Chapter 2
Addressing Power and Resistance with Chinese American Daughters-in-Law and Their Immigrant Mothers-in-Law

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Contentious mother-/daughter-in-law relations have long been a popular soap opera theme. These in-law relations are also stereotyped as conflictual in the folklore and popular cultures of Asia and in the United States, and are often the subject of jokes, situation comedies, and movies (e.g., Everybody Loves Raymond, 1996–2005; Monster-in-law, 2005). The stereotype depicts the relationship between mothers- and daughters-in-law as fraught with jealousy and competition as these women vie for the affection and loyalty of the man who is the son to one and husband to the other. Their disagreements often center on how domestic tasks and childcare should be done, and who has the authority to make decisions (Shih and Pyke 2010). The man who is son to one and husband to the other is often depicted as being stuck in the middle trying to please two demanding, unreasonable women. Rarely are these women portrayed as unified in struggles against male family members and patriarchal arrangements. In fact, their conflicts are often trivialized, making it easier to poke fun at them. Despite the explicit sexism of such images and the rise of feminist scholarship over the past 40 years, there is still little scholarly literature on the dynamics between women of different generations who are thrown together through heterosexual marriage.

Research on in-law relationships has been sporadic. The lack of research on this important family relationship prompts several scholars to advocate for the need for such examination in family scholarship (see, Goetting 1990; Lee et al. 2003; Walker 2000). Recent research efforts have focused on the caregiver roles of

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daughters- and sons-in-law (e.g., Globerman 1996) and aid and support given to aging parents and parents-in-law (e.g., Lee et al. 2003; Shuey and Hardy 2003). Others have examined the influence of in-laws on marriage (Bryan et al. 2001) and relationship ambivalence (Turner et al. 2006; Wilson et al. 2003). Even when there is research on in-law relationships, most have studied white samples of mothers- and daughters-in-law, and seldom has research examined this relationship in families of a different racial/ethnic background (see, for exceptions, Jackson and Berg-Cross 1988; Shih and Pyke 2010; 2015).

There are several reasons that may contribute to such limited research on this type of family relationship. First, most family scholars focus their inquiry on primary family relationships, such as marital relations or parent–child relations; few place an emphasis on secondary family relationships, such as those between in-laws (Cotterill 1994; Turner et al. 2006; see also, Lopata 1999 for a discussion). Second, in-law relationships are multifaceted as they are often influenced and mediated by other relations in the family system (Turner et al. 2006). Finally, the complexity and sensitive nature of the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship make it difficult to find appropriate methods to study this relationship (Cotterill 1994; Turner et al. 2006). In this chapter, I examine gender and power dynamics of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships in immigrant families from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

I am a Taiwanese American sociologist who teaches in a Human Development and Family Studies program in the U.S. I have interests in, and have conducted research on, immigrant and transnational families, gendered family power dynamics, and intergenerational relationships. I have invested many years studying the power dynamics and relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Chinese, Taiwanese, and Mexican American families.

Understanding Hidden Power and Emotional Economies

In studying power relations, I consider overt as well as covert dynamics (Komter 1989; Lukes 1974). Overt power measures decision-making and conflict outcomes and assumes power is exercised in a direct and observable manner (Blood and Wolfe 1960). However, it does not address how power dynamics shape latent and invisible processes that prevent issues and conflicts from erupting to the surface (Komter 1989). One way covert power works is by preventing issues from being raised. This occurs when the less powerful individual anticipates the needs of the more powerful party and does not raise issues due to fear of a negative reaction. The less powerful individual, in choosing his/her actions, then internalizes the needs and desires of the more powerful person, even when doing so may compromise her/his own wishes. Because individuals are often unaware of covert power, it is important to assess whether respondents feel they can raise issues without fear of dire consequences, or if they desire changes that they do not attempt to implement because of a sense of helplessness.

I also draw on the concept of an emotional economy of entitlement, obligation, and gratitude (Hochschild 1989). Cultural ideologies concerning what certain family members owe to or are owed by other memberships inform emotional economies. For example, norms of filial piety can shape emotional interplays of entitlement and obligation and, in the process, also shape power dynamics between family members (Pyke 1999; Shih and Pyke 2010). Norms of filial piety can lead a mother-in-law to feel entitled to deference and service from her daughter-in-law, who might feel obligated to provide such care, thus reducing her power. In families that do not subscribe to filial piety, however, the mother-in-law will not feel entitled to such services and the daughter-in-law will not feel obligated to provide them. If the daughter-in-law provides caregiving services to her mother-in-law, those services are likely to be regarded as a gift for which the mother-in-law is expected to be grateful and is obligated to reciprocate in some way. However, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law may not be in agreement about what constitutes a gift, what constitutes an obligation, what they owe, and what they are owed in their relationship. Conflicts, resentment, and resistance can occur when they disagree.

Method

Fifteen second-generation Chinese American daughters-in-law were interviewed about their relationships with their mothers-in-law. Each respondent is married to a Chinese American man whose mother is, like the respondent's own mother, a first-generation immigrant from China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Interviews focused on daughters-in-law's general feelings toward their mothers-in-law, conflicts, any shared interests or leisure activities, traits they like and dislike about them, domestic tasks they do together or provide for each other, expectations they have for their relationships, and instances when their mothers-in-law have tried to influence their home lives or marriages. Open-ended interview questions allowed interviewees to elaborate on their responses. Data are analyzed with a constant-comparative method and followed the strategies for developing grounded theory (Glaser 1965).

Domestic Expertise and Childrearing as Domains of Power, Gratitude, and Ambivalence

Most Chinese American women interviewed describe having mothers-in-law who display some degree of entitlement to the authority and deference accorded elders in traditional Chinese culture. Daughters-in-law typically feel obligated to show respect and honor toward their mothers-in-law. However, they do not feel they owe the older women unconditional or unearned deference.

Many Chinese immigrant mothers-in-law have to work at acquiring and maintaining their power by assuming the role of domestic "expert" to establish a hierarchal relationship with their daughters-in-law. They offer advice and recommendations to their daughters-in-law on matters of health, daily household management, meal preparation, finances, and childrearing.

Whether the mother-in-law is successful in her efforts to acquire and maintain power depends on if the daughter-in-law is grateful for her mother-in-law's advice or resents it as a threat, insult, or attempt to dominate. When a daughter-in-law is grateful, she is more likely to view such advice or assistance as a gift and follow her mother-in-law's wishes. Anne provides an example of a grateful daughter-in-law. Anne happily receives her mother-in-law's instructions and serves as her "helper" when they cook together. Anne says, "It's neat to be able to learn a few things that I didn't know and I'm appreciative that she is willing to teach me." In contrast, when daughters-in-law do not feel like they need the assistance or advice, they express resentment rather than gratitude toward the household services their mothers-in-law provided. Daughters-in-law interpret such advice or assistance as their mothers-in-law's lack of confidence in their ability to care for their families. Samantha says,

> If I'm cooking a Chinese dish and I forgot [to use] ginger, it's no big deal to me. [She'd say], "Oh, when I make that dish, I put ginger in it." I translate that to mean, "You think I'm cooking this wrong." I'm sure [that's what she means].

Madison shares another instance:

> When my husband and I first got married, my mother-in-law used to come over and she would bring two weeks' worth of food. It was kind of insulting to me because I felt like she was suggesting I wasn't feeding her son properly … She would also do laundry … I told my husband, "She doesn't have to do that. I know how to do laundry!"

Chinese American women who describe their mothers-in-law's advice as unwelcome believe they are using the guise of offering suggestions to give orders and criticize the way they manage their households and perform domestic tasks. These daughters-in-law perceive such advice as a burden imposed on them by their mothers-in-law. Many are offended by the implicit message that they are not good wives or mothers. In these relationships, the mother-in-law often has difficulty establishing power and authority in her interaction with her daughter-in-law because the younger woman does not feel obligated nor willing to defer to her demands. In addition, a daughter-in-law's resentment for having endured the burden of the mother-in-law's offensive intrusion can result in her feeling that something is owed to her in the emotional economy of their relationship.

Several women who resent their mothers-in-law for giving domestic and childrearing advice are limited in their resistance. This is partly due to their dependence on the assistance they receive from their mothers-in-law, for which they are grateful. They feel contradictory pulls of gratitude for those services and resentment toward their mothers-in-law's influence in their home lives. Their feelings of ambivalence often result in vacillation between resistance and deference to their

mothers-in-law. Childcare is an area in which such ambivalence is the most evident. Ella provides the best example:

> I was trying to take my son off the bottles … I wanted everybody who was taking care of him to not feed him from the bottle, but try to feed him from the cup. My mother-in-law initially resisted. Every time we came home, we would find her picking up the bottle and feeding him.

As Ella explains, her feelings of gratitude and indebtedness to her mother-in-law make her unwilling and unable to impose her wishes:

> I thought I couldn't say anything because she was here taking care of my son while I was working. [I] felt like I owed her for that … I think about times [when] I get frustrated and I don't want to hurt her feelings. I sometimes feel bad [getting into conflicts with her] because she's helping out so much. I don't want to do anything that might make her feel like she's not wanted or her help is not appreciated.

Mia also experiences a lot of conflicts with her mother-in-law with regard to how to care for her infant son:

> When I had my first son, we left my son with her. We had certain things that we wanted her to do … [be]cause we were paranoid about SIDS. She wouldn't do it so that would upset me because I felt like I can't trust her … If she believes that we're not doing the right thing with our kids, she would overrule us … It made me feel annoyed because I feel like we're the parents, so parents should be the ones ultimately in charge of how we raise our kids.

Despite their conflicts, Mia is grateful to her mother-in-law for her childcare assistance. Mia's gratitude leads her to feel obligated to reciprocate, which she does by offering insincere praise to her mother-in-law. Mia continues, "I try to thank [her] for everything because that really goes a long way with her … I'll make a special effort to thank her for everything she does, however minor it is, so she won't feel unappreciated."

Chinese American women's reliance on their mothers-in-law's childcare assistance reduces their power. Although these women describe not liking the interference of their mothers-in-law, neither can they live without it. They thus move between resentment and gratitude, generating an emotional wave of ambivalence that stalls their resistance.

Husbands as Mediators

On their own, Chinese American daughters-in-law who depend on mothers-in-law's childcare assistance lack the power to bring their mothers-in-law into compliance. These wives turn to their husbands to negotiate on their behalves with their mothers-in-law when conflict or disagreement erupts. In most instances, their husbands tend to support their wives' resistance and do not insist that they implement their mothers' directives or behave as docile daughters-in-law. Husbands and wives thus enjoy a cross-gender alliance that empowers and elevates the status of

daughters-in-law. In some situations, it is only after the husband joins his wife in reprimanding his mother that the older woman begins to change her behavior.

Mia frequently butts heads with her mother-in-law regarding childrearing issues until her husband steps in. She said of their childcare situation, "So finally my husband spoke to her and said, 'If you continue this way, we can't leave our son with you at all.' Then she started to do what we asked." Mia is confident that she enjoys greater power as a result of her husband's support: "My husband's pretty much on my side and [my mother-in-law] knows it, so she tries very hard to maintain a good relationship with me because she knows that she's going to be on the losing end."

Melissa's mother-in-law ignores her request that she stop carrying her baby daughter every time she cries until Melissa's husband mediates the situation. She says,

> My mother-in-law came out first to help out when my daughter was born. As soon as the baby made the slightest whimper, my mother-in-law would scoop her up … Her way of comforting the child was to walk her around the house and rock the baby in her arms to get her to stop crying … I said to her, "Mom, please stop carrying her around because I won't be able to do that when you leave." She kind of ignored me … Finally, my husband backed me up and told his mom, "Mom, you can't carry her around because when you leave, [Melissa's] not going to be able to handle carrying both of them just because one of them is crying …" My mother-in-law wasn't happy, but she stopped carrying my daughter around.

Chinese American daughters-in-law express that they would especially like their husbands to step into mediate in situations in which they feel they do not have the power to negotiate with or demand desired changes from their mothers-in-law. Daughters-in-law sometimes resent their husbands when they perceive their husbands to be unwilling to mediate conflicts, however. Pauline wants her husband to speak up and be firm with his mother, especially when the mother-in-law crosses the line with their children. It frustrates Pauline when she feels that her husband does not speak up enough on behalf of the kids. Pauline provides an example of when her mother-in-law was not getting along with and was being extremely critical of her oldest daughter:

> I was torn between [whether or not to] step in. I felt like as a parent, I needed to protect my daughter, but at the same time, I was afraid if I step in, my mother-in-law was going to see me as interfering or protecting her … So I was afraid I was going to make it worse for my daughter by my stepping in. I wanted my husband to do it. I felt like he wasn't doing it. I was getting frustrated with him. I said, "You need to stop the way your mother goes over the boundary with [our daughter]. You have to protect her; you are her parent!"

Pauline's story reveals her powerlessness. She worries about the possible repercussions both for herself and her daughter if she were to speak up against her mother-in-law. Pauline does not confront her mother-in-law due to her fear of her mother-in-law's negative reaction. However, she is torn as she needs to defend her daughter from her mother-in-law's criticism. There is no observable conflict between Pauline and her mother-in-law because conflicts are being suppressed. Conflicts would be observable if Pauline expressed her desires or voiced her

concerns to her mother-in-law. In this situation, Pauline believes that only when her husband intervenes would her mother-in-law stop her criticism of their daughter.

Some daughters-in-law believe that it is not their place to question their mothers-in-law. They believe that their husbands are in a better place and have more power vis-à-vis their mothers to request changes. This perception could explain why many of the women in this study rely on their husbands to facilitate their relationships with their mothers-in-law. Emma puts it:

> If I really want to get a point across, I will just let my husband say it because he is better at being completely honest. I have to care about her feelings, but he doesn't. He has the leverage of being the son, and she will take whatever he says. She will argue with him, but at least it is her son … My husband can do whatever he wants because he is the son.

Most of the wives with children depend on the power and authority of their husbands to get their mothers-in-law to follow their wishes. Chinese American daughters-in-law in these families can elevate their power by bargaining with patriarchy. They draw on traditional male authority by enlisting their husbands' support and mediation as a strategy to maximize their power vis-à-vis their mothers-in-law. By so doing, they remain dependent on their husbands to represent their interests, and thus implicitly consent to and reproduce male authority.

The Covert "Backstage" Resistance of Daughters-in-Law

Chinese American daughters-in-law frequently engage a covert form of resistance by appearing to agree and comply with their mothers-in-law while not actually implementing their suggestions in their absence. They thus engage a formal or symbolic display of deference to their mothers-in-law in their presence. Ella feigns agreement with her mother-in-law's suggestions when in her presence, even when Ella does not agree with her advice. She nods her head in apparent agreement; however, she does not always carry out the advice when her mother-in-law is not around:

> With my son, if [my mother-in-law] tells me, "Morning is very cold and you have to keep him in pajamas for a little longer," most of the time she's not here in the morning, so I change him anyway. I don't keep him in his pajamas.

Stella explains her behavior when she does not agree with her mother-in-law:

> She talked and I listened and nodded, which is *typical* of most intergenerational interaction with your elder … There's supposed to be a way around that, which is you thank them for their advice and say, "I'll think about it." Just don't say no to their face.

Sarah refers to this kind of performance as a balancing act:

> I hear what you are saying. I may not necessarily do it, but I don't necessarily have to tell her that I didn't do it her way. Or I usually just say, "Okay, we've already taken care of it …" in a respectful way. Like saying, "I appreciate what you're saying, but we may not

> necessarily following what you are asking us …" It's kind of like balancing a fine act between not being obedient in a sense, and still being respectful.

Mia describes a similar performance in her interactions with her mother-in-law:

> She'll see something on TV or read something in the Chinese newspaper then she tries to tell me, "Don't do that or you shouldn't eat that." I just smile. In this way, I do the *Chinese thing*. I just smile and nod. But I totally ignore her [advice].

Mia explains that pretending to agree with her mother-in-law allows her to "keep peace" while also abiding traditional expectations of respect.

It is on the front stage that daughters-in-law are most likely to behave and interact in accordance with the norms, moral codes, and hierarchies associated with the cultural expectations of their immigrant parents-in-law. In the ethnic world of their mothers-in-law, Chinese American women display the filial respect and obedience that they understand is expected of "good" Chinese daughters-in-law by nodding, smiling, or saying nothing when they disagree. Further, by not overtly disagreeing, Chinese American daughters-in-law avoid open conflict without actually having to comply and give up power over their households. Even those daughters-in-law who are not dependent on the services of their mothers-in-law typically do not engage overt resistance for fear of hurting their feelings, showing disrespect, and creating the impression of being a "bad" daughter-in-law.

When they are on the backstage where their mothers-in-law are not present, however, Chinese American daughters-in-law have greater freedom and can enact values and norms that conflict with those that they appear to accept on the front stage. The backstage autonomy of daughters-in-law to organize their households and parenting practices with little influence from their mothers-in-law is made possible because of the support and agreement of their husbands.

Working with Chinese American Women and Their Mothers-in-Law

Practitioners and therapists need to be aware of the situation-dependent nature of family power dynamics. Power should be understood as an ongoing process and not a zero-sum game. Power dynamics and outcomes shift across time and in different situations, and who has the most power in any given relationship can also change. Therapists working with Chinese American women and their mothers-in-law also need to consider hidden power dynamics rather than focus solely on power outcomes of who wins an argument. Conflicts (e.g., an argument) may not be observable because a daughter-in-law may have anticipated the needs of her mother-in-law and behaved accordingly so as to avoid potential conflicts. Or a daughter-in-law may have accepted an undesirable situation without voicing her concerns to her mother-in-law out of a sense of futility or fear of negative repercussions. Therefore, it is important for therapists to assess whether a daughter-in-law feels she can raise

issues or implement desired changes in her relationship with her mother-in-law without negative consequences.

When working with Chinese American women and their mothers-in-law, therapists should also consider how emotional economies inform power dynamics in their relationships. Feelings of entitlement, obligation, gratitude, and resentment need to be made explicit in the process. A daughter-in-law who receives assistance from her mother-in-law may be unwilling or unable to voice her displeasure or desire for change because she depends on and is grateful for such service. She may feel indebted to her mother-in-law and reluctant to overtly challenge her advice, thus reducing her power vis-à-vis the older woman. When a daughter-in-law (or mother-in-law) describes feeling obligated to provide or coerced into providing services or attention to the other, or resents doing so, it could be an indicator of less power.

Therapists should be cognizant of the power the husbands/sons hold in these families. This study points to the important role of the husband/son; he acts as the mediator rather than the instigator of conflicts between his mother and wife. Chinese American women in this study seemed to rely on their husbands' support in negotiating with their mothers-in-law, especially in the realm of childrearing and childcare. Some women express despair and resentment when they feel their husbands are not willing to support them or mediate strained relationships with the mothers-in-law. Spousal support thus acts as an important resource for women who feel powerless vis-à-vis their mothers-in-law. Therapists should engage men to mediate the relationships when working with Chinese American women and their mothers-in-law. The role a husband plays in family discord is important not only with regard to how the disagreement is resolved, but also how his handling of the situation may shape future family interactions.

As shown in the interview accounts of some Chinese American daughters-in-law, the strategy of front-stage compliance and backstage resistance seems to be a common strategy in Chinese culture, as well as any family system that emphasizes the formal display of respect toward elders. Practitioners and therapists who work with Chinese American (as well as other Asian American) daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law need to be aware of both backstage as well as front-stage behaviors to be able to capture and address covert forms of resistance that occur behind the scenes. When a daughter-in-law complies with the wishes of her mother-in-law in her presence, it does not necessarily mean she is powerless vis-à-vis her mother-in-law. It may be a strategy she uses to avoid open conflict and to achieve her goals for gaining some control over her household. It is essential for therapists and clinicians to not assume that ritualistic displays of deference in public or among extended family translate into powerlessness in the private realms. It is important for therapists to explore what a daughter-in-law does on the backstage when her mother-in-law is not present. This is particularly so when working with individuals who come from a culture that places much emphasis on formal displays of respect and familial honor in public.

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