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Gender morality and emotion work in Taiwanese immigrant in-law relations

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines major social, economic, and cultural factors that sustain in-law inequality in Taiwanese transnational families. Data are based on life-history interviews with 16 Taiwanese immigrant women and ethnographic observations in a Midwest urban area. Findings suggest that middle-class immigrants’ abilities to host in-laws for lengthy periods and parents-in-law’s financial support for immigrant couples lead to the living arrangement of three-generation households in many immigrant families. Daughters-in-law in these households experience enormous stress because their mothers-in-law demand obedience. Traditional gender norms become moralized when the women's husbands, mothers, and fellow immigrants reinforce Confucian cultural values of filial piety and respect for the elderly. Considering the importance of securing a stable family and children’s well-being, the women hesitate to challenge the power imbalance in their in-law relations. In a single ethnic household and a private domestic space, no competing gender ideology is available to contest Confucian culture. As a result, the women are compelled to fulfil their gender role expectations as submissive daughters-in-law. To cope with this home environment, they conduct varying degrees of emotion work and silence their voices, which results in the persistence of in-law patriarchy in these transnational households.

**Introduction**

Tracy was a 52-year old manager at a large insurance company in Chicago. She founded a non-profit organization to help second-generation Asian immigrants train leadership skills. Learning from her own workplace experiences, Tracy firmly believed that Taiwanese/Asian culture was ‘baggage,’ as she called it, which must be abandoned to succeed in the corporate world. She explained that Taiwanese culture cultivates self-reservation, humbleness, quietness, and submission, which are opposites of leadership qualities that American corporates seek in management.
– self-promotion, outspokenness, and aggressiveness. Therefore, she held workshops to share her experiences of demonstrating assertiveness and to teach the younger generation how to act ‘the American way’ in the workplace – strategies she learned from observing and replicating her White colleagues’ behaviors.

However, Tracy’s conscious actions and successful ‘battles’ with her culture of origin did not extend to the domestic sphere. A few years prior to our interview, her husband invited her in-laws to live with the family for six months. During those six months, Tracy felt extremely stressed. She constantly worried about what her in-laws liked to eat and where she should take them on weekends. She felt she had to clean the house every day and could not wear pajamas at home. She was very tense, could not relax after long hours of work, and began to hide in her bedroom more and more. Tracy told her husband to ask her in-laws to leave, but he refused because it would violate Taiwanese cultural norms. Tracy described her disappointment:

For my husband, being a filial son seemed more important than my well-being. I was devastated. I felt I was going crazy and did not want to be married any more. I saw a therapist for a while, but stopped going because my [White] therapist couldn’t understand our culture. She asked me why I didn’t just tell my in-laws to leave to solve the problem. Are you kidding me? I would not come to see you if I could! They [Whites] just don’t understand our culture!

Tracy’s story reveals the overwhelming pressure of cultural compliance at home when it comes to in-law relations, which is a common experience that many women reported during my decade-long research about Taiwanese Americans. In fact, not only wives but also husbands highly respect the husbands’ parents – a unique display of respect that sometimes appears closer to obedience. Rose (53, housewife) described how she and her husband behaved in front of her parents-in-law:

When we bought this house, my parents-in-law came to stay with us for six months every year. I had to do much work around the house. My son was still little back then. One day, he was cranky and crying recklessly. I was holding him with one hand and cooking with the other. I kept looking at my husband, hoping he’d help. But, he did not dare to move even a bit! We looked at each other, and I saw the fear and worries in his eyes. If he held the baby for me, his parents would be very angry. He is a filial son and did not want to anger his parents. I had no help at all. So, I just took my son everywhere I went, even when going to the bathroom.

Similarly, Mindy (39, clerk at an importing company) reported that her husband usually did the dishes after dinner. However, when her mother-in-law was present, he would just sit there and watch TV. Otherwise, her mother-in-law would blame Mindy for asking her husband to do women’s work, even though her husband volunteered to help. These family dynamics warrant discussions on the sociocultural factors that shape in-law interactions in immigrant households, a topic that has not received sufficient scholarly attention.

Many in-law dynamics described by my subjects mirrored what I witnessed in my mother’s interactions with her mother-in-law, so I was stunned to see the parallels between my mother’s life in 1970s Taiwan and these women’s experiences
in 2010s America. Why does in-law inequality persist in Taiwanese immigrant households in the United States, even in families of egalitarian marriages? Why do Taiwanese cultural norms continue to regulate in-law hierarchies after immigration, even after these women have assimilated into middle-class America for over two decades? Why is it so difficult for the women to assert themselves with their in-laws, even for those who do not hesitate to challenge racial and gender inequalities in the workplace regardless of their multiple disadvantages of being non-White, non-male, and non-native speaking? This study draws from Taiwanese immigrant women’s narratives and experiences to answer these questions.

The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to understand why immigrant women are compelled to act as obedient daughters-in-law, even when doing so causes them tremendous pain; and (2) to discover the structural and contextual factors that lead to the women’s ‘volunteered’ subordination to their in-law’s domination in transnational households. I begin with a literature review that shapes the conceptual framework of the article. Next, I introduce Taiwanese cultural values relevant to in-law relations, including gender role expectations, filial piety, age-based seniority, and relational harmony. I also explain the research methods and data upon which this article is based. Following this introduction, I present data to illustrate in-law dynamics in three-generation Taiwanese immigrant households. I discuss the roles of significant others (both the women’s husbands and mothers) and fellow immigrants that represent prevalent social perceptions of the in-law hierarchy. I also describe subjects’ emotional experiences in their transnational households. I conclude the article by discussing theoretical implications of the study.

Emotions, subjectivities and behaviors in the transnational social field

Both geographers and sociologists have discussed the role of emotions in human behavior and cognition. In geography, emotions are linked to the interplay of place and culture and its effects on translocal subjectivities. Individuals experience various emotions in different places and at varied times. In sociology, emotions are considered messengers of the self, although they are also shaped by social forces. Geographers’ emphasis on place and culture is important to understanding immigrants’ lived experiences of border-crossing, while sociologists’ attention to emotion management reminds us of the constraints of social structure on individuals’ subjectivities and behaviors. Integrating theoretical insights of both disciplines helps uncover the complexities of the interconnections of place, culture, emotions, gender, class, and subjectivity in transnational families.

Culture, place, and emotions

Many geographers have explained how geographic mobility affects individuals’ subjectivities and emotions. For instance, Bondi et al. (2002) contend that spatial movement has a significant influence on a person’s subjectivity and identity,
especially on those who migrate across national borders. Conradson and Mckay (2007) argue that an immigrant’s sense of self is connected to special places, such as different societies and cities that a person has lived at different points in time. Place plays an important role in shaping immigrants’ selfhood, cultural values, and social practices.

Over the last decade, geographers have discussed how the human world is constructed and lived through emotions and how emotional relations shape societies and space. Many advocate an ‘emotional geography’ that focuses on the role of emotions and affect in human geography (Anderson and Smith 2001; Bondi, Davidson, and Smith 2005; Pile 2010). As Anderson and Smith (2001) explain, in particular places and at different times, there are moments where human lives are explicitly lived through love, pain, anger, joy, sorrow, and so on; thus, geographers cannot ignore the power of emotional relations in research. An emotional geography, therefore, attempts to ‘understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation’ (Bondi, Davidson, and Smith 2005, 3). From a feminist geographical viewpoint, the emotions and feelings women experience in particular places and spaces are both personal and political because they illustrate gendered experiences of place and spaces. They also signify individuals’ subjectivities and selfhood when negotiating social relations and responding to social roles (Bondi, Davidson, and Smith 2005; Pile 2010; Rose 1993).

**Emotion work, morality, and the transnational family**

In her influential book, *The Managed Heart*, sociologist Hochschild (2003) argues that emotion is the most important sense human beings possess because ‘it is a mean by which we know about our relation to the world’ (2003, 229). According to Hochschild (1979), individuals engage in emotion work, or emotion management, based on the feeling rules in the society – cultural norms about what emotions are appropriate according to the social settings. For instance, feeling happy at a wedding and feeling sad at a funeral are two common social expectations for human emotions. When a person does not truly feel the ‘right’ emotion in a setting, he or she would work on one's feeling to display socially expected emotion. Hochschild defines emotion work as ‘the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling’ (Ibid., 561).

Hochschild differentiates surface acting and deep acting in emotion work (Hochschild 2003). Surface acting refers to controlling external behaviors to conceal true emotions, whereas deep acting involves self-deception and emotional control at a deeper level that often demands transforming one’s true feelings. Through surface acting and deep acting, individuals consciously engage in the acts of shaping, suppressing, or evoking feelings within themselves. Hochschild argues that women are more likely than men to engage in emotion work because of their lower social status and less independent access to money, power, and authority in society. Women are also socialized into the feminine role (e.g. caring and nurturing)
whose primary responsibility is to enhance others’ well-being by controlling their own emotions and tending to the needs of others (Ibid.). Putting others before their own needs, women’s greater involvement with emotion management also contributes to the persistence of unequal power relations between the two sexes.

Moreover, middle-class families do more emotion work than their working-class counterparts. Citing earlier studies on parenting styles, Hochschild (1979) argues that middle-class parents tend to teach their children how to feel the right way and see things from the right perspective. In contrast, working-class parents pay more attention to teaching their children certain behaviors and behavioral consequences. These different parenting styles not only nurture different degrees of emotion management skills but also reproduce class-based cultural differences in society.

Emotion work in transnational families is more complex. As mentioned earlier, immigrants’ emotions and subjectivities are linked to places. Having moved across national borders and having been exposed to at least two cultures, immigrants retain a transnational cultural toolkit and can make choices related to their social practices in different spheres and at different times in life. The culture within which individuals choose to follow in a social setting reveals their subjective understandings of their statuses and roles in relation to others. Individuals’ emotional experiences in making these decisions also uncover important information about the connection between individuals and the larger society.

Katigbak’s (2015) notion of emotional remittances helps untangle the intertwined relations of emotions, morality, and rationalities in the transnational family. In her viewpoint, emotion and morality intersect to constitute and reconstitute transnational familyhood. The monetary remittances transmigrants send to their non-migrant family members are essentially emotional ones because they convey love and concern, which are signs of positive morality. Obligations construct another significant moral value. Individuals perform responsibilities to build interpersonal relations that mark family as a social institution. In other words, morality instructs behavioral standards about what is right and wrong in a family. It is often reinforced by emotions because failing to practice codes of mores may induce negative feelings, such as guilt and shame. As Carling (2008) argues, transnational families are bound together by value systems that construct shared frames of reference. In these value systems, repaying the gift of communality is a vital element in the moral framework of transnationalism.

Nevertheless, immigrants and their children’s cultural traditions contain two or more competing and sometimes contradictory cultural and moral systems that are associated with different places – what Faist (2000) calls a ‘transnational social field.’ In this transnational social field, no clear boundaries or fixed hierarchies exist between or among the cultural systems that construct this structure. Individuals strategically use different elements of their transnational culture as their behavioral guidance in different social contexts and when interacting with different people (Gu 2010). To understand how cultural transnationalism affects individuals’
subjectivities and behaviors, social institutes, such as the workplace and the family are crucial sites to observe immigrants’ social practices. As Yeoh, Huang, and Lam (2005) point out, micro-politics and social practices of transnationalism often play out within the household.

**Gendered and classed experiences in transnational families**

Immigration reconfigures gender relations and family power structures (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). For instance, numerous studies have reported that immigrant women laborers’ employment in the host society enables them to make greater financial contributions to their families, thereby enhancing their negotiating power and status at home (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Kibria 1993; Min 2001; Pessar 1984). In middle-class dual-income immigrant families, the small gap between men’s and women’s salaries often leads to more egalitarian relationships compared to their laborer counterparts (Chen 1992; Espiritu 2002). Regardless, married women continue to perform more housework than their husbands in both middle- and lower-class immigrant families (Gu 2006; Min 1998; Pesquera 1993).

In the literature, the discussion of immigrant women’s gender strategies is fairly limited to spousal relations. Little is known about immigrant in-laws and extended family relationships. Those researchers who have examined intergenerational relations tend to focus on parenting the second generation and transnational motherhood (see, e.g. Foner 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Lansford, Deater-Deckard, and Bornstein 2007). Some scholars have discussed care giving and emotional support in transnational families (Atwood 2013; Baldassar 2007; Ryan 2004). Nevertheless, research remains scarce concerning how in-law conflicts affect gender relations and women’s subjectivities and emotions in transnational families.

Among the few studies that have addressed in-law relations in immigrant families, Shih and Pike (2010) examine in-law relationships between first- and second-generation ethnic-Chinese immigrants residing in separate households. They report that mothers-in-law have to work to gain their power by providing childcare or domestic assistance. Although daughters-in-law generally respect and honor their mothers-in-law, they do not show unconditional obedience and often use their husbands’ mediation to resist their mothers-in-laws’ control. The husband’s attitudes and actions also play an important role in buffering conflicts between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

My studies (Gu 2006, 2010, 2017) of Taiwanese immigrants show a very different picture of in-law dynamics. The findings reveal that mothers-in-law are the major source of stress for first-generation middle-class immigrant women across age and occupation, even among the most egalitarian marriages. In these three-generation households, mothers-in-law demand traditional gender roles from their daughters-in-law. Many women experience mental breakdowns, seek counseling, and leave their homes for a period of time to cope with the unspeakable pain.
In-law relations are the most significant and consistent stressor for middle-class immigrant women, both professionals and housewives.

Three factors may attribute to the different findings between the two studies. First, Shih and Pike examine ethnic-Chinese immigrants from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, whereas I focus only on Taiwanese immigrants. This demographic difference may have resulted in diverse social practices and cultural presentations among our subjects. Second, Shih and Pike study second-generation immigrants and their mothers-in-law, who are first-generation immigrants, while my subjects are first-generation immigrant women and their mothers-in-law. This generational difference between our studies affects the extent of acculturation of subjects and their mothers-in-law as well as our subjects’ practices of their culture of origin at home. Finally, the two generations in Shih and Pike’s study live in separate households (except one), while those in my study reside under the same roof. This is a significant environmental setting that shapes the in-law dynamics in my study – place matters.

Moreover, while Shih and Pike (2010) aimed to study in-law relations from the onset of their research, in-law inequality emerged as a noteworthy theme in my study concerning social adaptation. Further, Shih and Pike relied on interviews for their source of data, while I supplemented my interview data with ethnographic observations over seven years during which time I witnessed in-law interactions first hand, talked to my subjects’ mothers-in-law and mothers, and observed how immigrant women talked about in-laws in their ethnic circles. These differences shape both the nature and approaches of the two studies, which also result in very different findings.

**Gender roles and in-law status in the Taiwanese cultural tradition**

Confucian culture has profoundly influenced Taiwanese traditions. As a fundamental force of socialization, Confucianism greatly shapes social norms, moral values, and behaviors in Taiwan and, to some extent, shapes the cultures of overseas Taiwanese communities. In this section, I briefly introduce cultural values relevant to this study, including gender role expectations, in-law statuses, filial piety, age and generational hierarchies, and relational harmony.

According to Confucianism, the social status of men is higher than that of women. Men are to exercise ruling power in both public and private arenas, while women ought to be obedient, modest, and quiet. In contemporary Taiwan, improvements in women’s education and social status, growth in women’s participation in the labor market, and a wide diffusion of Western culture and feminist thoughts have promoted egalitarian ideologies and practices among men and women. Nevertheless, gender relations on the island remain grounded in traditional cultural norms (Gallin 1995; Yu 2001).

The family is the foundation of Taiwanese society. The importance of Confucian values, such as filial piety, is highlighted in Taiwanese family practices. Confucian
principles of filial piety demand children’s obedience and devotion to parents, which obligates children to repay parents by caring for them and providing financial and emotional support. Three-generation cohabitation (patrilocal) is highly valued because it reflects this Confucian teaching. Sons and daughters-in-law are expected to shoulder the filial duties of taking care of aging parents. They are also expected to subordinate their will to that of the older generation – a cultural tradition that sustains parental and generational authority (Chen 2006).

The Taiwanese government not only advocates three-generation cohabitation but also criminalizes the behavior of abandoning parents. According to Taiwan’s Criminal Code (Articles 294 and 295), the sentence for a person who abandons his or her linear blood ascendant ranges from six months to eight years (ROC Ministry of Justice 2013). Moreover, the mass media often reinforces the value of filial piety by portraying happy three-generation households in Taiwan in contrast to the lonely, sad, ‘abandoned’ elderly in Western societies (Hu 1995). In other words, three-generation households are a highly regarded human virtue.

Veneration of age demands similar obedience, as it requires children to honor their elders with deference, respect, and compliance. Extended families centered on patrilineal kinships are the primary circle of social relations (Gu and Gallin 2004). A daughter-in-law is expected to live with and serve her parents-in-law, an act that is strongly tied to the ideal of Confucian womanhood (Lan 2006). As Hu (1995) precisely describes, the ‘three Ps’ – patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal – mark the Taiwanese family structure. This patriarchal family system places a higher value on the parent-son relationship than the husband-wife relationship.

Relational harmony is another important cultural value in Confucianism. Harmony (he) is a central concept that penetrates all dimensions of Confucian discourse. Confucian teaching calls for the cultivation of one’s virtues when conflict arises from the relation between the self and others – a moral standard that is essential for maintaining social order (Yao 2000). In sum, Confucianism nurtures a culture that values filial piety, moral virtues, relational harmony, social order, and hierarchical structures and statuses (centered on gender, generation, and age).

Methods and data

The data presented in this article are derived from a long-term project on Taiwanese Americans’ social and psychological adaptations in an urban Midwest region (the greater Chicago area and Southwest Michigan) (Gu 2017). From 2007 to 2014, I conducted 45 life-history interviews with middle-class Taiwanese immigrant women. The main objective of the study was to examine how international migration and gender interact to shape the women’s life trajectories as well as their understandings of themselves and the social surroundings of their immigrant lives in different phases of settlement. The findings presented in this article are based on my interviews with 16 subjects in this larger project. These women spent more than one-third of the interviews (1–4 hours out of 3–12 hours) describing their misery caused
by their in-law relations. Thirteen other women reported their in-law conflicts, but normalized their suffering and said little. One-third (16) of subjects in the original project did not report in-law conflicts. The original study from which this article is derived did not intend to examine in-law relation, but in-law conflict emerged from the data as a significant theme in the women’s narratives. My analyses of the 16 cases cannot be generalized to the entire Taiwanese immigrant community because of the sampling method and the original research design.

The 16 subjects included seven middle-class housewives and nine professionals who varied in age from 30 to 61. Eight of the informants lived with their in-laws for more than 10 years, while the rest hosted their in-laws’ visits for varying periods (e.g. six months every year, three months every year or every other year, etc.). These women migrated to the United States between 1971 and 2006. One woman was divorced and four had considered divorce because of their in-law conflicts but remained married for their children’s well-being. Interviews were conducted in either Taiwanese or Mandarin Chinese, and ranged from 3 to 12 hours with each subject. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed based on the inductive approach and principles outlined in Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Major themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview data were categorized. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

I also conducted ethnographic observations in an ethnic-Chinese community in the greater Kalamazoo area in Michigan from 2007 to 2014 by joining an immigrant organization. This community included approximately 120 households, among which the majority were Chinese immigrants, 15 were Taiwanese immigrants (four wives from these families are among the 16 subjects discussed in this article) and a small number were inter-racial families and Southeast Asian immigrants. I attended formal and informal social events to observe gender relations and social interactions. I also gathered with ethnic-Chinese women (15–25 women; most of them were housewives) monthly for lunch to observe their social lives.

**In-law dynamics in middle-class Taiwanese immigrant households**

Three-generation Taiwanese immigrant households are transnational families. Although a fair number of families live with the husband’s mother after she becomes widowed, a more common practice is for the immigrant couple to host parents-in-law’s visits for several months a year or every other year. This living arrangement often leads to conflicts between the two generations of women because mothers-in-law tend to demand traditional gender roles. Whenever parents-in-law are present, they automatically represent the family’s tradition of origin, even in households in which the immigrant couple has been acculturated into the host society whose family culture and moral values may be quite different. Below, I present my findings to illustrate the classed gender culture, the roles of husbands, mothers, and fellow immigrants, and the emotion work required to maintain patriarchal structures in these households.
Classed gender culture in the Taiwanese transnational family

Middle-class Taiwanese immigrant families are fairly affluent and well settled in suburban White areas. As such, many husbands invite their parents and relatives to visit, usually without their wives’ consent. In Taiwanese culture, a married couple’s home is considered property that belongs to the husband’s family. Therefore, the social assumption is that the husband’s relatives, especially his parents, can visit for as long and as frequently as they wish. When the wife’s side of family visits, they consider themselves guests, usually stay for short periods, and visit less frequent. Hosting guests shows the husband’s economic ability and generosity – a ‘face’ issue associated with masculinity. In my earlier study that included Taiwanese immigrant laborers, none of the lower-class subjects reported in-law conflicts because they all lived in apartments (Gu 2006). Therefore, they did not have the space to host guests nor could they afford to pay their relatives’ airfare for them to visit from overseas. This contrast suggests that in-law issues in Taiwanese immigrant households are a social class specific matter.

Guests from the husband’s side often stay for long periods, ranging from one month to several years, and many families live with the husbands’ mothers. Round-trip airfare from Taiwan is expensive (approximately $2000, usually is paid by the immigrant family); therefore, parents-in-law tend to stay as long as their tourist visas allow (six months). In some families, the husband’s siblings live with the couple while studying in the United States or exploring the possibility of immigration because the immigrant family is expected to help them.

For instance, Michelle’s parents-in-law lived with her family six months a year; Tracy’s brother-in-law’s family stayed for six months when exploring the possibility of immigration; Linda’s, Christine’s, and Beth’s parents-in-law visited their families every other year and stayed for two or three months each visit; and Gina’s mother-in-law lived with her family for a year. Katie lived with her parents-in-law and brother-in-law’s family for 10 years; Jen, Mindy, and Nicole lived with their widowed mothers-in-law after their fathers-in-law passed. These women’s families initially migrated without the older generation. Their in-laws began to visit after they settled in the United States – most, after their husbands secured professional jobs.

The financial assistance immigrant couples receive from the husbands’ parents constitutes another structural factor that makes the above living arrangements a perceived obligation to repay the support and thus, is ‘nonnegotiable,’ using Rachel’s term. Many parents-in-law paid the full or the down payment when the immigrant couples purchased their first houses. Therefore, parents-in-law (and some husbands, too) tended to consider the house as theirs, so they can stay in ‘their own house’ without the wife’s consent. In the Southwest Michigan area where I conducted this fieldwork, approximately half of the Taiwanese immigrant families did not have a mortgage because the husbands’ parents made the purchases when the couples settled in the United States. This situation can be best illustrated in Rachel’s narrative:
In 1988, my parents-in-law moved in with us after their early retirement. I did not get a chance to say no or to negotiate the arrangement. At that time, we just got married and didn’t have much money. My in-laws put a down payment on a house and asked us to buy it. They said it was a gift for us. Soon after we bought the house, my husband asked me to sign my name on a card addressed to his parents, which said ‘Thank you for the generous gift, and welcome to live with us.’ The next thing I knew, we were living with my parents-in-law.

Regardless of Rachel’s strong opposition, her parents-in-law moved in as soon as the house was ready. During her 13 years of marriage, Rachel had numerous arguments with her mother-in-law over household decisions, from the color of the walls, to where to put the dishes, to what furniture to buy. Tired of fighting over little things, Rachel gave up and yielded the decision-making power to her mother-in-law. Extremely unhappy, she underwent psychological therapy for years to manage her depression. Rachel learned many coping mechanisms from therapy and reading self-help books; however, she continued to surrender herself to the cultural authority of her mother-in-law and did whatever she demanded. The patriarchal in-law inequality remained in the household until her divorce.

In another household, Michelle’s husband Joseph invited his parents to live with her family for six months a year regardless of Michelle’s opposition. Joseph found a professional job in the Midwest after earning his PhD. Being far away from his parents, he felt responsible for the living arrangement to fulfill his obligations as a filial son. Joseph considered the living arrangement an important way to repay his parents who had paid his tuition and the down payment for the couple’s house. Every summer, he booked and paid for round trip flights for his parents to visit and live with his family.

Michelle was very stressed during the six months every year her in-laws visited. Being a housewife, she was left alone with her in-laws on weekdays when Joseph was at work. Michelle got up early to cook breakfast and clean the house. She was always tense because her in-laws nagged constantly, followed her around the house, and demanded traditional gender roles. Every year before her in-laws’ visit, Michelle stocked up several inhalers because the stress often triggered her asthma. She often found, and sometime faked, reasons to get out of her house to avoid interactions with her in-laws. She also often complained to fellow immigrant women about various instances of mistreatment. Sometimes, Michelle felt so angry with her mother-in-law that she left home and drove around town for several hours to calm down. Michelle once told me, ‘I wish we didn’t let them [my parents-in-law] pay for our house. I would have a louder voice to say no if we paid for this [house] on our own.’

The roles of significant others and fellow immigrant women

In this study, five husbands took action to reconcile the clashes between their wives and mothers – three took their mothers out of town during their visits to lessen
the interactions between the two women. One man defended his wife when his mother said mean things to her, and one husband asked his mother, who lived with the family, not to interfere in his wife’s parenting authority by promising her total control in the kitchen. These households were able to maintain peace, although the mothers-in-law did not stop distressing their daughters-in-law or making unreasonable demands. The wives in these families appreciated their husbands’ actions and, therefore, tolerated their in-laws willingly. As the following narratives reveal:

Linda (53, housewife): My husband is a wonderful husband and father. He is a very filial son, so I feel I can’t put him in a difficult position. That’s why I tolerate her [my mother-in-law]. I just do whatever she says and try not to make her unhappy.

Gina (50, housewife): She is my husband’s mother. I can’t challenge her or make her unhappy. When she was mean to me, I just pretended that I didn’t hear her. My husband is a very good guy and a good father. I cannot defy his mother and let it affect our relationship. It’s my marriage that I care about, honestly. So, I just keep quiet and act submissively. As long as she is happy, everything will be okay.

A similar sentiment came from Nicole’s (60, retired computer programmer) husband, who appreciated his wife’s dutiful service to his mother and, thus, showed more support to his wife. Nicole described:

My mother-in-law had Alzheimer. I did not hire help during my mother-in-law’s last years, nor did I send her to a nursing home. It’s not our culture, so I didn’t want to do that. I took care of her every day, including feeding her, bathing her, and cleaning up her poop. I also came home during my lunch break to check on her. It’s what I should do as a daughter-in-law. My husband was touched by what I did for his mother and it strengthened our relationship.

In other words, in-law interactions and conjugal relationships influence each other. Most husbands supported their wives in private but never said anything to their mothers about how their wives felt, nor did they try to change their mothers’ behaviors. Some avoided interacting with their mothers by going to work early and coming home late as they tried to escape their mothers’ complaints and seeing their wives in misery. Many husbands insisted the importance of filial piety and demanded their wives’ obedience, which jeopardized their spousal relationships. Several women felt miserable and helpless about their husbands’ lack of understanding and support. Tiffany (52, computer programmer) described the hurt and bitterness she harbored for years:

For several years, I was deeply hurt. Every time I complained about my mother-in-law, my husband got angry and defended his mother. He said that the in-law problem was only in my head because his mother never complained about living with us. I felt that I was not his priority, and that my well-being was not his concern. I did not feel loved and I did not think I still loved him... For a long time, I could not have intimacy with my husband... because he looks like his mother, and I just couldn’t feel intimate when I looked at him. I thought about divorce a million times, but I did not want to lose my children. I have a good job and I am financially independent, so I would be fine. But, I did not want my children to grow up in a broken family.
Children’s well-being and the importance of sustaining a stable family were main concerns for many women who felt mistreated by in-laws but did not consider divorce as the solution. For instance, Jen (50, business owner) and Christine (40, housewife) both received a ‘list of ten major faults’ from their mothers-in-law. Although the two women lived in different cities and migrated to the United States in different eras, the two lists their mothers-in-law made about their faults are strikingly similar. According to their mothers-in-law, the two women’s wrongdoings included ‘You should let the kids eat dinner before doing homework,’ ‘You iron your husband’s shirts incorrectly,’ ‘Your cooking sucks,’ ‘You should not argue with your husband,’ and ‘You talk too much with your friends.’ Jen and Christine were very upset when they received their lists, and they could not stop crying when describing the faults their mothers-in-law found in them. Nevertheless, they both remained silent to preserve their marriages and ensure that their children had stable familial environments.

Moreover, many women considered the age factor and hesitated to violate the social norm of respecting the elderly in Taiwanese culture by defying their mothers-in-law. The women often said: ‘She is old. In our culture, we don’t challenge the elderly;’ ‘She will not live forever, so there’s no need to make her unhappy;’ and ‘Old people do not change, so it’d be in vain trying to change them.’ The women’s mothers also made similar comments when they advised their daughters on how to handle in-law conflicts.

Married women’s mothers were another significant other who influenced their perceptions and behaviors. Although empathetic about the pain their daughters endured, all the women’s mothers advised them to tolerate and obey their mothers-in-law, citing cultural appropriateness. A few mothers mentioned to their daughters that their own mothers-in-law were much worse; therefore, ‘Everything will be okay eventually,’ as Frances (50, housewife) recalled. She continued:

My mom said that my mother-in-law is old, so there is no need to argue with her and make her unhappy. She also reminded me that defying my mother-in-law would damage my marriage, so the best way is to tolerate the old lady and behave submissively. She will not live forever, and everything will be OK in the end. The most important thing is my marriage.

Likewise, other women’s mothers reinforced traditional cultural norms concerning in-law and generational/age hierarchies. They strongly believed that being obedient to in-laws helped to secure their daughters’ marriages. This attitude not only supported in-law inequality, but also normalized daughters-in-law’s suffering.

Mothers-in-law were sometimes a main conversational topic at immigrant women’s gatherings. When someone described the mistreatment she received from her mother-in-law, other women listened, commented, and provided support. Many shared similar stories about their in-law relations and expressed similar feelings of powerlessness and injustice. Finding people who understood the culture and unspeakable pain brought a great sense of comfort. At times, in-law stories became entertaining as the women humorously competed with others to find the ‘meanest
mother-in-law’ in the stories they told. Nevertheless, the group of women always concluded their conversations by suggesting that remaining silent and submissive was the best solution to in-law conflict. Below was what an elderly lady said at one of these social gatherings:

Taiwanese mothers-in-law are all the same. Mine is not any better. What we could do is to be submissive and do what we can [to please them]. Try not to be bothered. There’s nothing you can do. We all have been there.

Although providing emotional support, this group of women unanimously endorsed the social norm – married women should obey their in-laws. They considered maintaining the status quo as crucial to sustaining relational harmony in the household. Fellow immigrants’ similar experiences with their mothers-in-law also normalized the mistreatment and justified the unequal statuses between the two generations of women.

**Emotion work in maintaining patriarchal social relations**

Taiwanese immigrant women are surrounded by an ethnic community where filial piety is considered valuable morality and obeying mothers-in-law is perceived as a virtue of Confucian womanhood. As a result, many suppressed their psychological suffering and conformed to the traditional cultural expectations. To achieve relational harmony in their households, these women engage in varying degrees of emotion work to display obedience and filial piety.

Amy was a 30-year-old psychologist. Her parents-in-law paid cash for a new house for the newlywed couple as a gift. When Amy’s first child was born, her husband’s parents visited and stayed with the couple for two months. During the months-long visit, Amy’s mother-in-law cooked and took care of the newborn. She asked Amy to rest in bed and forbade her to hold her baby. In tears, Amy described the misery she endured:

I was not allowed to get out of the bed or pump breast milk. My mother-in-law insisted that I stay in bed full time to rest. She said pumping breast milk is harmful for my body, so I was not allowed to do that. She fed and played with the baby and they [my husband and his parents] often gathered and laughed in the living room. I was alone in my room, crying all the time. I had to sneak out during the night when they fell asleep to see and hold my own baby. I was devastated and miserable.

Because the newborn cried throughout the night, Amy’s engineer husband, Tom, did not sleep well and complained to his mother. At the end of the visit, Amy’s mother-in-law decided to bring the baby to Taiwan, against Amy’s will, so Tom could get quality sleep. Amy was devastated. She took several trips to Taiwan to try to bring her baby back to the United States. Unfortunately, each time, she surrendered to her mother-in-law’s authority and returned empty-handed. The baby was 15-months-old at the time of our interview, and Amy still could not get him back. She showed me a picture of her son and said in deep sadness:
I miss him. Every time I see a baby, I cannot help but cry so badly because it always reminds me of my baby. So I try not to look at little children. I would break down (crying)…I wonder when I can finally take care of my own child (continued crying).

I asked Amy why she had loyally obeyed her mother-in-law. ‘What else can I do? She is my mother-in-law. I cannot make her unhappy,’ Amy said, weeping.

During this painful time, Amy turned to her own parents for emotional support. She was advised that, according to Taiwanese culture, ‘A daughter-in-law should not question her mother-in-law.’ Amy’s husband believed that obeying his parents exhibited the moral virtue of filial piety, and her fellow immigrant women commented that she should be grateful that her mother-in-law took care of her child so she had more free time for herself. Amy seemed to be the only one who felt ‘something was wrong’ because she was in tremendous pain and could not stop crying during our five-hour interview. Nevertheless, she suppressed her true emotions and acted filially and submissively in front of her mother-in-law. For almost two years, Amy was severely depressed. She read her psychology textbooks diligently, hoping to find useful techniques to help herself.

Rachel (50, computer programmer) was a divorcee who lived with her parents-in-law and dutifully served them for 13 years, despite her true feelings of unhappiness. One night, Rachel called the police when her then husband hit her during an argument. Rachel’s mother-in-law blamed her for bringing shame to the family, and she insisted that the couple get a divorce. Rachel described her heartbroken moment:

They [my then parents-in-law] sat at the dining table with my husband and demanded him to divorce me. They were also talking about calling my parents and asking them to take me back to Taiwan. They were discussing my marriage without involving me or asking my opinion. I was crying in the living room by myself. It was my marriage that they were talking about, my marriage!

Rachel’s parents flew from Taiwan immediately after receiving a phone call from her in-laws. They apologized repeatedly and begged their in-laws to forgive Rachel. However, her in-laws insisted that nothing could amend the shame and humiliation and they refused to ‘take her back.’ They also refused to let Rachel’s parents stay in the house during the divorce process because they said the house belonged to them. Although Rachel still hoped for a second chance for the marriage for her children’s sake, she complied and got a divorce as her parents-in-law commanded.

**Sustaining Confucian in-law patriarchy: gender morality and emotion work**

Taiwanese immigrant women’s experiences and narratives in this study provide rich data to discuss the intertwined relations of place, culture, gender, class, emotion, morality, subjectivity, and self in the transnational family. As illustrated in this article, no matter how much pain the women felt in their subordination to their in-laws, the prevalent cultural beliefs of in-law hierarchies, filial piety, age-based
seniority, and relational harmony form a sociocultural web that keeps married women in their ‘right place’ within three-generation households and defines their behavioral and emotional appropriateness. Daughters-in-law are compelled to conduct surface acting (e.g. suppressing anger and despair) and deep acting (e.g. showing appreciation, filial affection, and obedience) to maintain peace with their in-laws. No competing gender ideology exists in a single-ethnic transnational household and community to contest against Confucian cultural values. The financial support of parents-in-law further legitimates in-laws’ lengthy visits and dominant status; it also reinforces the cultural expectations for immigrant couples, especially wives, to repay the older generation by showing filial piety and obedience. Even in egalitarian marriages, in-law inequality persists.

Conceptual implications drawing from the case study of Taiwanese in-law relations contribute to enhancing scholarly understanding of classed gender culture and emotion work in the transnational family. First, immigrants’ cultural transnationalism does not guarantee free choice of behaviors and emotional displays. In studies of transnationalism, scholars often emphasize immigrants’ identity fluidity to highlight the blurring cultural boundary between their sending and receiving societies (see, e.g. Faist 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Massey 1994). This emphasis may lead to a romanticized idea that individuals have total freedom or can exercise their free will to choose what cultural elements they wish to adopt from their transnational cultural toolkit based on their emotional responses to the social world. While acknowledging that individuals strategize how they use their transnational cultures, I argue that immigrants’ fluid identities in their cultural transnationalism is constrained by social structures, such as gender, social class, age, and place.

In this study, we see that within a single-ethnic household and a private domestic space, no alternative cultural norms or public discourses are available to challenge Confucian patriarchy. For instance, in American public spheres, gender equality and individuals’ autonomy are at least given lip services. In my previous study, which included a few inter-racial families, Taiwanese immigrant women who married Whites cited American culture to explain their partnerships in spousal and in-law relations (Gu 2006). Place matters. In a private Taiwanese household space, Confucian gender culture is given primacy.

Moreover, when morality is embedded in the discourse of transnational familyhood, culture becomes a powerful social force that confines individuals’ free will, true emotions, and translocal subjectivities. As Katigbak (2015) argues, morality instructs behavioral standards in the transnational family and defines what is right and wrong. Failing to practice moralized behaviors may generate shame or guilt. In this study, subjects’ husbands, mothers, and fellow immigrant women strongly believed in and advocated for Confucian values of filial piety and gender practice. In this cultural system, daughters-in-law have their ‘rightful place’ in Taiwanese transnational households and are expected to conduct ‘rightful behaviors’ accordingly. Any defying manners are condemned because it would bring shame to the
women or their families. In other words, a sense of righteousness is instilled in Taiwanese discourse of in-law hierarchies. As a result, Confucian gender culture becomes moralized and forms a constraining social power that shapes married women's 'choices' of obedience. Performing Confucian patriarchy, thus, becomes mandatory.

More than three decades ago, Stacey (1983) used 'patriarchy's female deputy' to describe mothers-in-law in ethnic-Chinese societies. In this study, I argue that daughters-in-law's mothers serve as another form of female deputy of patriarchy in Taiwanese transnational households. Regardless of their benign intention to preserve their daughters' marriages, these mothers participate in the reproduction of in-law inequality in three-generation Taiwanese immigrant households by suggesting their daughters silence themselves when facing in-law tensions and mistreatment and dwell in their subordinate positions. They also normalize daughters-in-law's suffering by citing their own pain caused by their mothers-in-law. Daughters-in-law are trapped in a 'double morality of filial piety.' They ought to be filial to their mothers by listening to their advice while also obeying their in-laws and enduring the pain that accompanies their obedient acts to fulfil their obligation as filial daughters-in-law.

Second, emotion work operates to sustain Confucian in-law hierarchies and patriarchal structures. As revealed in subjects' narratives, negative emotions often arise when mothers-in-law demand traditional gender practice and filial obedience. For example, Tracy expressed her feelings of devastation, anxiety, and excessive worry. Rose felt intimidated and exhausted; Amy and Rachel felt deeply depressed and powerless for two years; Michelle felt trapped, upset, and angry; Jen and Christine felt upset, unappreciated, and falsely condemned; and Tiffany felt deeply hurt and bitter. These women's emotional responses to in-law inequality were real and painful. They were aware of their suffering and its causes, but they also felt powerless and helpless in their expected gender roles as filial daughters-in-law.

Meanwhile, the women's husbands, mothers, and fellow immigrant women advised them to keep their negative emotions to themselves, to tolerate unreasonable demands, not to display anger, and not to disagree with their in-laws. As documented in my fieldnotes and interviews, Michelle's mother said, 'Michelle should not be unhappy when her mother-in-law is here.' Amy's mother also told her, 'You should be happy that your mother-in-law is helping you raise your son.' Rachel's ex-husband said to her, 'My parents are my Gods. They should be yours, too. They raised me and supported me. You should be grateful to them.' Michelle's and Amy's fellow immigrant women advised them that

tolerating your in-laws would strengthen your marriage. Don't think too much and don't feel too much. Everything will be fine in the end as long as you don't show your anger and do whatever your in-laws say to make them happy.
In other words, daughters-in-law not only are supposed to act a certain way, they are also expected to feel a certain way to be culturally appropriate. Their concerns about maintaining a stable marriage and risking social stigma amount to overwhelming feelings of hesitation, ambivalence, and caution. Therefore, some tried to transform their private feelings into a sense of gratitude and considered their services as a recompense for their in-laws’ care and support for their husbands, while others kept their emotions to themselves for the sake of their marriages. As a result, all of the women suppressed their true emotions and acted submissively in front of their in-laws, emotion work accomplished by alienating and silencing their true senses of self. On the surface, peaceful transnational households are maintained. Underneath the relational harmony, it is the emotion work daughters-in-law deliberately conduct that supports the persistence of Confucian in-law patriarchy.

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