

LETTERS

Divorce is hardly a happy event. Yet once done, it marks the beginning of a new life. In the west, writes Jui-shan Chang, one can even get invited to divorce parties when one of the divorced persons wants to celebrate the break and the new beginning.

■ MAKING A MEAL OF DIVORCE *Chinese and western recipes*

Divorce seems to go with modernisation. Taiwan, a country that has successfully achieved modernisation and democracy within the orthodox traditional Chinese culture in the past fifty years, is a case in point. In Taiwan, like everywhere else, divorce rates are going up. With a strong commitment to family in Chinese societies, divorce tends to provoke more shame than blame. So any initiative that can put people back on track is useful.

Recently, a very 'Chinese' response to divorce has appeared – the Divorce Banquet.

The divorce banquet aims to let divorced couples have a *haoju haosan* (good to be together and good ending). It is an opportunity for couples to announce their divorce to relatives and friends, and to receive the good wishes of their relatives and friends for happy futures.

The first banquet to celebrate a divorce was held recently in Tai-chung, a major city in the central Taiwan. The couple had split up six months previously after three years of marriage. The man is a business person, and the woman works in a beauty salon. They got approval from both sets of parents to hold this banquet, which had seven round tables of guests (their wedding banquet had 40 tables of guests).

The young divorcees were dressed up and each wore a sunflower which symbolises 'hope'. A popular song, *You Walk on Your Own Road*, was playing softly in the background. The man and woman used a glass of wine to toast each other for best wishes.

There are ten main dishes in the banquet. The name of each dish is a metaphor for one

aspect of the marriage and the process of going through the pain of divorce, but coming out as a positive person who can look forward to constructing a new life.

The first dish was called 'waking up from the dream of a marriage'. The second dish was called 'the taste of married life, both sweet and sour'. The third dish was 'good union and good ending'. The fourth was 'all the good memories treasured'. The fifth, 'each party has his/her own future'. The sixth dish was called 'stamping smoothly' (on the divorced certificate). The seventh, 'no regret to have had, and ended, this marriage'. The eighth was 'what a relief' (after divorce). The ninth, 'say good bye and take care of each other'. And the tenth dish was called 'a decent friendship be maintained'.

In Taiwan, the way to deal with divorce (like marriage) remains within the Confucian tradition, with its social structure based on the family. Both marriage and divorce involve relationships between two families (rather than two individuals). Most young couples get parental approval to get married, and parents are the hosts of the wedding. It is interesting that in this very first 'divorce party' the young divorced couple still sought approval from the two sides of parents.

Divorce, with all the process and issues involved, is a difficult time, particularly in a culture that emphasises the value of family and interpersonal harmony. So the approval and participation of parents from both sides suggests that the harmony between the two families may survive their children's divorce. In addition, the very last dish wishes the young couple to 'maintain a decent friendship' in the future. Thus, the divorce banquet, shared by both parties, opens

a new, positive relationship between the two families.

This way of thinking is very different from western ways, where divorce parties are typically held for only one of the parties (and certainly not with two sets of families present). On one level, divorce in the west means 'cutting', and typically each party does not want to have much to do with the other (or the other's family) except regarding possible ongoing legal entitlements and the ties and responsibilities they have with their children.

It is the case that divorce very often does not end a relationship (particularly when children of the marriage are involved), but rather gives the relationship a new dimension as it continues through post-divorce issues of contact, residency and other parenting arrangements. A negative post-divorce relationship may provoke the two parties to find faults with each other in order to make legal claims for entitlements or exemptions, even if the divorce itself was 'no fault'. In this, the parties may well have embarked on a new long-term warring relationship. The children in such a context do not have the same base of extended social and family support as children in equivalent social settings but who are not in broken families.

Indeed, the very idea of a 'broken' family begs for a 'repair job'. Legal entitlements and the parenting responsibilities of mothers and fathers are necessary, but these are often not sufficient to clean up the aftermath of divorce. Something else – that provides a symbolic, spiritual and emotional rite of passage – is needed.

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