on attachment theory in the Hong Kong cultural context, ex-wives, in fact, are experiencing an extended love to ex-husbands during the end-of-life caregiving despite of marriage termination. Enfranchising their grief is to acknowledge their extended love after the "first separation" with ex-husbands, and subsequently, to permit their love being transformed from the "first separation" to the "second separation". Hopefully, let the bereaved ex-wives experience the beauty of grieving.

Given that ex-couples are not uncommon among clienteles of social workers, and even our relatives and friends, do try to pay awareness on their psychological needs from the lens of attachment theory in local cultural context. Both disengagement and extended love after divorce deserve our respect and empathy.

After all, what we need to fill the knowledge gap of this topic, apart from the above findings and discussions, is our genuine acceptance.

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