

# The challenges of a stepfamily in Hong Kong Chinese culture

Yuen Han Mo\*, Tak Mau Simon Chan

*Department of Social Work, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Braemar Hill Campus, 10 Wai Tsui Crescent, Braemar Hill, North Point, Hong Kong, China*

\* **Corresponding author:** Yuen Han Mo, [yhmo@hksyu.edu](mailto:yhmo@hksyu.edu)

---

## ARTICLE INFO

---

Received: 6 May 2023  
Accepted: 22 May 2023  
Available online: 10 June 2023

doi: 10.59400/apr.v2i1.1355

Copyright © 2023 Author(s).

*Applied Psychology Research* is published by Academic Publishing Pte. Ltd. This article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0).  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**ABSTRACT:** The emphasis on nuclear family in Asia has often omitted experiences of remarried individuals, where aspects such as parent-child interaction and relationship have had specific implications for family well-being. This qualitative study interviewed 8 remarried parents and 11 social workers to explore the remarriage experiences in Hong Kong. The findings reveal four themes of Hong Kong remarried couples: 1) reasons for remarriage and factors hindering remarriage decision; 2) relationship with stepchildren become the biggest challenges in remarried relationships; 3) psychological and cultural factors contribute to negative stepparent-child relationship; and 4) the transition of remarriage--social service implementations. The findings extend perspectives around the contextualization of remarriage in the Hong Kong Chinese culture. The core values of family harmony, blood and family ties, plus societal stereotypes, are revisited with reference to the Chinese culture. It is recommended that social workers demonstrate more cultural sensitivity in their practices and offer different services to support blended families.

**KEYWORDS:** remarriage; Chinese culture; challenges

---

## 1. Introduction

The issue of remarried families deserves attention. In Asia, the remarriage rate is on the rise. In Japan, 16.9% of women and 19.7% of men are remarrying among all marriages in 2020, showing a 6.5% increase compared to 1995<sup>[1]</sup>. In Singapore, approximately 29% of registered marriages were remarriages in 2018<sup>[2]</sup>. In Hong Kong, remarriage accounted for 23.4% of all registered marriages in 2020<sup>[3]</sup>. As a result of this upward trend, blended families are becoming increasingly common in Hong Kong. The choice of a remarried partner is influenced by factors such as the marriage market and the consideration of the benefits and drawbacks associated with selecting a particular individual<sup>[4]</sup>. In previous research, it has been found that the choice to enter a second marriage is influenced by a combination of personal and familial desires, financial factors, the need for companionship, and the responsibility of caring for children<sup>[5-8]</sup>. It is important to note that the remarriage decision is also affected by cultural and social norms<sup>[9]</sup>, but little is known about the factors influencing the choice of a remarried partner among Hong Kong people under Hong Kong Chinese culture<sup>[10]</sup>.

Remarriage not only impacts the individual involved but also has implications for children and extended family members<sup>[8]</sup>. Many past studies have examined the implications of remarried families on youth wellbeing<sup>[11]</sup> and the adjustment problems of children within blended families<sup>[12]</sup>. Remarriage presents significant changes in family structure, posing challenges for individuals to achieve a balance in complex relationships within a blended family<sup>[5]</sup>. Moreover, it can be challenging for both children and

adults to accept and adapt to living together with new stepchildren and stepparents, while also forming a new bond with them<sup>[13]</sup>. In Hong Kong, the challenges and uniqueness of remarriage families need to be further explored, as factors influencing family transition and reactions to remarriage can vary in different socio-cultural contexts<sup>[10]</sup>. While extensive research has been conducted on remarried families in Western contexts, it is important to understand the specific challenges faced by remarriage families in Hong Kong.

In the Hong Kong Chinese context, local studies have examined the different issues in remarriage families, for example, Lau<sup>[14,15,16]</sup> has explored non-resident parents' participation in co-parenthood and the provision of financial support for their children. Chen and Yip<sup>[10]</sup> explore the quality of marriage among cross-border families and the related remarriage issues. These studies provide information about the remarriage of a specific group, such as non-resident parents, or a specific type of family, such as cross-border families. However, these studies cannot show the difficulties faced by remarried families in general and explore the social and cultural reasons behind them. In response, this study intends to adopt a cultural perspective in exploring remarriage issues in Hong Kong, in which the influential factors that create the difficulties encountered by remarried couples are identified.

## **2. Literature review**

Literature reveals that there are common social discourses that have played a part in describing remarriage. First, remarriage is not an individual choice; it is a family decision. Although societal perceptions of remarriage are changing and divorce and remarriage are now much more acceptable, remarriage decisions are still not easy to make. In Asian countries, remarriage is considered a family act instead of an individual act<sup>[17,18]</sup>. As indicated by Peng<sup>[18]</sup>, Chinese people need to consult other family members if they decide to remarry. Jin<sup>[19]</sup> also states that the Chinese family is a close entity. The act of getting married or divorced arouses concern among members of the extended family. In western countries, remarried behavior is common, but older people still cannot make a decision to remarry on their own after divorce or widowhood. Livingston<sup>[20]</sup> discovers that older people face more objection and resistance from their adult children because remarriage involves estate planning, inheritance of assets, and long-term health care. All these reflect that a remarriage decision is affected by the interpersonal network of a person.

Second, societal expectations of remarried families often focus on the child's best interests. Generally, this means the reaction and adjustment of children in the remarried family unit, which is a large enough concern to deter remarrying<sup>[21]</sup>. In Li's study<sup>[22]</sup>, the findings reveal that Chinese single mothers expect their marriage partners to be kind to their children. Their requirements for remarried partners are not easy to achieve, so they prefer to be single. Moreover, arrangements with the former spouse for childcare are another important issue<sup>[5]</sup>.

Third, stepparents are portrayed as wickedness, and remarried families are incomplete and undesirable. It is not easy for stepparents to perform as "a good mother" or "a good father" and be loved by their stepchildren<sup>[23]</sup>. A study conducted by Weaver and Coleman<sup>[24]</sup> highlights that stepmothers in remarried families are caught in the middle. This is because they are expected to perform multiple roles and to balance the relationships with different family members. Another study conducted by Blyaert et al.<sup>[25]</sup> reveals that stepfathers do not consider themselves "the father", and they just describe themselves as "a parent", "a friend", or "a father figure" in their relationships with their stepchildren. Besides, they need a lot of time to establish relationships with their stepchildren and meet difficulties in the initial stages of family formation. These studies reveal the fact that remarried couples

need to quickly adapt themselves to “a functioning parental unit” and this creates great stress. However, many people still hold the misconception that a remarried family is incomplete and such family composition cannot lead a happy life.

All along, the socially constructed view of remarriage and remarried families heavily influences remarried couples’ experiences in the families. Often stereotypes, prejudices, and social expectations became the basis for the discourses circulated in the societies. The social discourses circulating reveal the fact that remarried families are different from normal families, which have a weak couple and parent-child subsystem, and interference from extended family members or former spouses. Therefore, the subject of interpersonal relationships in remarriage families is an important area of investigation.

In fact, the subject of interpersonal relationships in remarriage needs further exploration in Hong Kong’s local literature. Yang uses “differential pattern” to describe the interpersonal relationship and self-other structure of Chinese people<sup>[26]</sup>. Yang reveals that Chinese people use “our own people” and “outsiders” to differentiate interpersonal relationships. The importance of blood and familial ties is emphasized in the *guanxi* (relationship) culture of Chinese societies<sup>[27]</sup>. The question is whether “blood and familial ties” in Chinese *guanxi* culture will affect relationship building between the stepparent and stepchildren. Recently, a local study conducted by To<sup>[28]</sup> in Hong Kong explored the role of children in remarried families, including catalysts, buffers, and gatekeepers. Interestingly, the complications and dynamics of transnational patterns within stepfamilies are highlighted.

The current study aims to fill the research gap and further explore the complicated interaction patterns in remarried families and the problems that remarried couples face in building their family. The Hong Kong Chinese people still strongly adhere to traditional beliefs of family harmony and collectivistic thinking<sup>[29]</sup>. Divorce is still considered to be a personal failure, a source of family shame or loss of prestige. The decision to divorce is still taboo, as divorced families are perceived as inadequate, so people are reluctant to share or seek help accordingly<sup>[30,31]</sup>. These traditional beliefs in divorce lead to a negative consequence for later remarriage. Remarriage is not only an individual choice but also affected by family, social, and cultural factors. All the societal expectations indeed affect remarriage behaviors.

This study addresses this research gap by answering the following research questions: a) What are the expectations of remarriage? b) How do remarried couples experience family life and their relationships with their children? c) What are the underlying psychological and cultural mechanisms causing the challenges faced by remarried couples? d) What are the implications for social services? The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the difficulties encountered by remarried families, the underlying mechanism causing these difficulties, and provide recommendations for social work service provision in the Chinese context.

### **3. Method**

A qualitative approach is used in this study, which has merits for exploring beliefs, attitudes, and viewpoints. The study also investigates the social and cultural factors that influence the decision to remarry. The data were collected through two focus groups with remarried couples and two focus groups with social workers. The goal of the four focus groups is to explore the decisions of couples to remarry and the difficulties encountered after remarriage from the perspective of both the remarried adults and social workers. The inclusion criteria for the remarried couples are parents who have remarried, and social workers who have experience with cases of remarried families.

## 4. Study participants

Human subject ethical approval for conducting this study was obtained from the former employing University of the second author. Homogeneous sampling was used, and specific criteria were established to recruit the sample<sup>[32]</sup>. The participants were recruited in collaboration with a non-governmental organization in Hong Kong that caters to issues around remarriages. In total, 8 remarried parents and 11 social workers (nine females and two males) took part in the study (see **Table 1** for details).

**Table 1.** Profile of the participants.

Parent focus group					Social worker focus group			
	Sex	Age	Biological (B) or stepparent (S)	Live with biological-child or stepchild		Sex	Social work working experiences	Handle cases of remarried families
P1	F	30–39	B	Yes	S1	F	6–10	Yes
P2	M	30–39	S	Yes	S2	F	6–10	Yes
P3	F	30–39	S	Yes	S3	F	10+	Yes
P4	F	30–39	S	Yes	S4	F	1–5	Yes
P5	M	30–39	B	Yes	S5	F	6–10	No
P6	M	40+	S	Yes	S6	F	6–10	Yes
P7	M	40+	S	Yes	S7	F	6–10	Yes
P8	F	30–39	B	Yes	S8	M	6–10	Yes
					S9	F	6–10	Yes
					S10	F	10+	Yes
					S11	M	10+	Yes

The remarried parents included four mothers and four fathers who ranged from 30 to 45 years old. Six of them were remarried, and two were marrying a remarried partner for the first time. Five of them had stepchildren. Three of them were living with their biological children and the other five of them were living with their stepchildren. Seven of them had college or university education. They belonged to the nuclear family type and the children received care from their grandparents occasionally. Sample questions asked for remarried parents included “What made you consider remarrying?” “How do you and your partner adapt to the role of parent in this new relationship?” “What do you think remarried families need to pay attention to?” “Is it easy for you to develop a relationship with your stepchildren?”

Besides, social workers who had experience working with remarried families were recruited. They were all recruited on a voluntary basis. Most of them are working as school social workers or family service workers. Nine female social workers and two male social workers participated in the study. Sample questions asked for social workers included “According to your experience, what difficulties do parents and children of remarried families often encounter when establishing relationships?” “What services are currently available in Hong Kong to support remarried families?” “What difficulties do you usually encounter when dealing with parent-child relationship issues in remarried families?” “What can be improved in Hong Kong’s current family services for remarriages?”

The semi-structured focus groups focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the problems facing remarried families and the issues that social workers who handle cases of remarried families face. All the focus group interviews were conducted in the Cantonese language, which is their mother tongue.

Each group session was about two hours in length. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis purposes without revealing the names and details of the participants. Nvivo-12 was used to complete the thematic analysis.

Prior to each focus group, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to the participants, with emphasis on the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study. The participants were informed of their right to decline or discontinue the interview at any time. The researcher also stated that in the event of negative emotions during or after an interview, the participant could use the resources provided to contact a social worker or mental health professional for assistance. All the participants provided informed consent.

## **5. Thematic analysis**

This study uses a thematic analysis to analyze the data<sup>[33,34]</sup>. This technique searches for themes or patterns and has been useful for identifying the key issues of specific groups or individuals in descriptive studies. Therefore, an analytical search procedure was developed to examine the details. The two researchers first achieved familiarity with the data by reading the transcription of each focus group several times to outline the initial findings. Then they noted the unique features of the data and generated preliminary codes. They discussed the codes, defined the relationships between the codes, and marked relevant text from each individual interview. A codebook was used to document the theoretical and reflective statements on the potential codes/themes, maintain the audit trails, demonstrate procedural logic, and provide transparency during the process<sup>[34,35]</sup>. Then a data-mining method was used to condense the codes into meta-codes (clusters). Coding divergence and convergence were also addressed<sup>[36,37]</sup>. The codes were applied, and subsequently, a search was carried out for themes and subthemes. They analyzed and refined the specifics of each subtheme into the main themes<sup>[34]</sup>. A semantic approach was used to identify the themes with the basic codes. The researchers also progressed beyond the semantic contents and used a latent approach that examined the underlying assumptions and interdependent concepts in the interviews.

## **6. Findings**

Four themes were identified from the findings. They were 1) reasons for remarriage and factors hindering remarriage decision; 2) relationship with stepchildren become the biggest challenges in remarried relationships; 3) psychological and cultural factors contribute to negative stepparent-child relationship; and 4) the transition of remarriage—social service implementations.

### **6.1. Theme 1: Reasons for remarriage and factors hindering remarriage decision**

Parents expressed their personal hopes for their second marriage. Despite facing difficulties in making the decision to remarry, they still desired to create a cohesive family once again. However, their thoughts were more practical, and they did not have too many fantasies about their partners, such as unrealistically expecting them to fully accept their children. Thus, they spent time observing whether their girlfriend or boyfriend could establish an amicable relationship with their biological children. Parents who had been single parents for several years expressed their desire to enter into a new marriage and seek support from their new spouse.

P1: I had been a single mother for a few years, which is quite challenging. I hope that remarriage will provide me with a supportive husband who will share the family responsibilities with me.

P5: To be honest, I was initially reluctant to remarry after my divorce. However, after a prolonged

period of open communication with my current wife, I found a sense of peace and began to hope that our children would have another opportunity to experience the warmth of a family.

Some parents recognized their need for companionship and desired to share their daily lives with their newfound love, believing that marriage would allow them to spend more quality time together.

P4: I hope that our new family will have a harmonious relationship. I hope that our interactions will be pleasant, and that everyone is willing to communicate and connect with each other.

P8: I think that if we marry, we can spend more time together. I can plan family activities with him and my children. We can live together and travel together.

However, according to social workers, many remarriage cases they had dealt with involved individuals who expressed a reluctance to remarry due to the emotional distress caused by their previous divorce. This was especially true for divorced women who had children, as they fear that potential partners may not accept their children.

S3: The remarriage cases I have handled, especially women, have many considerations when they decide whether to remarry. The main reason is that they all have children who are in primary school. Mothers have many worries, fearing that their boyfriends will not accept their children.

Social workers had also expressed concerns regarding unmarried single women considering marriage to a man who has been remarried, particularly if the man already had children. These women worried about performing the role of a stepmother and the potential impact on their ability to fully enjoy married life.

S7: I have a case where an unmarried single woman was considering whether to marry a remarried man. She initially thought that she did not need to live with the man's two children. Unexpectedly, it turned out that the man planned to take his two sons back to live with him after remarriage. This makes the single woman very struggling. She is afraid that she will not be able to fulfill her role as a stepmother, and she is also afraid that she will lose the time for the two of them.

## **6.2. Theme 2: Relationship with stepchildren become the biggest challenges in remarried relationships**

Parents expressed their challenges in forming relationships with their stepchildren, as they lacked trust in their stepparents and viewed them as outsiders. Parents endured challenging phases of family realignment and readjustment. Especially for stepparents, who are frequently perceived as outsiders.

P2: There is a distance between my stepdaughter and me. When she needs assistance, she is more inclined to turn to her grandma. This lack of trust from her leaves me feeling like an outsider.

P3: I've explained to my stepdaughter that she doesn't need to call me mom, auntie is just fine. This way, she is free from any concerns about loyalty, and it helps all of us feel more comfortable.

Children struggled to form new relationships with their stepparents due to their strong bonds with their biological parents and the influences of these parents.

P5: My former spouse harbors jealousy and is resistant to allowing her daughter to spend time alone with a new mother.

P8: I believe the primary reason lies in my son's strong bond with his biological father, which makes him feel less connected to his stepfather. He prefers spending time only with me or his biological dad.

Social workers stated that grandparents frequently intervened in remarried families and played a crucial role in raising their grandchildren. The presence of grandparents complicated the process of stepparents forming relationships with their stepchildren.

S2: The children's resistance towards the new parent may stem from pressure exerted by their grandparents or extended family members.

S8: I have come across some cases where children were entrusted to their grandparents due to challenges in adjusting to their parents' remarriage. This resulted in a vicious cycle of building trusting relationships between the children and their stepparents.

The lack of a harmonious parent-child relationship impacted the remarried couple. If a harmonious relationship cannot be established, it might greatly affect the connection between partners in a remarriage.

P5: In my family, I have my eldest daughter and a younger daughter who is my second wife's child. I strive to avoid any perception of favoritism towards either side. However, if I cannot manage properly, it can certainly lead to disturbances in family dynamics, as well as place a strain on our marital relationship.

According to social workers, these couples frequently face the pressure of creating a successful blended family. The dissatisfaction with the stepparent-child relationship could have a negative impact on their second marriage.

S1: In one of my cases, a wife expressed her frustration with the stepson, finding him challenging to discipline. She frequently voiced her concerns to her husband, believing that the stepson harbored hostility towards her. The husband, in turn, felt unhappy and defensive when his wife criticized his son.

S11: In a case I encountered, a wife expressed to her husband, "Your son is hostile towards me," which greatly angered him. Her husband often voiced grievances about this situation, which in turn had a negative impact on their relationship as a remarried couple.

### **6.3. Theme 3: Psychological and cultural factors contribute to negative stepparent-child relationship**

Parents and social workers expressed that the negative stepparent-child relationship was because of the bonding of stepchildren with their biological parents and their hostility towards stepparents. They hoped that their biological parents could reconcile and return to their original family structure. In fact, remarriage came as a terrible blow to the children, as it compelled them to face the fact that their parents had not ultimately reconciled with each other. Moreover, they held suspicions regarding the motives behind the remarriage.

P8: My stepdaughter rejected me as she had formed a strong bond with her biological mother and desired to reunite with her original family.

S6: I encountered a case in which a child is reluctant to accept his stepmother because he suspects that the stepmother's motives for marrying his father are driven by greed for money.

Social workers expressed that negative stepparent-child relationships could be influenced by cultural factors, such as the importance of loyalty to parents and the practice of filial piety. Developing a good relationship with a stepparent was viewed as a breach of filial piety towards one's biological parent.

S8: During family counseling, we will address the loyalty and trust issues that stepchildren may

have, as they often fear that having a good relationship with their stepparents may lead to disloyalty towards their biological parents.

S2: Stepchildren often find it challenging to accept their new mother or father, as they perceive it as a violation of their filial piety towards their biological parent.

Despite the decreasing societal stigma surrounding stepfamilies, some stepchildren still perceive their family as abnormal in comparison to other children.

P6: My stepchildren feel ashamed of themselves for being in a remarried family. He said that other classmates grow up in normal families as they are living with biological parents.

Parents had expressed their commitment to traditional family values, emphasizing the importance of maintaining family harmony through the principle that “a peaceful family will prosper (jiahe wanshi xing)”. They strived to achieve this by striking a balance between the various members of the family and meeting each other’s needs through equal and thoughtful consideration.

P4: Although I know that the family structure is relatively complicated, and my daughter may have many expectations and thoughts about me, her stepfather, and her biological father. What I hope is that the family will be harmonious and that a peaceful family will prosper. I understand that children are more sensitive, and I try my best to keep family harmony.

Parents said that it is crucial to maintain a balanced approach towards every member of the family, especially to avoid making children feel treated differently, which can make parents feel exhausted and blame themselves for not being able to achieve it. Social workers said that this unfair situation also caused frequent marital conflicts.

P7: I think the happiness and needs of three of us are equally important. I always hope to do my best to make my wife and my stepdaughter happy. However, sometimes I may not be able to make everyone satisfied and happy, and I feel deeply guilty.

P5: I need to treat both children fairly. My eldest daughter is jealous of her stepsister. When I scold her, she has a big reaction. I feel very troubled, I don’t know how to treat each child fairly.

S6: In a case, the woman frequently expresses dissatisfaction with the man’s inability to treat his stepson and biological daughter equally, leading to frequent conflicts between the couple.

Both parents and social workers emphasized that the traditional concept of hierarchy in Chinese families emphasizes the importance of respecting parents. However, it seems difficult for the authority of Chinese parents to be practiced in stepfamilies, which often leads to confusion and a sense of helplessness for the parents in these situations. The social worker also said that children do not accept their parents’ remarriage and feel disgusted. They did not respect their parents or stepparents, and there was no hierarchical order in the family.

P1: Although I am remarried, it is still like a single-parent family. I am the only one taking care of my daughter, and my daughter does not regard her stepfather as her father and does not have proper respect for him. I am both a father and a mother. It is difficult for me to practice my parental authority. My husband has no parental authority at all. This feeling of confusion makes both my husband and I feel at a loss.

S4: In a case I once handled, the father remarried later in life, and the age difference between his wife and his son was about the same. The children did not recognize or accept the stepmother.

S9: I have encountered a young man who hated his mother for remarrying, and the relationship



between mother, and son was very bad. The son disrespected the mother and she was unable to exercise her parental authority.

#### **6.4. Theme 4: The transition of remarriage—Social service implementations**

The parents mentioned that they had limited social resources to rely on. Nevertheless, they expressed their desire for some kind of support, particularly when it came to step-parenthood. They urged the government to provide additional resources for the remarried families.

P6: I think that the government should allocate more resources to support remarried families.

Social workers also agreed that remarried families needed extra support. The special needs of remarried couples included childcare arrangements and relationship building with stepchildren. Especially remarried parents found it difficult to handle the complex interpersonal relationships within blended families, such as the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren, as well as issues like how to treat each family member fairly and loss of parent authority. They needed counseling services and support.

S1: I think remarried families, like other families, will still face many practical difficulties, such as housing and financial problems. Of course, some remarried families will have special needs, such as the relationship between stepparents and children, but social workers should not label them as they are very different from ordinary families.

S3: In my role as a counselor, I am faced with the challenge of managing complex relationship dynamics within blended families. For example, I am currently dealing with a case where the stepmother is hesitant to reside with her two stepsons, as she prefers to live solely with her husband. However, the husband desires his wife to coexist with his sons. It is my responsibility to facilitate communication and find a common ground that accommodates the diverse expectations of all parties involved during the counseling process.

## **7. Discussion**

The research results show that when remarried individuals face the decision to remarry, they do so out of their own desire for marriage and love. They hope to once again experience love and being loved, as well as to rebuild a complete family. However, the decision to remarry is not easy. They are afraid of the failure of remarriage, which would make them experience the pain of divorce again. Additionally, they are also afraid that their partners may not accept their children. For a man or woman who is getting married for the first time, when remarrying someone with a child, they may also worry about whether they can take on the role of a stepparent, and even experience resistance to living together with the stepchildren.

This research highlights one of the biggest challenges in stepfamilies, which is the interaction and relationship building between stepparents and stepchildren. Due to the attachment to biological parents and the desire for family reunification, children are not easily accepting of stepparents, which is consistent with research conducted in other countries<sup>[12]</sup>. Western studies describe this phenomenon as a problem of family lifestyle and family boundaries, as children are accustomed to the lifestyle of their original family and resist the new family's lifestyle<sup>[38]</sup>.

However, in Chinese society, this phenomenon is not only based on the discomfort of living habits but also a problem of relationships and blood ties, similar to the issue of biological bonding discussed in Western society. This research highlights that the concept of family among children may not necessarily

change due to their parents' remarriage. From the perspective of the children, they still consider their biological parents, who share a blood relationship with them, as their true parents. Stepparents are seen more as aunts or uncles, representing a cohabitation relationship rather than a familial one. The participants who have remarried stated that their stepchildren refer to them as "auntie" or "uncle". These terms are used generically to address someone who is older and not related by blood. These findings contribute to the "differential pattern" proposed by Yang<sup>[26]</sup>, which highlights the distinct relationships between children and parents. Non-resident biological parents are considered "insiders" by the children, while stepparents, despite living with them, are seen as "outsiders". This concept of insiders and outsiders, as suggested by Yang<sup>[27]</sup>, can be applied to describe the importance of blood and familial ties in Chinese guanxi culture.

The findings reveal the significance of blood and familial bonds, highlighting "guanxi", as defined by Chow and Ng<sup>[39]</sup>, refers to the network and connections between individuals. It serves as a personal connection system, determining the level of trust and responsibilities among people<sup>[26]</sup>. Chinese individuals often define personal connections in relation to family, acquaintances, and friends<sup>[27]</sup>. The blood and familial ties will affect relationship bonding between the stepparent and stepchildren. To echo the ideas expressed by To<sup>[28]</sup>, the role children play in remarried families cannot be ignored. The alienation and conflicts between stepparents and stepchildren are bound to affect the marital relationship. For example, research results have shown that due to the estranged relationship between the daughter and the stepfather, the mother tends to protect the daughter, neglecting the husband and making him feel isolated.

According to the research findings, Chinese families place significant emphasis on harmony, conflict reduction, and maintaining a balanced relationship. In the case of remarried individuals, family harmony takes priority, and they consider their partner's ability to get along harmoniously with everyone in the family as a criterion for selecting a spouse. They are primarily concerned with practicality and do not hold unrealistic expectations regarding their partners. They do not anticipate their partners to fully accept their children, but rather take the opportunity to assess whether their partners can establish a harmonious relationship with their biological children. They use "family harmony" to judge whether he or she is Mr. Right or Miss Right. The most important criterion of choosing a remarried partner is based on the decision as to whether family harmony is foreseeable. Family harmony is considered to be mutual respect, happy family time, and good communication between family members. These spouse selection criteria are less mentioned in other countries' remarriage research. On the contrary, most studies mention that remarried individuals have unrealistic expectations, thinking that their children and stepparents can get along well after remarriage<sup>[40]</sup>.

Although remarried families or remarried families are on the rise, societal stereotypes that view these families as abnormal persist. Negative stereotyping of remarried families influences the experiences of remarried couples and their children. Stereotype is the belief that people hold about the characteristics of a group of people. Interviewed social workers said that people in society have a prejudice against young women who are willing to marry old divorced or widowed men. They think that these women are greedy for the man's money. Stereotypes that circulate in society carry negative connotations. Remarried participants said their children do not want to disclose their family status to the other classmates.

In sum, socially constructed views of stepparents and parenting roles heavily influence parents' experiences in remarried families. Remarried couples often feel that they should maintain family harmony and try their best to take up the role of good parent. The formation of an idealized family

depends on whether they can balance the needs of each family member. It is consistent with international studies that stepparents want to be perceived as good and to be loved by their stepchildren<sup>[23]</sup>. They put high expectations on themselves, and meeting such expectations is difficult<sup>[24]</sup>. The findings in this study expand the current understanding of the need for remarriage and the cultural pressure of collective family harmony. Societal perceptions of remarriage are changing, but it is evident that traditional cultural views are still pervasive. Some of the behaviors and attitudes are deeply rooted within the family culture of Chinese society. Contextualizing remarriages in the Hong Kong Chinese culture will therefore provide a nuanced understanding of remarriage behaviors.

## **8. Implications for social services**

The research findings indicate that remarried families require additional support, such as material and financial assistance, as well as the need for family counseling, especially in terms of learning how to accept and get along with each other. In terms of the division of family roles and cooperation, remarried couples need to have open discussions and work together to overcome various conflicts arising from psychological and cultural factors. Therefore, social workers need to possess knowledge and skills in counseling remarried families, be sensitive to cultural and psychological factors, and pay special attention to the subtle relationships among family members. Social workers can empower remarried individuals through remarried family support groups where individuals in remarried families can come together to share their experiences and learn from each other. Moreover, although remarried families are becoming increasingly common, this study shows that some children from remarried families still feel that their families are incomplete and not as good as their classmates' families. They may feel ashamed to admit their family situation to others. Social workers can use psychosocial educational activities to guide young people to think about problems from a positive perspective and be willing to seek assistance from social workers. Furthermore, this study also highlights the need for services for divorced families. After divorce, it is possible for an individual to encounter potential partners for remarriage, and deciding whether to remarry can often be distressing. Social workers can develop supportive services for divorced individuals, assisting them in understanding and recognizing the needs of their own families and establishing realistic expectations for remarriage.

## **9. Conclusion**

This study extends perspectives of cultural issues around the remarriage life and stepfamily relationships in the Hong Kong Chinese context. Psychological and cultural factors that impact stepparent-child relationships and couple relationships are found. To support social work practices, this study gives insight into the diverse needs of remarried families. The data from both those remarried couples and social workers experienced in remarriage work provides two different perspectives to supplement each other. However, a limitation of this study is that the sample size is small and only two groups of people are involved: remarried couples and social workers. It is recommended that future studies investigate the experiences of larger samples of remarried couples. Moreover, a comparative study of the case in Hong Kong with other Asian countries with a similar culture will enhance the current understanding of the relationship between culture and remarriage.

## **Author contributions**

Conceptualization, YHMO and TMSC; methodology, YHMO and TMSC; software, YHMO; formal analysis, THMO; investigation, TMSC; resources, TMSC; data curation, YHMO and TMSC;

writing—original draft preparation, THMO; writing—review and editing, YHMO and TMSC. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

1. Nippon Communications Foundation. Marriage Statistics in Japan: Average Age of Couples Continues to Rise. Available online: <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00759/> (accessed on 1 June 2023).
2. Singapore Department of Statistics. Statistics on marriages and divorces, reference year 2018. Available online: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/population/smd2017.pdf> (accessed on 1 June 2023).
3. Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistic. Marriage and Divorce Trends in Hong Kong, 1991 to 2020. Available online: [https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/data/stat\\_report/product/FA100055/att/B72201FB2022XXXXB0100.pdf](https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/data/stat_report/product/FA100055/att/B72201FB2022XXXXB0100.pdf) (accessed on 1 June 2023).
4. Schmiede CJ, Richards LN, Zvonkovic AM. Remarriage. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*. 2001; 36(1): 123-140. doi: 10.1300/J087v36n01\_07
5. Ehrenberg MF, Robertson M, Pringle J. Attachment Style and Marital Commitment in the Context of Remarriage. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*. 2012; 53(3): 204-219. doi: 10.1080/10502556.2012.663270
6. Matthijs K. Frequency, timing and intensity of remarriage in 19th century Flanders. *The History of the Family*. 2003; 8(1): 135-162. doi: 10.1016/S1081-602X(03)00010-1
7. Schmidt A, van der Heijden M. Women Alone in Early Modern Dutch Towns. *Journal of Urban History*. 2015; 42(1): 21-38. doi: 10.1177/0096144215610771
8. Watson WK, Bell NJ, Stelle C. Women narrate later life remarriage: Negotiating the cultural to create the personal. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 2010; 24(4): 302-312. doi: 10.1016/j.jaging.2010.07.002
9. Pakot L, Óri P. Marriage systems and remarriage in 19th century Hungary: a comparative study. *The History of the Family*. 2012; 17(2): 105-124. doi: 10.1080/1081602x.2012.662016
10. Chen M, Yip P. Remarriages and transnational marriages in Hong Kong: implications and challenges. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 2019; 46(14): 3059-3077. doi: 10.1080/1369183x.2019.1585026
11. Jensen TM, Lippold MA. Patterns of stepfamily relationship quality and adolescents' short-term and long-term adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2018; 32(8): 1130-1141. doi: 10.1037/fam0000442
12. Balachandran L, Jean Yeung WJ. Old Bonds, New Ties: Contextualizing Family Transitions in Re-partnerships, Remarriage and Stepfamilies in Asia. *Journal of Family Issues*. 2020; 41(7): 879-890. doi: 10.1177/0192513x20918428
13. Papernow PL. *Becoming A Stepfamily*. Gestalt Press; 2015. doi: 10.4324/9781315798974
14. Lau YK. Nonresidential Fathering and Nonresidential Mothering in a Chinese Context. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*. 2006; 34(4): 373-394. doi: 10.1080/01926180600553894
15. Lau YK. Parent-Child Relationships, Parental Relationships and Children's Self-Esteem in Post-Divorce Families in Hong Kong. *Marriage and Family Review*. 2007; 42(4): 87-103. doi: 10.1300/J002v42n04\_05
16. Lau YK. Facilitating Factors for Nonresident Parents' Financial Provisions for Children in Hong Kong. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*. 2007; 17(2): 44-55. doi: 10.1080/21650993.2007.9756022
17. Kurosu S. Remarriage in a stem family system in early modern Japan. *Continuity and Change*. 2007; 22(3): 429-458. doi: 10.1017/s026841600700642x
18. Peng D. Personal resources, family factors, and remarriage: an analysis based on CFPS2010 data. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*. 2016; 3(1). doi: 10.1186/s40711-015-0023-9
19. Jin YJ. *From tradition to modern*. Law Press; 2010.
20. Livingston G. Four-in-ten couples are saying "I do," again. Available online: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/11/14/chapter-2-the-demographics-of-remarriage/> (accessed on 1 June 2023).
21. Faber AJ, Wittenborn AK. The Role of Attachment in Children's Adjustment to Divorce and Remarriage. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*. 2010; 21(2): 89-104. doi: 10.1080/08975353.2010.483625
22. Li Q. Mothers Left without a Man: Poverty and Single Parenthood in China. *Social Inclusion*. 2020; 8(2): 114-122. doi: 10.17645/si.v8i2.2678
23. Cegliean C, Gardner S. Attachment style and the "wicked stepmother" spiral. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*. 2000; 34(1/2): 111-129. doi: 10.1300/J087v34n01\_07
24. Weaver SE, Coleman M. Caught in the middle: Mothers in stepfamilies. *Journal of Social and Personal*

- Relationships. 2010; 27(3): 305-326. doi: 10.1177/0265407510361729
25. Blyaert L, Van Parys H, De Mol J, et al. Like a Parent and a Friend, but Not the Father: A Qualitative Study of Stepfathers' Experiences in the Stepfamily. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*. 2016; 37(1): 119-132. doi: 10.1002/anzf.1138
  26. Yang Y. Guanxilization or categorization: psychological mechanisms contributing to the formation of the Chinese concept of "us." *Social Sciences in China*. 2009; 30(2): 49-67. doi: 10.1080/02529200902903800
  27. Yang MM. *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*. Cornell University Press; 2016. doi: 10.7591/9781501713057
  28. To CW. The role of children in marital relationships and (in)stability of cross-border stepfamilies in Hong Kong. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*. 2020; 61(3): 406-422. doi: 10.1111/apv.12294
  29. Sullivan PL. Culture, divorce, and family mediation in Hong Kong. *Family Court Review*. 2005; 43(1): 109-123. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2005.00011.x
  30. Sullivan PL, Leung T, Lau YK, Dignam M. Changing laws, family beliefs and behavior: Implications for divorcing Chinese families. In: *Proceedings of the Association of Family Court and Community Professionals 39th Annual Conference; 2002; Honolulu, HI*.
  31. Lau YK. Non-resident parents' participation in post-divorce co-parenthood in Hong Kong: Its determinants and impact on self-esteem [Phd thesis]. Chinese University of Hong Kong; 2001.
  32. Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K. *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge; 2007. doi: 10.4324/9780203029053
  33. Attride-Stirling J. Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. 2001; 1(3): 385-405. doi: 10.1177/146879410100100307
  34. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006; 3(2): 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
  35. Birks M, Mills JE. *Grounded theory*. Sage Publication; 2011.
  36. Flick U. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. Sage; 2009.
  37. Gibbs GR. *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. Published online 2018. doi: 10.4135/9781526441867
  38. Pylyser C, Buysse A, Loeyts T. Stepfamilies Doing Family: A Meta-Ethnography. *Family Process*. 2017; 57(2): 496-509. doi: 10.1111/famp.12293
  39. Chow IHS, Ng I. The Characteristics of Chinese Personal Ties (Guanxi): Evidence from Hong Kong. *Organization Studies*. 2004; 25(7): 1075-1093. doi: 10.1177/0170840604045092
  40. Garneau CL, Adler-Baeder F, Higginbotham B. Validating the Remarriage Belief Inventory as a Dyadic Measure for Stepouples. *Journal of Family Issues*. 2013; 37(1): 132-150. doi: 10.1177/0192513x13511954