

Among Women:
Migrant Domestic and their Taiwanese Employers Across Generations
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The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has long been a fertile subject for soap operas. It is also a real-life family drama in most societies—not least in Taiwan, where increasing numbers of women hire Southeast Asian migrant workers to fulfill their duties to their mothers in law. In her now-classic book, *Between Women*, Judith Rollins exposed the contentious dyad between maid and madam.¹ Triangular links bind maid, madam, and mother-in-law in Taiwanese domestic employments that span generations.

In Taiwan, the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law is structured by Chinese traditions of filial piety and patriarchal authority. Child rearing is viewed as a process of social investment with an expectation of delayed repayment, or, in Chinese, “*bau-da*” (payback). Parents undergo economic and emotional costs in bearing and raising children, this tradition stipulates, so children, especially sons, are obligated to return the debts through the provision of care for their aging parents. *San-dai-tone-tang* (three-generation cohabitation) is viewed as the ideal arrangement for elders and the realization of filial piety.

According to the Han-Chinese tradition, family membership, inheritance of property, and distribution of authority are defined through the axis of father and son.² A daughter is

considered “spilled water,” given away after marriage to another family headed by her husband’s father. In contrast, giving birth to sons assures parents more security for their future welfare.³ As a Chinese proverb says: “To protect yourself at old ages, raise a son.” The eldest married son is obligated to reside with and care for his aging parents; placing parents in a nursing home is stigmatized as immoral and irresponsible. But the actual work of serving a man's aging parents is performed mostly by his wife. The son, the major breadwinner, mainly provides economic support for his parents while his wife serves as his filial surrogate, offering care and service on a daily basis.

Intergenerational power dynamics have transformed over the last few decades of Taiwan's economic development. Taiwanese women served as a low-priced work force for the labor-intensive, export-oriented manufacturing industries of the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ The service sector, whose employment has surpassed that of manufacturing since the mid-1980s, offers further job opportunities for Taiwanese women. In 2002, almost half of Taiwanese women over the age of 15 were employed. The rate of labor participation is particularly high among young, highly-educated, urban women. Dual-earner households have become a social norm as well as an economic necessity as housing prices and living expenses rise in urban areas.

As women’s employment has grown, the conjugal, or nuclear, household has become the predominant residential structure in contemporary Taiwan. Current generations of young married couples, especially if they are well educated and have arranged their own marriages, expect to live separately from their parents. Adult children who resist three-generation cohabitation may still be blamed for violating filial norms, but they face less severe financial punishment than before. As a couple's wages now constitute the major source of household income, the cost of losing family property on account of disobeying one's parents has lessened.⁵

The decline of parental authority varies across class backgrounds. As Rita Gallin has observed, mothers-in-law in wealthy families still enjoy the power to distribute properties; hence they maintain traditional family authority. By contrast, poorer mothers-in-law have to “strive to make themselves dependable sources in order to ensure a measure of security.”⁶ The poverty of these elders is exacerbated by the Taiwanese government's failure to introduce a comprehensive social security system until very recently. Means-tested elder benefits are available to only a small segment of the elderly population, and nearly half of Taiwanese elders are financially dependent on their adult children.⁷ The government also actively promotes the privatization of elder care by favoring three-generation households with tax cuts, public housing subsidies, and moral education that emphasizes the family as the unit of filial care.⁸

Although the proportion of parents living alone has been increasing, the social ideology continues to pressure sons to take care of their elderly parents. Almost 60 percent of contemporary Taiwanese households are nuclear units; three-generation cohabitation, mostly on a patrilocal principle, still describes about one-third of the households.⁹ More than half of Taiwanese elders live with their sons, and only 3 percent are placed in care facilities.¹⁰ Young generations balance the social norm of filial piety against their desire for autonomy and privacy by making other arrangements, including living in different apartments in the same building, living apart yet having meals together or making frequent visits, and hiring non-family care workers. The recently available migrant labor force, which costs less than half the wage of a local caregiver and offers live-in stand-by service,¹¹ has become a popular arrangement for elder care in Taiwan.

The Maid Trade in the Global South

Significant numbers of undocumented migrants have worked in Taiwanese

households since the early 1980s, but the government officially opened the gate to migrant domestic workers in 1992. Taiwan first granted work permits to “domestic caretakers,” employed to take care of the severely ill or disabled; later, the government released a limited number of quotas for the employment of “domestic helpers” in households with children under the age of 12 or elders over the age of 70.¹² This policy is viewed as a solution to the growing demand for paid care work among both nuclear households and the aging population. Despite quota control and regulated employer qualification, the number of Taiwanese households hiring migrant domestic workers has rapidly increased in the last decade. Currently, over 120,000 foreigners are legally employed as domestic workers in Taiwan. Women from the Philippines and Indonesia constitute 93 percent of these migrant domestic; the rest are from Thailand and Vietnam.¹³

Taiwan's case is indicative of a regional pattern. The increasing prosperity of East Asia and the Gulf countries since the mid-1970s has stimulated substantial international migratory flows within this region. Most migrant women in Asia are concentrated in particular occupations, such as the entertainment industry, health services, and especially domestic service. It is estimated that over one million women from countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines are employed as domestic workers, with or without legal documents, in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Middle East. Scholars have named this regional migration flow the “trade in maids” in Asia.¹⁴

Globalization has simplified the gendered household burdens for more privileged women even as it complicates the racial and class stratification of domestic work. The supply of Third World women for paid domestic work in the West is historically and structurally linked to the uneven development of the global economy, the legacy of colonialism, and the increasing indebtedness of Third World countries.¹⁵ In the emerging

“new domestic world order,”¹⁶ migrant women work not only in the households of postindustrial societies like the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, but also in those of the oil-rich nations of the Middle East and the “newly industrialized countries” of Asia.

According to the official data, the majority of Taiwanese employers are dual-income, middle-class households formed by couples between the ages of 25 and 44. Over 30 percent of them reside in metropolitan Taipei.¹⁷ Most employers of domestic workers in Taiwan grew up without maids or babysitters in their homes. They are the so-called new middle class, made up of professionals and owners of small to medium-sized businesses.¹⁸ Employing foreign domestic workers allows them to upgrade their lifestyles and confirm their newly achieved social status.

Many female employers are also the first generation of career women in their families. Their mothers and mothers-in-law quit their jobs after marriage or childbirth, but the daughters and daughters-in-law yearn for career advancement and “couple egalitarianism” in the performance of household labor.¹⁹ Caught between traditional ideals and modern values, these young Taiwanese women seek to transfer their gendered domestic duties and kin work to the market. Low-cost migrant workers thus become vital to their ability to negotiate intergenerational relations as they pursue gender equality and career achievement.

Subcontracting Filial Duty²⁰

Mrs. Chang²¹ is a fifty-eight-year-old retired high school teacher. She and her husband, also a teacher, own a modest three-bedroom apartment in Taipei. When Mr. Chang's father died, his mother moved from the countryside to reside with him, her eldest son. Mrs. and Mr. Chang rented the apartment across the hall from their own to

accommodate her, so that they could maintain the ideal of three-generation cohabitation without sacrificing their own and their two adult daughters' privacy. Two years ago, Mrs. Chang convinced her husband to hire a Filipina worker to take care of his increasingly frail mother, who now needed daily assistance and personal care. Mrs. Chang then transferred most of her previous duties, including preparing meals, bathing, and changing diapers, to the Filipina worker. More than once during our interview, Mrs. Chang felt compelled to legitimize her decision to hire someone to take care of her mother-in-law:

I may sound like I have no sense of filial piety to you, but I have been serving her for twenty years! If you want to be a good daughter-in-law, you can no longer be yourself. Fortunately, it doesn't cost that much to hire a Filipina maid these days.... After I retired from school, I'm still doing some part-time work. I don't want to stay home, not a single day. And I can make some money. But all the money goes to the Filipina maid [*smiles*].

Mrs. Chang's remarks highlight the conflict she senses between performing her traditional gender role (being a "good daughter-in-law," "serving" one's mother-in-law) and seeking individual autonomy and self-achievement (being oneself). Zhong-Dong Liu²² has argued that the traditional ideal of caregiving in Chinese societies is associated with the hierarchical concept of "serving" rather than with the more egalitarian notion of "caring." The typical image of a caregiver in Chinese families is a female relative in a subordinate position, such as a wife serving her husband, or a daughter-in-law serving her parents-in-law. The act of caregiving is strongly tied to the ideal of womanhood, and the failure to fulfill these gendered responsibilities incurs social stigma. Mrs. Chang continues working even after retirement in order to avoid the full-time duty of "serving" her mother-in-law. She volunteers to contribute the wage she earns at her part-time job to hire another woman as her filial agent, but both her mother-in-law and her husband oppose this plan:

What did amah²³ say when you first wanted to hire a Filipina maid?
She always says bad things about the Filipina maid because she wishes we could stop the employment so she could live with us.

How about your husband? He objected, too?

Of course. First, it costs money. Second, in this way, it doesn't seem that we are a family, and he won't be able to make the ideal of a filial son.

The mother-in-law considers the care worker a barrier between her and her son's family. The son worries that employing a domestic worker may ruin his filial reputation. But it is the daughter-in-law's unpaid labor that sustains the social myth of intergenerational family unity. Mrs. Chang expressed anguish over the unequal division of filial labor between her and her husband:

I worked as hard as he did, but he said taking care of children was women's business; serving the mother-in-law was women's business. I feel this is really unfair. I am also an educated person; I cannot accept this. If you want to be a dutiful son, then you should be the one who serves your mother-in-law, not me! My mother brought me up. I should take care of my mother, not yours. She is the mother of you and your six siblings, not mine. You cannot just leave her to the daughter-in-law.

To change the terms of this "unfair" gendered assignment, Mrs. Chang seeks a surrogate worker to perform her filial duty. In so doing, she enacts a transfer chain of "filial kin work,"²⁴ [quotations are necessary] which I define as care work to maintain patrilineal intergenerational ties. This transfer chain consists of two components: *gender transfer* of the filial duty from the son to the daughter-in-law, and *market transfer* of elder care from the daughter-in-law to a non-family care worker, who is usually a woman. The subcontracting of elder care reveals a transformation in cultural practices, but it does not present a radical challenge to the gendered division of filial kin work. As another woman employer explained, "Many husbands say women today are luckier than ever because they have Filipina maids to help. But actually, who's your wife taking care of? She's taking care of your mother!"

Some young women employers continue doing some portion of housework or elder care in order to affirm the ideal of the filial daughter-in-law and to avoid negative judgments imposed by their mothers-in-law. Rowena, a Filipina domestic worker, observed the struggle of her employer, a successful coffee shop owner who nonetheless

remained a powerless daughter-in-law in her patriarchal extended family. With great sympathy, Rowena described how her employer managed to do some housework even though she hired Rowena for exactly that purpose:

My employer works hard during the day, but she still works very hard after she gets home! I don't understand. I wouldn't if I were her! If you've worked hard all day, you should rest when you get home....When I complained to her that I had too much work to do, she told me there was nothing she could do about it. She belongs to another family. She always needed to ask for [the mother-in-law's] permission to do anything.

The daughter-in-law and the domestic worker may develop a sisterly camaraderie when they face the mother-in-law's authority together. Mrs. Chang refreshes her rusty English in order to better communicate with her Filipina worker, Sheila. The time they spend together doing the grocery shopping and cooking allows Sheila to get away from the mother-in-law and to seek emotional support from Mrs. Chang. When I interviewed Sheila in the Changs' living room about the renewal of her contract, the interaction between the two women clearly expressed the bond they had come to share:

Sheila: I don't know if I will work here next year. Maybe the husband does not like.

Mrs. Chang: I like! I like! Never mind my husband!

Sheila: I like my ma'am very much, but *amah* is very difficult.

PCL: Why is she difficult?

Sheila: [*lowers her voice*] I am afraid to talk about his mother [*points at the husband in the dining room*].

Mrs. Chang: It's okay. He does not understand English.

Sheila: Her husband never talks to me. I am here for two years. Only my ma'am talks to me.

Mrs. Chang [*explains to me in Madarin*]: He forgot all his English and he feels embarrassed talking to a woman.

Sheila: The husband was good to me before, but *amah* told him bad words about me. So he is not good to me now. Sometimes I am thinking of going back to the Philippines, but I think of my ma'am. If I go back, she will be the one to take care of *amah*! She does not like to. I know that. *Amah* sometimes says bad words to me, but I am always patient. I always talk to my ma'am. She understands me.

Mrs. Chang [*nodding*]: Yes I understand. I am like you before!

Sheila [*smiles at Mrs. Chang*]: That's why I can understand you, too.

After the interview, Mrs. Chang invited me to stay for dinner. Her mother-in-law

declined Mrs. Chang's dinner invitation, saying she felt sick. (Mrs. Chang read as: "Well, she's still mad at me.") While cooking together in the kitchen, Mrs. Chang and Sheila taught each other the words for cooking utensils and materials in English and Chinese; they exchanged complaints about the hardships of serving the mother-in-law; and they chatted about each other's children and family. During dinner, Mr. Chang asked me about my research topic and mentioned a news report about a crime committed by a migrant worker. "They cause a lot of problems for our society, don't they? And they are not really that cheap. We have to provide lodging and food and everything," he remarked. Rather than acknowledging the real person who was helping meet his mother's the pressing need for care, Mr. Chang discussed the presence of migrant workers as an abstract social problem. From across the table, Mrs. Chang threw me a look that seemed to say, "Well, now you understand what I was talking about."

Safeguarding the Nuclear Family

Some daughters-in-law use domestic workers to protect their nuclear families from the intervention of extended kin. Young mothers-in-law who are in a good health may not yet become recipients of "filial kin work," but they often provide "kin labor" for their sons and daughters-in-law, in the form of unpaid or underpaid childcare, cooking, and housekeeping for dual-earner young couples. In return for this labor, these mothers-in-law expect to secure three-generation cohabitation and close bonds to their sons' families. From the perspective of adult children, however, especially daughters-in-law, this assistance also threatens to allow mothers-in-law to intervene or dominate the conjugal family.

Childcare is often the source of conflicts between women across generations. In addition to the child's mother, the mother-in-law is traditionally defined as a child's primary caregiver. She supervises her daughter-in-law in the care of her son's children

and intervenes when the job is not being done in a way she deems proper.²⁵ It is common for Taiwanese mothers-in-law to care for grandchildren if their daughters-in-law work outside of the home. This happens not only in three-generation households, but also in situations where mothers-in-law live nearby. Catherine and her husband, in their early thirties, both received MBAs in the United States and work in Taipei as market consultants. When Catherine returned to work after three months of maternity leave, her mother-in-law took over caring for the couple's newborn baby. The couple sent the baby to her grandparents' house every morning and picked her up after work. Without being asked to, Catherine paid the mother-in-law \$18,000 NT (US\$530) per month, an amount equivalent to the lower-end wage of a local caregiver. Although she did not have to worry the way she might have had she left the child with a stranger, Catherine felt that this arrangement caused difficulty and tension between her and her mother-in-law:

We argued almost every day.... She was just exhausted, unhappy, and then she gave me a poker face. Every time when we picked up our daughter, we didn't know if we should leave or stay. If we left, she would say you guys just want to get your child. If we stayed, she would say I had been working so hard, I took care of your child, and I also have to cook your dinner? She was not saying these things to her son, only to her daughter-in-law.

Not only was Catherine's mother-in-law exhausted by the work of caring for a newborn baby, but she felt deprived. She felt that she had sacrificed the comfort of her old-age in order to maintain her son's family, a duty that was supposed to fall to her daughter-in-law. Catherine later hired a migrant live-in worker to care for her daughter, spending more money to save the emotional cost.

Adult children who seek a way out of binds like Catherine's often generate parenting practices that deviate from tradition. Neophyte Taiwanese parents seek guidance not only from their parents but also through books by expert guides, many of which are translated from English. Young mothers hire nannies to safeguard their parental autonomy and to avoid confrontations with the older generation. For example, Ann, a

thirty-two-year-old bank manager, explained why she preferred a migrant caregiver to her mother-in-law:

When there are different opinions regarding childcare, you somehow have to listen to the elderly. Then you lose your autonomy. I cannot control my mother-in-law, but I can control my Filipina maid, right?

By hiring a foreign maid, women employers not only solve the problem of childcare but also avoid arguing with their husbands over who does the laundry and the dishes. Some Taiwanese husbands, mostly from younger generations, are willing to share some housework, but their mothers object. For example, when I asked Hsiu-Yun, a forty-three-year-old real estate agent, if her husband helped out with housework, she answered:

More or less. He's a neat person. Once he saw some dirt on the floor and couldn't help but mop it. The maid was on vacation or something. Then his mom came to our house and was shocked when she saw this. She must be thinking, "My son never did anything like this in *my* house! Now he is mopping the floor!" So I rushed to ask my husband to stop. I would do that later.

This scenario demonstrates not only a divide between traditional and modern notions of marriage, but also an implicit competition between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law over the son. The extended family and conjugal family are marked as separate territories dominated by the two women across generations ("my house" vs. "your floor"). The mother-in-law viewed the son's participation in housework as an indicator of his subordination to his wife, and concomitantly, of the weakening of his ties to his mother and extended family. Some daughters-in-law, such as Emily, a thirty-year-old financial consultant, hire a maid to avoid potential disputes around the division of housework:

I'm thinking that when my daughter gets married in the future, I'll also hire a Filipina maid for her. That way she can avoid a lot of problems with her mother-in-law. You can't let your mother-in-law do housework, like cleaning and cooking, but you also feel reluctant to do it alone—there's no way she'll let her son do it, right?

Some female employers more assertively use the employment of domestic workers as a strategy to resist three-generation cohabitation. Hsiao-Li, thirty-six years old, has a junior college degree and worked as a nurse before giving birth to her son. Her mother-in-law volunteered to move to Taipei to be the family's live-in caretaker, but Hsiao-Li rejected this proposal, saying that she would seek a migrant caretaker. Hsiao-Li described what happened then:

My mother-in-law is a very sharp woman. She said to me, "Your father-in-law thinks hiring a Filipina maid is a bad idea." She wouldn't say that it was she who thought it was a bad idea. Whoever she ran into—my friends, relatives—she told them, "You talk to Hsiao-Li, tell her to let me watch the child." Anyway, the main point is that she wants to live with her son. She doesn't really love the grandson. She loves her son!

It is interesting that the mother-in-law put social pressures upon Hsiao-Li by proxy, framing her objection in the name of the father-in-law, the patriarchal authority in the extended family. I went on to ask Hsiao-Li what her husband thought. She replied, "Him? Of course he'd like to live with both his wife and his mother! Then he could be a baby forever. Everything would be taken care of by others."

In another interview, I heard a story about a mother-in-law who, when visiting her son's house, expressed her anger by throwing out the baggage of the migrant worker. She thought that if there were no Filipina maid, the couple would have invited her to live with them and take care of her grandchildren. These mothers-in-law feel anguish not because their grandchildren have been "taken away" by the domestic workers, but because they have been denied the link they would have enjoyed with their sons' families even in lieu of cohabitation.

Unlike Mrs. Chang, Hsiao-Li has a contentious relationship with her Filipina worker, Julia. Julia is college-educated and plans to pursue a master's degree after saving enough money from working overseas. Hsiao-Li bluntly admits that she has been "a mean boss" to Julia, but she explains this as more a product of contextual factors than an innate

personality clash. She has not yet found a suitable job after quitting her nursing position prior to giving birth. Being a stay-at-home mother has brought her a sense of loss and isolation. Her insecurity is aggravated by the presence of a well-educated maid and by the pressure from her husband and mother-in-law:

The reason I don't get along with the maid is because of all the pressure my mother-in-law and my husband put on me. They complained, "Why are you not working? What are you doing at home every day?" Well, every day I watch her [the maid] and I pick on her. She has an advanced degree, so she feels humiliated. If I were working, all this wouldn't have happened. Because you gain nothing at home, so you become picky and cranky all day long.

A Chinese proverb says: "A daughter-in-law must suffer to become a mother-in-law" (*si-fu-au-cheng-po*). A young bride who experiences hardships in a patriarchal extended family, in other words, eventually accedes to authority by controlling the next generation of daughters-in-law. Women offset patriarchal domination by controlling other, subordinate women—daughters-in-law in the case of mothers-in-law, and foreign maids in the case of young women employers. Daughters-in-law like Hsiao-Li seek domestic help to lessen the gendered obligations placed upon them, but ironically, they then become authority figures similar to their mothers-in-law.

Smoothing Tensions and Anxieties at Home

Jessica, thirty-two, has worked in several international banks and has been promoted to a manager position in her current job. She married a coworker four years ago and moved in with her husband's parents. Although she abides the tradition of three-generation cohabitation, Jessica is determined to continue her career after giving birth to her daughter. To solve the thorny problems of childcare and housework, she wishes to hire a Filipina worker, as many of her co-workers have. However, she recounts, "I went through a revolution to hire my Filipina maid!" She spent half a year convincing her mother-in-law, who threw out various objections, such as, "This is a waste of money,"

“Hiring a foreigner at home is not safe,” and, “Maybe it’s better for you to quit and stay home.”

Jessica's story is not atypical. Many daughters-in-law have to fight to convince their mothers-in-law that they are not irresponsible mothers or lazy wives. After all, most older Taiwanese women were full-time homemakers and mothers when they were the age of their daughters-in-law. Shin-Yi, a homemaker in a nuclear household, recalls:

My mother-in-law always said that it was kind of “weird” that I don’t work but still hire a maid. “Weird” is the word she used. Of course, I know what she meant by that....She thinks I am just lazy and I shouldn’t have hired a maid.

Similar pressures came to bear on Wan-Ru, an employed woman in an extended household, when she brought her new Filipina maid to see her mother-in-law. When I asked Wan-Ru why she brought the maid to meet her mother-in-law directly on her arrival, she replied:

Well, you have to let the mother-in-law know about this. You have to let her understand that you hire a maid to help, not because you want to be a *shau-nai-nai* [young mistress in the house]. My mother-in-law had a misunderstanding like this in the beginning. She would say, wow, someone else has done everything for you; you have no work to do; you have such a great fortune.

Many of these mothers-in-law fear not only that their links to their sons will be weakened but that they will be replaced by the domestic workers. Pei-Chi and her husband, both in their forties, own and manage a small company that produces and exports computer chips. The husband’s mother moved from the province to live with them in Taipei and to help raise her three grandchildren. Five years ago Pei-Chi and her husband decided to hire a Filipina maid to take over the household chores so that the mother-in-law could focus on childcare. Pei-Chi’s mother-in-law, however, expresses not relief but anxiety, as Pei-Chi recounts:

The first time the Filipina maid moved in, my mother-in-law was really, really upset. She felt that we had deprived her of her rights of working.... Raising children and doing housework are not only her responsibilities, but also her only achievement. She values herself solely based on that. So in the beginning, she was

wondering if we didn't want her anymore, if we wanted to kick her out, if she still had any "surplus value." We had to communicate with her again and again, and finally we decided to save one job for her—cooking [laughs] !

Because Pei-Chi's mother-in-law has been a full-time homemaker all her life, domestic labor is her domain of mastery and the foundation of her identity. She interpreted Pei-Chi's hiring of a Filipina maid as an expression of doubt about her professional skills and a diminishment of her contribution to the family. She was also worried that Pei-Chi and her husband "didn't want her anymore," that they would "kick her out" once her work was transferred to the migrant worker. The social norm of three-generation cohabitation has attenuated, and the moral ideal of filial piety can no longer guarantee paybacks from children. Parents thus struggle to present their "surplus value" to their sons' families because they worry that they will lose economic and emotional support at frail ages.

Frequently, the mother-in-law feels threatened by the arrival of a "professional" domestic worker on her territory. Because older Taiwanese speak little English, the language barrier further exacerbates the tension between mothers-in-law and Filipina domestic workers. Says Jessica of her mother-in-law:

She feels lost in her life. Her life has no more goals. All her jobs have been taken away by the Filipina maid, and the maid does even a better job than she did.... To her, everything is out of her control now. And she cannot even control the Filipina maid because she doesn't speak English!

A daughter-in-law who hires a migrant worker may have lightened her physical workload, but she has often taken on the additional emotional labor of soothing her mother-in-law's tensions and anxieties. One common strategy among female employers is to confirm the mother-in-law's authority. For example, they intentionally have their mothers-in-law release wages to the migrant workers even though the money is actually from the young couple. Women employers also manipulate translations to minimize tensions between mothers-in-law and migrant domestic workers. Jessica's mother-in-law

felt so anxious about the worker's presence that she tried to outperform the worker around the house, especially in cooking, a domestic duty with considerable cultural and affective significance. One day, the mother-in-law made an unusual and complicated dish for the family. The message behind this dish, Jessica says, was clear: "I have been married into this family for years, and I never saw her cook that dish! She did this on purpose. It's a performance." But for whom was Jessica's mother-in-law performing? "For the Filipina maid! She was trying to tell the maid, 'See, it's not that easy to take over my job. This is my territory. I can do a lot of things you cannot. So don't think that you can replace me.'"

Jessica took the opportunity to translate the worker's comments on that dish in a way that she knew would mitigate her mother-in-law's anxieties. By exaggerating the worker's compliments of the mother-in-law's cooking skills, she validated a hierarchical distinction between the mother-in-law and the maid:

I tried to sugarcoat the words of the Filipina maid when I translated them. I said, "Mama, the maid said it's delicious. Chinese food becomes like magic at your hands. You can compete with those chefs in five star restaurants!" Then my mother-in-law was happy, and she put more food on the maid's plate!

The loss of status these mothers-in-law fear is no small thing. Indeed, the subordination of daughters-in-law and the authority accorded to mothers-in-law have affected the quality of life for generations of Taiwanese women. Margery Wolf reported that in 1905, young adult women in Taiwan had a high rate of suicide compared to senior women, who had a relatively low suicide rate, coinciding with their empowered status.²⁶ Yet, Yow-Hwey Hu later found that in 1984, the suicide rate for young women significantly dropped, even as older women became more likely to take their own lives.²⁷ This suicidal tendency among older women is partly explained by their decline in family status and economic security. They are caught in the transformation of gender and intergenerational relations in Taiwan. As young adults, this generation of women sacrificed career achievement for the welfare of family. All the while, they looked

forward to enjoying a secure and easy old age. But after surviving their own difficulties as daughters-in-law, they are not accorded the authority their mothers-in-law received in the past. Facing modern daughters-in-law who seek self-realization and autonomy as wage-earners, mothers-in-law struggle to enhance their status in the family, even by contributing their kin labor in exchange for economic security and social support.

Fictive Kin across Ethnic Boundaries

Migrant domestic workers constitute a potential threat for some mothers-in-law, but these foreign workers may also become primary caregivers and fictive kin for Taiwanese elders whose adult children subcontract their filial duty. I conducted some interviews in a small town in mid-Taiwan, where most residents make their living on farms or in factories. The town's population is aging, because many younger villagers have left their parents and gone to cities in search of advanced education and white-collar jobs. This small town is, however, not untouched by globalization. Advertisements for agencies recruiting foreign caretakers are posted all over mailboxes and telephone poles. In the early morning, Filipina or Indonesian women are seen wheeling Taiwanese elders for walks along the field; in the afternoon, they gather in front of the temple, with Taiwanese elders sitting in one circle and migrant women chatting to each other in another.

Amah Lin was born to a poor farming family in 1913. She never attended formal school, and she married a farmer's son when she was sixteen. Discovering that she was infertile, she adopted a daughter and a son. The daughter committed suicide in her early thirties; the son got married and moved to Taipei. After her husband died, *Amah* Lin lived on her own until she had a bad fall and became half-paralyzed three years ago. She disliked Taipei and did not get along well with her daughter-in-law. After the accident, she lived in a nursing home for a year until her son hired a Filipina caretaker, which allowed

her to move back to her old house. When I met her, she was eighty-six years old and frail, but with a clear mind. Talking about her own children through tears, *Amah* Lin pointed at her neighbor who has five sons and said with envy: “She had a good fortune. She has a lot of children.”

Rural grandmothers, who have accumulated only limited economic resources and rely mostly on their children’s financial support, occupy the bottom of the elder social ladder. *Amah* Chen, the neighbor *Amah* Lin described as “having a good fortune,” is actually attended by a Filipina caregiver, too. *Amah* Chen has no major illness except diabetes and arthritis; the latter commonly afflicts Taiwanese seniors who used to do heavy farm work. Her two sons live in concrete apartments only a few blocks away from *Amah* Chen’s old brick house. When I asked her why she was not living with her sons, she could barely finish her answer for weeping:

The house is theirs, not mine. Children today don’t like to live with elders anyway. I am dying but not dead yet. This is most painful [*rubbing her knees in tears*]... Every day I cry and cry...I don’t want to hire someone, but my son said no, nobody is watching you during the day. I’m a useless person, but only cost them a lot of money [*sigh*]. It’s better for me to die soon [*weeping*]....

Poor senior women commonly express feelings of being useless and a burden on their children. Among Taiwan’s elderly, widowed women have the least access to social security, the heaviest reliance on children’s support, and the strongest preference for three-generation cohabitation. The suicide rate among rural women over sixty-five is the second highest in the national population, next to that of old, rural men.²⁸ When I asked *Amah* Lin what she would do when her Filipina caregiver, Sylvia, finished her contract, she answered me with a flat tone: “Me? I don’t know. Maybe it’s better for me to just die.” Sylvia then patted *Amah*’s shoulder, speaking in broken Taiwanese with a heavy Filipino accent: “No say that!”

Sylvia is a forty-year-old high school graduate and a mother of three. She and her

husband used to run a small chicken farm and sell eggs in the village. Driven by financial depression at home and drawn by the success stories of migrant villagers, her husband worked in the Middle East until the decline of construction and manufacturing jobs after the Gulf war. Sylvia then took her turn to work abroad, first in Malaysia and then in Taiwan, as a domestic worker and caregiver. Pleasant and patient, Sylvia has earned a reputation in town for being a great caregiver, tolerant with difficult *Amah Lin*. As we talked in the living room, Sylvia frequently went to the kitchen to check on the pork stew, *Amah Lin*'s favorite dish. She explained that the meat had to be cooked for more than three hours, until it was tender, because *Amah Lin* has lost most of her teeth. In addition to Chinese cooking, Sylvia has also picked up a good deal of Taiwanese vocabulary in a short time. When street vendors pass by the house hawking their food or wares, she diligently asks *Amah Lin* what they are saying, and she repeats the words a few times to memorize their pronunciation.

Compared to *Amah Lin*'s son, who visits her only once or twice a month, Sylvia knows a lot about the personal needs and idiosyncrasies of her client. Out of concern for *Amah Lin*, Sylvia complains to me about the irresponsibility of her children in the provision of medical care:

Nobody brings *amah* to see the doctor. She doesn't have medicine! During the night, she cried and shouted. She had pain, so I gave her my Filipino medicine. I complained to my employer. They bring her medicine only once a month.

To *Amah Lin*, Sylvia is not merely an employee but something like "fictive kin," a term that describes "those who provide care like family and do what family does [and] are given the labor of kin with its attendant affection, rights, and obligations."²⁹ In general, the kinship analogy works best when elderly clients and their care workers are of similar ethnic backgrounds and share cultural knowledge.³⁰ In this case, Sylvia transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries by learning Chinese cooking, studying the local language, and

even sharing the medicine she brought from the Philippines.

On the one hand, a fictive kin relationship improves the quality of care and retrieves personal meanings for both the provider and the recipient. On the other hand, when employers place kin expectations onto care workers, they may blur the distinction between employees and [remove a] family members, assigning workers extra labor beyond what was contractually agreed. For example, Ms. Lai, a forty-one-year-old widowed employer, hired a Filipina worker to take care of her ill mother-in-law. After one year, the worker ran away and filed an official complaint on account of extra work and long hours. Ms. Lai, however, considered the workload reasonable because she measured it based on the social expectations placed on daughters-in-law:

She complained I gave her too much work. Come on, what work? Housework and cooking? What's the big deal? Didn't I have to do all these things before? Which working woman is not like this? Which daughter-in-law doesn't do all these?

Migrant workers who are adopted into the families of their care recipients risk subordinating their own families to the needs of their employers. Sylvia forfeited the annual one-week vacation her contract specified out of loyalty to *Amah* Lin. During her two years in Taiwan, she had had no chance to visit her three children, who were attended by her mother in the Philippines. Sylvia said with a deep sigh: “My son always says, ‘Mom, when are you coming back to the Philippines?’ I keep saying, ‘maybe next year, maybe.’ It will be two years this June, but they don’t want me to take a vacation. Nobody can take care of her if I am not here.”

When migrant mothers sell their reproductive labor to maintain their employers’ families, they depend on other people’s paid or unpaid reproductive labor to fill the void they leave in their own families. Some husbands quit jobs and become full-time homemakers, while other households hire local domestic workers. The majority of migrant workers rely on female kin—grandmothers aunts, sisters, or other relatives—to

take care of their children.³¹ These relatives provide care in exchange for a secure flow of monthly remittances from the migrant mothers.³² Unlike Taiwanese daughters-in-law, who use domestic workers as a means of securing distance from their mothers-in-law, migrant women strengthen their extended kin networks in order to maintain their transnational families while they serve as others' fictive kin overseas.

Conclusion

Globalization has participated in the transformation of intergenerational relations among Taiwanese women. As local cultural practices meet global labor forces, three types of labor reproduce kin ties. The first is "filial kin work," or care work conducted in order to maintain intergenerational, patrilineal ties. The filial duty of serving aging parents is transferred first from the son to the daughter-in-law (a gender transfer); later, it is outsourced to migrant care workers (a market transfer). The second is "kin labor," which is provided by extended kin in order to sustain ties to other family members; the unpaid domestic labor parents offer their adult children is one example of kin labor. Modern daughters-in-law often prefer to hire migrant workers rather than accept the kin labor offered by their mothers-in-law, because they fear excessive intervention in their families' domestic lives. The third kind of labor is that of "fictive kin," or non-family migrant workers who provide family-like care for elderly clients in lieu of the filial kin work of adult children.

As migrant domestic workers have entered Taiwanese households, intergenerational domestic dynamics have become triangulated, with the three women forming alliances or antagonisms. In some cases, when daughters-in-law hire migrant workers to subcontract the filial duty, the wives and workers become comrades under the mother-in-law's authority. Other daughters-in-law hire domestic workers in order to resist

three-generation cohabitation or to minimize the intervention of their mothers-in-law in domestic affairs. These daughters-in-law may become authority figures similar to their mothers-in-law, reproducing the oppressive relationship they seek to escape. Still other daughters-in-law apply themselves to smoothing the tensions that arise in the daily interactions between mothers-in-law and migrant workers. Finally, mothers-in-law who live apart from their children may develop strong personal ties with their migrant caregivers, who become fictive kin across ethnic and cultural boundaries.

The dominant East Asian model of three-generation cohabitation has been praised by policy makers and academics as a time-honored solution to eldercare.³³ This romanticized image of family unity obscures intergenerational power struggles. A family-based model of eldercare also exacerbates class inequalities among the elderly: The poorer the elderly are, the more dependent they are on their children. Migrant care workers only present a solution to relatively privileged households, which outsource elder care to low-wage migrant women, who then leave their own families to care for others.

If senior citizens are to age with independence and dignity, their governments should assume eldercare as a collective responsibility, providing public pensions and subsidized care. Universal social security and health insurance would go a long way toward removing the stigma attached to “living on welfare,” and toward lessening class disparities among the elderly. The market transfer of elder care is unavoidable. Therefore, we should recognize the value of paid care work by better regulating the working conditions of migrant laborers.³⁴ On this condition are care providers and recipients able to form emotional bonds that do not reproduce the oppressive aspects of family relationships, which their employers are themselves seeking to avoid.

¹ Rollins, Judith, *Between Women: Domesticity and Their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1985).

² For a comprehensive literature review on the Chinese family, see T. Fricke, J.S. Chang and L.S. Yang, "Historical and Ethnographic Perspectives on the Chinese Family," in A. Thornton and H.S. Lin eds., *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1994), 22-48.

³ Kandiyoti has insightfully discussed how the mother-in-law may internalize patriarchy as a rational strategy to maximize her interests in a patrilocally extended household. Because a woman's well-being in old age is guarded only by her sons, she has a vested interest in suppressing romantic love between her sons and daughters-in-law as a means to secure the married sons' loyalty. See Kandiyoti, Deniz, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," in J. Lorber and S. A. Farrell, ed., *The Social Construction of Gender* (London: Sage, 1991), 104-18.

⁴ Hsiung, Ping-Chun, *Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1996).

⁵ Weinstien, M, T.H. Sun, M. C. Chang, and R. Freedman, "Co-Residence and Other Ties Linking Couples and Their Parents," in A. Thornton and H. S. Lin ed., *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1994), 305-34. Hu, Tai-Li. *My Mother-in-law's Village: Rural Industrialization and Change in Taiwan* (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 1994).

⁶ Gallin, Rita, "The Intersection of Class and Age: Mother-in-law/ Daughter-in-law Relations in Rural Taiwan," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9 (1994), 138.

⁷ Ministry of Interior, *Report on the Living Conditions of the Elderly in Taiwan Area* (Taipei: Executive Yuan, Republic of China, 1996).

⁸ Hu, Yow-Hwey, *Three Generation Families: Myth or Trap?* (in Chinese) (Taipei: Chu

Liu Publisher, 1995).

⁹ Chronological demographic data show that the increases in nuclear units are associated primarily with the decline of joint households (of those extended both laterally and across generations), but the percentage of stem households (of those with at least one of the husband's parents alive) containing one or two grandparents has decreased only slightly. The decline in both mortality and fertility rates has also increased the propensity for stem co-residence across generations, because older generations have a higher survival rate and the supply of married sons has shrunk. See Weinstien, M. et al, "Co-Residence and Other Ties Linking Couples and Their Parents," 332

¹⁰ Directorate-General Budget, Accounting and Statistics, ROC, *Report on the Housing Status Survey in Taiwan Area* (Taipei: Executive Yuan, Republic of China, 1996).

¹⁰ The monthly wage of a migrant domestic worker was NT\$15,840 (approximately US\$466) in 2002. A full-time, local domestic worker or caregiver is paid from NT\$35,000 to \$45,000.

¹¹ Taiwan's government has stopped releasing quotas for the employment of domestic helpers, but it places no quota restriction on the employment of foreign caretakers. Many households thus apply for caretakers with forged medical documents but in fact assign them household chores or childcare.

¹³ Council of Labor Affairs, *Monthly Bulletin of Labor Statistics*, February 2002. (Taipei: Executive Yuan, Republic of China).

¹⁴ Heyzer, Noeleen, Geertje L. Nijeholt, and Nedra Weerakoon eds., *The Trade in Domestic Workers: Causes, Mechanisms and Consequences of International Migration* (Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Center, 1994).

¹⁵ England, Kim and Bernadette Stiell, "'They Think You're as Stupid as Your English is.': Constructing Foreign Domestic Workers in Toronto," *Environment and Planning A*

29 (1997), 195-215.

¹⁶ Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette, *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Council of Labor Affairs, *The 1998 Investigation Report on the Management and Employment of Foreign Workers in R.O.C.* (Taipei: Executive Yuan, Republic of China, 1999).

¹⁸ Chu, J.J., "Taiwan: A Fragmented 'Middle' Class in the Making," in R. Robinson and D. Goodman, eds., *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds, and Middle-class Revolution*, 207-22 (New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁹ Hertz, Rozanna, *More Equal than Others: Women and Men in Dual-career Marriage* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986).

²⁰ The following analysis is based on data collected for a broader project on transnational domestic employment in Taiwan. I conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with forty-six Taiwanese employers, mostly women of younger generations, and fifty-eight Filipina migrant domestic workers. For more details, see Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Divisions, Local Identities: Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers and their Taiwanese Employers*, unpublished diss (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2000)."

²¹ All names are pseudonyms. I use Chinese first names for younger employers and follow the local practice of calling senior women employers by the last names of their husbands. I apply English pseudonyms to those who are employed by multinational companies and use an English first name at work.

²² Liu, Zhong-Dong, *Women's Medical Sociology* (in Chinese) (Taipei: Feminist Bookstore, 1998).

²³ *Amah*, literally meaning "grandmother" in Taiwanese, is a general term used to refer to senior women. It is also what most foreign caregivers call their Taiwanese elder clients.

²⁴ The concept of “kin work” is borrowed from di Leonardo, who refers in a broader sense to “the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of kin ties.” See Di Leonardo, Micaela, “The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship,” in K. V. Hansen and A. Garey ed., *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, 419-430 (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1998).

²⁵ Wolf, Margery, “Child Training and the Chinese Family,” in M. Freedman ed., *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*, 37-62 (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1970).

²⁶ Wolf, Margery, “Women and Suicide in China.” In M. Wolf and R. Witke, eds., *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press 1975), pp. 111-14.

²⁷ Hu, Yow-Hwey, “Elderly Suicide Risks in the Family Context: A Critique of the Asian Family Care,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 10 (1995), 199-217.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Karner, Tracy, “Professional Caring: Homecare Workers as Fictive Kin.” *Journal of Aging Studies* 12/1 (1998), 70.

³⁰ In another study, I found that ethnic Chinese households in the San Francisco Bay Area preferred care workers of the same ethnic cultural background, who come closer to the ideal of fictive kin. Chinese adult children employ the kinship metaphor to maintain a cultural sense of filial care; home care workers also understand the cultural significance of kinship analogy and accept the job obligation of being the surrogate children of care recipients. See Lan, Pei-Chia, “Subcontracting Filial Piety: Elder Care in Ethnic Chinese Immigrant Families in California,” *Journal of Family Issues* forthcoming.

³¹ According to a survey conducted in the Philippines, 60 percent of married migrant women entrusted their children to the care of their parents, 28 percent reported leaving the children with their husbands, 5 percent leaned on their husbands’ parents or family members, and 7 percent hired caretakers outside of the family. See Paz Cruz, Victoria and

Anthony Paganoni, *Filipinas in Migration: Big Bills and Small Change* (Quezon City: Scalabrini Migration Center, 1989).

³² Parrenas, Rhacel Salazar, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001).

³³ Hu, Yow-Hwey, "Elderly Suicide Risks in the Family Context."

³⁴ A growing body of literature examines the social organization and policy implication of care work; see, for example, Abel, Emily and Margaret Nelson eds., *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1990).

Meyer, Madonna Harrington ed., *Care Work: Gender, Labor and the Welfare State* (New York: Routledge, 2000).