

## Failed Families and Quiet Individualism: Domestic Abuse and Women's Strategies of Resistance in Urban Taiwan\*

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### ABSTRACT

The tensions between individual desires and the needs of the family exist in any society. Yet in Taiwan there is a greater rhetorical emphasis on self sacrifice for the needs of family than in many Western nations. In the following pages I will draw on several interviews and closely examine five in depth interviews of domestic abuse in Taiwan in order to explore just how far individual sacrifices can be demanded in the name of familial responsibility. These are by no means common cases in Taiwan but they highlight tensions between individual needs and group obligations in starker clarity than average familial relations.

Confucianism is so male oriented that its effects on women are understudied. The following pages will demonstrate the tremendous moral and psychological force that Confucianism has also had on women. The extent to which the women in these accounts have suffered for their families is shocking, yet their stories also highlight the fact that even in the most extreme cases of familial abuse, individuals still maneuver to fulfill their own wants and needs to the degree that it is possible. This demonstrates what I have called Quiet Individualism, as opposed to the more overt Western Enlightenment form of Individualism, in that individuals attempt to protect their own interests while maintaining an ideological commitment to Confucian precepts that familial concerns outweigh individual interests.

**Keywords:** domestic abuse, family, filial piety, gender, quiet individualism, Taiwan.

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## 破碎的家庭與噤聲的個人主義：臺灣都會家庭暴力和女性反抗策略

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### 摘 要

個人欲望與家庭需求之間的緊張關係，可見於任何社會之中。在臺灣，強調犧牲個人以成全家庭的現象比許多西方國家更明顯。在本文中，筆者分析五份臺灣家庭暴力事件，探討家庭責任如何導致嚴重的個人犧牲。這些在臺灣絕非常見，但卻比平常家庭出現較顯著的個人需求與團體義務間的衝突。

儒家傳統強調父系中心主義，女性在其間只能充當配角。本文發現，儒家思想同樣對女性造成巨大的道德與心理影響。女性們為家庭而自我容忍的程度，令人驚訝，然而，她們的故事也同時述說了即便在極端的家庭控制中，個人仍可達成最大之所欲及所需。這即是我所稱的「噤聲的個人主義」，而它正可用來相對於西方啟蒙時期盛行之顯形於外的個人主義。總之，臺灣都會女性個人試圖維護自己利益的同時，亦兼顧了維持儒家所盼家庭大於個人利益的實踐傳統。

關鍵字：家庭暴力，家庭，孝順，性別，噤聲的個人主義，臺灣

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a marked discourse in contemporary Taiwan concerning a perceived decline of traditional values. In this setting, an exploration of what happens when family, whether in the form of parent/child relationships or spousal interactions, takes on a legal and moral force that places individual desire as a remote secondary priority seems in order. Confucian morality and filial piety have contributed much to Taiwanese society. Yet, far from creating an ordered harmonious universe as Confucian theorists would argue, in abusive families inflexible family values can also lead to tragedy and heartbreak. As the case studies I provide below will demonstrate, in cases of domestic abuse, familial obligation in modern Taiwan can keep people in unhappy marriages, force daughters into prostitution, and hide battery, incest, and rape.

On the other end of the spectrum is the equally oppressive force of individualism as associated with a new emphasis on youth culture, both of which have been ushered in by a growing fascination with the West through the mediums of the music and movie industries as well as travel, international business, and language study. Increasing urbanization, legal reforms, and capitalism have also created a more individualistic society in Taiwan. Thus, we are witness to two strong cultural forces that are often at direct odds with each other—the traditional Taiwanese familial iron cage and Western inspired individualism. In between these two extremes is what I have called “quiet individualism” (Moskowitz 2005), as juxtaposed with Western enlightenment public discourse on individual rights, in which Taiwan’s individualism is quietly hiding behind a more overt ideological commitment to group orientation whereby individuals subtly subvert the system to meet their own needs.

I should point out from the outset that the following case studies are by no means the norm for they include the most extreme cases of abuse that I was told of in over eight years of living in Taiwan. If anything, I have been impressed by the healthy and loving families that I have met in Taiwan. Yet to ignore the issue of domestic abuse is to do a disservice to women who have gone through such experiences, for people’s reluctance to discuss such matters has resulted in each of these women believing themselves to be alone in their hardships. This is part of a rational that discourages

abused women from going to the police or other governmental or religious organizations that might be able to assist them. Thus, to ignore the cases of abuse that I outline in the following pages would render the important experiences of these women invisible, and in silencing these women's voices we would be perpetuating the violence that was done to them. My hope is that in documenting these case studies, and in trying to explore the issue of women's agency that emerges even in these extremes, we can come to a better understanding of all aspects of Taiwanese society rather than only focusing on points of pride. I believe I stand on good ground here, for other scholarship examining some of the less pleasant sides of Chinese and Taiwanese culture<sup>1</sup> have proven to be invaluable in coming to understand the full range of culture and behavior in Taiwan.

Perhaps most importantly, it is my hope that in highlighting the surprising level of agency that each of these case studies evince, even within the context of such extreme familial abuse, it may help these women, and others who have been through similar experiences, to recognize their own courage and innovation in cases of extreme duress. Because of the intensely personal nature of these accounts the names, occupations, and some other details have been changed to protect the identities of the women I interviewed.

## **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: GENDERED EXPECTATIONS IN MODERN TAIWAN**

Women in contemporary Taiwan have an unprecedented presence in business (Simon 2003), politics, and religious charity-based organizations (Huang and Weller 1998). Women attending junior college or universities more than doubled (from sixteen to thirty-seven percent) between 1979 and 1995, for example (Simon 2003: 9). Yet many women in Taiwan continue to face challenges in the public sphere that most men do not. These obstacles range from sexual harassment to being taken less seriously by teachers, to lack of parents' emotional or financial support for their career endeavors. In 1973 women earned between fifty-five percent to seventy percent of men's wages depending on their profession (Marsh 2004: 150). In 1988 this ranged

from sixty percent to eighty-five percent (Marsh 2004: 150)—clearly an improvement, but still not parity.

In recent years, more women are going on to college and engaging in white collar work after high school (A. Lee 2004a: 111) but in the working class, especially, there is continued social pressure that discourages women from pursuing further education (A. Lee 2004a: 103). Most working class families report that they feel that nine years of education for girls is ideal (A. Lee 2004b: 104)<sup>2</sup> and working class girls continue to incur strong obligations to work in order to support their families at the expense of their own educations (A. Lee 2004b: 67). It is still quite common for teenage girls to do full time work at factories, for example (A. Lee 2004b: 105). Although Confucian thought portrays such individual subjugation to the needs of the group as part of a desirable order of the cosmos, daughters often resent the sacrifices they make for natal families that will later give all inheritance to sons and that continue to consider daughters to be part of their husbands' families (A. Lee 2004b: 125-129). Thus, for many women, filial piety is seen as irresistible force to be fulfilled rather than to be enthusiastically embraced (A. Lee 2004b: 112-117).

In the working class, familial reliance on daughters' labor has continued. In part, this is precisely because of Taiwan's improving economy, in that as incomes are rising it is correspondingly more difficult to find people to work for low wages. In this setting, daughters serve as cheap labor both in the home (because they cannot demand wages from their parents) and out of it (because it is thought that they will retire to full-time motherhood upon marriage and will therefore settle for jobs with lower status and pay than their male counterparts). This has made daughters more important to their families but it has also bound them more tightly to familial demands and decreased their options for education (A. Lee 2004a). In short, Taiwan has made great strides in gender equality but there is still a long way to go.

Some women are much better situated than others. The lower the class, the less things have changed. As one example of this, Miaoli, a twenty year old woman who was working her way through technical school and helping to support her parents, said the following:

*I am studying management at a technical school and I have one year left before I graduate. Now I'm working between thirty or forty hours a week at this coffee shop. During the summer when I don't have classes I also work at another job so sometimes I end up working seventeen hour days—it's really exhausting. My parents have some financial problems so in part I need to work this hard to support myself—in part to help them. I have a brother in college in Taizhong who doesn't contribute because he is in college*

I pointed out that she was also in school and she shrugged her shoulders.

*My sisters and I all help out. It is hard because most of my classmates don't have to work so it is difficult to keep up with them in school. I'm really looking forward to graduating but I'm not sure if I will find any work because no one wants to hire technical school graduates for management, especially not if you are a women. [She points to the employees in the adjacent bookstore.] See, in the daytime the cashiers are all women but at night the they are all men because night work pays more money. (Miaoli, October 2003)*

When I spoke to Miaoli some months later (July of 2004) she told me that she had dropped out of school. Although she did not say why, one can only assume that this workload was a large contributing factor.

Anru Lee suggests that today's parents are forced to take a smaller percentage of their unmarried daughters' incomes because they recognize that young women's needs as adults have changed (A. Lee 2004b: 106).<sup>3</sup> This marks a weakening of parental control in that parents can no longer demand as much as they once could for fear the daughters will reach a breaking point and just move out. This gives women more leeway to assert individual needs and desires within their families.

Similarly, as men are becoming less dependent on parents financially, parents have less control of their son's choice of a wife (Adrian 2003: 106). Yet even today

parental vetoing of one's choice of a spouse is still very much a factor in people's romantic ties and many will break off a relationship if parents insist (Adrian 2003: 88). Another interesting development is that though parental authority in a child's selection of a mate has decreased, a woman's criterion is often approximately the same (stability, economic potential, and family name) as her parents once used.<sup>4</sup>

Expectations for men are also remarkably consistent with past ideals in that they are still primarily responsible for the needs of their patriline. Yet in recent years men more frequently choose to live near their parents rather than under the same roof—another result of having their own incomes and the corresponding right to make their own decisions.

Men are increasingly focusing their attentions and funds on their children rather than their parents. Married women, in contrast, are now more likely to maintain greater financial and emotional ties with their parents even though it is technically the responsibility of their brothers (Adrian 2003: 97; Farris 2004: 348). Women's higher incomes are also resulting in increasing participation in care giving for natal parents (Farris 1994: 313). Twenty-eight percent of women who married between 1955-1959 give money to natal parents after marriage whereas sixty-nine percent of those married between 1980 and 1984 do so (Fricke et. al. 1994: 128). In 1967, eighty-eight percent of parents reported that they expected to live with a married son in old age as opposed to forty-seven percent in 1986 (Weinstein et al. 1994: 320). The percentage of Taiwanese married couples living in nuclear households rose from thirty-five percent in 1965 to fifty-six percent in 1986 (Weinstein et al. 1994: 331). Yet in spite of increasing emotional and financial assistance provided by daughters, preferential treatment of sons continues in many families. Taiwan's law currently stipulates equal inheritance for sons and daughters, for example, but in practice the dowry is the only significant exchange of properties a daughter can expect to receive from her natal family (Farris 2004: 360; A. Lee 2004a: 109).

There is an extremely widespread perception that women are treated well before marriage but can expect a life of drudgery afterwards in that they continue to primarily be responsible for household work and childcare, and are often relegated to the home,

while husbands go out to work and play. As a reflection of this perception, I have often heard young women complain that before marriage they are treated like princesses, and after marriage they are treated like maids. It is no surprise, then, that single life is increasingly seen as care free and pleasurable as opposed to the obligations of married life (Adrian 2003: 89). In 2001, twenty percent of women between thirty and thirty-four remained unmarried—many in this group reported that they intended to refuse marriage altogether (Adrian 2003: 11, 98). By 2002 there was new divorce for every 2.53 marriages in Taipei (Adrian 2003: 94). The divorce rate is lamented by many as a sign of Taiwan's breakdown of social values, yet it also reflects women's greater rights to reject the sexual double standards of their adulterous husbands (Farris 1994: 314) as well as a growing disenchantment with other forms of gender inequality in marriage.

Working class women's work options are still extremely limited and offer little job satisfaction, relating to what Aihwa Ong has called "the banishment of imaginative life from the factory floor" (Ong 1987: xiv). As has been documented in scholarship on Japan, however, in an important sense women are freed from emotional commitment to the workplace because of the fairly rigid glass ceiling (Kondo 1990; Ogasawara 1998). Leisure time is thus less likely to be aligned with career mobility than with friends or family. Women who postpone or reject marriage have gained the freedom to travel abroad or to pursue interests within Taiwan.<sup>5</sup>

## **THE FAMILIAL IRON CAGE AND INDIVIDUALISM**

Taiwanese and Chinese culture have always had strains of individualism hidden behind a rhetoric of sacrifice for the group—the aspiring scholar who gained personal glory,<sup>6</sup> wealth, and concubines while bringing honor to the family; the daughter-in-law or mother-in-law who fight only with their sons' interests at heart; the businessman who desperately climbs the socioeconomic ladder "for his family." This is not an overt rhetorical commitment to individualism as in the West but rather a quiet maximizing of individual wants behind the scenes in what I have called "quiet individualism" (Moskowitz 2005).



In the late 1960s and early 1970s Margery Wolf documented the stories of individual women who vied for power within the family, often resulting in the break-up of extended families (Wolf 1968: 1972). Individualistic tendencies can also be seen in personal interpretations of religious practice (Harrell 1974; Hsu 1948; Jordan 1972, 1986; Moskowitz 2001, 2005; Weller 1994, 1996, 1999). It is commonly believed that Chinese and Taiwanese people prioritize familial loyalty in business dealings. Yet it has been demonstrated for both Hong Kong (Silin 1972) and Taiwan (De Gloppe 1972) that familial preference is in fact based on the increased access to information as to a kin member's reliability and that people are quite willing to deal with others if a better price is offered or if one finds nonrelatives to be more reliable.

Robert Weller examines individualism through the lens of economic change and civil society, applying concepts from Western enlightenment to explore the ways in which "autonomous individual activity" grows "independent from both the state and the fetters of older kinship and Feudal Ties" (Weller 1999: 14). He emphasizes that even in areas that seem to be inherently conforming one can see fundamentally individualist strains. As one example of this he points to Confucian education, often thought to be the strongest agent of conformity in Asian culture, and emphasizes that an important part of such education was an individual's "transformation of self" (Weller 1999: 25) and that there is a particularly strong individualistic streak in popular religion in Taiwan (Weller 1994: 130-142; Weller 1998: 81-82, 93).

I argue that individualist strains in Taiwan are nothing new. Yet as Weller and others point out, in recent years these individualist elements seem to be more public. I will now present five case studies that demonstrate the sometimes brutally inflexible familial obligations invoked in cases of domestic abuse and the underlying presence of Quiet Individualism in each instance.

## **CASE STUDIES**

### ***Case Study 1—Little Fang (December 1994)***

When I interviewed Little Fang in December of 1994 she was a twenty-four year old English teacher at an elementary school in Taipei. In 1998 she married a man from

Latin America and is currently living with him in Taipei.

*My father is a retired policeman. He and my mother love to gamble—it's like they can't control themselves. Just after I graduated from high school they really got in trouble because they had lost a lot of money and they couldn't pay their debts. In the end I agreed to have sex with men until I could pay the money off. When I finished I told my parents that I would never pay off their debts again even if they were going to die if I didn't. But I guess they didn't believe me or they couldn't help themselves or something.*

*A couple of years ago my father came to me and said that they needed money really badly. He asked me if I could help. He didn't actually say the word prostitution but I knew what he wanted. I got really angry and started shouting at him but he said that I didn't have to become a prostitute but he needed money. It was a lot of money and he and I both knew that I could never earn that kind of cash doing anything else but prostitution. I just couldn't believe that he was doing this to me again! But what could I do? He is my father. He said that since I was not married I owed it to him and my mother to give them my income since they gave me life and took care of me when I was young.*

*I had to laugh when he said this. I mean, what kind of parents were they anyway? They made me sell my body and when I was in college they didn't give me a dime to help. They told me I shouldn't go to college but that I should get a job to help support them. They gave everything they had to my brothers and I had to support myself through college with scholarships. They even made me give them part of my scholarships! My father said that he gave everything to my brothers because after I was married I wouldn't be responsible for them anymore, it would be my brothers who would have to take care of them.*

*My older brother is no better than my father. He used to beat me up really badly as a child. One time when I was fourteen he raped me and beat me with a stick so badly that I had to go to the hospital. After that my parents sent me to live with my grandmother in Taizhong. They yelled at him but besides that they didn't do anything to him at all.*

*After I graduated from college I ended up living in the same house with my brothers. I got along with my younger brother really well but my older brother and I barely talked. I guess it was sort of stupid to live with him again but I didn't have to pay rent so I stayed there. Besides, he's family, what could I do? I think I must have been a bad person in my last life to deserve this kind of family, I really do. So I always try to be good in this life because I hope the next life won't be so horrible.*

*I have only had one Taiwanese boyfriend. When we had sex for the first time he was outraged that I was not a virgin. I told him why—you know, what happened with my brother—but he still acted like it was my fault. After him I never dated a Taiwanese guy again.*

*Anyway, finally my father just came out and said it. I have an aunt who runs a brothel in Japan and he said that if I worked there for a year I could make so much money that I could pay off all of their debts. He said that if I agreed to do this he would never ask me to do it again. Of course I didn't believe him, he said the same thing the first time.*

*In the end I refused to sell my body again but I agreed to make a little extra money by introducing women to brothels. I mainly met these girls at bars and I was always completely honest with them. I told them it was horrible work but when they heard how much money they could make some of them decided to do it anyway. I quit that after a couple of years because the*

*brothel owners were taking advantage of me —they just wouldn't give me the money they promised me. In the end I gave the job to my older brother. Because he's a man the brothel owners were more honest with him.*

One might ask why Little Fang and others are willing to sacrifice themselves to such an extent. One answer lies in the fact that filial piety, the absolute obedience and devotion owed to one's parents, is the central principle of Confucian ideology and Taiwanese culture. A good example of the extent to which self sacrifice for one's parents might be expected can be seen in the *Twenty-Four Exemplars*, written by Guo Jujing in the Yuan dynasty (1260-1368). In these moral exemplars one sees a story of a son who allowed mosquitoes to feast on his blood so that they wouldn't bite his parents (Jordan n.d.: Exemplar 11). In another account, a son lays naked on ice to melt a hole to fish in order to feed his parents (Jordan n.d.: Exemplar 12). In a third account, a son tastes his mother's dung to ascertain the severity of her illness (Jordan n.d.: Exemplar 16).

The Twenty-Four Exemplars seem so exaggerated that it is hard to imagine anyone taking them seriously. Yet, even today these stories continue to be told to every school child to extol them to sacrifice themselves for their parents. Little Fang's case study demonstrates the extent to which such models are internalized in modern Taiwan. In spite of the fact that most of the exemplars focus on filial sons, Little Fang's life, as the lives of many others, attests to the fact that women are also very much influenced by such precepts. Note, for example, her father's use of Confucian rhetoric when he asserts that "she owed it to him" to pay off his debts by whatever means necessary because he "gave her life" and took care of her when she was young.

Once again, I should emphasize that the case studies presented in this article are extremes rather than average experiences. Yet, although they are more dramatic in scale, they are not completely unheard of. Little Fang's experience of being forced into prostitution to pay her parents' gambling debts would be found to be abhorrent by the vast majority of people in Taiwan. Yet when I was in Taipei in the summer of 2001 the government apparently found this to be a widespread enough problem that it created an

advertising campaign, to be shown as movie previews, warning of the dangers of youths being forced into prostitution. Rape and other physical abuse, my sources tell me, are not uncommon.

Little Fang's account is a modern day echo of Margery Wolf's account of Lim A-hong who forced her daughter, Chun-ieng, to become a prostitute to support her (Wolf 1968: 99-114). An important difference between these two accounts, however, is that in Margery Wolf's account, although the daughter protested her mother's actions, she inevitably submitted to her mother's authority. In contrast, Little Fang first acted as a filial daughter but then asserted her rights as an individual, refusing to prostitute herself a second time. Equally significant is the fact that she made the effort to find a solution to make money for her parents that would allow her to escape her parents' demands while still asserting herself as a filial, and therefore moral, being. Thus, though Little Fang sacrifices herself to a surprising extent she also reaches her limit and in the end protects herself rather than continuing to prioritize her parents' demands. Note that she mediates between familial obligation and her own individual needs quietly, however, emphasizing her devotion to an undeserving family while maneuvering as best she can to protect herself.

***Case Study 2 —Miss Dai (August 1999)***

When I interviewed Miss Dai in August of 1999, she was a twenty-two year old college graduate with a degree in economics.

*My father has an extremely bad temper and often hit me as a child. I think that's why my mother doesn't disapprove of my lifestyle at all. In fact, after all those years of being married to my father she encourages me to go out and have fun. At this point she goes out to play as much as I do.*

*My mom and I go to different bars but besides that I guess our lives are quite similar. [She laughs] Last night she went out in a leopard skin miniskirt. She wears sexier clothing than I do!*

*I'm sort of tired right now because last night I got a call from my mother on my cell phone at three o'clock in the morning.*

*She had been arrested for drunk driving and reached an agreement with the police officers that rather than putting her in a jail cell for the evening she would get her beautiful young daughter—that's me—[she laughs] to join her and the policemen for late night snacks. I was actually with a guy at the time. He was pretty unhappy about it but I went to meet my mother and the policemen anyway. I thought it was pretty funny.*

*[...] My main friends are pretty much the people I go to clubs with or that I meet at clubs. I've had a few boyfriends but mainly I try to keep things casual. I'm too young to settle down. I have some female friends but it seems like sooner or later we get in a fight about some guy and then I have to find new friends. I guess both my male and female friends are just eating-drinking buddies (jiu rou pengyou) (酒肉朋友).<sup>7</sup> I guess I try to live my life for the moment. You know, you can't really rely on people so why try?*

Miss Dai's parents continued to live together long after they no longer loved each other and at least one member of the marriage was actively dating others while continuing to live with her spouse. Husbands are far more likely to have other romantic attachments but I know of at least two other cases in which it was the wife who openly dated someone else with her husband's knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Though Miss Dai does not frame her actions in terms of individual resistance, this overt pursuit of individual pleasure is a radical break from women's roles in the past. Because her mother endorses her behavior there is less conflict between her individual wants and her family's honor than there might have otherwise been. Her actions were clearly individualistic, however, in that she rejected the traditional roles of housebound women and maintained a certain control over her life by refusing to enter into long term relationships. Miss Dai, though perhaps an extreme, was hardly alone in her actions and in many ways represented a new breed of Taiwanese women.<sup>9</sup>

Again, then, while not overtly framing her actions as a political choice, Miss Dai's actions and philosophy of life are individualistic on two levels: First, she avoids long

term social ties. Second, in focusing on the moment, she pursues individual pleasure rather than starting a family of her own. Both of these actions have left Miss Dai to stand alone as an individual, with no apparent long term emotional ties other than her mother.

***Case Study 3—Little Hua (July 2001)***

When I interviewed Little Hua in July of 2001, she was teaching English at a cram school. At twenty years of age she had recently broken up with her American boyfriend, an English teacher and a singer in a local band. After they stopped seeing each other she began dating the drummer in the same band, a college student from Hong Kong. Her second boyfriend flunked out of college shortly after they began dating and had to return to Hong Kong lest he be forced to serve in the Taiwanese military for two years. In short, Little Hua's world had turned out to be uncertain, and the men she had relied on to be unpredictable.

*My father died when I was a teenager and my mother wasn't able to support our family single handedly. So I had to fend for myself from a very young age. Even before my father died things weren't all that great though. When my father was alive he used to get really drunk and often beat my mother and I to the point that we had to spend time in the hospital.*

*My ex-boyfriend was extremely possessive even though he cheated on me all the time. In the two years that we were together he sternly cross-examined me if I even spoke with other men and he insisted that when I was not with him that I should remain at home by myself. I finally got tired of him cheating on me so I broke up with him. But once we broke up I found myself really alone because my only friends were my boyfriend's friends.*

The central ideology of Taiwan, and of wider Chinese culture, concerns familial harmony. The reality of Little Hua's family life, however, was quite different from this Confucian ideal and taught her at an early age that she would have to rely on her

individual efforts rather than depend on others. As with the previous two case studies, far from relying on family she had learned to be economically and emotionally self-reliant, demonstrating a remarkable resilience and determination. Economically independent since she was a teenager, she embodies Western views of individual agency but in emphasizing that her actions were out of necessity rather than choice she allows individualism to remain a conceptual aberration rather than extolling her independence as an ideological ideal.

***Case Study 4—Mrs. Yong (April 1998 and July 2001)***

The following are two interviews with Mrs. Yong, who works in public relations for a large corporation. The first interview was in April of 1998 and the second was in July of 2001. In July of 2002 she was thirty-five years old and was still married.

***Mrs. Yong—April 1998***

*My father “bought” my mother. Actually he paid a bride price but he pretty much bought her. He was from mainland China and he was stationed in Penghu Island. She was just seventeen and he was thirty-seven but he paid the price so she had to marry him. When my mother found out she hid in a movie theater for an entire day but in the end had to go home.*

*They fight all the time but I think they love each other now, maybe, I don’t know. My mom used to beat the heck out of us [da sile](打死了). I used to get around it by running away. One time she chased me for a whole hour and she was wearing high heels! When she finally caught me she hit me but she was so tired she couldn’t really do much.*

*Even though she hit us a lot we all love our mother more than our father because she really loves us, our father doesn’t really care about us. My mom was really pitiful because my father was in the military and he would sometimes go away for a year at a time and our mother had to take care of us by herself.*

*Now I think my father is the pitiful one though. He is so*



*old and he has no energy to fight with my mother. But my mother is always picking fights with everybody, especially him. You really have to feel sorry for him.*

**Mrs. Yong —June 2001**

*I married my first boyfriend when I was 27. He and I were college classmates. As soon as we got married he demanded that I change completely. When we were just boyfriend and girlfriend he let me go out late with my female friends but as soon as I got married he demanded that I stay at home and stop going out with my friends. I still go out with my friends for dinner, tea, and occasionally beer after work but if I go home late my husband is not only angry with me but he will call my friends and yell at them. Once, when I got home late, he even made me go with him to my friend's house. He made me wait in the car while he went to her house to yell at her. He just stood there at her doorway and yelled at her for an hour, accusing her of trying to break up our marriage. I was so embarrassed.*

*For a long time I tried to get him to come out with me when I went out with my friends. I thought that this way he wouldn't get jealous or wonder what I had been up to but he just refused. He says that he hates going out and wants me to stay at home with him. Now I don't mind staying home most of the time but it isn't healthy to never leave the house. I mean, he wants me to stay home seven days a week and I just don't think that is normal.*

*I did stop going out for a couple of years—Not only because I didn't want to make him angry but because my friends were so afraid of my husband that they stopped asking me to go with them when they went out after work. After our daughter was*

*born the tensions decreased for a few months because I was so busy with the baby. After a while though I began to feel even more lonely and isolated [gudu](孤獨) and it scared me that my entire life was being absorbed by my husband and child. I adore my daughter and I don't resent the time I spend with her but I still feel cut off from the outside world.*

*When my daughter was about nine months old I began to go out with my friends again —just a couple of times a month. Sometimes I would take my daughter, sometimes I wouldn't. Anyway, this went on for a while and things became more and more tense with my husband and I. Finally I hit the breaking point and I told him that I wanted a divorce. The next day my husband went to our nursery school and took my daughter away. Then he called me and told me that because I wanted a divorce he would never let me see our child again. That was the last time we talked about divorce.*

*I was completely shocked when that happened. I knew my husband and I had had a lot of problems but until that day I had always thought that if we did divorce we could at least be civil for our daughter's sake. I never dreamed that he could do this kind of drastic thing. Am I happy in the marriage? [She shrugged] Is anyone ever really happy in their marriages? That's not really what marriages are about right? Maybe I'm not the happiest person in the world but I really couldn't bear the thought of never seeing my daughter again.*

Mrs. Yong and her husband entered into an uneasy truce, primarily on her husband's terms. They no longer spoke of divorce and her social life consisted of her husband, daughter, and an occasional outing with her friends when she was willing to face her husband's anger.

Until 1996 Taiwan's divorce law granted automatic custody to fathers with no

visitation rights for the mothers. A 1996 revision of the law shifted custody rights to the “most capable parent” but in practice custody is still almost inevitably awarded to the father (Adrian 2003: 95). In other words, Mrs. Yong’s husband’s actions were completely legal and his threat to take away her daughter and never allow her to see the child again was perfectly realistic. According to many whom I have spoken with, this is a very common tactic of husbands who wish to prevent their wives from divorcing them.

Although Mrs. Yong’s account demonstrates the psychological force of traditional concerns in modern Taiwan, we should not overlook the strong individualistic strains in her stories. This is present in the account of her mother who publicly protested her parents’ decision to marry her against her will, though she did succumb to her parents authority in the end. It can also be seen in the fact that the mother raised her children almost single handedly and by the mother’s strength of will when she vented her anger on both her children and spouse.

By American standards Mrs. Yong’s husband is clearly in the wrong, both for refusing her a social life even after he was invited to join her, and for kidnapping his child as a threat to prevent divorce. Yet by Taiwanese standards the fault was equally Mrs. Yong’s. Her friends, including the one who Mrs. Yong’s husband scolded for an hour, strongly discouraged her from leaving her husband. That Mrs. Yong demanded to stay out late without her husband is in direct contradiction with traditional societal norms in which the husband might venture out on his own while the wife was expected to stay home with the children. Note, too, that although Mrs. Yong eventually submitted to her husband by remaining in the marriage, she was hardly docile in that she continued to go out with her friends, leaving her husband at home waiting for her return. In fact, on September 30, 2005, I ran into Mrs. Yong at a dance club. Although she was still married and had given birth to two additional children, she has clearly asserted the right to go dancing on a monthly basis with her female friends. Thus, in spite of capitulating to her husband’s demands in terms of not obtaining a divorce, she maneuvered a compromise with her husband in spite of the fact that neither traditional nor contemporary cultural mores support such actions.

As with the previous case studies, Mrs. Yong frames her account in terms of her own desires and what she sees to be an abuse of Confucian morality on her husband's part rather than making a call for individual rights. Conceptually this places her actions in the realm of her own choices rather than seeking legitimacy through a discourse of individual rights as she might have chosen to do.

**Case Study 5—Miss Wang, November 2003**

When I interviewed Miss Wang in November of 2003 she was an MBA student in Taipei.

*My parents divorced when I was six. My mother was really sick for a couple of years but my father said she was faking it to get out of doing housework. How ridiculous, she didn't have to pretend, she could just say she didn't want to do the housework, right?*

*So this was my father's excuse not to take care of her when she was sick. After they divorced she moved back to the east coast with her parents. He wouldn't let us talk—he didn't tell her where I was and he wouldn't tell me where she was. Years later she found me by looking at the published list of students who had passed the college entrance exam—I was easy to find because I was at the top college. Now I go to visit her every month or two.*

*I don't really talk to my father anymore. I worked my way through college. When he remarried he treated his new wife and their new child like family and me like an outsider. I think he hates me because I look just like my mother who is the person he hates most in the world.*

*Sometimes he could be very violent—once he smashed my head into the wall. He always got angry about little things—nothing important. When I get married I will never divorce because I remember what it was like being the child of divorced*

*parents. It was horrible. When I was in elementary school, if it rained all the other kids' mothers would wait for them after school with umbrellas to take them home but I would have to walk home alone in the rain. Or if they forgot to bring one of their books they could just call their moms and their moms would bring the book to them at school. I couldn't do that. I guess I don't believe in much because of this. I don't believe in true love but will get married and never divorce no matter what. Even if he cheats on me, I might kill him when he gets home—I said I wouldn't divorce him, I didn't say I wouldn't kill him [laughs]—I would stay married for my children's sake.*

*I have a bad temper like my father. Once I had to take my ex-boyfriend to the hospital because when we were still dating we had a fight and I hit him in the eye so hard he had to go to the hospital.*

*My father's wife is nice and very pretty—she has a nice figure. Actually I get along with her better than with my father. I don't think she realizes that he pushed me out of the family because of her and her child so it is not her fault. (Miss Wang, November 2003)*

As with Little Fang and Little Hua, Miss Wang found that she had to be economically and emotionally independent at a very young age. Yet, far from embracing Western Enlightenment Individualism as a means of legitimizing, or perhaps even glorifying, her own achievements, her greatest hope was to create a family that more closely abided by traditional cultural expectations of family life. Again, then, we are witness to highly autonomous independent individuals who, rather than taking pride in their independence, lament the breakdown of social structures that in many ways caused their pain and, in equally numerous ways, contradict who they have become.

## **CONCLUSION: COMPARING THE CASE STUDIES**

Every society has tales of abuse—this is an unfortunate side of being human—but such accounts manifest themselves in particular ways according to the culture they occur in. The case studies presented in the previous pages should in no way be taken to reflect typical familial relations in Taiwan yet in documenting these tragic lives one can attempt to come to an understanding of the cultural forces that created the contexts for such abuses as well as for individuals' means of dealing with them.

The women's lives I have just described are all quite different. Little Fang initially obeyed her parents at great emotional cost to herself but in the end found that she had to rebel in order to maintain her sense of dignity. Mrs. Yong abided by the traditional ideal of marrying her first boyfriend. Little Hua had planned to do so but was driven away by his infidelity. Rather than accepting this as the natural actions of men, as most women did in the past, she decided to end the relationship for what she hoped would be a more stable monogamous relationship. Miss Dai rejected the monogamous ideal altogether, saying that in watching her parents she decided that marriage would only end in misery. Miss Wang's experiences as a child of a divorced couple strengthened her commitment to the traditional marital structure, although this was less out of an idealized belief in eternal love than because of the trauma of being the only child of divorced parents that she knew growing up.

In spite of the very different choices that the women in these case studies made, certain patterns emerge. In all five accounts the women's parents had extremely unhappy marriages. Also, all five women had been severely physically disciplined, further undermining traditional conceptions of family members being the only people that one could genuinely rely on.<sup>10</sup> The rhetoric of familial harmony that is perhaps the central focus of Taiwanese and Chinese culture had turned out to be, for them at least, false.

Yet coexisting with the sacrifices for familial welfare in these accounts were strong elements of individual agency. Significantly, all five accounts also displayed a surprising degree of resistance, based on their desires and assumed rights as individuals. In their own ways, each of these women were active agents with forceful

personalities. Though leading relatively tragic lives, these women can not be considered to be passive victims, discounting the myth of women who are completely dominated and suffering at all times (Bray 1997; Ko 1992, 1994; Wolf 1974).

It seems unlikely that these individualistic strains are an entirely new phenomenon. Scholastic (Bray 1977: 354-355; Topley 1975) and fictional (Zhang 1991) accounts of polygynous households demonstrate the fiercely individualistic battles that were waged behind the scenes in traditional China. We also see individual agency in anthropological scholarship on contemporary Taiwan (Moskowitz 2001, 2005; Weller 1994, 1996, 1999; Wolf 1968, 1972, 1974). In the above accounts, familial obligation and individual sacrifice become moral imperatives to an almost unimaginable extent. Equally striking, however, is the degree of success that their acts of resistance achieved.

Significantly, none of the women chose to embrace ideological commitments to individual autonomy though such rhetorics are readily available in modern Taiwan's mass media as well as through exposure to other countries' ways of thought through education and travel. Instead, each of the women maneuvered to maximize her needs quietly, maintaining a rhetorical and ideological commitment to group orientation in spite of the fact that their own experiences and actions did not support such beliefs. Quiet Individualism therefore continues to be a way of mediating between traditional and modern lifestyles, and coming to terms with the grey area between Western Enlightenment Individualism and Confucian models of self sacrifice — forcefully demonstrating Taiwanese women's skillful and often creative ability to mediate between competing expectations in Taiwan's rapidly transforming society.

## NOTES

1. I'm thinking of the works of Margery Wolf (1968) and David Schak (1988) on Taiwan as well as the scholarship of Honig and Hershatter (1988), Picowicz and Zhou (2002), Jonathan Spence (1978) on China, among others.
2. As opposed to six years of education, twenty to thirty years ago (A. Lee 2004b: 104).

3. Also, because women are marrying later, the parents may in fact be getting more money in the long run even they are getting a smaller percentage per year.
4. For more on this in the PRC see Honig and Hershatler 1988: 102, 142-143.
5. Although Scott Simon's study of female entrepreneurs highlights the hopeful changes in women's in modern Taiwan (2003), many of the women he interviews demonstrate a marked prevalence of cynicism towards community, familial relations, or friendship. In several of the accounts women relate that they discovered that they had to rely on themselves with statements such as "neither friends nor enemies are eternal" (Simon 2003: 109) or "but in the end, every individual is alone [...] Human life is by nature solitary" (Simon 2003: 113).
6. For strains of flaunting individual prowess in contemporary China see Brownell (1995: 119, 296) and Morris (2002: 21) for individual glamour within sports.
7. Friends who meet when they go out to drink or eat but who do not really make contact at other times or rely on each other as do normal friends.
8. One of the women was in her early thirties and the other was in her early fifties.
9. One of the more prominent leaders of the feminist movement in Taiwan, for example, has despaired of being able to reform men and has called for women to pursue sexual pleasure as a means of leveling the playing field (Ho 1994).
10. For spousal abuse in traditional China see Spence 1979. For familial and spousal abuse in the PRC see Honig and Hershatler 1988.

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