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Shaping one's own destiny: Global economy, family, and women's struggle in the Taiwanese context

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Abstract

This article compares and contrasts the experience of two working women as their lives were affected by Taiwan's economic restructuring in the late 1990s. Both women were in their thirties and unmarried. However, one woman's decision to remain single and return to school caused a major disagreement in her family, while the other's decision was respected by her family. Two factors are particularly instructive in explaining these differences. The first is the pattern of their labor market participation, which reflected the way in which each of their families was incorporated into Taiwan's economy and thus the structural constraints each family faced under the recent economic restructuring. This was further augmented by the issue of marriage. As marriage is viewed as part of a Taiwanese woman's destiny, these women had to find a culturally acceptable alternative in order for their decisions to be accepted by their families.

Introduction

Probably due to the short history of industrialization in many parts of the developing world, much of the gender and global industrialization literature (e.g., Chow, 2003; Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Rothstein & Blim, 1992; Ward, 1990) emphasizes the opening stage of transformation when women in a society, single or married, were first recruited into factory work. This emphasis tends to be concerned with the global and local interaction at the juncture when social relations in a newly industrializing economy are initially reconfigured, with culture as a significant interlocutor. However, over time, whether a particular practice based on gender ideologies adopted for the benefit of either capital or labor can be continuously effective depends on its articulation with the ever-changing global and local economic conditions. Furthermore, granted a different context, the same cultural ideology employed to legitimize the subordination of women in any given society could also be drawn upon by the women themselves as a strategy to subvert their subordination. Therefore, the study of gender and global industrialization should focus not only on cultural distinctions based on locale, or the interaction of gender and other stratifying factors within a

socio-cultural system, but also on how gender can produce different effects and meanings over time under different historical-economic circumstances. This is especially evident in Taiwan where the economy transformed within a few decades from one based on agriculture to one centering on manufacturing, and currently moving towards service industries. The pattern of labor deployment, as well as the labor available for deployment, differs at each of these stages. Given the short span of time involved, I argue that the impact of these transitions can be observed during the work life of one single individual (see Lee, 2004 for details).¹

To illustrate these points, this article compares and contrasts the experiences of two working women as their lives were affected by Taiwan's recent economic restructuring since the late 1980s (namely, capital outflow and deindustrialization): Wang Mei-ling, who came from an industrial–entrepreneurial family that owned a small textile factory, and Yang Ch'un-mei, who grew up in a family that had a little plot of land but not enough to feed the entire household. Family background aside, these two women shared much in common. When I first met them in the mid-1990s, they were both in their early thirties and unmarried. They both started laboring for their family at an early age, one at her father's factory and the other working for other factory owners, to help improve the economic conditions of their families; as a result, they missed the opportunity to continue their education as far as they would have hoped. To build a life and career different from the ones they had had in their youth, they both insisted on going back to school for more education while remaining single at a relatively old age. Despite these early similarities, their later experiences differed considerably. While one woman's decision to remain single and return to school caused a major uproar in her family, the other's determination won acceptance from her widowed mother and siblings.

This article brings together two literatures that are usually discussed separately: labor and gender under global industrialization, and gender and family (epitomized by marriage) in the Chinese cultural context. In doing so, it argues that two factors are particularly useful in explaining these two women's varied experiences, notwithstanding the specific family dynamics and individual personalities involved. The first is the pattern of their labor market participation. The fact that one of the women labored for her family while the other worked for others as a hired hand does not simply signal a difference in personal choice or family wealth but, rather, reflects the way in which each of their families was incorporated into Taiwan's economy and thus the structural constraints each family faced under the recent economic restructuring. Specifically, while Taiwanese industrial producers continued to see labor as a key to their competitiveness in the global economy during the 1990s, it was increasingly difficult for them to find cheap labor given Taiwan's expanding labor market and rising number of service sector jobs, on the one hand, and young Taiwanese women's preference for newly created service jobs over traditional manufacturing employment, on the other. This particularly affected Taiwanese industrial–entrepreneurial families who, in turn, were ever more dependent on their children's labor to overcome this labor problem. Mei-ling was thus under great pressure to work for her family at a time when the job market was changing and increasingly diversified. In contrast, ironically, Ch'un-mei, Mei-ling's

counterpart from a less privileged background, had no family factory to labor for but was highly sought after by other industrial employers. This allowed her relatively more freedom to pursue her personal goals. Together, their stories challenge the view implied in most of the demography literature that a better-off economic background and more access to education would give a woman more options for resisting marriage. These two cases show that the effects of family-level socioeconomic indicators on the outcome of marriage resistance were mitigated by families as economic actors.

The contrast between the two women was further augmented by the fact that Ch'un-mei was able to find a culturally acceptable alternative to marriage. She joined the residence of a group of middle-aged single women who were devout followers of I-Kuan Tao [Yiguan Dao] (the Unity Way) and who had decided to remain single in order to perfect their religious quest. She convinced her mother that, even without a husband, her life would be taken care of by these women. In comparison, Mei-ling was not able to find an alternative social space to sway her parents to accept that she made a right decision. As a result, her spinster status caused her parents much worry about her future welfare. It was also a topic of neighborhood gossip and increasingly an embarrassment to the family, which, ultimately, became the root of family tension and strife.

Methodology

The life stories of Wang Mei-ling and Yang Ch'un-mei that inform the analysis of this article are part of my research that investigates the impact of Taiwan's recent economic restructuring on the local economy and society of Homei, a small town of approximately 90,000 residents in central Taiwan well known for its history in weaving production, with a chief focus on the experience of female textile workers, since the mid-1990s. The development of Homei's textile industry after World War II closely reflects the path of Taiwan's economic development in the postwar era which, in a short span of four decades, experienced import-substitution industrialization (1950s–early 1960s), export-oriented industrialization (late 1960s–1970s), the status of one of the world's manufacturing powerhouses (1980s), and economic restructuring (starting from the late 1980s) (Lee, 2004).

At the initial stage of the research, I lived in Homei for nearly two and half years (September 1993–December 1995), first staying with the Wang family where I came to know Meiling well and later moving to the dormitory of Treasure Island, a local textile company, where Ch'un-mei was employed as a loom tender and one of my roommates in the dormitory. After my departure at the end of this period, I made regular return trips to Homei to follow up on its economic changes over time. My knowledge of the women textile workers is derived primarily from ethnographic fieldwork, namely participant observation and the everyday chats and conversations I had with them. Additional insight was gained from talking to other Homei residents, either through formal interviews or informal discussions. I also visited other textile factories in Homei and elsewhere in Taiwan, to obtain an understanding of the larger economic context within which Homei's textile industry is embedded.

There is always a certain arbitrariness in how the researcher in an ethnographic study comes to associate him/herself closely with particular individuals, households, and/or social groups or organizations, which often became the primary source of their information. However, the life stories of Mei-ling and Ch'un-mei were not chosen simply because they happened to be a member of the family – or an employee of the textile company – that housed me during my research. They were chosen because their workplaces – the Wang family factory and Treasure Island presented two different kinds of production organizations that were representative not only of Homei's textile industry but, to large extent, also of Taiwan's manufacturing sector (Chen, 2001; Hsu, 2005; SMEA, 2008b). The Wang family factory was typical in Taiwan's highly decentralized industrial system (Hsiung, 1996; Hu, 1984; Ka, 1993). Its production size was small, and the nature of their business was subcontracting. Family members constituted the core of its workforce, although from time to time additional workers were hired from outside the family. The Wang family, like their counterparts countrywide, depended primarily on the collaboration and cooperation of family members to overcome economic ups-and-downs. On the other hand, with more than one hundred production worker on its payroll, Treasure Island was considered a big company not only locally but also by Taiwan's industrial standards, although it was still tiny by the world's standards (SMEA, 2008a). It was not a family business but had multiple investors, all of whom had a voice in major company decisions. The relatively large size of Treasure Island also made it necessary to develop a more complex and hierarchical organizational structure with several layers of management, which in turn required shop floor managers to utilize formal management policies and labor recruitment strategies other than relying on personal relations and/or social obligations as the head of a family firm (usually the eldest male [or son] in the family) would mostly do. Accordingly, in contrast to the situation of individuals laboring for their family factories whose rights and responsibilities as a worker were often conflated with their rights and responsibilities as a family member, this formalization of production relations gave workers at Treasure Island (as well as in other like industrial settings) different, if not more, opportunities to bargain for self-interests separate from their social obligations toward their bosses and co-workers, many of whom were also their friends and neighbors. The relatively large size of Treasure Island also made it more favorable than family factories for young and/or unmarried women because it offered a work environment in which one could make friends. This is in great contrast to a family factory environment like the Wang family factory where one often worked alone, with one's own family, or with only a few other employees.

The Wang family factory and Treasure Island thus epitomize two different types of workplace in Taiwan's industrial sector. Correspondingly, the experiences of Mei-ling and Ch'un-mei were exemplary of women under similar circumstances, who were placed in each of these settings due to their family economic situations. Together, these constituted the institutional bounds within which female workers had to negotiate their lives.

Theoretical context

Globally and economically, women like Mei-ling and Ch'un-mei were an integral part of

the labor force in Taiwan's post-World War II economic development that was closely related to the concurrent process of global industrialization. Past literature has established that global industrial expansion is a gendered process, in which women are often the targeted workers for the newly created industrial work (Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Pun, 2005; Salzinger, 2003). However, the experience of women workers around the globe does not appear to be homogeneous. Ethnographic studies from different parts of the world indicate that global industrialization is also a process of flexible accumulation that employs increasingly heterogeneous workforces and utilizes multiple modes of production (Harvey, 1990). Accordingly, different models of regulation based on gender ideologies have been developed to manage labor (Mills, 2003; Ong, 1997), ranging from direct despotic labor management in large firms (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Lee, 1998; Ong, 1987) to paternalistic control in small-scale, family-centered factories (Greenhalgh, 1994; Hsiung, 1996; Lee, 2004). Yet, if ideological constructions of women as docile and nimble-fingered workers have facilitated their massive recruitment as an ideal workforce for the global assembly line, the experiences and resources of wage labor also provide these women with new means to contest their subordination both in the workplace and in other areas of daily life (Mills, 2003: 48). Women workers 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 (Caioli, 1998; Kim, 1997; Simon, 2003). 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).

The stories of Wang Mei-ling and Yang Ch'un-mei exemplify culturally specific modes of labor management and possibilities of workers' subversion, thereby supporting the above theorizations. Both women adopted the strategy of marriage resistance in their pursuit of personal goals. Locally and culturally, marriage has until recently been nearly universal to both men and women in Chinese societies including Taiwan (Jones, 2005; Thornton & 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 (Wolf, 1972). Unmarried females are viewed as temporary members of their natal families. It is only through marriage that women are accepted into their husband's family and permanently integrated into a lineal line. 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, the failure of which has been considered in Chinese culture as a serious breach of filial piety even today (Simon, 2004). Economically, marriage also grants, especially to 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, therefore, is 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.

Over the past twenty years, however, non-marriage for women is becoming more common in Taiwan especially in big cities (Chen, 2005: 62–63; Jones, 2005: 94–96).² Concomitant is the phenomenon of the continued upward shift in age at marriage, which indicates that a substantial number of Taiwanese women will remain single during a large part of their early life course (Jones, 2005: 94).³ This is primarily due to the expansion in female education and the fast growing economy in the past few decades that opened up employment opportunities for Taiwanese women particularly in the areas of service professions but also in manufacturing (Tables 1 and 2).⁴ Labor force participation rates for women have risen accordingly. While many of these new jobs are repetitive, dead-end, and frequently poorly paid compared to the same tasks performed by men, they nonetheless provide women with an opportunity to be financially independent as well as find (mainly female) friendship and companionship at the workplace.

The decision to remain single made by Wang Mei-ling and Yang Ch'un-mei thus dovetails with the general trends both globally and in the contemporary Taiwanese society. Yet, what also becomes clear from their life stories discussed below is, over time, within the bound of culture, whether a particular practice based on gender ideologies adopted for the benefit of either capital or labor can be continuously effective depends on its articulation with the ever-changing global as well as local economic conditions. Their stories challenge any simple, ahistorical conclusion about the connection between a woman's socioeconomic background and education attainment and her ability to pursue a life path alternative to the culturally prescribed ones (in this case, through the means of marriage resistance). I thus stress an analysis that takes into account not only spatial differences but also changes mediated by temporal factors. Comparative studies of gender and global industrialization should focus not only on cultural distinctions based on locale and interaction with other stratifying factors (such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, age, or sexuality) within a socio-cultural system, but also on how gender can produce different meanings and effects under different historical-economic circumstances.

Table 1

Opportunity of education in Taiwan by sex (%).

School year	Secondary education ^a			Higher education ^b		
	Age 12–17			Age 18–21		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1976	73.6	77.6	69.3	15.7	19.3	11.9
1981	82.5	82.6	82.5	18.7	20.8	16.6
1986	92.2	90.9	93.6	25.2	26.7	23.6
1991	95.4	93.6	97.3	37.9	38.1	37.7
1996	95.8	94.1	97.6	47.7	45.7	49.8
1999	99.6	98.3	101.0	61.0	57.8	64.4
2000	99.2	98.1	100.5	68.4	65.7	71.3
2001	98.6	98.3	100.6	77.1	74.5	79.9

Source: Adapted from Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics (DBGAS)

(2002).

^a The numerator equals the number of students attending junior and senior high schools (including night schools, special-aid schools, and schools of continuing education) and the first three years of the five-year junior colleges. The denominator equals the number of people aged 12 to 17 at the end of the year in question.

^b The numerator equals the number of students attending junior colleges (including colleges of distance education and the last two years of five-year junior colleges) and four-year colleges and universities. The denominator equals the number of people aged 18 to 21 at the end of the year in question.

Gender and Taiwan's recent economic restructuring

It was only in the 1960s that the Taiwan government adopted an export-oriented initiative to spearhead its industrialization. By the 1980s, however, Taiwan had grown into a manufacturing powerhouse in the global economy. Yet, ironically, it was also at the peak of its success that Taiwanese industrial producers began to feel the squeeze caused by changes in both Taiwanese society and internationally. Production cost was 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 to their shop floor in the country (Lee, 2002). By the late 1990s Taiwan had exported most of its labor-intensive industries that once made it globally famous.

Gender is a key to the understanding of Taiwan's recent economic restructuring. As in many parts of the world, in the initial stage of Taiwan's export industrialization in the late 1960s and 1970s, it was young, single women who were recruited by factory owners (Kung, 1994). With the endorsement of their parents, young girls often started working as soon as they graduated from elementary school; their monthly wages were frequently the only regular, reliable source of income of their families. However, as Taiwan's economy started to take off and the economic conditions of individual families (particularly in rural areas) began to improve, parents no longer felt the pressure of having 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 or even (vocational) high school or junior (two-year) college education. 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 chances for upward mobility and marriage prospect than manufacturing work. 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 the population between age twenty and twenty-four by the mid- 1980s; there were fewer young people available for hiring than before.⁵ Despite 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 remain 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 workforce. 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). In addition, young women who chose to continue to work in factories tended to have a sense of economic independence because industrial employers needed them. Some even felt that they could choose to remain unmarried and support themselves with their wages, resonating with the larger demographic trends indicated in the previous section (Lee, 2008).

Table 2

Educational attainment of civilian population age 15 and over in Taiwan (%).

Average of year	Total	Primary and below	Junior high	Senior high and vocational	Junior college and above
1976	100.0	60.5	14.8	17.7	7.0
1981	100.0	52.1	16.2	21.6	9.8
1986	100.0	44.5	17.4	26.3	11.7
1991	100.0	37.4	17.8	29.9	14.8
1996	100.0	30.7	17.3	32.8	19.2
2001	100.0	25.5	16.3	33.7	24.5

Source: Adapted from Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics (DBGAS) (2002).

The numerator equals the number of students attending junior and senior high schools (including night schools, special-aid schools, and schools of continuing education) and the first three years of the five-year junior colleges. The denominator equals the number of people aged 12 to 17 at the end of the year in question. The numerator equals the number of students attending junior colleges (including colleges of distance education and the last two years of five-year junior colleges) and four-year colleges and universities. The denominator equals the number of people aged 18 to 21 at the end of the year in question.

The stories of two Taiwanese women

Wang Mei-ling and Yang Ch'un-mei were both born in 1965 and thus slightly younger than the first generation of female workers who experienced firsthand the transition of the Taiwanese economy from one based on agriculture to one centered on industrial manufacturing (c.f. Kung, 1994). Nonetheless, their work experiences are similar in many respects to that of the generation before them. They are older, however, than the generations coming of age during and after the recent economic restructuring. By the early 1990s when Taiwanese industrial employers were competing for younger, better-educated workers with their counterparts in the service sector, Mei-ling and Ch'un-mei were already in their late twenties. They were considered too old for entry-level jobs in the service sector but too inexperienced or short of right credentials to assume a position of higher responsibilities. Many employers also hesitated hiring people like them, due to the concern that they might get

married and leave the wage labor market for a domestic life forever. Paradoxically, these drawbacks also made them desirable factory workers. Their advantages and disadvantages in Taiwan's wage labor market under the recent economic restructuring were thus both derived from their between and-between status.

Wang Mei-ling: daughter of an industrial-entrepreneurial Family

Wang Mei-ling's family grew asparagus for international markets in the early post-World War II years. In the late 1970s, following the example of many of his fellow villagers in Homei, Mei-ling's father used the capital accumulated from agricultural production to set up a weaving factory on his farmland, to take advantage of Taiwan's full-fledged export industrialization at the time. The Wang factory was essentially a family business. The four children in the family – Mei-ling's elder brother, her two elder sisters and Mei-ling herself-constituted the core of the workforce. The children were still going to junior high or high school when their father started the factory. They worked side by side with hired employees, tending looms after school as well as on weekends. They also had to fill in for workers who were sick or absent from work. Mei-ling's brother also served as a mechanic.

Compared to women of her generation in Homei, Mei-ling was considered privileged. While many of the girls in her cohort had only junior high school qualifications, Mei-ling as well as her elder siblings all went to vocational high school. After high school, they were all encouraged by their parents to stay home and work at the family factory until, for the girls, they got married and moved out to join their husbands' families. Mei-ling and her second sister, the two youngest children in the Wang family, had a different idea about their future, however. They both wanted a career not only outside their father's textile factory but outside manufacturing altogether. In order to enhance their chance of finding a white-collar job in Taiwan's expanding service sector, they both expressed the wish to have more education; they wanted to have at least a junior college diploma. As the elder of the two, Mei-ling's second sister made her request to their parents first after her high school graduation. Although she had to wait a few years, she eventually got their (particularly financial) support to attend a local junior college. Mei-ling, one year younger than her second sister, made her demand about continuing schooling as soon as she graduated from high school. Her parents told her to wait because they could not afford to pay for two college tuitions at the same time. Generally, such a delay is not an issue because younger female children in a Taiwanese family often have the advantage over their elder female siblings in educational attainment, given that the family budget usually improves over the course of the domestic cycle (Parish & Willis, 1993). In this case, however, Mei-ling was also getting older while she was waiting.

Mei-ling also told her family that she would not consider the possibility of marriage until she graduated from junior college, despite her parents' matchmaking efforts and the fact that she was approaching thirty, a fairly old age for Taiwanese women to be still unmarried. Mei-ling's insistence, at remaining single until she completed her college education was informed by her understanding of gender roles in Taiwanese society, especially the drastic

change in social surroundings and the many more family responsibilities that a woman had to endure upon marriage (cf. Gallin, 1994; Lan, 2006: 94–124). Taiwan is traditionally a patrilineal, patrilocal society. Even though in recent years an increasing number of newly-wed couples have chosen to establish their own residence instead of living with the husband's parents, the duty of a daughter-in-law remains central to a married woman's life. This includes not only attending to domestic chores and caring for senior members (primarily parents-in-law but sometimes also grandparents-in-law) but, in the context of Taiwan's export industrialization, also frequently includes laboring in one's in-law's family enterprise (Hsiung 1996). This was certainly the life of Mei-ling's eldest sister who, according to Mei-ling, was obliged to work at her father-in-law's textile factory alongside with her four other sisters-in-law, until her father-in-law's retirement.

In any case, Mei-ling listened to her parents and waited; she made her request again only after her sister's graduation from junior college. This time, however, she was discouraged by her parents as they were worried that a few more years of schooling would only make her older and further diminish her prospects of marriage. They did not want her to be left alone, without anybody or any family to take care of her, when she got old. They also had to bear the social pressure for having a spinster grownup daughter. Mei-ling's parents also shared the idea of many of their fellow villagers who did not see much value in higher education for young women (the education for young men, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter). They saw their primary responsibility as parents as finding a good husband from a respectable family for their daughter, so that her future would be well-attended. Following this logic, they actually invested more on their daughters than many of their friends or neighbors by sending their daughters to high school (and even junior college). They did not feel that they had to oblige to their youngest daughter's wish this time.

Given Mei-ling's age, the first priority of Mei-ling's parents was to find her a husband. If they could not get her married, however, they would rather have her work at the family factory than go back to school. They needed her labor. Past literature on the industrialization of Taiwan has pointed out the many advantages of using one's own family as the chief labor force, particularly the efficiency and flexibility (in addition to a cheaper labor cost), as enabling Taiwanese factory owners to remain competitive in a global market that required increasingly lower prices and shorter turn-around time (Gereffi & Pan, 1994). The salience of family labor was made even clearer under Taiwan's recent economic restructuring, in which industrial producers were struggling to keep an inexpensive and stable workforce. Mei-ling's parents faced an additional problem: once both of Mei-ling's elder sisters were married, and the Wang family would lose their labor forever to the families of their husbands.

The year 1991 was a turning point for the Wang family. In that year Mei-ling's second eldest sister got married (the eldest sister married a few years earlier) thereby leaving Meiling the only unmarried daughter at home who could help the family ease the labor shortage. Also in that year, Mei-ling's father resolved that he had had enough of running the family factory; he made the decision to retire, and passed the factory as inheritance to his son, Mei-ling's elder brother. It was also the year that Mei-ling decided that she had endured enough

dismissal from her family. She was bitter about the fact that she was made to wait for her second sister to graduate from junior college, but her desire to go to school was eventually rejected by her parents. She made up her mind to go back to school. She enrolled secretly in a night junior college, using the money she had saved from years of working for her father, to pay for the initial tuition, and only told her parents about it the night before the semester began. By that time it was too late for her parents to force her to quit. They could only accept it as a fact.

Mei-ling's brother inherited the family factory at a time when the industrial sector in Taiwan was experiencing a labor shortage. As a strategy to solve the labor problem, as well as to increase the profit margin, he decided to downsize the factory. With the new arrangement, he would only need three workers, one per shift, to take care of the looms. With Mei-ling working one shift during the day, he only needed to find two more workers to take care of the night and graveyard shifts.⁶ He would be the mechanic himself. His plan was supported by his parents. It seemed reasonable to them all that, as long as Mei-ling remained unmarried, she was one of the family and she should and would devote herself wholeheartedly to the family. Yet, what was conveniently forgotten but nonetheless remained pertinent in everybody's mind was the fact that, under the Taiwanese patrilineal system, Mei-ling as a daughter is not – and will never be – a true and permanent member of the Wang family (Cohen, 1976; Wolf, 1972). In accordance with their opinion that Mei-ling's destiny should be with a husband and his family, Mei-ling's parents also believed that the Wang family should comprise themselves, their son, his future wife, and all the sons they bore (their daughters would eventually be married off just like their aunts were a generation before). This conviction, as well as Mei-ling's ambiguous status at home, was made evident in an argument that her parents had over her. Concerned about his daughter's welfare, Mei-ling's father considered giving his daughter NT\$2 million so that she could have something to fall back on in case she remained single for her entire life. This was also the amount of money he gave his son, along with the factory, upon his retirement. Because this money might seem like an inheritance given to Mei-ling (although in reality Mei-ling's brother would be the sole heir of the Wang family farmland and other non-movable properties), this idea was rejected vehemently by Mei-ling's mother, who saw this as an unfair treatment of her son. She said that there was no precedent of giving daughters a share of the family inheritance; they should be, instead, given a dowry on the day of their wedding. By giving Mei-ling something other than the form of a dowry was to take away what rightfully belonged to her brother.

When Mei-ling's brother failed to find two more employees to work on the night and graveyard shifts, Mei-ling became her brother's sole worker; she regularly worked ⁸ hours a day before going to school at night. When she had to be in class, Mei-ling's brother had no other choice but to turn off the machines. However, he tried to keep Mei-ling on the shop floor as much as possible. It was a necessary strategy to keep the factory going. Yet, Mei-ling spoke bitterly about it. She said that she was always urged to work whenever she was off from school. Her brother's wedding in 1992 seemed only to heighten her resentment. Mei-ling's sister-in-law did not come from a textile family; she knew nothing about weaving

and she did not appear to be eager to learn. Mei-ling's brother rarely asked his wife to work in the factory. "Tending looms is a lot of hard work, and he loves her too much," Mei-ling would comment sarcastically about this situation. It might not be personal affection, however, but a family division of labor based on cultural beliefs that were at work here. Just like Meiling as an unmarried daughter was to work hard to help increase the collective wealth of her natal family (which would one day be inherited by her brother), the chief responsibility of Mei-ling's sister-in-law as a daughter-in law was to produce male heirs for the family.

It became painfully obvious that Mei-ling's brother depended on her for the operation – and thereby, success – of his factory. Mei-ling was particularly angry that her labor was taken for granted by her family. Her relationship with her parents and brother turned even more sour when she announced that she would like to have Sundays off in addition to her school time. Mei-ling said that her mother was particularly upset. She saw her daughter's request as a further betrayal to her son and the Wang family. At the end, it was Mei-ling's action of going out every Sunday that forced the family to accept her absence as a fact. However, her mother and brother never quite forgot what she did. Their relationship has remained distant since then.

The dilemma of Mei-ling illustrates the double-edged effect of culture on gender and global industrialization. On the one hand, under the principle of Taiwanese patriliney, family loyalty was constantly called upon to secure Mei-ling's labor. On the other hand, it was also the principle of patriliney that propelled Mei-ling's parents to think her future should be with a husband and his family. The Wang family's claim over her labor could only be temporary, especially now that the factory was owned and run by her brother but no longer by her father. Mei-ling's status as a spinster daughter hence created a betwixt-and-between state that lent legitimacy to the assertion of her parents and brother while at same time allowing enough ambiguity for her to pursue her personal aspirations. Mei-ling's situation also challenged a static understanding of the impact of global industrialization, however. The sense of possibility Mei-ling had about her life was partly derived from the success of the Wang family factory in, and the wealth accumulated through, Taiwan's early export-oriented industrialization. She was privileged to have more education – and likely a better chance for career development – than many women of her cohort in Homei. Yet, ironically, it was precisely the Wang family's concern for continual success under Taiwan's recent economic restructuring that made Mei-ling's labor indispensable to her family. This, as a result, caught her in a conflict between her needs and the needs of her family.

Yang Ch'un-mei: daughter of a factory-less family

Born into a poor farming family, Ch'un-mei did not have many of the privileges while growing up enjoyed by Mei-ling. She is the eldest daughter, followed by four brothers and two sisters. Her father was the sole economic source of the family when Ch'un-mei was young. With many mouths to feed but not enough means to do so, Ch'un-mei's father was constantly in debt and under pressure to look for non-agricultural earnings. However, as Taiwan's export industrialization had only begun, and young boys and girls were the preferred

workforce, he could only supplement agricultural revenue with temporary, low-paid employment. Exhausted from his economic burden, Ch'un-mei's father frequently took his frustration out on his wife and children by abusing them physically.

Like many girls of her generation and the generation before, Ch'un-mei began to work for industrial wages right after she graduated from elementary school at age twelve. She could have gone on to junior high school because the tuition was made affordable after the Taiwan government extended the mandatory education from six to nine years in 1968. Even so, Ch'un-mei's father wanted her to start working as soon as she finished elementary school. Like Mei-ling's parents who doubted the usefulness of higher education for women, Ch'un-mei's father did not see much value in three extra years of schooling for girls. He insisted, however, that his sons should have at least junior high school education, because they needed it to find decent jobs. Although he changed his mind and allowed Ch'un-mei to go to junior high school after Ch'un-mei begged him, she gave up this opportunity later. She said that she wanted to lessen her father's burden as she could no longer bear to see her father beating her mother. Her monthly salary quickly became her family's main source of income.

For more than ten years Ch'un-mei was the primary breadwinner of the family. The hardest years came after her father's death when she became the household head and the sole wage earner at age nineteen. Her mother was too weak from years of bad health to assume the responsibility; she relied on her eldest daughter to make decisions as well as for economic and emotional support. Ch'un-mei's brothers and sisters were still at elementary or junior high school then. They were too young to be helpful in any major way. Only after the oldest of Ch'un-mei's younger brothers graduated from junior high school, finished his mandatory military service, and went to work as a relatively well-paid mechanic in a motorcycle shop, was Ch'un-mei able to shed her responsibilities. The economic condition of Ch'un-mei's family also started to improve. A new house was built a few years later with the wages of Ch'un-mei and some of her younger brothers.

Only after she was freed from her primary family responsibility, did Ch'un-mei begin to pursue her own goals. She went back to junior high school in 1990 at age twenty-five, and graduated in 1994 when she was twenty-nine. She continued on to take the vocational high school entrance exam that summer, and was admitted to a well-known night school in a city near Homei. While pursuing her high school education, Ch'un-mei continued to work as a loom tender in the local textile industry. In addition to the pay that was one of the highest among industrial employments for women, the fact that she was an experienced, mature, and "duty-free" worker – as opposed to her more playful and less responsible younger colleagues, as well as married workers who were often distracted by their family obligations – also granted her some leverage from employers. Ch'un-mei was the kind of employee Taiwanese industrial producers preferred on their shop floor, and they were willing to make adjustments to retain her. On a few occasions Ch'un-mei thought about leaving the factory for a service job as that would give her more time to study even though the pay would be lower than that in the textile industry. However, every time she expressed her wish to resign, she was persuaded to change her mind by the management of the factory.

Like Mei-ling, Ch'un-mei also gave no consideration to marriage, at least before she finished her (high) schooling. To give herself more personal time, after graduating from junior high school, she took residence at the Sacred Heaven Fo-tang, an I-Kuan Tao temple built, inhabited and managed by a group of middle-aged women who had by and large decided to remain celibate in order to devote their lives to study the Tao (Lee, 2008). Ch'un-mei had converted to I-Kuan Tao — “a syncretic, universally salvational, apocalyptic, and evangelical religion whose members practice vegetarianism and are led by charismatic masters” (Skoggard, 1996: 157), in her early days of working in the textile industry. Over the years, Ch'un-mei developed a special communion with the residents at Sacred Heaven, located not far from where her mother's home. Ch'unmei spent most of her evenings in the fo-tang, and returned home to visit her mother from time to time. When asked why she decided to live in the fo-tang, Ch'un-mei said:

For many years I was the one who had to take care of my family. I had to make all the decisions, and solve all the problems. I got so tired, and exhausted [from both of the physical and mental stress.] Besides, my brothers need to learn to make decisions. I am glad to have this opportunity to be by myself for a while! My mom understands this need of mine, too. [Author: “What about the pressure to get married?”] My mom worries about finding me a husband. But I told her 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.

Arguably, compared to Mei-ling, Ch'un-mei enjoyed more autonomy at home. Although she was subjected to the great burden of being the sole breadwinner at a tender age after her father's untimely death, she also became the de facto family head and assumed the authority accordingly. She was looked up to by her mother and younger brothers and sisters. The decisions she made, particularly those about herself, were well respected. This does not mean, however, that her mother did not raise concerns over her choice of not getting married — or, at least, delaying marriage. Like Mei-ling's parents, Ch'unmei's mother was worried about her daughter's future. Yet, in contrast to Mei-ling who was facing persistent objections from her family, Ch'un-mei effectively persuaded her mother into accepting her decision. This was in part due to her comparatively autonomous status at home, but, more importantly, it was also because she was able to find an alternative social space that could shelter her as well as provide her with social and emotional support even without a husband. It was the thought that Ch'un-mei would be taken care of during her old age (but not simply the influence she had over her mother) that helped put her mother at ease with her non-marriage decision. Furthermore, by co-residing with a group of single women at a place with religious overtones, Ch'un-mei was joining a string of Chinese women, in both the imperial period and at the present time, who adopted the strategy of marriage resistance through religious means in their attempt to establish a life outside the traditional realm of patrilineal family (Lee, 2008). Although the choice of celibacy (either made by a man or a woman) has never been fully

avored, and is always received with reservation, in Chinese societies including contemporary Taiwan (Li, 2002; Simon, 2004), it is nonetheless acknowledged as an option to marriage. Therefore, by joining Sacred Heaven Fo-tang, Ch'un-mei not only helped to reduce her mother's anxiety over her future, but also provided her family with culturally acceptable grounds to respond to the queries and curiosity of friends, neighbors, or even strangers about her marital status.

The teaching of I-Kuan Tao emphasizes apocalyptic eschatology and individual salvation (Bosco, 1994). According to Skoggard (1996: 157–158):

those who receive the Dao [Tao] 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 Dao [Tao] 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.

Women of Sacred Heaven were certainly good models of this religious dedication (Lee, 2008). Slightly older than Ch'un-mei, these women had fairly similar work and personal experiences to hers. Many of them converted to I-Kuan Tao in their late adolescence or early adulthood while living in factory dormitories. The original construction funds of Sacred Heaven came from some of the most senior fo-tang residents at the time when Ch'un-mei joined them, along with a few others who once lived in the fo-tang but were no longer there. These women one day decided that they should do more for the religion than simply improving themselves. They 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-tang 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. Over time, there were also other women joining Sacred Heaven as long-term residents, with Ch'un-mei being one of the newest and youngest members. There was no formal procedure to screen or evaluate those who expressed wish to live in the fo-tang; neither was there a legal contract for potential residents to sign. Women of Sacred Heaven seemed to genuinely welcome anyone who would like to join them.

Together, women at Sacred Heaven lived a simple life. Their world centered mainly on their religious beliefs, and many of them spent much of their spare time running the fo-tang and assisting local worshippers who came to them for help. Similar to Mei-ling, their decision to remain single was mainly based on their understanding of women's role in the Taiwanese family, which led them to believe that a total separation from married life – and hence the time and energy consuming role of married women – would give them the best chance to study the Tao and, as a result, enhance their possibility to be salvaged from the everlasting suffering of reincarnation. Yet, they did not vow to become nuns as devoted women in other organized religions might choose to do. There was neither such religious ritual nor need in I-Kuan Tao for them to do so. They participated in the day-to-day social and economic life

just like any other ordinary Taiwanese. The majority of them also kept close ties with their families of orientation.

Still, they were a special group of women. Despite the fact that there was no formal ritual to signify the transition of their status, many of the middle-aged women in the fo-tang were considered as “married” daughters in the eyes of their families. It was the very thought that they had already been “married” that put in peace the mind of their elderly parents – including Ch'un-mei's mother – who would otherwise worry about their daughters' future. The “married” status of women at Sacred Heaven was most notable on the second day of Chinese New Year when, according to Chinese culture, married daughters would go back to *nian chia*, the houses of their mothers. Ch'un-mei informed me that, on the morning of each lunar January Second, 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-off sisters.”

Past literature indicates that the experience and resources of wage labor provide factory women with new means to confront their subordination in the workplace and other areas of daily life. Ch'un-mei's story exemplifies this point. Yet, to fully understand Ch'un-mei's life, we should take into account two more factors. Culturally, marriage continued to be an important concern if not for Ch'un-mei then for her mother. The reason that Ch'un-mei was able to remain single while pursuing her own goals was because she found an alternative social space acceptable to her mother.⁷ Ch'un-mei's optimism, however, was also related to the structural change in Taiwan's economy. Since Taiwanese industrial producers could no longer find enough young, single women but had to rely on married women (with children) as their main source of labor, many of the employers in Homei regarded unmarried, middle-aged women like Ch'un-mei as a better alternative. Ch'un-mei thus derived her sense of security from a favorable industrial wage labor market. Her advantage might be short lived, depending on the continual change in Taiwan's economy. At least for the time being, she was able to find a job and support herself with her income, even though she did not have the economic support of a husband.

Conclusion

This article brings together two literatures that are usually discussed separately: labor and gender under global industrialization, and gender and family (epitomized by marriage) in the Chinese cultural context. Past studies have established that global industrial expansion is a gendered process, in which women are often the targeted workers for the newly created industrial workforce. However, the experience of women around the globe does not appear to be monolithic. Ethnographic studies from different parts of the world indicated that recent global industrialization is also a process of flexible accumulation that employs increasingly heterogeneous workforce and utilize multiple modes of production. Yet, if ideological constructions of women as docile and nimble-fingered workers facilitated their massive recruitment as an ideal workforce for the global assembly line, the experiences and resources of wage labor also provide these women with new means to contest their subordination both

in the workplace and in other areas of daily life. Women workers 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.

The stories of Wang Mei-ling and Yang Ch'un-mei attest to culturally informed possibilities of workers' subversion. Both of them adopted the strategy of marriage resistance in their pursuit of personal goals, a decision shaped by their understanding of the gender roles and ideologies in the Taiwanese patrilineal kinship system. Their stories thus supported the above theorization. However, the different results of their similar practices are of great theoretical significance. They helped to problematize the tendency in the gender and global industrialization literature to treat culture as a constant. They highlighted the fact that the "heterogeneous workforce" utilized in the current global process of flexible accumulation is not identified simply by one's national or cultural origin, but also by the way one or one's family is incorporated into the process. This, in turn, provides a critique of the tendency in the literature on gender and the Chinese/Taiwanese family to essentialize culture. Thus, the stories of Mei-ling and Ch'unmei illustrate both the spatial differences and the changes mediated by temporal factors within the global industrial process. Consequently, whether a particular practice based on gender ideologies adopted by a worker in a(ny) given society to subvert the capital's control can be continuously effective, depends on its articulation with the ever-changing global and local economic conditions.

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Endnotes

1 For the methodology of analyzing events through the life of one individual, see Behar (2003) and Shostak (2000).

2 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 (particularly outside metropolitan areas) or elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia where non-marriage among women has become common. There is little hard evidence on this, however (Jones, 2005).

3 The average age of marriage for women was 22.8 in 1975, rising to 29 in 2006, while for men it rose from 27.1 to 32.6 during the same period (Government Information Office, 2008).

4 In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Education quickly expanded the number of higher education institutions, thereby greatly increasing the number of students, both men and women, currently attending colleges and universities; as such, it is not comparable to the numbers from previous decades. For this reason, I did not include the statistics after 2001 in Tables 1 and 2.

5 The population growth rate in 1957 was 3.5 %, from which it gradually declined to 1.8% in 1982 and 0.47% in 2006. In relation, the total fertility rate (TFR, the average number of children born to a woman during her childbearing years) was 5 during the 1960s. It fell to 2 in the 1980s, and further dropped to 1.12 in 2006 which was lower than many advanced capitalist countries including Japan (1.3), France (1.9), and the United States (2) (Government Information Office, 2008).

6 To maximize productivity, textile factories in Homei and elsewhere in Taiwan operate twenty-four hours a day, and nearly three-hundred and sixty-five days a year. Accordingly, there are usually three shifts of loom tenders in the textile industry (for eight hours per shift), working around the clock.

7 One could continue to raise the questions of why I-Kuan Tao was an option available to Ch'un-mei but not Mei-ling and, by extension, if Mei-ling had had the option, how her parents would have reacted to her decision. Yet, these are two different kinds of questions. The first one is about why a particular individual chooses to follow – or not to follow – a particular religion, which is always a difficult question to answer (cf. Sangren, 1987) and which may not be particularly useful to the issue of gender and global industrialization at hand. The second question, on the other hand, carries more theoretical significance for it asks about to what extent we can generalize the findings from the two cases presented in this article. It is also a difficult question to answer, however, because of the ethnographic fact that Mei-ling was not an I-Kuan Tao convert; nor was she seeking to legitimize her non-marital status through any religious means.

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