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Affairs In The Fast Lane by Cathy Tsang-Feign

One of the most well-known maxims in any expatriate community is that “Hong Kong (or Paris or Jakarta) is a marriage graveyard.” It is certainly true that expatriates suffer from a high number of extra-marital affairs and formerly stable marriages suddenly ending in divorce. It is easy, and tempting, to place the blame outward: “the new secretary” or the pressures of the expatriate lifestyle. But usually the real reasons are to be found by looking inward.

“I don't believe he did this to me after I gave up my career, my friends, to come out here with him,” Margaret said as she fought back tears. She suspects that her husband has been having an affair.

Margaret is 40 years old, married, with a daughter of 12. Lately she has been suffering from insomnia and depression. “I know our marriage wasn't the best but it wasn't as bad as he said. Of course, he blames everything on me,” she said with a helpless look.

Margaret is very confused and considering divorce. She gave up her own professional career back in Virginia to relocate to Hong Kong with her husband Bill. In doing so, she shifted roles from working mother to full-time home-maker. Now she is facing the possibility of losing even this role because of her husband's affair. Margaret feels as if her identity has been stripped to nothing. Her sense of self-worth is being shattered.

Like most other people in her situation, Margaret blames the affair for destroying her 15-year marriage. She believes that the newness and seeming sophistication of the local women made her husband turn away from his own family. Certainly the affair has contributed to their breaking up, yet it is likely not the sole cause. After all, marital discord doesn't happen overnight. As Margaret recalls: “Bill and I fought a lot over minor things but I never thought it bothered that much until he told me recently.”

Then why did such a thing not occur back home, where Margaret would have been better prepared to deal with it? Why now, after she gave up everything to move with him to Hong Kong? The expatriate lifestyle itself probably served as a catalyst, bringing to the surface –

and accelerating – problems that may have already existed in the marriage. In his new position as an international executive, Bill finds his ego boosted daily. He enjoys his new powerful identity and all the attention he receives from business associates.

On the contrary, Margaret's identity is becoming blurred. Even though she enjoys the social status of her husband's position, she sees herself very much as Bill's dependent. She resents this feeling and wishes Bill would give her more support and understanding, after she gave up so much for him. However, Bill is enjoying himself and isn't able to empathize with Margaret's frustration. He only sees her as unappreciative and views all her complaints as nagging. Meanwhile, Bill unconsciously denies his wife's problem because admitting it would mean having to alter his glamorous life-style.

Furthermore, Bill's many business obligations have him working late hours. When he is home either he is dead tired or he wants to have peace and quiet. Even though Margaret is active socially, she doesn't see her husband all day and is desperate for intimacy. Bill's preoccupation with his job has become the subject of frequent arguments, which makes their relationship even more distant.

One of the challenges many expatriate wives face is “identity inflation”, in which the image exceeds the reality. Their comfortable life style may often mislead them into believing things should be perfect, yet deep inside they have a sense of emptiness. Many remark that they don't feel grounded here, that they can never think of Hong Kong as “home”. Losing their professional identity compounds the problem.

In Margaret's case, instead of dealing with her frustration she half-heartedly joined in some charitable work and hoped it would make her life more meaningful. However, doing something for the sake of only passing time doesn't solve the original problem. What she actually needs is something which can give her a sense of self-worth. She needs something to fulfill her intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, which can serve as a way to express herself.

Personal growth is vital for every single person, no matter which age group they are in. Indeed, personal growth should be parallel to one's marriage. If one is not happy with oneself, one's marriage is bound to suffer. Expatriate families in particular should be very sensitive toward providing every family member with the opportunity to realize his or her own potential.

Margaret needs to work on gaining a better understanding of herself, who she is and what life direction she wants to pursue. Before she can choose whether to stay married or divorce,

she needs to regain her sense of self-identity. In terms of Bill's affair, she still has to deal with it directly. Together both of them need to make a clear and firm choice where they want their marriage to lead.

The above is not an actual case, but a reconstruction based on actual cases.

*Cathy Tsang-Feign is an American- licensed psychotherapist based in Hong Kong. She works with individuals and families on problems of stress, marital dilemmas, career pressures, foreign relocation, and other issues. She is the author of the book **KEEPING YOUR LIFE, FAMILY AND CAREER INTACT WHILE LIVING ABROAD.***

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