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In traditional Chinese society, the older generations of women in kinship relations had more power than the younger ones. However, with the transformation of Taiwanese society and family form, contemporary mothers-in-law are often described as the generation of women 'caught in between', no longer commanding the privilege and authority of their mothers-in-law's generation, but with high expectations of their own daughters-in-law.

# 'Daughter-in-law for the second time':

## Taiwanese mothers-in-law in the family of cross-border marriage

HSING-MIAO CHI

Women's issues have always been related to the family but the definition of gender hierarchy between men and women is insufficient to explain the issues among women themselves. This is the reason for my choice to discuss the position of Taiwanese women in the context of cross-border marriages. Most existing studies concentrate on the inferior status of foreign brides. Although most Taiwanese researchers who work in this area mention the role of the mother-in-law in the family of cross-border marriage, they do not make her a focal point. They also fail to address the interaction between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and they make no attempt to explain these interactions in term of wider social processes. My study, however, shows that the mothers-in-law I interviewed were more or less involved in their sons' marriage process. I have classified their involvement in four ways: (a) persuading the son to get married (b) matchmaking; (c) helping son to select a bride; and (d) providing all or part of the costs. On the surface it appears that these women exercise considerable control over their sons' marriage, and the lives of their foreign daughters-in-law in Taiwan. Does this necessarily mean, based on traditional Chinese ideology, that they reinforce their authority in the family? I try not to judge who holds the dominant position, or who shares the relatively inferior status in this relationship, but rather to understand the complicated and multiple functions of patriarchy and culture operating on women's everyday practices in the context of cross-border marriages in Taiwan.

The study undertook qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviewing with individual cases. The interviewees were mothers-in-law, aged between 57 and 86, the majority of whom (11) helped with agricultural work undertaken by the family, in Yunlin County, on the west coast of Taiwan. Seven women had Vietnamese daughters-in-law, five had Indonesian daughters-in-law, and one had a Cambodian daughter-in-law. Two of the interviewees have more than one foreign daughter-in-law.

### Memories of being a daughter-in-law

"Being a daughter-in-law in my generation was very difficult. My mother-in-law was really dominating, she wanted to control everything and she always scolded me. Being a daughter-in-law is now more flexible, you can

sleep as long as you like, you don't have to bother with cooking. Before, if I didn't wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning and prepare to cook, my mother-in-law would make a noise by building the fire in the stove...you cannot complain about this [sigh], if you do then you will be treated nastily. Really! It is difficult to speak out." (Ping, aged 86)

This account shows that women in Chinese society have been imbued with cultural rituals and norms which lead them to believe that they are obligated to perform a particular role in the family. It also points out women's oppression related to age, ability, gender and class. For instance, another interviewee, Mèng (aged 57), told me that she was taught to be an ideal woman who follows the 'three obediences and four virtues'. The three obediences are to: obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband's death. The four virtues are: moral discipline, proper speech, modest appearance and diligence. Mèng follows this doctrine unflinchingly. She believed it was natural for women to obey their parents-in-law and husbands. That said, most of the interviewees did mention becoming aware of their inferior situation as daughters-in-law, but they chose to remain reticent in order to avoid conflict. These subordinate experiences of the past, help the women try to reduce hierarchical relations between themselves and their own daughters-in-law today. Despite this, all of them still expressed a desire to have compliant and diligent daughters-in-law:

"The fine line between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is no longer definite [laugh]. If you really want to compare, this one [Vietnamese daughter-in-law] is better than my oldest [Taiwanese] daughter-in-law, she rarely helps me to cook. But this one [Vietnamese daughter-in-law], everyday, when she returns from the fields, she rushes to prepare the meal in order to catch up with dinner time. I hardly need to tell her what to do, she works very hard [laugh]." (Táo, aged 60)

As a result of knowledge from past experiences, women build up expectations and begin to create an ideal image of what a proper daughter-in-law should be. This ideal reflects assumed cultural expectations about how daughters-in-law should act. Women tend to think that the requirement of domestic work does not necessarily mean their foreign daughters-in-law will be ill-treated, just that they will, (and should), experience the same

circumstances as they did when they were someone's daughter-in-law.

### When foreign daughter-in-law arrived

Differences in cultural practice and aspects, as well as the language barrier, were significant factors - both physical and emotional - in the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law. Only four of the interviewees felt they had a satisfactory relationship with their foreign daughters-in-law. These perceived smooth relationships were based on the fact that they had compliant daughters-in-law. Three patterns emerge from the women's experiences of being mothers-in-law:

#### 1) Grandparenting

With regard to childcare responsibilities within cross-border marriage families, the division of labour between mothers- and daughters-in-law, to some extent, mirrors the traditional household division of labour in China (Chen, 2004). Half of the women interviewed look after their grandchildren when their foreign daughter-in-law is at work, not always willingly:

"She wants to work, if I cannot help her look after the child who can [sigh]. I said it is really bothering me to look after the child. My work is harder than hers, really. I have to bring up this one and also cook for the family. If she is off work, she takes her child out to have fun and I still need to cook. Every piece of my bones are damaged now." (Shuei, aged 65).

#### 2) Domestic labour

The term mother-in-law is commonly understood, in the Chinese context, as meaning having the authority to exert influence over a daughter-in-law. Mothers-in-law are seen to have a particularly strong influence on the way domestic roles are viewed. Domestic work has always been considered to be a feminine role and women's responsibility and thus the obligation is seen to fall upon the daughter-in-law. However, most of my interviewees suggested that such expectations were rarely met, as their foreign daughters-in-law were often reluctant to accept 'their' work load. This meant that much of the domestic work was being left in the hands of their mothers-in-law:

"I often started to work in the early morning, she has to sleep until just before nine o'clock, then she goes to work. My son always helps her to set the washing machine, if she doesn't hang the clothes up, then I have to help her." (Shù, aged 70).

#### 3) Work outside the home

In this context, economic circumstances were the main reason for the mothers-in-law to take on work outside the family. Half of the women questioned were working in the family fields and received a wage as an agricultural worker. In addition to expecting their earnings to help balance the family expenditure, the women also expressed the desire to appropriate money for their sons, to help with various expenses. This included buying flight tickets so that their daughters-in-law could visit family in their own countries, paying for things for the children and school fees.

### Emotional burdens

Having particular expectations of how a foreign daughter-in-law should behave had considerable emotional impact on the mother-in-laws. Some of the interviewees were aware of the cultural differences between themselves and their foreign daughters-in-law, especially when they adjusted and negotiated variations in lifestyle, usual domestic practice and ritual obligations. However, when foreign daughters-in-law began to practice some elements of their own culture, these women somehow failed to understand and actually felt threatened by such practices, seeing them as undermining the family. For example, one of my interviewees acquired a red braid from the local temple for her grandchild to wear on her neck. The red braid is seen as a symbol of being blessed by God. Two weeks later she found that her Vietnamese daughter-in-law had changed the red braid to a white one. Significantly for the mother-in-law, the colour white is considered by the Chinese to represent misfortune. My interviewee misinterprets this as a malicious action and draws the misinformed conclusion that her foreign daughter-in-law is plotting against the family.

There is no decipherable boundary or guideline to provide both mothers-in-law and foreign daughters-in-law with a clear picture of how to adapt to their cross-border marriage situation. Furthermore, the language barrier also adds to the emotional difficulties. As Ying said:

"She [her Vietnamese daughter-in-law] is off-hand and also mischievous, you know? I have never heard that people offered a raw chicken to the ancestors, she bought a cock and a hen, raw! [her emphasis] ...I told her no one would do this, you should cook [the chicken], she replied that this is their custom. I asked the people from Vietnam who are working here,

to see whether this is true, [they said] "No, always cooked!" Someone said, she seems to be practicing some black art, so we [Ying and her husband] and the younger generation are afraid of her". (Ying, aged 68)

Some mothers-in-law, especially those sharing close relationships with neighbours and the community, acquire a general suspicion of all foreign daughters-in-law. They start interpreting ordinary practices as conspiracies - suspecting that the daughter-in-law is planning to harm the mother-in-law or the family. Such suspicions are compounded by the mothers-in-law considerable worries over their sons' future. They fear that in their absence the daughter-in-law will take advantage of their sons, particularly with regard to finances. This accentuates the idea of an 'insecure marriage' and as a result adds to the women's emotional burden.

The title phrase 'daughter-in-law for the second time' stems from my interviewees. They used this phrase to explain how they feel about their current situation in the context of the cross-border marriage family:

"My two foreign daughters-in-law are such well-behaved women, they wait for me everyday to come home from the fields and cook for them. They are not like my neighbour's foreign daughter-in-law who always goes off somewhere and is never at home in the evening, because I cook, you know I cook for them,... no wonder people were saying that I am the daughter-in-law for the second time". (Mèng, aged 57).

Even though the women are aware that they cannot expect to share the same authority as their mothers-in-law's generation, they still hope that they can maintain the dignity shown by their own mothers-in-law in the past. ■

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