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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Culture, emotional transnationalism and mental distress: family relations and well-being among Taiwanese immigrant women

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Immigrant women’s vulnerability to mental distress has been recognized in the literature and yet the socio-cultural causes of their distress have rarely been explored. On the basis of a case study of Taiwanese immigrants residing in Chicago, this article illustrates the dynamic contexts within which Taiwanese immigrant women’s distress is produced at home and explains the social and cultural factors that engender the women’s distress. In this article I argue that Taiwanese immigrant women frequently shift back and forth between Taiwanese and American cultural norms in an effort to apply effective behavioral guidance and justifications to interactions with their spouses, children and in-laws. The term ‘emotional transnationalism’ is used to describe the psychological experience associated with transnational cultural practices. Distress is often generated as these women struggle with feelings of ambivalence and contradictions that confront them in their search for cultural identities. The severity of distress is largely determined by the power hierarchies between women and those with whom they interact. Married women’s status as subordinate to their in-laws creates more negative experiences than any other status.

Keywords: transnationalism; emotions; immigrant women; immigrant family; mental health; Taiwanese immigrants

Previous studies have found that immigrant women tend to be more distressed than their male counterparts (Bagley 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Ying 1988).1 Nevertheless, the socio-cultural contexts that produce immigrant women’s distress and the theoretical implications of these contexts have rarely been explored. Moreover, most studies of immigrants’ mental health use measurements developed by the discrete model of mental health, which presumes a universal presentation of mental disorders across subgroups and cultures. Symptom checklists, for example, are used to identify specific psychological disturbances such as depression. Influenced by biomedical knowledge, such positivist methods overlook individuals’ subjective experiences of psychological suffering, which are often fluid and loosely defined (Davar 1999; Stoppard 2000). Symptom checklists also lack validity when administered to ethnic and immigrant groups whose mental health experiences are greatly shaped by their own cultures, which deviate from that of the majority (Fabrega 1990; Uba 1994). Many scholars emphasize the importance of exploring subjective interpretations of emotions as well as the socio-cultural contexts of experience (Davar 1999; Fabrega 1990; Kleinman and Kleinman 1997; Stoppard 2000).

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Davar (1999) suggests that the use of the term mental distress highlights subjectivity and its social contexts, allowing for better understanding of psychological suffering. This article follows Davar’s perspective to contextualize immigrant women’s subjective experiences of mental distress.

Culture is critical for understanding immigrants’ subjective experiences of emotions and distress. Immigrant culture is influenced by both the sending and receiving societies, which creates a transnational social field that blends two systems of cultural values (Faist 2000). This does not mean, however, that the borders and distinctions between the sending and the receiving societies disappear in immigrants’ cognition. Rather, an individual’s sense of place continues to play an important role in shaping selfhood and emotions in transnational social fields (Anderson and Smith 2001; Conradson and McKay 2007). The places where experiences occur also create individual variations. For instance, Taiwanese immigrant women identify themselves as American in the workplace but as Taiwanese at home. Their cultural identities affect their family dynamics as well as their psychological well-being (Gu 2006). Nevertheless, few researchers have attempted to examine how transnational culture and cognition of place affect immigrants’ self-identities, emotions and distress in everyday life. This article aims to address the conceptual connections of culture, place, transnationalism, emotion and mental distress. Empirical material drawn from a case study of Taiwanese immigrant women to the US illustrates these concepts.

In this study, I seek to answer the following questions: What is the major source of distress for immigrant women in their family lives? What are the socio-cultural contexts in which their distress is produced? How do women interpret their psychological suffering? How do women’s subjective experiences help to understand the conceptual connections among culture, place, emotion and distress? Feminist scholars have emphasized that women are by no means homogeneous; their life experiences are largely shaped by the social locations (i.e. gender, class, race, nationality) that they occupy in society (Collins 1990; Haraway 1988; Hekman 1997). Therefore, in addition to exploring common experiences among Taiwanese immigrant women, I highlight social class differences where applicable.

This article begins with a discussion of cultural transnationalism, emotional transnationalism and mental distress. Next, I introduce the research methods, setting and subjects of the study. Following this introduction, I provide contextual illustrations of the psychological struggles that Taiwanese immigrant women encounter at home. Using these illustrations as examples, I further elaborate the connections among concepts and identify key causes of immigrant women’s distress. Finally, I conclude the article by extracting conceptual implications from this case study.

**Conceptualization**

The mental health of immigrants and their children remains a challenging subject in both immigration studies and the sociology of mental health. One of the major research difficulties with which scholars must contend derives from the cultural otherness of immigrant groups, whose perceptions, experiences and expressions concerning mental problems differ from those of the mainstream culture. Moreover, immigrant groups are by no means homogeneous. Each immigrant or ethnic group has its own cultural tradition, which not only affects the members’ emotional lives but also shapes their social practices, such as role playing. It is particularly evident that an immigrant culture is shaped by the norms of both the sending and receiving societies (Faist 2000; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blac-Szanton 1999; Ong 1999). This transnationality of immigrant culture
complicates associations among culture, emotion and distress. To help clarify these complex conceptual connections, this section discusses concepts of and linkages among cultural transnationalism, emotional transnationalism and mental distress.

**Transnationality of immigrant culture**

Culture is central to understanding immigrants’ lives, including their mental health (Agbayani-Siewert, Takeuchi, and Pangan 1999; Fabrega 1992). Immigrants and their children are carriers of culture whose social practices, beliefs and values are shaped by the cultural norms of sending and receiving societies (Faist 2000; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blac-Szanton 1999). They are also actors who make their own culture (so-called creolization) while serving as the carriers or instruments of such transnational culture (Foner 1997). The transnationality of immigrants’ culture, as Ong (1999) calls it, complicates the interactions between individuals and structures, because immigrants and their children’s cultural tradition already contains two or more competing and sometimes contradictory cultural systems. In particular, neither clear boundaries nor fixed hierarchies exist between or among the cultural systems that construct this structure (Faist 2000). Transnationalism is therefore important for understanding immigrant culture and individual life experiences.

Within a transnational social space with fluid cultural boundaries, an individual’s concept of place continues to exist and serve as an important point of reference in their subjectivity. As geographers suggest, movement between settings has a significant influence on subjectivity. Place plays a major role in the ongoing constitution of identity, especially for those who migrate across national borders (Bondi et al. 2002; Conradson and McKay 2007). Conradson and McKay (2007, 168) use the term translocal subjectivities to describe the ‘multiply-located senses of self amongst those who inhabit transnational social fields’. They argue that a migrant’s sense of self is connected to particular places. Place is thus important for understanding immigrants’ selfhood and perception of cultural practices, because subjectivity and identity change with geographic mobility. Moreover, social institutions such as the workplace and the family contextualize subjective experiences. As Yeoh, Huang, and Lam (2005) point out, micro-politics and social practices of transnationalism often play out within the household. Examining how transnationalism is experienced in a given place therefore helps to understand individual subjectivity in social context.

At a transnational level, an immigrant’s subjectivity and sense of self are linked to at least two places: their sending and receiving countries. For example, for a Filipina nurse who works in the United Kingdom, she receives cultural influences from two places, the UK and the Philippines; these influences may co-exist and do not necessarily exclude one another. Although national cultures are by no means lists of given traits and fixed qualities, salient cultural characteristics that are associated with the two places, such as individualism in the UK and familism in the Philippines, may merge in the psychological schema as two polar opposites. In other words, an individual’s concept of place creates cognitive distinctions between the cultures that are associated with each place. As a result, this Filipina nurse may find herself more Westernized than her friends in the Philippines but more Filipina than her UK co-workers. Place is therefore an important factor when examining an individual’s self-understanding and cultural perceptions. In contrast, for those who have never migrated, the time factor might be more significant than place. For instance, a contrast between traditional and modern values may emerge when individuals attempt to position their self-understanding, beliefs and behavior. Questions such as ‘Should I follow tradition?’ and ‘Should I behave in a modern way?’ could be major concerns in this context. For immigrants who move across national
borders, the relationship between the places to and from which they migrate remain central in their cognition.

Cultural norms in a given society create a *cognitive schema* that directs individuals’ thoughts and behavior by defining appropriate and inappropriate conduct. In other words, this schema serves as a behavioral foundation upon which individuals make judgments in their social life. Being nurtured by two cultures, immigrants’ cognitive schema reflects the structure of cultural transnationalism. They seek sources of value, meaning and behavioral norms from a transnational cultural ‘toolkit’, which is polarized by two cultures despite its transnationality. Individuals use this transnational cultural toolkit to interpret their behavior and interactions with others. These interpretations can be affected by various factors, such as social locations (gender/race/class), social relations and psychological needs. It is thus important to contextualize individual interpretations and identify key factors that shape perceptions. For immigrants and their children, constructing a cognitive schema is a fluid dynamic process that cuts across national borders, shifting back and forth between two cultures. This transnational space gives rise to meanings that support and legitimate individual actions. The formation of such a counteractive, hybrid identity is key to understanding an immigrant’s sense of self (Mitchell 1997).

In spite of the fluidity and flexibility of cultural transnationalism, the search for behavioral guidance in a transnational schema is not always smooth, especially when two cultures attach contradictory meanings to the same behavior. Individuals sometimes must make difficult decisions or deal with emotional struggles in their attempts to accommodate these contradictions. Therefore, the interconnections between transnational culture and emotions need to be further discussed.

**Transnational culture and emotional transnationalism**

Wolf (1997, 2002) uses the term *emotional transnationalism* to describe the mental distress that second-generation Filipino youth experience when confronting conflicting cultural codes. According to Wolf, Filipino youth place a special emphasis on family cohesion, a traditional value in Filipino culture. At the same time, they suffer from the restraints imposed by their parents who demand obedience. From the perspective of these youth, their family practices are a form of authoritarian control. This perspective emerges as the youth reflect upon or awaken to American culture’s emphasis on individualism, independence and autonomy. Conflicts occur when they attempt to accommodate such disparate and contradictory values; it is not uncommon for members of this population to have suicidal thoughts or to harm themselves.

Wolf’s study exemplifies the experience of cultural transnationalism and its impact on psychological well-being. She vividly depicts the feelings of ambivalence that immigrant children experience. Her use of emotional transnationalism in particular brings scholarly attention to the transnationality of immigrant culture and to the culture’s profound role in mental health. As yet, however, there is no rigorous definition of the term *emotional transnationalism*. According to Wolf, emotional transnationalism is itself an experience of distress or a transnational struggle. Conceptually, however, the transnationality of emotion does not necessarily entail distress, which is a negative emotional state. The transnationality of emotion can also refer to positive psychological experiences, such as feelings of joy or excitement that surface when individuals embrace their cultural heritages. An individual might experience other emotions that are neither solely positive nor solely negative (such as ambivalence). It is therefore important to define emotional transnationalism and to further clarify its association with mental distress.
To accomplish this task, I define *emotional transnationalism* as ‘the emotions experienced when immigrants and their children search for behavioral guidance and a foundation for moral judgments from the cultural norms of both their sending and receiving societies’. In other words, emotional transnationalism refers to the emotions that individuals experience in their social space of cultural transnationalism. Emotional transnationalism, both in itself and in relation to cultural transnationalism, highlights the unique life situations and cultural contexts that immigrants and their children face. These situations and contexts constitute factors that can help researchers better understand mental health issues among immigrant or ethnic groups. Like Louie (2004), who demonstrates how the cultural identities of Chinese American youth are produced, contested and negotiated in various contexts, I argue that the experiences of emotional transnationalism are fluid and situated. They vary in social context and produce diverse psychological effects.

**Emotional transnationalism and mental distress**

As mentioned earlier, the emotions that individuals experience when they encounter cultural transnationalism are not always negative, but their negative effects on psychological well-being are what most concern sociologists and mental health professionals. I use the term *mental distress* to refer to ‘varied negative emotions that individuals experience in their daily lives’. Use of the term *mental distress* was first suggested by Davar (1999), who substituted it for the term *mental illness* in mental health studies. Using India as an example, Davar (1999) examines discourses in mental health research, theories, clinical practice and policies regarding women’s mental health. She finds that mental health scholars use varying and inconsistent terms that present positivist biomedical views and that fail to account for the perspectives of the subjects themselves. Davar therefore advocates use of the term *mental distress*, which emphasizes subjectivity in psychological suffering and the social contexts of this subjectivity.

In *Understanding Depression*, Stoppard (2000) makes similar arguments to those of Davar. She points out that the meaning of depression to a large extent depends on the social context in which the term is used and on the person who uses it. She argues that researchers’ notions of depression, primarily based on positivist perspectives, do not necessarily reflect subjects’ depressive experiences. Stoppard therefore develops different meanings for these terms, distinguishing between *depressive disorder* (a disorder defined by mental health professionals and researchers), *depressive symptoms* (a person’s responses to a questionnaire designed to assess depression) and *depressive experiences* (individuals’ subjective experiences in everyday life that are described by themselves as depression). She criticizes mental health researchers for their tendency to adopt positivist perspectives and measurements, a tendency that promotes neglect of women’s experiences as perceived from their own standpoint.

The concept of mental distress embraces an inclusive attribute that highlights the psychological experiences of those researched. As Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1997) state, people express their experience of suffering in lay terms. Mental distress, therefore, could be expressed in terms of frustration, stress, depression, worry, pressure, uneasiness, unhappiness and other forms of negative psychological states. This approach addresses general issues of psychological well-being rather than assessing specific mental problems. By not rigorously defining specific mental problems, this strategy allows the subjects to freely express their emotional lives. In this study, I encouraged the informants to describe and interpret what distressed them the most in everyday life. Findings of my study suggest that while work relations distress men, family life distresses women (Gu 2006). Below,
I explain the research methods used in this study and present the data concerning Taiwanese immigrant women’s distress experiences in the family.

Research methods and data

My findings are based on the data that I collected while studying social and psychological adaptation among Taiwanese Americans who resided in the Chicago metropolitan area. I conducted 54 semi-structured in-depth interviews and limited participant observations in Chicago’s Taiwanese immigrant community in 2001. I selected a group of subjects comprising 27 females and 27 males to maximize variations in generation, age, marital status, social class and occupation. This sample comprises 48 middle-class professionals and 6 lower-class laborers. All first-generation informants had acquired US citizenship at the time of our interviews. Interviewees were recruited by multiple methods, which drew from my own personal networks, snowball sample referrals and various ethnic-Chinese community organizations and religious groups. My design for the interview schedule took a semi-structured form, which enabled me to comprehend how the participants’ immigration motives, gender and social relations in the family and workplace affect their mental health. I conducted the interviews in Mandarin, Taiwanese or English. The interviews, which ranged from one to four hours, were transcribed verbatim and analyzed systematically using coding schemes based on grounded theory (Strauss 1987). The findings presented in this article are based primarily on interviews with 17 first-generation women. All names used are pseudonyms to ensure privacy.

Taiwanese are the most educated immigrant group in the US (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). In this study, the majority (82%) of the female informants are college educated and more than half hold advanced degrees. Most of these women earned their postgraduate degrees in the US. At the time of the interviews, 13 of the 17 immigrant women worked outside of their home, most in Caucasian-owned companies. One was a homemaker, one was a caretaker and two were self-employed.

Family relations and mental distress: experiences of Taiwanese immigrant women

No matter how successful they might be at work, Taiwanese immigrant women struggle enormously in their family lives. Even among highly acculturated middle-class professionals, the family constrains women’s contentment and empowerment (Gu 2006). For example, Taiwanese immigrant women are responsible for most housework; their parenting style often encounters strong resistance from their children; and they can be devaluated by their in-laws. To further explain why and how the family is a major source of women’s distress, it is important to understand the socio-cultural contexts of Taiwanese family life. In this section, I introduce Taiwan’s cultural tradition regarding gender roles and family relations and then illustrate a variety of contexts that create distress in relations with spouses, children and other relatives.

Gender and family relations in the Taiwanese tradition

Taiwan’s history is inseparable from that of China. Therefore, Taiwan’s traditions have been profoundly influenced by Chinese culture and by Confucian teaching in particular. Confucian morality ascribes to gender relations a patriarchal nature in which men’s social status is higher than females (Gu and Gallin 2004). The cultural aphorism that ‘men are superior; women subordinate’ (nan zhun nu bei) highlights the traditional Taiwanese worldview of gender: men are to exercise ruling power in both public and private arenas,
while women are 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 thought have promoted egalitarian ideologies and practices among both men and women. Nevertheless, as several scholars have observed (Gallin 1995; Huang 2000; Lee, Yang, and Yi 2000; Yu 2001), gender relations on the island remain grounded in traditional cultural norms.

The family is the foundation of ethnic-Chinese societies, including Taiwan. The importance of Confucian values, such as filial piety and veneration of age, is highlighted in Taiwanese family practices. Confucian principles of filial piety demand children’s obedience and devotion to parents, obligating children to repay parents by caring for them and by ensuring support for the elderly. Three-generation cohabitation (patrilineal) is highly valued because it reflects this Confucian teaching. Extended families which are focused on patrilineal kinship comprise the primary circle of social relations, in which daughters-in-law hold subordinate status (Gu and Gallin 2004).

**Family relations and mental distress**

The female informants in this study experienced distress in a variety of contexts and relations: when negotiating the distribution of domestic labor with their husbands, when educating their bi-cultural children and when interacting with in-laws. Few Taiwanese husbands share an equal amount of housework and their family members tend to disregard the value of the wife in the family. Moreover, some children criticize their mother’s parenting style. These situations create major causes of distress at home. Below, I describe these distressing circumstances.

**Spousal relations and distress**

Several female restaurant workers were overwhelmed by their double shifts. With regards to her husband’s lack of participation in domestic labor, waitress Yi-Hua complained ‘He’s never helped! Even when I ask for help, he would not even bother to move a little bit. I’m so exhausted every day.’ She and her husband work together at a carry-out Chinese restaurant. At home, her husband refuses to do ‘women’s tasks’ in order to maintain his role as ‘head of household’ and to save ‘face as a man’. Hsiao-Fen experienced similar exhaustion and distress. Her husband went out to play table tennis every night, leaving all of the housework and the childcare responsibilities to her. Hsiao-Fen was worn out in her daily life. In a tone full of sadness and regret, she complained repeatedly that she had never gone to a movie or spent a day doing things just for herself.

Both lower-class and professional women faced distress resulting from overwhelming double shifts. Wan-Jen, a manager at a real estate company, is a busy working mother who is active in the Taiwanese immigrant community. Her husband is very supportive of her career and encourages her participation in social activities. Nevertheless, she still has to do all of the housework. According to Wan-Jen, her husband ‘never helped, even though it was he who encouraged me to participate in those activities’. She complained that her husband’s support always stopped at the verbal level and that he had never taken real action, such as sharing in housework. Beset by her multiple obligations of work, family and community activities, Wan-Jen finally hired housekeepers to clean the house and to do the yard work.

The gender division of domestic labor to some extent reflects the power structure in a conjugal relation, which is an important element of marital arrangement that affects individual well-being (Van Willigen and Drentea 2001). In this study, all lower-class wives
were solely responsible for housework. They experienced devastating fatigue, resulting from double shifts. In contrast, many middle-class wives were able to demand help from their husbands or outsource their housework by hiring housekeepers. Even so, the overload of domestic work was a common source of distress among women in both social classes.

*Generational relations and distress*

Several sociologists have identified generational conflicts as one of the major sources of distress in immigrant families (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 1996; Wolf 1997). This trend is also true in the case of Taiwanese immigrants. Nurtured in two different societies, first-generation informants and their children encountered obstacles in their interactions with one another and some of these interactions engendered enormous distress. In this study, parents’ Taiwaneseess and children’s Americanness frequently caused disruptions between the two generations. The mothers, in particular, encountered such conflicts significantly more often than the fathers, because the mothers were usually the ones responsible for supervising the next generation in daily life. Below I illustrate the distress that first-generation women experienced in their relations with children.

‘*They are too Americanized!*’ As explained earlier, Taiwanese culture grants parents much authority, and many mothers are eager to sustain this in the US setting. Nevertheless, growing up in a society within which individual independence and autonomy are highly valued, second-generation children frequently defy such authoritative parenting. As a result, children feel controlled by their parents, while parents feel disappointed with their children. Parent–child conflicts occur, generating distress for both generations, as the following excerpt from my interview shows:

> It’s very difficult to educate children who grow up in America. What they learn in school is that parents should respect their privacy. For example, you cannot enter their rooms without knocking and you cannot open their letters. So, you’d think, what’s up? I am your mother! Why can’t I read your letters? I just want to know what kind of friends you make. I am concerned about you. But what they learn in school is different. Their teachers told them that they should have their own autonomy and they should make their own decisions. So, we can’t really change their perceptions. Whenever we try to persuade them with a different perspective, they feel resentful and say we don’t respect them.

In another family, the parents had to make an appointment to visit their son, who lived alone in downtown Chicago. As a result, the parents had been estranged from their son for years. The mother was deeply saddened by her son’s businesslike attitude and attributed it to Americanization. She said, ‘I don’t understand why we have to make an appointment to see him. He’s become American!’ Likewise, many parents interpreted their children’s rebellion as the result of acculturation.

‘*Am I not American enough?*’ In addition to the conflicts resulting from cultural differences between generations, the children’s accusations that their mothers were ‘not American enough’ hurt the feelings of several mothers. Five mothers, all middle-class, expressed anxiety because of this. All of these mothers worked in private companies owned by Caucasians and were confident that they had adapted to American society. However, their children’s criticism shook their self-confidence and created distress. Wen-Ting, a professional working mother, expressed:

> Of course, we [first-generation immigrants] cannot speak English as well as Americans, nor can we compete with the next generation. So, I’ve seen a lot of children look down on their
mothers who do not work and cannot speak fluent English. I’ve worked in an American company for more than ten years and am quite content with my social skills with Americans. Yet, my daughter often criticizes that I don’t understand American culture. So, I can imagine that those stay-home moms would face a more difficult and embarrassing situation when their children feel ashamed of them.

Immigrant families that reflect dissonant acculturation have been found to exhibit high levels of depressive symptoms (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). In this study, despite the fact that middle-class informants were highly acculturated white-collar professionals (e.g., US trained, fluent in English and assimilated to the middle-upper class), quarrels over the degree of the parents’ acculturation and consequent distress occurred more often than in lower-class families. Professional women perceive their occupational accomplishments as evidence of their acculturation. In fact, many consciously act ‘like Americans’ (i.e. aggressively) in the workplace to protect their autonomy. They strive for recognition and fair treatment, and have gained a great deal of confidence in this arena; however, criticism from their children challenges this confidence. Such intergenerational conflict is particularly severe for professional mothers who hope to sustain Taiwanese culture at home.

In contrast, lower-class women in this study perceive themselves as Taiwanese and hold a persistent self-concept at work and at home. They do not want themselves or their children to be Americanized. As a result, intergenerational conflicts in lower-class families compromise a cultural tug between the parents and the children over the retention of Taiwaneseness. The mothers do not doubt themselves or feel as hurt as their middle-class counterparts; they simply blame their children’s behavior on being Americanized. The influence of social class and place on selfhood reveals the nuances of women’s distress in intergenerational dynamics.

**In-law relations and distress**

Taiwanese immigrant women’s relations with mothers-in-laws and with relatives from their husbands’ side of the family constitute another significant source of distress. These relations, whose presence represents the legitimacy of Taiwanese patriarchal norms, create pressure on the married women. In Taiwanese tradition, married women are expected to fulfill all the household duties, including childcare, elderly care and hosting guests. As described earlier, women across social classes are overwhelmed by the necessities of daily life in America. Caring for extended family members adds more work and reduces the amount of time that they have for themselves. Their in-laws take their work for granted because they expect the couple to uphold traditional gender roles. For instance, the in-laws view the couple’s house as belonging to the husband; therefore, they can visit at any time and stay as long as they want without consulting the wife. Moreover, daughters-in-laws tend to be blamed for perceived problems in the family that violate in-laws’ expectations. Examples of these situations include when the wife asks her husband to help with the housework; when the children do not speak Mandarin well or underperform at school; when the kitchen is not organized in a certain way; or when the wife spends too much time with her friends.

Many of the female subjects were extremely distressed by their failure to meet their in-laws’ expectations. Despite feeling disrespected and wrongfully blamed for these situations, all of the women conformed to Taiwanese norms and behaved submissively in order to avoid confrontation. Even among couples whose spousal relations are fairly egalitarian, there is enormous pressure to ‘act Taiwanese’ in front of the husband’s family.
For example, some husbands who usually did the dishes would avoid doing any housework in front of their mothers or siblings and wives who often made family decisions were cautious of letting their in-laws know of their power. Below, I illustrate the contexts of in-law dynamics.

‘She always thinks it must be my fault!’ Six families in this study were living or had lived in three-generation households. The average time during which the three generations lived under the same roof was ten years. During this period, the mother-in-law usually helped with housework or childcare, thus reducing her daughter-in-law’s workload to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the tension between women I interviewed and their mothers-in-law were often reported to be the source of serious psychological distress. Every female informant who had lived with her mother-in-law reported severe distress during the period of three-generation cohabitation. For instance, whenever a couple had a disagreement, the mother-in-law would take her son’s side, believing that ‘women are not supposed to argue with their husbands’, according to traditional Taiwanese norms. Whenever a wife asked her husband to help with housework, her mother-in-law would become angry and defend the woman’s husband, because traditional Taiwanese culture stigmatizes men who ‘do women’s work’ around the house. Consequently, the argument turned into a fight between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, as described by Hsio-Fen:

Sometimes when I asked my husband to help me with some housework, my mother-in-law would be very angry. So, every argument I had with my husband would turn into an argument with her [my mother-in-law]. It was actually a fight between my husband and me, but my mother-in-law would always intervene. She was very unhappy that I initiated a fight with my husband and that I asked him to do housework.

Mei-Li, another female informant who had lived with her mother-in-law for more than 10 years, recalled:

Every time we brought my mother-in-law to a friend’s place for dinner, she would want to come home right after we finished the meal. But my husband liked to talk and hang out with friends longer, and didn’t want to leave that early. Then, my mother-in-law would blame me, asking why I didn’t want to go home. I tried to make my husband leave, but he liked to talk so much that we had to stay with him. After we came home, my mother-in-law would blame me, saying that ‘Women are always too talkative.’ In fact, it’s her son who’s talkative but not me. In her eyes, it must be my fault whenever something goes wrong. Every time I had an argument with my husband, she would take his side and accuse me of causing problems in our family.

Regardless of the tension with their mothers-in-law, Hsiao-Fen, Mei-Li and other female informants who faced similar situations tended to remain obedient. Although enormously distressed, these women chose to follow traditional Confucian teaching and deferred to the older woman as much as possible. ‘She was old, so I thought I didn’t want to argue with her and make her angry’, Hsiao-Fen said. Even when their mothers-in-law lost their ability to be independent, none of these women sent them to a nursing home. Instead, they washed, changed and fed their mothers-in-law, regarding this care as an obligation. Because of this arrangement, Hsiao-Fen often had to call in sick in order to take care of her mother-in-law. Her work performance was affected by her frequent absence, but her husband’s work was not. She was distressed but felt that she could not ask her husband to share the burden, because it is considered her work by Taiwanese norms. Mei-Li felt that she could not send her mother-in-law to a nursing home, although acknowledged that it would be much easier for her to balance work and family life. Accepting the demands of Taiwanese norms, these women tolerated the hardships of serving and obeying their
mothers-in-law as well as the consequent distress of their conformity. Traditional
Taiwanese culture and the values of (patrilineal) filial piety were sustained in these families
at the expense of the daughters-in-law’s mental health.

‘They are too un-American!’ Middle-class Taiwanese immigrants in this study were fairly
wealthy. Most of them owned large houses in the suburbs and sent their children to
expensive private schools. Therefore, when their relatives came to visit from Taiwan,
these families usually hosted them at home. Moreover, when relatives first migrated to the
US, they expected that they would obtain help from kin who were already established
in the receiving society. Tensions erupted, however, when these visits occurred too
frequently or lasted too long. Wan-Jen, a middle-aged professional woman, described how
distressed she was during the stay of her brother-in-law’s family:

Last year, my husband’s brother and his family migrated to the US. We were very supportive
and welcomed them to live with us as they looked for a place to settle. Yet, they stayed here for
six months! It’s terribly too long! You know, that really ruined my entire life, you know, my
family life. I sought help from a marriage counselor, and I didn’t want to continue my marriage.
How can you live with a family for six months? I feel that they are too un-American!

While her in-laws’ stay had caused Wan-Jen serious psychological distress, she felt that
she could not directly ask them to leave because of her in-law status. She asked her husband
to talk to them, but he refused. He even asked Wan-Jen not to mention this matter to them,
because it would be ‘inappropriate’. Typical Taiwanese attitudes are evident in this situation.
First, a husband’s ability to do a favor, such as hosting relatives in his home shows his
generosity and masculinity, a greatly valued attribute in Taiwanese society. Second,
rejecting people directly is not culturally appropriate in Taiwan, because it would cause
embarrassment to others. Third, traditional Taiwanese social norms dictate that a married
woman should be subordinate to her husband and in-laws and that she refrain from decision-
making that involves her in-laws. In this case, Wan-Jen had been living in the US for almost
20 years and regarded herself as Americanized. At work, she was a competent manager who
handled business and colleagues efficiently. Nevertheless, Wan-Jen was unable to overcome
the constraints that Taiwanese cultural norms imposed on her as she dealt with her in-laws.
Even though she was obviously enduring psychological suffering and knew that her in-laws’
departure would solve the problem, Wan-Jen felt compelled to conform to these norms:

I felt I was going crazy. In my own home, I just want to relax. When there are guests in my
home, I would not be able to sleep well. I would think, what would they like to eat and things
like that. I would have to take care of extra things. So, I was stressed all the time when my in-
laws were here. The tension continued for about six months. I couldn’t even sleep at night.
I was so angry and was breaking down. My daughter tried to help by talking to them. Then she
told me, ‘Mom, they really don’t know you need privacy.’ My goodness! How can they not
know I need privacy? We have a huge house, but it doesn’t mean that we have the obligation
to host them, you know. Later, I realized that they thought it was my husband who made
decisions for this family, so my feelings and opinions were not considered. You know, you’ve
got to respect me, because I contribute more than a half for this family. I mean, at least as
equally as he does. You must know that. You cannot say his decision can override mine.

The above narrative reflects Wan-Jen’s strong sense of individual rights and privacy
in the family. Yet facing an issue that was constrained by Taiwanese cultural norms,
Wan-Jen felt unable to speak up and confront her in-laws. She went to a Caucasian marriage
counselor but did not find it helpful because, according to Wan-Jen, ‘He did not understand
our culture.’ Finally, she asked a family friend to talk to her brother-in-law, suggesting that
they should move out. Her nightmare eventually ended, but her relationship with her
husband was significantly damaged.
Conceptual implications
Taiwanese immigrant women’s experiences provide fruitful materials that can enhance our understanding of the connections among cultural transnationalism, emotional transnationalism and mental distress. In other words, this case helps to ground these concepts in individual experiences, thereby adding empirical strength to these notions.

First, regardless of cultural transnationality, the experience of distress is not always a result of emotional transnationalism. Taiwanese immigrant women’s psychological struggles caused by their spousal, generational and in-law relations are all experiences of distress, but the engendering processes of these experiences differ. Distress caused by both generational and in-law relations is a product of emotional transnationalism because such distress is generated when women experience varied emotions while searching for behavior guidance or moral justifications from their transnational cultural toolkit. Place plays an important role in this context. In the women’s cognition, their American children and Taiwanese in-laws occupy the two poles of their transnational cultural field, forming a spectrum between which they shift back and forth. This swing illustrates the fluidity of identity and highlights the importance of relational contexts in shaping translocal subjectivity.

During my interviews, the informants consciously and constantly referred to their feelings of ambivalence, confusion, anxiety, sadness, unease and pressure as they struggled to justify whether American or Taiwanese norms should guide a specific situation. In contrast, the women’s distress resulting from their failure to negotiate equal shares of domestic labor does not involve emotional transnationalism. Describing how exhausted they were when their husbands did not help with housework, the informants rarely introduced cultural norms into their interpretations. From their perspectives, their pursuit of equal division of labor was simply an attempt to ease their burden rather than an effort to meet the demands of a specific cultural norm. This phenomenon suggests that emotional transnationalism does not always present itself as a preceding factor of mental distress.

Second, women’s identification with American and Taiwanese cultural norms is implicated in the development of distress, which involves emotional transnationalism. Consider the following excerpts from my interviews and the latent meanings that they carry (in italics):

‘Am I not American enough?’ [Of course I am!]
‘My children are too Americanized!’ [They should be more Taiwanese.]
‘I’m a Taiwanese daughter-in-law.’ [I would not have felt so powerless if I had followed American norms.]
‘My in-laws are too un-American!’ [If they were as Americanized as I am, I would not be bothered so much.]

As shown, the women identify with their Taiwanese heritage in some contexts but not in others. Their cultural identification is not fixed or tacit; rather, it is fluid and explicit. It flows across national borders, as immigrants are housed in a transnational social space.

Third, power relations serve as a key factor that produces mental distress. In each context within which the women’s distress is engendered, power hierarchies between them and other family members determine how these women feel and react. For instance, the authoritarian parenting style of Taiwanese immigrants provokes defiance, rebellion and criticism from the second generation, which in turn causes distress. In contrast, Taiwanese culture places married women’s status beneath their husbands’ kinships. Although enormously distressed by their powerlessness in their relations with in-laws, married women remain constrained by their subordinate positions. Moreover, the gender division of domestic labor reinforces the power structure of conjugal relationships.
Women’s distress resulting from their failure to negotiate equal shares of housework from their husbands can be seen as a product of such a gendered power structure.

Finally, I argue that individuals are by no means the victims of power relations or mental distress. Rather, they are social actors that are able to resist imposition of power and to mitigate mental distress. Many feminist scholars use the concept of agency to demonstrate individuals’ resistance against power (see Gallin 2002; Villarreal 1992; Wolf 1992; Yeoh, Teo, and Huang 2002). They argue that manifestations of structure, power, resistance and agency are multi-level and fluid. From this viewpoint, no one is absolutely powerless or powerful in a social relation or a structural position. Rather, individuals use various strategies to exert personal agency when confronting structural constraints or power relations. In this article, I have broadened the discussion of this theoretical perspective to the area of mental distress. When individuals experience psychological struggles, they utilize available resources in an attempt to mitigate distress, receiving social support from friends or seeking professional help. These coping strategies provide different ways for individuals to exert their personal agency. In this study, for example, several Taiwanese immigrant women visited counselors; many hired housekeepers; some read self-help books and attended workshops on parent–child relationships; many tried to adjust themselves in order to accommodate other family members’ needs. These strategies are all examples of how the women exert their agency in an attempt to mitigate mental distress.

In sum, power relations and emotional transnationalism are two key factors that generate Taiwanese immigrant women’s mental distress at home. Socially, the women’s position in the family is predominately defined by Taiwanese norms. Culturally, however, their transnationality generates varied emotions in their roles as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law. Mental distress is consequently engendered and personal agency is exerted in response to such distress. Individual attempts to alleviate distress, however, are not always successful, but personal agency is always exercised in these attempts. Meanwhile, the exertion of agency also reconfigures power relations that are imposed on individuals. These conceptual linkages can be illuminated by my process model of Taiwanese Americans’ mental distress (see Figure 1; Gu 2006).

Figure 1. Process model of Taiwanese Americans’ mental distress.
According to this conceptual model, socio-cultural structure affects how the distress process proceeds and why individual experiences vary in different contexts. This factor includes individual structural positions (i.e. gender, race, class), social institutions (i.e. family, workplace) and the larger societal environment (i.e. nation, culture, economy). In this article, I have illustrated that professional and lower-class women differ in their experiences of distress and their coping strategies. For example, professional women have more resources to alleviate mental distress. Professional women’s work also complicates their experience of emotional transnationalism, because they are exposed to more American cultural norms than their lower-class counterparts. Their cultural toolkit is full of diverse elements from two social systems, which increases the complexity and contradictions in their daily utilization of this toolkit. In future research, differences other than social class and transnationalism in places other than the family must be investigated to enhance scholarly understanding of the interconnections among place, culture, emotion and mental distress.

Conclusion

In this article, I have illustrated the dynamic contexts within which Taiwanese immigrant women’s distress is produced, explained the social and cultural causes, and discussed conceptual implications drawn from this case. Taiwanese immigrant women’s transnational struggles at home illuminate the challenges that the women encounter in handling family relations. As I have previously reported (Gu 2006), in contrast to their overall contentment with and confidence in their work experiences, the Taiwanese immigrant women in my study exhibit considerable distress about their family life. In the workplace, the women tend to act in an ‘American way’, daring to challenge stereotypes of Asian women and to fight against unfair treatment. In their work life, the women consciously abandon Taiwanese cultural norms of submissiveness. In contrast, the family remains a transnational arena in which the women frequently struggle between American and Taiwanese cultural norms, resulting in emotions such as anxiety, pressure, confusion, disappointment, ambivalence, sadness and frustration. Discovering the complexity of interconnections among culture, power, place, emotions and distress as well as their variations across social institutions will contribute to a better understanding of the socio-cultural causes of immigrants’ psychological well-being.

My findings in this study support Foner’s (1997, 961) statement that ‘the immigrant family is a place where there is a dynamic interplay between structure, culture, and agency’. Taiwanese immigrant women’s family experiences illustrate such interplay at home; their mental distress produced by this interplay points to the challenges, conflicts, ambivalence and contradictions that they encounter in their family relations. As Morris (1990) puts it, families are a theatre of multiple relationships in which transnational contexts, power structures, dual cultures and individual agency interact to establish family relationships. The structure of family life and the meanings attached to family relations and roles are defined and redefined in everyday life. It is also through this multifaceted interplay of transnational power/culture/agency as well as through the ongoing process of building meanings that mental distress is engendered.

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Notes

1. Parallel results of this gender difference also have been found among the second-generation population, indicating that women’s vulnerability to mental distress surfaces in both generations (see Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zady 2002; Rumbaut 1996; Wolf 1997).
2. Appadurai (1995) uses the term *locality* to describe such a sense of place. Localities are important sources of meaning and identity, even for mobile individuals.
3. Jackson, Crang and Dwyer (2004) use the term *symbolic and imaginary geographies* to describe how individuals make sense of their transnational world by developing imaginative relationships between places of origin and settlement.
4. According to The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term *emotion* can refer to disturbance or excitement, which can be positive or negative psychological states.
5. My interviews were conducted in three different languages: Taiwanese, Mandarin and English. In each language, the informants expressed their negative emotions differently, even when they were describing a similar psychological state, such as feeling depressed. This phenomenon suggests that researchers should use an inclusive concept, such as ‘mental distress’, to understand the informants’ emotional lives and to generalize factors that cause their distress.
6. My informants included 34 first-generation and 20 second-generation Taiwanese immigrants. Their ages ranged from 18 to 82. At the time of our interviews, 28 informants were married and lived with their spouses. All but one were in their first marriage.
7. In the Taiwan-born population, 66.6% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher and 64.6% work in management, professional and related occupations (US Bureau of the Census 2003, Table FBP-1).
8. The women attributed their husbands’ lack of help to Taiwanese cultural norms only when explaining why their mothers-in-law were opposed to their husbands performing housework.
9. Following Brubaker and Cooper (2000), I use the term *identification* instead of *identity* to emphasize the fluid nature of identity.
10. In the case of Taiwanese immigrant women, being powerless (e.g., being powerless daughters-in-law) as well as being powerful (e.g., being authoritarian parents) engendered mental distress.
11. In this study, some mothers’ strong authority in parenting became a source of their husbands’ distress; these fathers felt powerless in negotiating with their wives on how to educate their children.
12. Decision-making power is another important indicator of the power structure between a couple. In this study, I examine gender division of domestic labor and decision-making power on finances and children’s education to assess gendered power relations in the Taiwanese immigrant family. I conclude that Taiwanese immigrants’ gender relations exhibit a patriarchal mode. The couples are patriarchal in some arenas but egalitarian in others. Ethnicity of origin and social class also shape nuances among these families.

Notes on contributor

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References


**ABSTRACT TRANSLATION**

Cultura, transnacionalismo emocional y estrés mental: relaciones familiares y bienestar entre las mujeres inmigrantes taiwanesas

La vulnerabilidad al estres psicico de las mujeres inmigrantes ha sido reconocida en la literatura, y sin embargo las causas socioculturales del sufrimiento de estas mujeres han sido muy poco exploradas. Sobre la base de un estudio de inmigrantes taiwanesas residentes en Chicago, este artículo ilustra los dinamicos contextos dentro de los cuales se produce el estres de las mujeres inmigrantes taiwanesas en la casa y explica los factores sociales y culturales que lo generan. En este articulo propongo que las mujeres inmigrantes taiwanesas alternan con frecuencia entre las normas culturales taiwanesas y estadounidenses, intentando seguir normas de comportamiento y justificaciones eficaces en las interacciones con sus
El término ‘transnacionalismo emocional’ es utilizado para describir la experiencia psicológica asociada con las prácticas culturales transnacionales. El estrés a menudo se genera a medida que estas mujeres luchan con los sentimientos de ambivalencia y las contradicciones que las confrontan en su búsqueda de identidades culturales. La gravedad del estrés está en gran parte determinada por las jerarquías de poder entre las mujeres y aquellos con quienes ellas interactúan. El estatus de las mujeres casadas como subordinadas a sus suegros y suegras crea más experiencias negativas que cualquier otro estatus.

**Palabras clave:** transnacionalismo; emociones; mujeres inmigrantes; familia inmigrante; salud mental; inmigrantes taiwanesas

文化、情绪跨国主义与心理耗竭：台湾移民女性的家庭关系与福祉

诸多文献业已认识到移民女性在心理耗竭层面的脆弱性，但其社会文化背景仍鲜少受到探究。基于对移居芝加哥的台湾女性所进行的案例研究，本文描绘她们居家生活中导致耗竭的动态脉络，并解释造成耗竭的社会文化因素。我主张，台湾移民女性为了应用有效的行为指导方针，合理化和配偶、孩子及姻亲的互动，必须不断努力摆荡在台湾及美国的文化范式之间。‘情绪的跨国主义’一词是用来描写跨国文化实践的心理经验。这些女性在处理追求文化认同时遭遇的矛盾情绪与冲突时经常产生耗竭。耗竭的程度主要取决于这些女性和其互动者间的权力阶层关系。已婚女性在姻亲关系中的从属地位较其它情况造成更加负面的经验。

**关键词**：跨国主义、情绪、移民女性、移民家庭、心理健康、台湾移民