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Women of the Sisters' Hall: religion and the making of women's alternative space in Taiwan's economic restructuring

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During the course of my research on labor and gender politics in Taiwan's recent economic restructuring, I came to know a group of middle-aged working-class women who were believers of I-Kuan Tao (Yiguan Dao), the Unity Way, 'a syncretic, moralistic religion whose members practice vegetarianism and are led by charismatic masters' (Skoggard 1996, 157). Aged from early thirties to late fifties when I started collecting my data in the mid-1990s, these women lived together in the Sacred Heaven Fo-t'ang (literally 'Sacred Heaven Buddha Hall'), an I-Kuan Tao temple in Homei, a small town in central Taiwan known for its history in textile production. By and large having decided to remain single but not sever ties with their natal families and communities, these women participated in daily social and economic activities (similar to the larger population in the area) while at the same time dedicating themselves to the study of religious teachings. Many of them were employed in local textile factories. These women did not completely reject the possibility of marriage; however, they were not actively pursuing it. Their understanding of women's roles in the Taiwanese patrilineal family led them to believe that a total separation from married life would give them the best chance to study the Tao, the virtuous way, thus saving them from the eternal suffering of reincarnation.

This article is an ethnographic study of the subject formation of women at Sacred Heaven. It investigates two issues: the circumstances under which Sacred Heaven as an alternative social space for these women was enabled and accepted, and the impact that this alternative space had on the individuals involved as well as on the people around them. I contend that three interlocking factors are particularly important to the understanding of these women's experience: cultural (i.e., the Taiwanese patrilineal family), religious (i.e., I-Kuan Tao), and economic (i.e., Taiwan's post-World War II export-oriented industrialization and its recent economic restructuring). I-Kuan Tao presented an opportunity for self-realization to these women who would otherwise be relegated to a secondary role in the Taiwanese family. The same gender hierarchy in the family, however, also served as an ideological base that facilitated

the hiring of these women as cheap industrial labor when they were young. Their early working experience, in turn, might have motivated them later in life to seek a different path from the traditional role of women within I-Kuan Tao. Yet it was also Taiwanese industrial producers' persistent need for cheap female labor in the recent economic restructuring that continued to give these women employment opportunities upon which they could support themselves economically while attempting to change their lives by staying single. All of these factors thus provided members of Sacred Heaven with multiple yet often conflicting conditions in which they could – and had to – negotiate their lives. The story of women at Sacred Heaven exemplifies a culturally specific pattern of resistance. Paradoxically, while trying to establish an alternative social space, they were also seeking cultural legitimacy for their choice. Marriage resistance, in this case, was an act of both transgression and conformity. Power and resistance hence form a dyad; they cannot be understood separately. Yet, the different readings that these women and their families applied to their situations, as well as the ingenuous ways through which they solved their predicaments, also added new elements to the cultural repertoire which, collectively considered, may broaden the range of options for future Taiwanese women who attempt a similar life trajectory. In this article, I therefore caution against a totalizing understanding of the concept of resistance based on its final result, but call for a more nuanced analysis focusing on the process instead.

Methodology

Homei is a small town of approximately 90,000 residents in central Taiwan well known for its history in weaving production since the end of the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945). The development of Homei's textile industry after World War II reflects closely the path of Taiwan's economic development in the postwar era, which in a short span of four decades experienced import-substitution industrialization (ISI) in the 1950s and early 1960s, export-oriented industrialization (EOI) in the late 1960s and 1970s, the status of one of the world's manufacturing powerhouses in the 1980s, and economic restructuring (namely capital outflow and deindustrialization) starting from the late 1980s (Lee 2004). As a sign of this recent wave of economic restructuring, only half the number of looms in use during the late 1980s remained in production in the mid-1990s.

I was first introduced to Sacred Heaven by Ch'un-mei, a textile worker who was herself an inhabitant while I was doing research on the impact of the economic restructuring on the local economy and society of Homei (September 1993–December 1995).¹ My primary focus then was on the work experience of female textile workers including those at Sacred Heaven. I lived

at the dormitory of a local textile factory, but visited the fo-t'ang frequently on weekends and occasionally at night, became acquainted with most of its regular residents, and gradually learned about their lives. More intensive study, with an emphasis on the connection between religion and other aspects of these women's lives, was conducted in the summers of the early 2000s, when I took residence at Sacred Heaven and participated in the daily routines of its members as well as some of their religious activities (some of the religious functions were reserved exclusively for I-Kuan Tao followers and not open to non-converts like myself). I also visited the workplaces and families of a few of them. My knowledge about the women at Sacred Heaven is derived mainly from ethnographic fieldwork, namely participant observation and the everyday chats and conversations I had with them. Additional insight was gained from meeting and talking with other I-Kuan Tao believers, either through the introduction of Sacred Heaven members or other individuals, during my decade-long research in Homei and elsewhere in Taiwan. In addition, I conducted formal interviews with a few local I-Kuan Tao leaders and fo-t'ang t'ang-chus,² as well as some I-Kuan Tao leaders based in Taipei, to obtain an understanding of the larger religious context within which Sacred Heaven is embedded.

Theoretical context

My point of departure lies as much with the question of why women of Sacred Heaven deviate from the ideal of Chinese kinship and family as with what this pattern of deviation teaches us about the strength and weaknesses of Chinese culture. Their behavior informs us not only about the forms of resistance but also the forms of power in Chinese societies (see Abu-Lughod 1990). It is an indicator and diagnostic of power (Cresswell 2000). Marriage has been nearly universal to both men and women in Chinese societies including Taiwan (Adrian 2003; Jones 2005; Thornton and Lin 1994). Marriage as a social institution is particularly significant to women, for it serves as both a symbol of and gateway to their ultimate (though subordinate) position in the Chinese kinship system (M. Wolf 1960, 1972). Unmarried females are viewed as temporary members of their natal families. It is only through marriage that a woman is accepted into her husband's family and permanently integrated into a lineal line (Freedman 1979; Hsu 1971; Wolf and Huang 1980). It is also through marriage that a woman earns a rightful place in her husband's ancestral hall in the afterlife (Ahern 1971; Harrell 1986). Marriage also provides the opportunity for men and women to perpetuate the family line through childbearing; failure to do so is considered in Chinese culture as a serious breach of filial piety even today (Thornton and Lin 1994, 202; also see Hsu 1971; Simon 2004). Economically, marriage also grants especially women some financial support and social security as men continue to be seen and act as primary breadwinners in contemporary Taiwanese households. Refusal or delay of marriage – or simply

the lack of enthusiasm about it – is therefore a major decision and oftentimes a strategy for women who struggle to negotiate a life trajectory other than the culturally prescribed roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law. Unsurprisingly, women of Sacred Heaven constitute a small group of people. They are a minority not only in larger society but also within the I-Kuan Tao community, although there has been a gradual increase in the non-marriage rate among Taiwanese women in the past two decades.³ The significance of the women of Sacred Heaven, therefore, is not based on their numbers but on the ways they reveal the cultural logic and socioeconomic dynamics currently at work in Taiwan.

Dominant power always has its moments of crisis, particularly on the occasions when acts do not conform to expectations (Cresswell 2000, 266). Here I draw from Sherry Ortner (1996), who, in her search for ‘subaltern practice’ suggests that however powerful a culture is as a guiding force of behavior, it can at most be a partial hegemony, leaving sites of practices and perspectives that may become the bases for resistance and transformation. It is thereupon in ‘the lapses in social reproduction, the erosions of long-standing patterns, and at the moment of disorder and of outright anger and obstruction’ that subaltern agency including that of women is most likely discovered (Ortner 1996, 17). The choice to remain single made by the women at Sacred Heaven – or their passive attitude toward marriage – in my view, represents such a slippage from the process of social reproduction.

This article relates the story of women at Sacred Heaven to previous scholarship on resistance. It bridges two sets of literature that are usually discussed separately: class and gender under global industrialization, and gender and family (epitomized by marriage) in the Chinese cultural context. Globally and economically, women at Sacred Heaven are an integral part of the labor force in Taiwan’s post-World War II economic development, which has been closely related to the recent process of global industrialization. Their work experience echoes that of neophyte female workers worldwide laboring at the global assembly line (Chow 2003; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Pun 2005; Rothstein and Blim 1992; Salzinger 2003; Ward 1990). Yet if ideological construction of women as docile and nimble-fingered workers has facilitated their massive recruitment as an ideal workforce for the global factory, this new employment opportunity also bears subversive potential (Cairolì 1998; Hsiung 1996; Mills 2003; Simon 2003). The experiences and resources of wage labor provide women workers with new means to contest their subordination both in the workplace and in other areas of daily life (Mills 2003, 48). Those seeking to improve their lives have been observed to adopt strategies both within and outside the traditional realm of class struggle, drawing inspiration from their individual cultures. These ranged from (1) direct confrontations such as strikes and labor organizing (Kim 1997),

and mass spirit possession (Ong 1987) that defy the way labor is disciplined on the shop floor, (2) displaying agony over exploitation through uncontrolled screams or recurring nightmares (Ngai 2000, 2002), to (3) using the enhanced autonomy given by wage earning ‘to participate in new patterns of consumption linked to desired and often globally oriented standards of “modernity”’ (Mills 2003, 49; also Freeman 2000) and to negotiate with parents over marriage arrangements or simply seek more personal freedom and security (Kung 1994; Salaff 1995). Despite the fact that most of the tactics lacked the effectiveness to challenge capital’s hegemony, these cultural struggles frequently challenged the authority of others, particularly in one’s family, often with the result of engendering a new sense of self and community for the workers (Mills 1999, 2003; Ong 1997).

Locally and culturally, the experience of the women of Sacred Heaven resonates with that of ‘marriage resistance’ of Chinese women, in both the imperial period and at the present time, attempting to establish a life outside the Chinese patrilineal family system usually through religious means (Gates 1997, 188–96). The most notable example of this was the case in the Canton Delta at the turn of the twentieth century, which involved young women who vowed never to marry and wives who refused to live with their husbands (Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975). In both situations the women would no longer live with their natal families – or, in the case of married women, their husbands’ families – but often organized themselves into sisterhoods and lived together in usually self-owned vegetarian halls (with or without a Buddhist connotation). Similar practices were observed in Taiwan until the 1950s (Chiang 1997) – as well as in diasporic Chinese communities (Topley 1961) – among especially upper-class women who chose to remain single (or who had little marriage prospect due to reasons such as disability) and whose families built a *chai-t’ang* (literally also ‘vegetarian hall’) to accommodate them, so that they could have a place to live and grow old while practicing Buddhism. Some of the *chai-t’angs* were built to accommodate the family’s widowed or older women. At times, these privately owned vegetarian halls also accepted women of similar situations from poor families, thereby serving the function of social welfare institutions. In spite of their religious devotion, however, *chai-t’ang* residents, as well as the women of Sacred Heaven and those in the Canton Delta, were not monastics but lay believers. Lately, an increasing number of young women in Taiwan, many with college education, are renouncing the secular life and choosing to become Buddhist nuns (Cheng 2003; Li 1999). Like the women of Sacred Heaven, many of these young nuns wished to avoid the encumbered lives of Taiwanese women as wives and mothers, which, according to Buddhist belief, made women more attached to things and people, and kept them stuck in the wheel of reincarnation (Crane 2004, 237). Their choice is therefore a contemporary manifestation of the long-standing tradition of marriage resistance as a form of resistance against

Chinese patriliney (Crane 2004).

The women of Sacred Heaven stand at the interlocation of the global economic forces and local cultural dynamics. Their story exemplifies a culturally specific pattern of resistance, enabled by their participation in the global industrial labor market and reinforced by their devotion to the I-Kuan Tao religion. While it supports the above theorizations, locating their story within specific temporal contexts is significant. The story of the women of Sacred Heaven shows that, over time, whether a particular strategy adopted by women workers to seek a better life can continue to work depends on its articulation with the ever-changing global as well as local economic conditions. This is especially important in Taiwan where the economy transformed within a few short decades from one based on agriculture to one centered on manufacturing, and which is now moving toward the direction of service industries. The different pattern of labor deployment, as well as the kind of labor available for deployment, at each of these stages has affected the effectiveness of women's strategies.

Moreover, these women's experience shows that resistance as a culturally informed practice can be a double-edged sword. It often has the simultaneous effect of subverting a cultural ideal while at the same time reaffirming it (Abu-Lughod 1990, 2000; Butler 1990; Rose 2002). Yet I would argue it is precisely this paradoxical nature of these women's behavior that helped to make it a successful strategy. Practically and tactically, instead of openly confronting a cultural ideal or expectation, their subtle manipulation (and partial compliance) was a much more effective means of getting their way (see Ferguson 2000). More fundamentally, their practice advances our knowledge of the performative nature of social reproduction. It helps us understand how an individual actor can exert influence on, or even steer the direction of, a dominant cultural value in the process of social reproduction. To paraphrase Judith Butler (1990), culture is always a 'doing'; it requires a performance that is repeated. Agency, therefore, 'is to be located within the possibility of a variation on the repetition' (Butler 1990, 145); and the task involved is not whether to repeat the cultural expectation, but how to repeat it or to repeat it through a radical proliferation of possible practices (Butler 1990, 148). The solutions that women at Sacred Heaven found in their pursuit of an alternative life trajectory, as well as the different interpretations that these women and their families applied to their solutions, are illuminating examples of such 'creative forms of social practice' (Rose 2002) that may have the potential to disrupt the process of social reproduction as well as incrementally redirect long-standing patterns.

Introducing the Sisters' Hall: I-Kuan Tao and Sacred Heaven Fo-t'ang

One of the heirs of Chinese sectarianism that flourished in the late imperial period, I-Kuan Tao emphasizes apocalyptic eschatology and individual salvation as part of its worldview (Bosco 1994; Teiser 1995). The teaching of I-Kuan Tao centers on the belief that in an effort to save humanity from an impending cataclysm, the Laomu (the Venerable Heavenly Mother) sent Milefo (the Maitreya Buddha) to spread the Tao (Bosco 1994; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Sung 1983). According to Skoggard (1996, 157–8),

Those who receive the [T]ao will survive the apocalypse and be freed from the endless cycle of death and rebirth for a period of ten thousand years. Followers are expected to diligently and sincerely study the [T]ao in order to perfect themselves and through their example lead the rest of mankind to salvation. One accumulates merit most surely by contributing time and money to the religion's proselytizing mission and bringing in new recruits.

Partly due to Taiwan's until recently hostile political environment, but primarily reflecting its sectarian emphasis on individual piety and activities, I-Kuan Tao is organized as a secret sect, with temples located on the top floors of devout supporters' private homes (Bosco 1994, 425). Within Taiwan, I-Kuan Tao temples are organized in districts under the loose leadership of a master (or initiator) (Tien-ch'uan Shih), who has been promoted to the position because of his/her devotion or contribution to the religion and whose major responsibilities entail presiding over initiation ceremonies and guiding the activities of the district faithful. According to Bosco (1994, 426), the master also links the district with the nationwide hierarchy: 'At the top of the hierarchy is the man who brought [I-Kuan Tao] to Taiwan from China in 1945. The people he and his followers have converted form what is known as a line [or a 'lineage'] . . . Each missionary who came from China has a line of followers behind him [or her], forming in essence separate – though loosely federated – sects' (Bosco 1994, 425–6; also see Jordan and Overmyer 1986, 222–3).

Sacred Heaven Fo-t'ang is one of the temples under the governance of the Lineage of Precious Radiance (Pao-kuang Tsu). It was built, inhabited and managed by a group of women who have by and large decided to remain single in order to devote their lives to studying the Tao. Before the construction of the current fo-t'ang, some senior members of Sacred Heaven had already lived together, and practiced the Tao, in a rented house near the marketplace in downtown Homei. One day these women decided that, to truly practice the Tao, they should do more than simply improve themselves. A more dramatic version, however, was offered by Yu-ju, a current Sacred Heaven resident who was not one of the original founders and who told

me quite a few personal stories related to divine revelation during the course of my research:

One night the Big Sister [who brought together the handful of women to live and practice the Tao in the first place] dreamt she was walking on the side street [turning away from the main road in downtown Homei], heading to the house she rented with other women. There are houses on the two sides of the street and they are usually well lit. She was walking at a usual pace when all of a sudden the lights were gone. Just when she was caught by surprise and didn't know what to do, amidst the pitch dark a narrow pathway appeared, glimmering with a glow of unknown origin, leading to somewhere in front of her. She hesitated, but decided to go along. As soon as she made up her mind and started walking, she woke up. For a few nights in a row, she continued to have this dream. Finally she realized it was probably a sign from the deity that was telling her she should follow the Tao. That was when she decided that she should build a fo-t'ang that would open to the public and serve the public.

Whether it was a decision made by secular individuals or based on celestial intervention, these women put together their own savings, purchased the land of the current site, and built a four-story building. They lived on the top three floors, and set up a fo-t'ang on the first floor that was also open to the public. Beginning as an effort of a small group of women to better serve their religion, Sacred Heaven gradually became a local I-Kuan Tao center. Since a bigger congregation space was eventually needed, and the women of Sacred Heaven offered to continue their care of the fo-t'ang, money was raised among the believers and a plot of land bordering the existing one was purchased for the expansion. The current Sacred Heaven Fo-t'ang was completed in 1987.⁴ It consists of two adjacent cement buildings, including the original four floor one and a new five-story construction, connected on both the first and the third floor. Residents of the fo-t'ang continue to live in the four-floor building, but they turned the first floor into a spacious living room that they use to watch television programs and receive private visitors. The five-story building serves as a public space for worship, religious teaching and regular meetings. The new and enlarged temple is located on the top floor, and is open to the public most of the time. A general congregation is held on Sundays. During the week there are also night classes and recreational activities designed for specific constituencies of the congregation.

In spite of some changes, the membership of Sacred Heaven has remained relatively stable over the years. In the early 2000s, 16 women called Sacred Heaven home. Their ages ranged from late thirties to early sixties. These women shared much in common. Ethnically

Taiwanese, they were all born and raised in the Homei area. Regardless of their (parents') family fortune, they all started working at a young age, before or upon elementary school graduation for older members and junior high school graduation for younger ones.⁵ Many of them had to find work because their families needed the money they could make. Ideologically, however, most (if not all) of these women were sent to work because their families considered schooling beyond the mandatory nine years (implemented by the Taiwan government in 1968; prior to 1968 it was six years) unnecessary for girls as they were only temporary members of the natal family and thus did not merit too much investment (see Parish and Willis 1993). It would be more rational, instead, that they should make money to give to their parents, so that they could show their piety by paying back the debt they owed to their parents for raising them before they were married off and joined their husbands' families. These women were diverse, however, in the way they lived their lives after joining Sacred Heaven. Some lived quiescently, with a daily routine primarily between work and home (the fo-t'ang), and observed I-Kuan Tao mainly as an individual believer, apart from helping out with the day-to-day maintenance of Sacred Heaven. Some others led a much more dynamic life, and actively pursued goals such as education, religious training, and other kinds of knowledge or skills, which I will discuss later.

Not all of the current residents contributed funds to the construction of the original fo-t'ang. Nonetheless, they were welcomed by the founding members to be part of the fo-t'ang. However, they each chipped in several thousand (Taiwanese) dollars each month to cover the utilities and other communal expenditures.⁶ Aside from the public religious activities, each of these women lived an independent life of her own. This was most evident in their separate daily schedules. Due to their different working hours, these women did not eat dinner together. They had to prepare their own meals, although the person who came home the earliest would usually cook enough food for everybody else while making dinner for herself. They did, however, rotate breakfast preparation, as a means to share the drudgery as people often rushed to work in the early morning.

Materially, these women lived a simple life (for example, they did not subscribe to cable TV service, a ubiquitous feature in the vast majority of Taiwanese households). Their world was essentially centered on their religious devotion (some were notably more committed and carried more responsibilities than others, as previously indicated). Together, they took care of the fo-t'ang's daily maintenance. Although none of the Sacred Heaven members had yet been promoted to the position of master/initiator, they worked closely with their district master as well as other community leaders and served as organizers or facilitators of many of the

religious functions. They were also zealous advocates. True to the words of their religious teaching, they were never shy in their attempt to convert friends or strangers. Yet they did not have to vow to become full-time religious practitioners (reflecting the lay membership and leadership of I-Kuan Tao). In fact, they participated fully in the everyday social and economic life of the ordinary Taiwanese. The majority of them also kept close ties with their natal families, whom they visited regularly. Given the fact that these women were middle-aged, their natal families were mostly headed by one of their brothers (or even the brother's son), who also bore the primary responsibility of caring for their aging parents. Accordingly, these women no longer needed to contribute their income to their brothers' households, but they might give their parents some pocket money. In a few cases, when a parent or a family member became seriously ill, these women might also move back home temporarily to tend to the ailing family member.

Contextualizing the Sisters' Hall: gender and Taiwan's export-oriented industrialization

The religious calling of women at Sacred Heaven is closely related to their work lives. Most of these women were part of the first postwar generation factory workers whose lives were well documented in the literature on gender and global industrialization in Taiwan (Arrigo 1980; Diamond 1979; Gallin 1984, 1990; Hsiung 1996; Kung 1994; Lee 2004; Simon 2005). They experienced firsthand the transition of the Taiwanese economy from one based on agriculture to one centered on industrial manufacturing. Most of them began working for wages right after they graduated from elementary school, sacrificing their own education to make money to support their families and often the education of their younger (especially male) siblings. Some of them started at an even earlier age. Many of them converted to I-Kuan Tao while working in factories as young girls. Conversion to I-Kuan Tao had been an experience widely shared by young Taiwanese workers in the 1960s and 1970s, especially for those who followed the course of rural migration to cities where many of the then booming industrial zones were located, and who found themselves in a new and alienating environment. An I-Kuan Tao temple with a group of fellow worshippers often became a home away from home under these circumstances (Sung 2000, 11–12). Also, until recently most of the textile factories in Taiwan had dormitories to accommodate their employees. At night, after work, young factory women usually spent time together. It was on these occasions that those who had converted to I-Kuan Tao would suggest to their friends to *pai-fo* (pay respect to the Buddha) or *t'ing-ching* (listen to religious scriptures) – both of which considered by the Taiwanese as virtuous things to do. Towards the end of these evenings, newcomers were often eagerly persuaded by their friends and fellow worshippers to go

through the initiation ritual. Whether working in an industrial zone in northern Taiwan or somewhere close to home in Homei, this was how most of the women at Sacred Heaven learned about and converted to I-Kuan Tao.

Why a particular individual chose to follow a particular religion is a difficult question to answer (see Sangren 1987). In retrospect, members of Sacred Heaven did not have much in terms of reflections about the moment when they first converted to I-Kuan Tao especially if that happened at a young age. Many of them seemed to accept it as part of their fate, similar to their acceptance of many other things that happened in their lives (including having to start working at a young age to help their families). Some of them attributed their religious calling to the encounter they had with I-Kuan Tao deities in their dreams. For example, Yu-ju, who told me about the Big Sister's dream preceding the establishment of Sacred Heaven, described her own conversion as follows:

At first I was an ardent non-believer who thought I could take pretty good care of myself. One night while I was asleep, [in my dream] I was awakened up by the feeling that someone was lifting me up. All of a sudden I was not only in the air but my body was tossed against the wall. Oh how it hurt! When I was dropped on the ground, the person picked me up and hurled me once more. It hurt even more this time. The person didn't stop just there. I was lifted up and hurled against the wall again, and again, and again. The pain was getting worse and worse, and my whole body ached badly.

Finally the person stopped, and I was left alone on the floor. At long last I stole a glance at the person, and saw an old man with a long, white beard dressed in an ancient-style gown carrying a staff. I didn't know who he was. A few days later a neighbor persuaded me to visit a fo-t'ang with her. This was the first time I ever stepped inside a fo-t'ang. When I looked at the statues on the altar, oh my, sitting in the middle wasn't it the old patrician who lifted me and hurled me in my dream the other night? Then I learned that he was Lu'' Tung-pin [one of the most important deities among the I-Kuan Tao pantheon]. He obviously came to teach me a lesson.

Revealed in this story is also the notion of 'election' emphasized in the I-Kuan Tao teaching – i.e., the believers belong to a minority of 'the chosen ones' destined to survive the calamity that would terminate the existing world and doom the non-believers. This notion, as well as salvation based on individual deeds, might have appeared particularly attractive to these women who came from a humble rural background.⁷

If these women's early memory of conversion seemed to be vague, they were much more self-conscious about their decision to remain unmarried. Surely, not every Sacred Heaven member had the same reason; neither could every one of them articulate – or was willing to or felt comfortable about articulating – her reasoning. One hot summer afternoon, I raised this issue openly to a small group of them with whom I was chatting in the living room to escape the heat. I asked them whether their decision to maintain single status had to do with the gender roles or family ideology in Taiwanese society. They all hesitated for a short time before responding to my rather direct inquiry. Several of them then said that they had never pondered this question in such a straightforward way. When urged, they emphasized the religious aspect of their lives, and expressed how wonderful it was for them to be I-Kuan Tao followers. They spoke of the true benefit and secret treasure they enjoy which could not be publicly voiced but only experienced by an I-Kuan Tao follower; and they said that they felt sorry for my loss caused by my non-convert status. Finally, Shu-hui, who was the only Sacred Heaven resident holding a junior college degree at the time of my research, answered my question with a firm nod after giving it some thought. She said that her family was not poor and could have easily afforded to send her to high school. However,

My father has this idea that education is no good for girls. It didn't matter that my sister and I begged him to let us go to high school. [He didn't really need the money we made, but] he sent us to work in a textile factory right after we graduated from junior high school anyway. [She was quiet for a second before continuing speaking.] Yes, I do see a great difference between how men and women are treated in the Taiwanese family, and, yes, that indeed made me wary about being/becoming a part of it.

She went back to school and earned a junior college degree in her early thirties, using the money she saved from years of waged work.

Commonly shared by members of Sacred Heaven, and by many others in the wider society, was the sentiment that Taiwanese women were obliged to perform numerous drudgeries for which they were poorly rewarded. This often became a strong rallying point for the Sacred Heaven residents to persuade their families into accepting their choice of remaining single as well as joining the fo-t'ang. Ch'un-mei, who introduced me to Sacred Heaven, attributed her decision partly to her experience of witnessing her parents fight while growing up. She is the eldest daughter of a poor farming family, followed by four brothers and two sisters. Her father was the sole economic provider of the family when she was young. The ill health of her mother, as well as her responsibility of having to raise seven children, prevented her from seeking paid

work outside home. Exhausted from his economic burden, her father frequently took his frustration out on his wife and children; he abused them physically. Her father died when she was 19. After that she became the sole breadwinner of her family, working primarily in local textile factories, until the eldest of her younger brothers finished his mandatory military service and came back to work as a relatively well-paid mechanic in a motorcycle shop. It was then when she began to contemplate the possibility of Sacred Heaven. She told me that her mother was at first hesitant about her decision of moving into the fo-t'ang; she was anxious that her daughter find a husband:

But I told [my mother] there's no guarantee marriage will do me any good. Look at her marriage! My parents quarreled constantly, and my mother got beaten so often. She looks much happier and more at ease now that my father has passed away; nobody will hit her anymore. I don't want to live a life like hers.

Women at Sacred Heaven were also concerned that if they were married the time and energy they had to spend on domestic chores and family responsibilities would divert them from something more salient like studying the Tao. Quite a few of them also expressed the concern that, as a married woman, they would have to cook for their husband, children and in-laws. They were afraid that they would not be able to change other family members' eating habits and hence had to compromise their own vegetarian diet or, cook meat for others. With either option they would violate the non-killing teaching of their religion and, as a consequence, greatly undermine their efforts to perfect themselves.

Sacred Heaven under Taiwan's recent economic restructuring

While friends at a factory dormitory provided many at Sacred Heaven with the first introduction to I-Kuan Tao, it required more than friendship to maintain a single lifestyle; economic resources were equally crucial. Historically, the possibility of non-marriage in China was closely related to the increasing significance of women's work due to the growth of foreign trade and early industrialization (Lu 2004; Mann 1992). For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, the development of mechanization in sericulture in the Canton Delta required female workers to rotate among different filatures in the local silk industry to meet the different production cycles and schedules. This enhanced the importance of young and unwed women who were unattached and could move freely, which in turn provided these women with the economic foundation for marriage resistance (Stockard 1989; Topley 1975). In the case of Sacred Heaven, non-marriage was in part made possible by Taiwan's successful export-oriented industrialization, which

recruited a large number of young women including those of Sacred Heaven. Though not wealthy, these women were able to support themselves with their wages, remain single, and even save enough money to build their own fo-t'ang. When I first made acquaintance with them in the mid-1990s, however, most of these women were in their late thirties or early forties, an age normally considered by Taiwanese employers as too old and too burdened with household responsibilities for women to stay in the waged labor force. Yet these women continued to work in factories, which kept them financially self-reliant. Although unthinkable a generation ago, these middle-aged women were now favored by local industrial producers, who traditionally preferred to hire young single women but had been forced to explore new sources of labor due to Taiwan's recent economic restructuring.

It was only in the 1960s that the Taiwan government adopted an export-oriented initiative to spearhead industrialization. By the 1980s, Taiwan had grown into a manufacturing powerhouse in the global economy (Skoggard 1996). Yet, ironically, it was also at the peak of this success that Taiwanese industrial producers began to feel the squeeze caused by changes in both Taiwanese society and internationally. Production costs were on the rise as a result. To solve these problems, Taiwanese industrial producers developed cost-effective strategies such as reorganizing the division of labor on the shop floor, reducing factory size, or upgrading the quality of production (Lee 2004). They also explored new sources of cheap labor, adopting more radical practices such as relocating their production overseas (Hsing 1998) and importing foreign workers into the country (Lee 2002). By the late 1990s, most of the labor-intensive industries which once dominated Taiwan's industrial landscape had been relocated overseas to China or Southeast Asia.

As in many parts of the world, in the initial stage of Taiwan's export-oriented industrialization in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was young, single women who were recruited by factory owners. However, as Taiwan's economy started to take off and the economic conditions of individual families (particularly in rural areas) began to improve as a result, parents no longer felt the pressure to send their daughters to work at an early age but could consider keeping them in school longer. By the late 1970s, the majority of Taiwanese girls were able to continue their education to junior high school; some had a (vocational) high school or even junior college education (Chou, Clark and Clark 1990). Concomitantly, jobs in the rapidly expanding service sector quickly lured away many of these young women, who were better educated than previous generations and who considered service sector employment as more modern, prestigious, and providing better opportunities for upward mobility than manufacturing work (Lan 1998). The

impact of a changing labor market was further felt due to the fact that the birth rate in Taiwan had declined significantly since the 1960s and, as a consequence, Taiwan began to experience a decrease in population in the 20 to 24 age group by the mid-1980s (Lin n.d., 21); there were fewer young people available for hiring than before. In spite of continuous technological upgrading and capital investment, most Taiwanese industrial producers still relied on cheap labor for profits. Accordingly, many of them saw the short supply of young women workers as a major obstacle to remaining competitive in the world market. The strategies mentioned in the previous paragraph resonate with their interests in reducing labor costs and exploring new sources of cheap labor. These strategies, in turn, had a profound impact on the remaining female work force. In recent years, there has been an increase in employment opportunities for married women, who were previously perceived as less dependable because of their domestic responsibilities, but now are regarded as more reliable because young women are no longer available (DGBAS 2001).

The popular perception that women like those at Sacred Heaven were experienced, mature, and ‘duty-free’ workers, as opposed to their more playful and less responsible younger colleagues and their married co-workers who were often distracted by their family obligations, made them attractive to employers under the aforementioned circumstances. They were the kind of employees Taiwanese industrial producers wished to have on their shop floor. The economic independence of women at Sacred Heaven at a relatively old age, which was less plausible if not entirely impossible at an earlier phase of Taiwan’s industrialization, was therefore sustained by a changing labor market enabled by Taiwan’s recent economic restructuring.

Marriage resistance as cultural transgression and conformity

The ability to be economically independent constituted only half of the story of marriage resistance, however. The act of avoiding marriage challenged the dominant cultural view about kinship, the family, and women’s destiny in Chinese society. Yet the deeply rooted belief against spirit tablet placement of an unmarried daughter at her father’s home upon her death, and the subsequent fear of becoming a homeless, eternally wandering ghost due to tablet displacement, had propelled unwed women in the past to undertake various arrangements to secure their wellbeing in the afterlife (Crane 2004; Watson 1985). Commonly observed was the course of adopting a daughter who would not only take care of her unwed mother in her old age but also be responsible for her spiritual happiness after she died, as was seen among the sworn spinsters in the Canton Delta (Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975) and some in Taiwan’s vegetarian halls (Chiang 1997).

The strategy employed by the women at Sacred Heaven attests to the multivocality of cultural interpretation among members of a society, which could have the effect of reinforcing or subverting a cultural ideal (see Weller 1994). Despite the fact that there was no formal ritual to signify the transition in their status, many of the middle-aged women at Sacred Heaven were considered as ‘married-off’ daughters by their own families. The ‘married’ status of women at Sacred Heaven was most notable on the second day of Chinese New Year, when, conventionally, married daughters would go back to niang-chia, the homes of their mothers. Ch’un-mei informed me that, in the morning of the second day of the new lunar year, many of these women’s paternal nephews would come to escort them home. She said: ‘It’s the custom. Brothers should send their sons to greet their aunts. That’s the propriety one should observe towards one’s married sisters.’

Still, these women had to take care of their spiritual well-being after death, if not for their own sake but to appease their parents and families. Although there was no ‘ancestral hall’ for these women to place their spirit tablets, the leadership of I-Kuan Tao took up the responsibility by building a communally-owned ling-ku-t’a (bone tower) to accommodate the remains of their deceased celibate female – and male – followers. This effort was further aided by the surging popularity of cremation and placing the ashes of one’s departed family member, with a fee, in a government-owned or privately run ling-ku-t’a instead of an individual tomb or a lineage-based ling-ku-t’a. This was primarily due to the scarcity of land and people’s busy schedules in post-agrarian Taiwan, making it difficult for them to tend to the needs of the deceased. In all of these establishments, on important Chinese holidays, the management would hold a religious ceremony (the nature of which depended on the establishment), burn incense, and have a feast to honour all their deceased residents. Placing one’s spirit tablet in such a place, therefore, provides the assurance that one’s needs in the afterlife will be tended to, regardless of whether one has living descendants to take up the responsibility. I would further suggest that this commercialization of caring for the dead, paralleled by the recent commercialization of caring for the aging living (e.g., employing a live-in foreign healthcare worker to take care of one’s elderly parents; Lan 2006), provides some possibilities for all Taiwanese, not just unmarried daughters, to evade or deviate from their ascribed social roles, thereby bearing the potential to subvert patrilineal ideology and practice in the Chinese kinship system.

It is the very thought that their daughters were already ‘married’, and their daily needs in this as well as in the other world taken care of, that comforted the elderly parents of women at Sacred Heaven. Paradoxically, even though the practice of marriage resistance defied the dominant view of gender and the family in Chinese society, the recurrent concern of unwed women over

their spirit displacement indicated the continued compliance of these women and their families to the Chinese kinship system. Marriage resistance was thus also a sign of cultural conformity; it did not overturn the patrilineal ideology but, counter-intuitively, reaffirmed it. In this regard, domination and resistance are coexistent, and cannot be disentangled (Sharpe et al. 2000).

Even so, resistance was often significant to the individuals involved, for their lives – as well as those of the people around them – were likely to be changed forever. Quite a few of the Sacred Heaven women did not choose to remain single simply because they feared marriage; neither did they lead a cloistered life. Rather, these women answered their own call for religious propriety by actively participating in the fo-t'ang's activities, which in turn provided them with opportunities to live beyond the daily terrain of family and work which they might otherwise have little chance to do, given their humble rural origin and working class background.

Personal growth and accomplishment

Although women of Sacred Heaven had to quit school and start working at a young age, many of them went back to school later in life. When I first visited Sacred Heaven in the mid-1990s, several women in their mid-thirties were studying in junior or vocational high school. Subsequently, upon high school graduation, a few of them began working as bookkeepers or accountants, jobs requiring higher levels of education and carrying higher prestige than those in the manufacturing sector.

On the religious front, as Sacred Heaven is a major worship center in the local area, in addition to the daily maintenance of the temple, quite a few of the residents also coordinated with the higher-ranking leaders in their district to design, organize, and execute various religious or social activities. Although they did not hold, or had not yet held, any official titles, they were indispensable assistants in initiation and other religious functions. Admittedly, many of the activities these fo-t'ang residents performed looked like an extension of domestic work traditionally carried out by women in the Taiwanese family. Specifically, with the help of female members in their congregation, they were in charge of providing lunch for regular Sunday worshippers as well as receptions for guests or distinguished visitors on special occasions. However, meal preparation for an I-Kuan Tao congregation was not synonymous with cooking for her own individual family. It was through this kind of communal activity that women at Sacred Heaven and those in the congregation began to develop friendly relationships (see Li 1999). Moreover, by making public a domestic chore like food preparation and serving a large constituency, women at the fo-t'ang not only accumulated religious virtue but also acquired

recognition and appreciation not usually bestowed on someone simply taking care of her own household. One Sacred Heaven senior member, Ah-chu, in particular, was revered by the congregation as the ‘chef’. No matter how big a meal there was to prepare or how many individuals there were to help wash and chop the vegetables, it was always she who would be standing next to the giant wok, working the spatula, and transforming the raw materials into delicious dishes. Occasionally, she would have a few helpers cook under her instructions. Like a commander-in-chief leading a small army, she guided the organization from beginning to end and ensured that everything went smoothly.

Because of their affiliation with Sacred Heaven, the intimate knowledge they had about I-Kuan Tao rituals and taboos, and the role they played in mobilizing local followers, women at the fo-t’ang were seen as exemplary models of religious propriety and were often sought by women believers in particular for advice. Likewise, many of the Sacred Heaven members maintained good relationships with the I-Kuan Tao believers in their district, i.e. followers in the adjacent villages who regularly attend the Sunday congregation and other gatherings. They hosted and received visitors to Sacred Heaven. They visited ill members of their congregation at home, attended funerals, and celebrated weddings, birthdays, and month-days of the newborn. This is in part due to the fact that single men and women in I-Kuan Tao live a this-worldly life and continue to maintain ties with their families and communities. The fo-t’ang residents rejoiced and mourned with followers of their temple because they were good neighbors or responsible members of the local community. They also participated in these events, however, not as individuals but as representatives of the Sacred Heaven Fo-t’ang. Being the host of the center of their religious community, it was both essential and practical for them to have good relations with the public. In addition, women of Sacred Heaven frequently joined seasonal and emergence relief efforts organized by the I-Kuan Tao leadership (World I-Kuan Tao Headquarters 2001b). Through these good deeds, they created a positive image of I-Kuan Tao among the local population, which would likely aid them in their conversion efforts.

The many responsibilities of women at Sacred Heaven were most evident on the white board hanging in the fo-t’ang’s living room that these women used to record their monthly duties. From the number of tasks listed under each day, it was clear that most of them had a busy schedule (although some were visibly busier than others). To prepare themselves for the diverse roles that they were encouraged and expected to play, many of these women took courses offered by the I-Kuan Tao regional office in their free time. The purpose of many of the courses was to help them better understand the essence of the Tao in order to prepare them for more important proselytizing missions in the future. The course materials, reflecting the syncretic nature of the

religion, were adapted from various religious and literary sources including ancient Chinese texts such as the Four Books (Szi-shu). While staying at Sacred Heaven one summer in the early 2000s, I was impressed by the efforts these women put into understanding these texts, which were usually reserved for students in higher education. Although the interpretations given to these texts were to support a specific religious worldview – and thus could be very different from the conventional reading – through them the women were introduced to the ancient literary world that they might otherwise not encounter as elementary or junior high school graduates. Moreover, they were sometimes required to draw on information from their course texts to write up ‘sermons’, and practice public speaking in front of the class – a skill that would come handy in the future. They were conscious about their own endeavors and frequently joked about it. Ah-fen, whom I ran into regularly at the library of Sacred Heaven while she was doing her homework, said: ‘Look at us! We are old, and we are studying like a girl. Other people study when they are young and quick. Only we do it when we are of age and slow. We can’t even read clearly [indicating her age-related far-sightedness]. And [the text] is really hard.’ Always with a big smile on her face, she was slightly embarrassed about being noticed for studying hard, yet at the same time she seemed to enjoy the experience of learning that she missed as a young girl.

Some of the courses taken by the women were not directly related to their religion but considered by them (and many Taiwanese) as good for self-improvement or refinement. These included English conversation and Chinese music instrument classes. After years of mastering the music instruments, some of the Sacred Heaven residents including Ah-fen had become teachers themselves and begun giving lessons to young members in their congregation.

Members of Sacred Heaven were also sent on short overseas missions, traveling as far as the inland provinces of China and lately Southeast Asia to spread the message of the Tao. Again, to prepare themselves for future missionary calls, some of them volunteered their time, at their own expense, to study the languages of prospective countries of destination. I learned in the summer of 2001 that Yu-ju and Ah-ch’in, two of the women at Sacred Heaven, had the ability to speak Thai, though still rudimentarily. Both had only elementary level formal education. Yet, through their own endeavors, they managed to acquire a language that very few Taiwanese could speak. Ah-ch’in learned the language through communicating with her fellow Thai workers. Yu-ju, however, went to great trouble to enroll in a Thai language class sponsored by the county government, which was open only to factory owners and managers. Without the proper qualification – she was neither a factory owner nor a manager – she had to fake her position through the help of a fellow worshipper whose factory had no objection to lending its name. Thai language skills not only proved useful to I-Kuan Tao’s proselytizing effort, but also beneficial to

their employers and co-workers. As foreign workers (primarily from Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand) have become an essential and integral part of Taiwan's industrial workforce – a by-product of Taiwan's recent economic restructuring – the language barrier between Taiwanese producers and their foreign employees has also become a major management problem on the shop floor (Lee 2002). However, the county government serving Homei Township only recently began to offer Thai language lessons for factory owners and managers. The language skills Yu-ju and Ah-ch'in had were thus readily applied to facilitate communication within each of their factories. Not only did the management in their workplaces gain from their expertise, their Thai co-workers also benefited from having someone translate for them. Needless to say, there was always the possibility that the Thai workers would be converted to I-Kuan Tao either because of their gratitude to these two Taiwanese women or through their direct proselytizing effort.

In all of these occasions, women at Sacred Heaven were able to learn new knowledge and skills, as well as explore new life experiences. This is a privilege usually associated with urban middle-class women that most working wives or full-time housewives in Homei are unable to enjoy, either because of the lack of appropriate economic means or their preoccupation with endless family obligations (Huang and Weller 1998).⁸

Views outside the Sisters' Hall

In spite of the positive aspects associated with their single status, the women of Sacred Heaven had not yet won the hearts of a wider audience outside the local I-Kuan Tao community. Singleness and cohabitation of unmarried women often raise suspicion and criticism or, at least, curiosity in Taiwanese society. Even within the larger I-Kuan Tao circle in Taiwan, there has always been lingering uneasiness about whether singleness should be incorporated into the teaching of I-Kuan Tao and, if so, how it may be explained.

The ambivalent attitude of the I-Kuan Tao leadership towards their single devotees was clearly illustrated in my interview with Mr. Chang, a chief administrator who was in charge of the community extension program based at the I-Kuan Tao headquarters in Taipei in the summer of 2000. The Senior Master of Mr. Chang's own lineage, who was female, had indeed remained unmarried. Possibly because of this, there was a higher number of single female believers, as well as single women holding the position of master/initiator, in Mr. Chang's lineage than in other lineages including Precious Radiance to which Sacred Heaven belongs. However, as soon as I explained my interest in the role of women who chose non-marriage in I-Kuan Tao,

Mr. Chang cautioned me not to overemphasize their importance. He said,

There are only a handful of them [roughly a thousand within his lineage]. Like many of the women you met in Homei, they may have more time to spread the Tao because they don't have family obligations – and they have certainly made valuable contributions – but they also lack the necessary education and social experience to plan activities effectively. We rely on intellectuals [chih shih fen tzu] to take on that responsibility. (Mr. Chang 2000)

Mr. Chang was particularly concerned that, by stressing the unmarried women, I would give people outside I-Kuan Tao a wrong – and negative – impression about their religion. He suggested that I look at more important issues if I wanted to fully understand their religion. In answering my question about how non-marriage was perceived within the I-Kuan Tao community, Mr. Chang chose to focus on the similarity between their religious teaching and Confucian rectitude. He told me that they did not incorporate singlehood as a topic of discussion. 'It's a personal choice, you see', he said,

People make their own decisions. We as a religion neither encourage nor discourage it. It's their destiny [yin yuan]! The teaching of I-Kuan Tao emphasizes the ethos of 'working to improve one's virtue while fulfilling one's obligations in this social world' [tzai chia ch'u chia, shih nung kung shang]. Our first and foremost guiding principle is 'the relations of humanity' [jen lun kang ch'ang], upon which 'Father and Son improve themselves together and Husband and Wife pursue the Tao as a team' [fu ch'i t'ung hsiu, fu tzu t'ung hsiu]. (Mr. Chang 2000)

Entrusted with the future expansion of I-Kuan Tao, Mr. Chang extolled the importance of 'family values' to me. His view about non-marriage being a personal choice, nevertheless, was repeated by one of the only two female initiators of the Lineage of Precious Radiance in the Homei area who has kept close working relationships with women of Sacred Heaven. A single I-Kuan Tao devotee in her fifties, Manager Yun (as she is called by the followers) played down her choice to remain single while telling me about her life story. There was nothing special about it, she said, in a light tone during our interview, it was simply a personal decision for convenience.

Outside the I-Kuan Tao official discourse, among the local population in Homei, my question about non-marriage met with much less consensus. Married women whom I talked to,

in particular, tended to have mixed, and often contradictory, feelings about those who chose an alternative unmarried path of life. Coincidentally, not long after I was introduced to Sacred Heaven by Ch'un-mei, three of her married co-workers signed up for a yoga class at the fo-t'ang. These three married co-workers became very interested in the women at Sacred Heaven, and I frequently saw them probing Ch'un-mei with many questions at lunch breaks: 'Do they have to pledge never to marry in order to be admitted to the fo-t'ang?' 'Have they really decided not to marry? Can they change their mind later if they regret their choice?' 'What kind of women are they [that led them to make such a decision]? Are they very different [from the rest of us]?' Sharing a common cultural background with these three married women, and thus knowing well that to remain single was rather unusual, Ch'un-mei eventually came to the defense of her co-residents, explaining that they did not exactly reject marriage but were simply waiting for their turn to come. Her explanation did not satisfy her married co-workers, however; they continued to engage in heated discussion among themselves. Yet, taking part in these conversations, I rarely detected hostility. It was more curiosity, and even envy, that prompted their enthusiasm. After all, like one of the married workers said, women at the fo-t'ang 'All have a [paid] job. They get to keep their income. They are free!'

Conclusion

Women of Sacred Heaven were 'free' certainly because they were not constrained by the designated roles of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law within the Taiwanese family and had an income at their disposal. Reading more closely, however, a deeper meaning associated with such freedom rests on their between-and-betwixt status in many social situations. On the one hand, they were religious and unmarried – and, by extension, celibate. Yet they were different from other religious and celibate women in that they were not detached from a secular mundane everyday life or from active participation in community and social work. The former sets them apart from Buddhist or Catholic nuns who live collectively and would have to observe a strict religious daily routine though they may engage in social and charity work, whereas the latter separates them from women who reside in a traditional vegetarian hall, following a Buddhist, Taoist, or other folk religious tradition, and who confine themselves primarily to their personal business and/or individual religious virtues. On the other hand, the continual involvement of women at Sacred Heaven with their families and friends, as well as their participation in the waged labor market (or the market economy in general), draws them close to Taiwanese women who are celibate but not religious. However, these two groups are different in that the fo-t'ang provided a ready shelter to accommodate its residents. It also presented an alternative social

space in which, even without a husband, the residents could give one another social and emotional support particularly in time of need.

Agency as an action-oriented concept can only be realized and thus understood against a specific background. In this case, the I-Kuan Tao religion presented an opportunity for self-realization to these women who would otherwise be relegated to a secondary role within the Taiwanese family structure. The same gender hierarchy in the family, however, also served as an ideological base that facilitated the hiring of these women as cheap industrial labor when they were young. Their early working experience as filial daughters and docile workers might have, in turn, motivated them to seek a different path within I-Kuan Tao later in life. Yet it was also factory employment that gave these women the economic independence essential for their initial ability to live a self-sufficient alternative life. All of these factors thus presented to the members of Sacred Heaven multiple yet often conflicting conditions in which they could – and had to – negotiate their lives.

Past literature on gender and global industrialization points out that, while the ideological construction of women as docile and nimble-fingered workers facilitated their massive recruitment into the global assembly line, the experiences and economic resources derived from industrial waged labor also provided these workers with new means to contest their subordination in the workplace or other arenas of daily life (Mills 2003). The story of women at Sacred Heaven attests to this theorization. However, economic factors alone do not grant a full understanding of these women's lives – or the life of any neophyte factory worker around the world. Just as their strategies of resistance were informed by their culture, they were also constricted by the same cultural parameters. Even though women at Sacred Heaven tried to establish a social space of their own, they also sought ways to make their choice culturally acceptable. This does not mean that their efforts did not have long-lasting effects, however. To subvert a cultural construct, the task is not whether to repeat it, but how to repeat it or to repeat it through a radical proliferation of possible practices (Butler 1990, 145–8). The alternative readings that these women and their families bestowed on their non-married situations (e.g., seeing them as 'married-off' daughters) and the solutions they found to care for their spiritual well-being (e.g., placing the spiritual tablets of deceased unmarried members in I-Kuan Tao-sponsored or commercially run bone towers) all provided new options for social acceptance for future Taiwanese women who seek a similar life trajectory. Nevertheless, they constructed these new options from within an existing cultural framework.

Also, economic context is critical. The story of women at Sacred Heaven shows that, over

time, whether a particular strategy adopted by women workers to seek a better life can continue to work depends on its articulation with the ever-changing global as well as local economic conditions. This is especially important in Taiwan where the economy transformed within a few short decades from one based on agriculture to one centered on manufacturing, but which is now moving in the direction of service industries. The different pattern of labor deployment, as well as the kind of labor available for deployment, at each of these stages has affected the effectiveness of women's strategies. In this case, the decision by members of Sacred Heaven not to marry was initially enabled by Taiwan's early phase of export-oriented industrialization that targeted young, single women as the ideal work force. Yet, their continual ability to support themselves, thus maintaining a self-sufficient lifestyle, was aided by Taiwan's recent economic restructuring in which middle-aged or married women were gradually perceived by industrial producers as favorable employees due to Taiwan's changing labor market.

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Notes

1. The personal names used in this article are all pseudonyms.
2. T'ang-chu (literally 'chairperson') is the official I-Kuan Tao title given to someone who establishes, owns and/or manages a fo-t'ang (Jordan and Overmyer 1986, 222–3).
3. Based on the Taiwan government's statistics (DGBAS 2001), in 2000, women of unmarried status constituted only 20.67% of the whole female population above age 20, and the number drops to 6.42% of the female population above age 30, although we do observe an increase in the percentage of unmarried women (and, in relation, the divorce rate) over the past 20 years (Chang 1999, 73–5; Chen 2005, 62–3; Jones 2005, 94–6). Single women constitute an even smaller percentage of I-Kuan Tao believers. According to the World I-Kuan Tao Headquarters (2001a), I-Kuan Tao currently has two million members. While a precise number is unavailable, it seems to be the consensus of my I-Kuan Tao informants that there are only a few thousand members among its followers who have decided not to marry, with the majority of them being females. In Western countries, declining rates of marriage have been largely but not completely

compensated by de facto arrangements such as common-law marriages or cohabitation. This does not appear to be the case in Taiwan (or elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia where non-marriage among women is also becoming common). There is little hard evidence on this, however (Jones 2005).

4. The I-Kuan Tao Pao-kuang Chien-t'o website:

<http://www.bgjd.org.tw/content.asp?MessageId/470> (accessed April 9, 2007).

5. Some of them, particularly the senior ones, went to find jobs in northern Taiwan in their young adulthood where large factories were concentrated, but they returned home to Homei later in their lives and worked in local factories after the export-oriented industrialization developed at full speed in Homei and elsewhere in Taiwan.

6. NT\$31=US\$1.

7. This insight was offered by Dr. Huang Yeewen of Changhua Christian Hospital, who contributed his experience as both a psychiatrist and chaplain in the Hospital, working closely with the same population on whom I based my current research, to understand the religious experience of women in this article.

8. Since the 1990s, there has been a religious revival in Taiwan in which women play an important role (Huang Forthcoming, 2009; Huang and Weller 1998; Weller 1999, 2005). A full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say, however, the active participation of women at Sacred Heaven could be considered as a part of – or aided by – this larger trend.

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