MOTHERS-IN-LAW AND DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW: INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS WITHIN THE CHINESE FAMILY IN TAIWAN*

ABSTRACT. This paper examines the relations of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in a Taiwanese village that has changed over the past 25 years from an economic system based primarily on agriculture to one founded predominantly on off-farm employment. Using ethnographic data, it explores Amoss and Harrell's (1980: 5) proposition that the position of old people is a function of a 'cost/contribution balance' compounded by resources controlled. It concludes that economic development shifts power between women in different generations.

Key Words: intergenerational relations, women, China, development, family

Men and women experience old age differently (Holmes 1983: 129–132) and, according to Harrell (1981: 199), Taiwanese women “who are unquestionably treated as inferiors and even oppressed from childhood through middle age, are usually happier and less lonely in their final years than their once-powerful husbands and brothers”. This difference in circumstances, Harrell argues (ibid.: 205–206), is in large part a product of the different relations women and men have with their sons: those between mother and son are marked by affection and those between father and son by distance. Ignored in this argument, however, is the son's wife who represents a potential threat to the mother-son bond and, thus, to the old-age security the mother hopes to achieve through that bond.

Many writers have noted the difficult nature of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship in China (e.g., Baker 1979: 43–44; Lang 1946: 47–48; Levy 1949: 109–110; Wolf 1972: 36; M. C. Yang 1945: 38). But, with the exception of Wolf's report, these accounts describe women's intergenerational relations as they existed 40 years ago. When socio-economic change is rapid, as it has been in Taiwan, the experience of old age is different for each generation (Amoss and Harrell 1981: 6). This paper describes that contrast in Taiwan by examining the relations of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in a Taiwanese village that has changed over the past 25 years from an economic system based almost entirely on agriculture to one founded predominantly on off-farm employment.¹

More specifically, this paper uses data from Taiwan to explore a proposition put forth by Amoss and Harrell which states:

Two factors largely determine the relative success old people have in a particular society in achieving their goals [physical and emotional security, respect, and a useful role]. The
first is the balance between the costs old people represent to the group and the contributions they make. The second is the degree of control old people maintain over resources necessary to the fulfillment of the needs or wants of younger members of the group (1981: 5).

I follow Amoss and Harrell's lead by considering the position of mothers-in-law to be 'high' if they meet their goals and 'low' if they do not. In this sense, then, I view mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations as asymmetrical since any position is superordinate or 'high' only in relation to one that is subordinate or 'low'.

In the first sections of the paper, I describe development in Taiwan and discuss the meaning of old age and intergenerational relations in the traditional Chinese family. Then, I present material about mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations at two points in time: during the 1950s when the villagers studied derived most of their livelihood from the land and during the late 1970s when their income was largely derived from employment off the farm. In a final section, I discuss the results of the analysis and consider what the future may hold for today's Taiwanese daughters-in-law when they become mothers-in-law.

DEVELOPMENT IN TAIWAN

When the Chinese Nationalist government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, it found a primarily agricultural island marked by conditions not entirely favorable to development. The policies it adopted to foster economic growth have been documented in detail elsewhere (Ho 1978; Lin 1973). Suffice it to say that the government initially strengthened agriculture to provide a base for industrialization, pursued a strategy of import substitution for a brief period during the 1950s, and then, in the 1960s, adopted a policy of export-oriented industrialization.

The latter policy produced dramatic changes in Taiwan's economic structure. Agriculture's share of national output declined as industry's rose. By 1973, agriculture contributed only 11 percent to Taiwan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while manufacturing accounted for 43 percent (Ho 1978: 130). Industrialization was not restricted to a few urban centers, however. During the 1960s industry began to disperse to the countryside to gain access to labor and raw materials. By 1971, 50 percent of the industrial and commercial establishments and 55 percent of the manufacturing firms in Taiwan were located in rural areas, and the proportion of farm households with members working off-farm grew.21Taiwan was no longer an agrarian society.

To promote industrialization, the government relied heavily on foreign capital (Ho 1978: 111, 117, 249), introducing numerous tax incentives and establishing export processing zones to attract investors. These measures