Family Life Between Traditional Mother-In-Law And Modern Daughter-In-Law

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Abstract
Influenced by the western Industrial Revolution, educated and independent married women in Taiwan seemed to have a total different life from the traditional married women, who had to obey their husbands and parents-in-law. However, the fact is that married women today are still in the transition from tradition to modernity, which makes them confused about their roles, at home or at work, and also leads the conflicts between them and their mothers-in-law.
The purpose of this paper is to explore the possible problems which might arise between a traditional mother-in-law and a modern daughter-in-law in a three-generation extended family, owing to their different life habits, money spending habits and values. With qualitative interviews in October and November, 2016, and, after that, information analyses, the following conclusions have been drawn:
a. Modern daughters-in-law have gotten used to the traditional family life as time has gone by.
b. The mother-in-law and her two daughters-in-law respected each other. When they had different opinions, they always tried to adjust themselves.
c. In terms of money spending habits, all the mother-in-law and two daughters-in-law put their other family members first, meaning they seldom spend too much on themselves. In terms of children’s rearing, all three cared more about the tradition of showing their elders respect.

Keywords: traditional mother-in-law, modern daughter-in-law, family life

1. Background
In Chinese traditions, marriage was very sacred and it was not simply the union between two people, but the union between two families as well. The new life for a bride after her wedding was more like an adventure. Whether she could fit in her husband’s family determined the happiness of the rest of her life. Also, in traditional Chinese culture, a married woman, deemed as the 'property' of her husband’s family, should live with them. Parents-in-law took control of a daughter-in-law and the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was like
master and slave. A daughter-in-law had to accept everything arranged by her mother-in-law and couldn’t fight for her own right (Lin, 1996 & Liang, 2014). A daughter-in-law could only obey her mother-in-law and tried to endure all the unreasonable treatment from her in order to be accepted (Cheng, 2004). In short, the happiness of a daughter-in-law was all dominated by her mother-in-law (Hsu & Huang, 2006).

In fact, in traditional Taiwan society, a bride was always told to be obedient to her husband and her parents-in-law. As the old saying goes, “A newly-married woman has no right to give opinions of her own.” A daughter-in-law back in the old days could only listen and gave no her own opinions. When her mother-in-law lessoned, she could never argue or talk back (Huang, 2010). However, influenced by the western Industrial Revolution, the power structure between mother-and daughter-in-law was different from that in the past. More education made daughters-in-law better ability and more job opportunities, which improved their positions in the family (Li, 1987). Women were increasingly aware that they should be more independent (Yang, 2001). It seems that women today should be different from the women in the traditional society. However, the truth is they are still in the transition from tradition to modernity. Their ideas about themselves are a mixture of old norms and new concepts (Mao, 2008). They are confused about their roles, at home or at work, and this also leads the conflicts between them and their mothers-in-law (Hsieh, 1998). These conflicts are especially obvious when a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law live together. Conflicts arising from different life habits, housework sharing, child rearing and money spending are typical (Win, 2008). Li-Hsiang Cheng, the Counseling Psychologist of the United Psychological Services, pointed out that the different attitudes towards gender equality between a modern daughter-in-law and a traditional mother-in-law can easily lead to their conflicts on life habits, child rearing, money spending or other values (Gao, 2015).

In Hsiang-Ming Kung’s in-depth interviewing with 18 households in northern Taiwan, most common complaints made by daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law were illustrated. Mothers-in-law usually think daughters-in-law don’t have good manners, tend to waste money and are lazy. Their unwilling to fit in the eating styles of their husband’s families is the main reason making their mothers-in-law annoyed. Daughters-in-law usually think mothers-in-law’s getting involved in child rearing, seeing them as outsiders rather than as their own, being authoritative, leaving little privacy to them, and always comparing them with the daughters-in-law in the past generations are the issues upsetting them most (Kung, 1999).

Since Taiwan became an industrial and commercial society, the family structure in Taiwan has also been gradually changed. Functions of a family in the past were to
strengthen ethics and cohere economic resources, but nowadays the main function of a family is to provide emotional support (Hsu & Huang, 2006). According to Tsai (2003), the patterns of interaction between mother- and daughter-in-law are more flexible today. In the past, both mothers- and daughters-in-law cared more about how to play their roles, not about how to build a real relationship. Nowadays, both of them do communicate, but they try not to cross the line.

This study was conducted in a traditional extended family in the hometown of the researcher. In this three-generation big family, the mother-in-law has had rich experience of traditional life as she used to a daughter-in-law living with the previous two generations, and the two daughters-in-law are educated women with modern thinking. By interviewing them, this study is to explore the following issues:

a. How do the two modern daughters-in-law adjust themselves to this traditional family life?

b. How does the mother-in-law get along with either of her two daughters-in-law?

c. Regarding money spending habits and child rearing, what are the opinions of these three women?

2. Methods

2.1 Data Collecting

The purpose of this paper is to explore how a mother- and a daughter-in-law get along with each other when they have different life habits, money spending habits and values. With qualitative interviews, the specific experiences the interviewed subjects have and the meanings behind their behaviors are pointed out (Pan, 2003).

All the interviews in this study follow the steps of a formal interview. Apart from appointments made before the interviews, all the interviews were done in a natural and comfortable environment. With permission of the respondents, all the answers of the respondents were recorded by hand and digital audio recording device. Interview outlines and questions were set for different respondents before the interviews, in order to get the data intended. During the interviews, extended or in-depth questions were asked if necessary, and, after the interviews, any questions about the collected data would be clarified by video chat, telephone or further face-to-face interview.

2.2 Study Subjects

The experience the mother-in-law has had with previous generations and the modern-woman characteristics of the two daughters-in-law in this extended family were the reasons that the researcher decided to choose them as study subjects. When the mother-in-law in this study was still a daughter-in-law, she used to live with her par-
ents-in-law and grandparents-in-law and the family traditions back then included: visiting and paying respect to the elders in the family every morning and evening, men in the family having meals before women and children, and men being breadwinners while women homemakers, and so on. Even though this mother-in-law and her husband moved out from the big family, had their own business and raised their four children, they still followed some of the family traditions. Now, her two sons -- one in charge of their family business and the other a restaurant owner -- her daughters-in-law, who are the study subjects, and her grandchildren still live with her, which makes them a typical three-generation family.

The code for the mother-in-law is M while two daughters-in-law are DA and DB.

Table 1: Basic Profiles of Study Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Place Of Birth</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Length of Marriage</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>Current Status of Children</th>
<th>Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Changhua County</td>
<td>junior high school diploma</td>
<td>generous, easy-going (making different kinds of friends), conservative and care too much about manners</td>
<td>forty years</td>
<td>two daughters and two sons</td>
<td>the eldest daughter single while others married/the older son in charge of the family business and the younger son a restaurant owner</td>
<td>used to help her husband start and run their own business, and look after the whole family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>Kaohsiung City</td>
<td>BA degree</td>
<td>simple</td>
<td>eight years</td>
<td>two sons</td>
<td>5-year-old son in kindergarten, and the other 2.5 years old</td>
<td>once worked in a hotel, and after marriage, helped her husband’s restaurant, but now a full-time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Results

Taiwan’s society has changed, and its family structure has changed as well, from big families to core families. Big families like the one in this study are fewer and fewer. How do a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law interact with each other when influenced by traditional norms and modern thinking at the same time? The findings from our interviews are as follows:

**a. Modern daughters-in-law fitting themselves in the traditional family over time**

In the beginning, DA couldn’t accept the breadwinner model – a man as breadwinner and a woman as homemaker – in this traditional family, so she felt unhappy to think it her responsibility to take care of her husband’s daily life. However, over time, she has gotten used to it. She used to wash her own clothes herself, but now she has her clothes washed with other family members.

In DB’s natal family, she was educated to clean her own dishes after a meal, but, after marriage, in this big family, she always waited for others to finish their meals and then shared the dishwashing work.

When being asked about whether it’s fine to live with her mother-in-law, DA had wanted to move out before having children because she felt uncomfortable with so many family traditions. Now, she finds it very beneficial to live in this big family and take care of one another, and thinks it scaring to take care of the children all by herself. DB said, in the beginning of the marriage, she did think of moving out, but after a few years’ getting along with her parents-in-law, she has gotten used to a big
family model and she even said if she and her husband one day moved out, she would take her parents-in-law to live with them. In M’s opinion, she thought it was fun to have all the family members live together, but she did think there would be more room for everyone in a core family. If possible, she would live with only one son and his family.

b. Respect others and try to adapt
DA and DB thought talking to their M was not like talking to their own mothers and they had to be careful not to cross the line although they enjoyed chatting together. M said when there’s something that her daughters-in-law didn’t do well, she usually told them directly; however, when it came to the bad habits they couldn’t break, she would try to adjust to them or ignore them. This probably has something to do with her dislike of arguments in the family, and obviously this idea of having all family members live together in unity is a traditional concept. The main problems DA thinks she has with M are the concept of gender equality, too many traditions and different ways of child rearing. DB thinks the main problem she has with M is about child rearing because M always changes her principles and this really makes her upset.

c. Same value on money spending and children attitudes toward elders
All three study subjects have the same idea about how to spend money. They are all economical. Most of time, they spent money on their beloved ones, not themselves. Both DA and DB think having a career is important and they believe either M or their own mothers will help take care of their children if they have to be busy with their work. About the way of raising the third generation in this family, DA thinks M has spoiled her grandchildren because she always gives in to her grandchildren. DB thinks M doesn’t stick to her principles when dealing with her grandchildren. From M’s point of view, both DA and DB spoil her grandchildren too. She didn’t give many suggestions about how to raise children to DB because she used to be a kindergarten teacher. However, recently, M has decided not to give her daughters-in-law any suggestions about child rearing; she wants to leave the child rearing work to her sons and daughters-in-law, and what she wants to do with her grandchildren is to love them. In the beginning, both DA and DB didn’t get used to the traditional norms in this family; however, taking the advantages of the traditional norms into consideration, it seemed to them there was no reason for them not to accept these good old norms. Greeting elders, asking elders to eat during the meal time and not talking back are some of the good traditions which can teach children how to respect elders from the daily routines.
4. Conclude

From this study, we can see the key to a successful relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law is mutual respect. The two daughters-in-law were not familiar with the big family life in the beginning; however, over time, they have gradually gotten used to it. Likewise, the mother-in-law in this study has also adjusted in many ways to reduce conflicts among her and her daughters-in-law. As a result, we can tell if a mother- and a daughter-in-law respect each other more, they certainly can create a more harmonious family life together.

5. References

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