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Exploring detraditionalisation through gender reflexivity in late modernity: the negotiation of family/filial responsibilities among Taiwanese (younger) professional men

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This article maps out gendered practices among Taiwanese (younger) professional men, examining how they make sense of their gendered identities through local traditions and cultural practices, such as kin values and filial responsibilities. Although existing literature suggests that late modernity is marked by a decline in tradition, such claims are often under-theorised, with little connection to lived experience. Drawing on qualitative research undertaken in Taiwan, this article explores how the tension between tradition and detraditionalisation is culturally lived out by elder and younger generations. Specifically, it argues that traditions do not disappear but rather become a complex resource in making sense of the men's gendered identities. By situating gendered reflexivity within the tension between tradition and detraditionalisation, the article brings together some of the theoretical and cultural complexities involved in understanding contemporary gender relations in Taiwan at a time of rapid global change.

Key words detraditionalisation • filial/family responsibilities • gendered reflexivity
• Taiwanese younger professional men

Introduction

Late modernity scholars, such as Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck (1992), have provided useful insights into exploring the notion of gender and change in contemporary (Western) societies. In particular, they have addressed the notion of contingent gender relations and flexible gender configurations, whereby they claim that there is a decline in the significance of tradition, as individuals are freed from the constraints of existing social structures and gendered norms, such as marital or family obligations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). However, what is often underplayed in their analyses is how existing social categories, such as gender, continue to restrain 'freed' agency and the living of 'a life of one's own' (Adams, 2006). In response, feminists have highlighted that entrenched gendered experiences continue to operate alongside notions of flexibility and contingency, thus addressing the pervasive impact of the current

gendered configuration that shapes particular forms of gendered life (Jamieson, 1998; McNay, 1999). Of key importance, in this article, is how the 'structures of tradition' are (re)interpreted in the context of the emerging cosmopolitanism of Taiwan (Farris et al, 2004).

In this article, we hope to contribute to this underdeveloped notion of tradition within a late modernity framework, exploring two generations of Taiwanese professional men and their gendered experiences of marriage, family and kinship. Specifically, Beck's argument that 'the more societies are modernised, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the conditions of their existence and change them' captures, albeit unevenly, a changing global-based Taiwanese society (Beck, 1994: 174). Furthermore, Giddens (1991: 75) suggests an increasing self-monitoring capacity that usefully captures the notion of identity as an active process of seeking, enacting and becoming within the context of the social development of Asia (see also Farris et al, 2004). However, despite the appearance of a greater reflexivity, it is not clear why such changes in agency are leading *only* to a detraditionalisation. In particular, Beck has not explained why agency cannot be deployed to reflect on local traditions and their rules and resources as familiar cultural routes or meaningful practices. Giddens' oppositional logic on tradition and modernisation fails to convince us why 'tradition exercises influence only in a non-cultural way, through the repetition compulsions of addictions' (Alexander, 1996: 136). In light of these limitations, if agency can undo tradition, it could also be possible that traditions themselves can be re-forced and promoted. As a result, agency does not simply have to be concerned with a *break with* tradition; it could also be about *choosing* tradition.

This article explores this debate further. In contrast to Giddens (1994 and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), who perceive tradition as something gradually disembedding that has lost its legitimacy as a result of reflexive agency, we argue that gendered reflexivity is a necessarily creative energy and a contemporary strategy for the continuation of certain traditional values. In arguing this, we are not claiming that processes of detraditionalisation are not occurring. Rather, we find that the dualistic oppositional stance on tradition and reflexive modernisation has explanatory limitations within a Taiwanese context. Hence, we argue for the need to understand such processes as necessarily contextual, complex and asymmetrical with reference to the economic developments and societal transformations in Taiwan.

These asymmetrical processes of tradition and reflexive modernisation become apparent if one recognises the different dimensions of tradition and gender reflexivity (Williams, 1977; McNay, 1999). In particular, derived from Williams (1976), we understand tradition in two primary senses: strong tradition as *cultural comfort* and weak tradition as *cultural formality*. The former perceives tradition as 'an interpretative scheme' that invites agency to make sense of its cultural values as significant past or meaningful practice (Thompson, 1996). The latter operates through exclusion and sacred authority, embedding itself as something in explicit contrast to innovation and the contemporary. Unlike formulaic truths or traditional habits (resembling weak tradition), strong tradition must be *responsive* to the alternatives and oppositions that question its hegemonic position. Hence, it 'has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified' (Williams, 1977: 112), in order to maintain its contemporary relevance, not by exclusion or eradication, but by the strategic incorporation within subjects.

Additionally, we explore simultaneously *both* social *and* cultural dimensions of gender reflexivity. Through a Bourdieusian analysis (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; McNay, 1999), we understand the former in terms of gender reflexivity that explains the discontinuities of certain gendered practices, where the subject has distanced themselves from (weak) traditional gendered values. The latter, derived from Williams' (1977) notion of hegemony,¹ explores *culturally* how gendered reflexivity – as a sense of endorsement, with necessary negotiation involving conflict and tension – functions as a contemporary strategy for the continuation of (strong) tradition as meaningful practice. Specifically, the social dimension of reflexivity, according to McNay (1999: 107), refers to a sense of 'the lack of fit' to highlight the complicated and 'uneven' nature of gender reflexivity. For example, women's entry into the workforce (after childrearing) has not freed women demonstrably from the burden of emotional responsibilities for being a mother. Detraditionalisation thus generates increasingly conflictual female roles (such as mother and career woman) that can intensify the tension between the desire of 'living one's own life' and the drive for 'being there for others'. It is within this tension or intensified gendered awareness in which 'a distancing of the subject with constitutive structures' can occur (1999: 111).

Nevertheless, for McNay (1999: 110), '[reflexivity] can emerge therefore only from distancing provoked by the conflict and tension of social forces operating within and across specific fields'. In other words, self-awareness only counts as reflexive when one can *distance* oneself from the constitutive structures of patriarchy and then question conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. McNay's rejection of the cultural dimension of reflexivity appears to result from her definition of culture as 'the works and practice of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams, 1976: 90). This is evident in her critique of possible reflexivity arising *culturally* from the process of the aestheticisation of everyday life. For her, this suggests 'an elision of symbolic detraditionalization with social detraditionalization' (McNay, 1999: 106). Yet, what is omitted here is another important dimension of culture – as 'ordinary', which is lived out through a distinct whole way of life (see Williams, 1976, 1977). By eschewing this dimension of culture, McNay fails to explore another facet of the entrenched gendered experience and its intensified self-awareness she is seeking to reveal (see Adkins, 2002, for an alternative perspective). Although in her later work, McNay (2004) has recognised internal generated structures, such as strong tradition, she has not further identified gender reflexivity as a cultural production of a particular form of life that can further complicate the processes of gender transformation. A key aim of this article is to provide empirical evidence that reflexive agency will not necessarily transform but rather *perpetuate* the continuation of gendered structures.

The article now goes on to discuss methods and data collection. This is followed by a section on distancing (weak) tradition as a cultural formality, which explores changing family practices among younger professional men. Then the article focuses on endorsing (strong) tradition as cultural comfort, which addresses the younger generation and the continuation of family/filial practices. Following this, a section on reinterpreting local kinship in a global context focuses on the elder generation and the discontinuation of family practices. Finally, the article concludes.

The article sets out to challenge a dualistic understanding of tradition and reflexive modernisation. In so doing, we focus on tradition – in two senses – and use reflexivity as a mechanism for detraditionalisation. While class is not a central analytical theme

of the article, our focus on younger professional men makes clear how their gender reflexivity and their way of endorsing strong tradition is class specific.

Research methods and data collection

Currently, there is an absence of large-scale and systematic surveys of Taiwanese men, hence the importance of accessing other forms of knowledge (Sandwell, 1996). Qualitative research techniques are especially useful in capturing key features of 'invisible' Taiwanese men's lives (Tu, 1996; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). These techniques enable life history narratives to emerge that may be obscured by inconsistent and inconclusive statistical analysis. At a broader level, Asian masculinities, as part of emerging work on global masculinities (Connell, 1998), remain under-researched. Within the context of the absence of empirical work on Taiwanese men, a case study approach seemed appropriate in developing an exploratory examination of contemporary gender relations and social and political change (Yin, 2003). Such a study complements existing work on Taiwanese women and femininities. We were particularly interested in gaining the participants' meanings, located within a wider material and cultural framework of a changing Taiwan (Sandwell, 1996; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

The empirical research was undertaken over two years, 2007–09, in Taiwan. The sample was drawn from three urban areas: Taipei and two provincial cities, one located on the south-west coast and the other situated in the middle of Taiwan. Generational differences were chosen as a heuristic device to capture contemporary gender continuities and changes. The final sample consisted of 16 participants aged from 26 to 65, all of whom had at least one degree, most of them had a Master's degree and many of them had PhDs. The elder group consisted of seven participants aged 55 to 65, who worked in the same university, across a range of departments, including science, social science and humanities. All were married with children, except Huo, who was in a long-term heterosexual relationship. The younger generation consisting of nine participants aged 23–35 were from different universities, across a range of disciplines, including, arts, business management, history, geography and political science.

The choice of obtaining the sample from men working in universities and using these as the study site was based on a number of considerations. The study builds on comparative studies of the politics of gender change in the UK and the United States (Laker and Davis, 2011). Within Taiwan, a reading of feminist research suggested that professional men might have the cultural capital, including a gender literacy, to participate in this research project (Farris et al, 2004). Also, access to the participants was easy to negotiate, due to acquaintance with a number of academics working in the institutions. Initial contact was made through Tom (the gatekeeper for the elder generation) and supplemented by snowballing (Patton, 1990). Similarly, initial contact with the younger group was made through Alvin.

The research deployed in-depth interviews, carried out at the interviewees' workplaces or local coffee shops. They were informed of the necessity of tape recording for accuracy of translation (from Chinese to English), and informed that they could terminate the interview at any time. All interviews were both anonymised and coded by theme. The research participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, as part of a wider ethical code.

As a qualitative study, involving a small number of participants, it is important to stress that it is grounded in current Taiwanese feminist research on gender/sexuality and change (see Xu and Lai, 2004; Ho, 2007). Also, this is an exploratory study, which does not seek inductive validity by suggesting that the participants represent the experiences of the broader Taiwanese male population (Dooley, 1990). Instead, alongside Crouch and McKenzie (2006: 493), we perceive our respondents as ‘meaningful experience–structure links’ who reveal ‘dynamic patterns’ of interplay between individuals and their social world. In researching the family/filial practices of Taiwanese (younger) professional men, we found values, patterns and mechanisms for explaining the discontinuation of tradition and family/filial practices in contemporary Taiwanese society. We created labels to capture both the practices and meanings of these processes:

- distancing tradition as cultural formality;
- endorsing tradition as cultural comfort;
- reinterpreting local kinship in a global context.

Distancing tradition as cultural formality: changing family practices among younger professional men

‘For my father’s generation, to be a man is to get married and to have a son carrying the family’s name. You don’t ask them what they would like to do when they turned into [their] thirties because they are like “Taiwanese buffalos”, working all the time with few complaints in order to support their families. They simply lead a life for others.’ (Lin, a 29-year-old PhD student in art)

‘What does it mean to be a Taiwanese man?’ was the primary research question of this project. In response, participants from the elder generation suggested that ‘to be a man is to get married, have a son and work hard in order to support his family’. By the elder generation, we refer to those aged 55 or older. The socioeconomic conditions of disadvantage during the post-war period did not encourage men who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s to lead a life outside of a standardised route.² Traditional male roles, such as breadwinner and filial son, were the cultural repertoire for constructing the gendered self for men from the elder generation. However, it is less straightforward if we explore the younger generation’s understandings of what it means to be a man. Their diverse and complex gendered experiences indicate how processes of detraditionalisation are occurring in contemporary Taiwanese society. Specifically, a ‘norm-al biography’ is giving way to a ‘do-it-yourself biography’. ‘The individual himself or herself becomes the reproduction unit for the social in the life world’ (Beck, 1992: 130). This can be exemplified by their changing gender practices in marriage, family and kinship, as we elaborate respectively in the following discussion.

Marriage was once understood as a direct component of the social order or the material anchor for gendered lives. However, Charles (a 26-year-old postgraduate in business management from a Taiwanese elite university) has rejected prescribed gendered roles – the husband as ‘a long-term rice ticket’ (meal ticket) and the wife as ‘someone good for the family’:

‘[T]he concept of marriage is more varied now. Before it was to do with parents’ decisions, but now it is down to individuals ... simply marrying someone for having kids is not enough for me.... I want someone who I can talk about my problems in life or to share wonderful things in life ... I hope the other person will feel the same about me.’

For Charles, marriage needed to be based on personal choice and was similar to what Giddens (1992) terms ‘the pure relationship’. Yet, one who makes choices is also subject to those made by others. Marriage therefore has become contingent and is only good ‘until further notice’. Thus, for Charles personal investment becomes essential to maintain a relationship at the present time: ‘A good relationship needs to be earned ... you shouldn’t take the other person for granted ... I jokily tell my friend that if you want to drive a Ferrari, you shouldn’t expect it only to cost the same as a Ford.’

If marriage becomes a personal choice, individuals can decide whether or not they want to be married. Whereas marriage was an obligation or personal safety-net for men from an elder generation, it could be perceived by the younger generation as an obstacle to achieving self-autonomy:

‘Unlike my father who fulfils his responsibility by getting married and supporting his children, I am more concerned about taking care of myself. If I get married, I can’t be the way I am but the way I am expected to be... I do enjoy having someone’s company, but you don’t need to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. Marriage is not the only way you can reach for a decent companionship, but it’s likely to be the threat to a couple’s social life particularly if kids come into play and we need to put ourselves second in the relationship....’ (Wong, a 30-year-old PhD candidate in computer engineering)

‘My parents expected me to get married at some point. They worried if I didn’t get married, I won’t have a wife or children who could take care of me when I get old. I told them what works for them is not necessarily good for me. It’s simply selfish to get married for free caring-labour.... Also, I have to say a good nursing home and a couple of close friends are more reliable than the children of one’s own when one gets old.’ (Yong, a 35-year-old university lecturer in art)

Marriage was a ritual path for becoming a ‘proper’ man for the elder generation, but was perceived as a social apparatus of male norms that mould individuals into a standardised manhood. Unlike the elder generation who perceived marriage as the cornerstone of one’s relationship and were ascribed by social roles, such as father or husband, the exploration of self for the younger generation was *acquired* through knowing and managing the self. In other words, a strong sense of self-reflexivity was emphasised in Wong’s and Yong’s narratives, in which the younger generation distanciate themselves from traditional gendered values that are not applicable to one’s way of life. Thus, one may suggest that the articulation of a ‘do-it-yourself’ biography – to make a life of one’s own – is where (weak) tradition is fractured.

Alongside marriage, we can also witness how the traditional family form and its gendered values are unsettled. Specifically, family in the conventional context as

strictly blood-related has become plural in its nature. For example, Zing (a 29-year-old PhD student in geography) maintained that the conventional understanding of 'family' cannot capture what a family means at the present time:

'My friends and I tend to agree that we enjoy the feeling of being at home. Being at home doesn't mean that you need to be with your family ... the concept of "family" has become broader for me. Rather than strictly based on blood-relation, it is a sense of belonging that counts. This sense of belonging can occur when I stay with my close friends, who I can understand and feel understood. It can also happen if I choose to be alone in a place where I can find myself and make myself comfortable. It is the sense of belonging that defines what family means to me.'

Zach (a 33-year-old art gallery manager) presented a similar account:

'How individuals understand the concept of "family" will influence the way that they realise their biographies. For my father, he was obliged and expected socially to set up his family through which he fulfils his manhood. For me, it is more to do with the self. It's not saying I am an irresponsible person, quite the opposite; I am very responsible in my own way. Whereas my father is responsible for his family, taking good care of us, I am responsible for myself and take good care of myself. In terms of caring for the family, my father and I are doing exactly the same thing. The difference is that I make up my own family, and marriage and children make up my father's.'

Traditionally, we do not associate family relationships as options to be chosen. One cannot choose but is born as someone's brother or sister. And strictly speaking, a person alone is not considered as a 'normal' family, since it is assumed to contain at least parents (often a father and a mother) and their children. However, for Zing and Zach, a family can go beyond blood-hood and is organised around one's choice. For Zing, it was 'a sense of belonging' that constituted a family rather than a conventional family bond (Weeks et al, 2001). Neither children nor a partner was a prerequisite for his idealised family. The concept of 'family' was defined by the self, rather than being a norm that defined everything else. This was further echoed by Zach who did not perceive family as a norm-al but an *elective* biography. Rather than social expectations, he was the centre of his own lifecourse and was able to choose a lifestyle that suited his own preference. A key social change here is the search for a satisfactory relationship through personal affirmation. Family, therefore, becomes the outcome of one's own choice rather than a biological or moral necessity.

Changing gender expectations can also be found via contemporary kin practices. Particularly, to have a son that carries the family's name is of major cultural significance for Taiwanese men from an elder generation. However, as Chris (a 35-year-old research director and a father of three daughters) points out, filial piety should not be fulfilled solely through traditional rules. Both Chris and his partner wanted to have children, but they did not think it necessary to have a boy. Yet, their decision had caused some concern for their parents (-in-law):

‘My parents worry if we don’t have a boy, who is going to worship the (*zúxiān*) *pai-wei* [ancestral tablet]³ and family ancestors after we die? My father said my grandfather had passed the *pai-wei* to him and it’s his responsibility to pass it to me. My parents-in-law also regretted that their daughter could not give a son to my family. In Taiwan, ancestor veneration is an important cultural ceremony and the inherence of *pai-wei* signifies filial piety. I understand their [the parents] concern, but for us *it is not the formality that counts* when it comes to filial practice.’ (Emphasis added to the last sentence)

With his partner’s support, alongside his Christian belief, the symbolic meaning of the *zúxiān pai-wei* and its ritual practices had been downplayed as *cultural formality*, where (weak) tradition and its obligations are rejected. As Chris commented: “Our parents have their belief of what a family should be, but it is really down to us to decide what kind of life we want to have. . . .” Here we can see how weak tradition and its kin practices become references rather than inevitable social forces that determine what a son ought to do. Unlike the elder generation whose lives were grounded by the *normative* perspective of tradition (ie, ‘that’s what we’ve always believed’), Chris has decided what constituted the significant past for himself.

Endorsing tradition as cultural comfort: the younger generation and the continuation of family/filial practices

While there is much evidence pointing to the processes of destabilising family/filial practices, we also witness the retraditionalisation of gender relations among the younger generation. For example, in our previous discussion, Chris rejected the idea of having a son in order to carry on the *pai-wei*, as his father expected him to do. To reject tradition as cultural formality is one thing. Yet it is another matter to repudiate the fundamental cultural practices that are meaningful and significant for individuals:

‘I understand the significance of the *zúxiān pai-wei* for my parents and I don’t want them to think that since I became a Christian, I have forgotten my cultural roots. . . . My wife and I have spent more time with our parents whenever we can. I also tell my wife that we should pay for the monthly cost of the food supplement for my parents-in-law. . . . I think when it comes to conflict [between what we want to do and we are expected to do], some compromises are needed. We expect them [our parents] to accept our decision, but *we also have to comfort them in our actions that we don’t forget where we come from.*’ (Emphasis added to the last sentence)

Acknowledging his parents’ disappointment, Chris was aware of the meaning of rejecting the *pai-wei* and its potential implications and consequences. To turn down the *pai-wei* – as the symbol of filial piety – could be interpreted by the elder generation as the denial of tradition; and more importantly, the denial of the traditional Chinese parent–child relationship: to take care of parents when they are old. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, it was necessary for Chris to assure his parents by demonstrating tradition as cultural comfort, such as caring for older people.

The process of retraditionalisation can also be found in the context of marriage. As discussed above, Charles highlighted how an individual’s choice is the prerequisite

for marriage, yet such a position did not transfer into his understanding with regard to divorce. Specifically, despite the intensification of romantic love and (re)marriage as personal choice, Charles *did not* consider divorce as a ‘meaningful’ option for him:

‘I don’t rush in and out from a marriage simply because I can get divorced. I don’t want to get divorced not because I can’t but I care for someone so much that I want my marriage to work. The possibility of getting divorce will make me pay greater attention to my wife’s need, having greater investment and commitment to my marriage. Also, I want to set up my own family with someone who I love and play basketball with my children like my father did with us. This is my ideal family picture and divorce isn’t in it.’

Interestingly, Zach had a similar account, emphasising family as a sense of ‘self-belonging’, and marriage as also a possible option, which could be accommodated within his project of the self. However, Zach insisted that the concept of ‘marriage’ must come from personal decisions rather than cultural obligation. During his childhood, his father was away from home for long periods due to work commitments, so Zach also realised how difficult it was for his mother to bring up children by herself:

‘Don’t take me wrong when I said that family as a sense of belonging does not mean that I don’t want to have my own family.... If I meet someone I love, I can’t see why not get married. But I will think more about having children, not simply because to raise children is expensive. My father always thinks I worry too much. He told me in their time people were poor but kids could still grow up like I was. But for me financial stability is just a ticket rather than a key for a family. To support my children financially is simply not enough for me. I want to be with them rather than being taken away from them by work when they grow up....’

Therefore, for Zach, the option of having children becomes possible only when he and his partner are financially stable. Hence, neither Charles nor Zach rejected the idea of having their own family. Yet, such an idea needed to be perceived as an option rather than an obligation. For Charles, the concept of having children was a ‘cultural ideal’ from his childhood memory. For Zach, on the other hand, his memory of his absent father made him actively negotiate with the idea of having children. Such an option was not completely ruled out, but its difficulty was acknowledged by a possible tension between work and family life – an important facet that we are going to explore next.

The endorsement of traditional gendered values is not straightforward. It is often accompanied by conflicts and tensions and can be accomplished through potential exhaustion. This can be identified in Chris’ experience of fatherhood and his endeavour to achieve a work–life balance. For Chris, the ideal fatherhood was to be both a breadwinner and an attentive father. The former was strongly influenced by his father’s traditional values, whereas the latter was acquired through his experience of being a PhD student in America, where he witnessed close relationships between his male university lecturers and their children. As Chris commented: “In an elder generation, a man might be ashamed of telling you that he has to go home to spend

some time with the family ... it is different for me, my students know I am very family oriented.’

Chris understood that without his partner’s support, he could not devote himself to work, and fulfil the traditionally approved male role. Unlike men from his father’s generation, who “tend to think actions are more important than words”, his gratitude towards his partner was demonstrated by *both* emotional care *and* verbal appreciation. Hence, intimacy for Chris was not only based on words (Giddens, 1992) or primarily based on actions (Jamieson, 1998). Rather, he thought that “words are as important as actions ... what you do is not enough, you have to make your actions as loud as your words”. The changing attitude towards intimacy, as Chris suggested, may be a result of generational differences in gendered expectation: “For a woman from my mother’s generation, it was considered as ‘normal’ for her husband to spend most of his time at work, while leaving her in charge of childrearing and housework.” Few acknowledgements were needed to each other, simply because one was doing what they should be doing. However, Chris’ partner *chose to* opt out of her career to become a full-time mother. Unlike his mother, who quietly accepted her husband’s absence, “my wife would complain if I spend too much time on work and claims that both of us should be responsible for taking care of the girls, not just her alone”. Hence, the continuing process of communication/negotiation between him and his partner was essential in order to work out how to do things together, where a shared sense of fairness was pronounced.

In order to become a hands-on father as well as a respectable breadwinner, it was not enough for Chris to rely on his partner’s sacrifice. A flexible timetable for work was also necessary. Indeed, this was the main reason why he chose to work in the university sector, where he could arrange his time flexibly. However, his promotion to the director of the institute where he worked had increased the tension between his professional and family life:

‘The value of being a hard-working man I have learned from my father is still very significant for me. To be honest, it’s one thing to tell your students you have to finish a meeting early in order to pick up your kids; it’s another matter if you want to tell your boss you can’t come in on Saturday for the meeting because of your family time.... But trying to be a good husband and good father at the same time as a good employee is not an easy task. It can be quite exhausting.’

Such tension was stretched by his traditional gendered value of the man as the hard-working breadwinner and his drive for being an attentive father. Although there is space for manoeuvre (eg, to rely on his partner for help), his practices of being a respectable/responsible father created a constant struggle to achieve a balance between work and family life. A sense of arduousness is suggested here, in which Chris, on the one hand, clung tightly to the ideal of performing the traditional role of the breadwinner, and, on the other, endeavoured to grasp firmly his desire of “being there for my family”. At a time of rapid socioeconomic change, the work–life balance could only be achieved through exhaustion.

In sum, through the above participants’ narratives, we can see how strong tradition operates not through eradication, but through incorporation and negotiation. Rather than formulaic truths, strong tradition reinvents itself as meaningful practices by

inviting individuals to actively make sense of its cultural practices (which in turn might paradoxically perpetuate rather than distance the existing gendered configuration, as Chris' narrative suggested). Certain family practices are *meaningful* since they 'matter to the persons concerned and which are seen in some way as being "special" or "different"' (Morgan, 1999: 19). Meaningful family practices thus indicate a mixture of emotional and moral dimensions, where a degree of significance is suggested in recognising such practices. Yet to suggest that strong tradition is morally significant is not to claim that the binding power of morality is so compelling that one ought to carry out such practices without any personal reflection. The younger generation do not simply follow a set of pre-ordained social rules, nor do they carry out their family practices without reference to public regulations or private interactions. Rather, their family practices are an outcome of continuing negotiation in which there is always social space for individual manoeuvre, although it is never entirely open-ended and sometimes can be quite tightly constraining and exhausting. Unlike weak tradition that defines what one ought to do, through strong tradition one is able to ask who does what, for whom and in what circumstances. Rather than being normative rules, strong tradition is perceived as 'guidelines' that allow the younger generation to negotiate their differences and to develop a common understanding of what a particular course of action means (Finch and Mason, 1993).

Reinterpreting local kinship in a global context: the elder generation and the discontinuation of family practices

Whereas processes of detraditionalisation are occurring among younger professional men, such processes are less apparent among the elder generation. As indicated above, this is particularly true for our elder research participants, who were born into post-war Taiwan, where the socially and economically disadvantaged conditions did not encourage men to lead a life outside of a standardised biography. As Tom (a 60-year-old professor in business) commented: "I suspect if I didn't get the scholarship and my father's permission in the first place, I would never have the chance to leave the village and would have married with kids in my early twenties like most of my childhood friends."

Here, we are not denying that the specific biographical route of the elder research participants (ie, to obtain a scholarship and higher education and then work in the university sector) had enabled them to develop a different gender understanding from their fathers. Yet the elders were still under the influence of traditional gendered values. For instance, while talking about the changing family practices, Tom commented:

'The term "housewife" is problematic since in the present society there is less housework than there used to be.... The family and housework are socialised.... For example, cooking has become less compulsory ... my two sons are away studying, my wife and I buy our breakfast and lunch in university and bring our dinner back from the cafeteria.'

Being an educated and professional woman who worked in the university, Tom's partner, Helen, was also involved in their children's education and decision making for the family. This was very different from Tom's mother, who mainly quietly helped her husband. Additionally, rather than one being subordinate to the other, Tom suggested

that the relationship between Helen and himself worked 'like a team'. However, as the narrative developed, when we asked Tom to give more details about how the cooperative relationship worked out, his account resonated with a more traditional gendered division:

'When it comes to housework, we do what we are good at.... I am responsible for tasks that demand more labour, such as gardening, clearing the car park, taking the bins out, mainly stuff outside of the house. Helen is responsible for cooking from time to time, doing laundry, tidying the house, those things in the house.'

This was very different from the younger generation who had a more ambivalent feeling towards who should do what for whom regarding domestic chores. As Xiao-Wei (a 30-year-old PhD student in information technology management) suggested:

'Doing laundry can be a bit awkward for my girlfriend and me in the sense of whose turn is it to laundry, how often should it take place, and how to do it. Instead of two washing machines, a couple need to have two separate laundry bags. Eventually, she will wash hers and I will wash mine separately. The relationship between men and women is changing; there are few things that can exclusively be done by men or women....'

Interestingly, doing laundry was not such a problem for Tom and Helen because it was seen as a 'woman's job'. Yet, for Xiao Wei, a pre-assigned gendered role for the arrangement of domestic chores was no longer applicable. The ascribed gendered task was replaced by a continuing process of negotiation for deciding who should do what, for whom and under what circumstances. Moreover, we can see how gendered space in Tom's house was actively orchestrated by the 'family myth' (Hochschild, 1990). Both Tom and Helen appeared to accept that things fall into place according to circumstance, competence and preference. The 'obviousness' of domestic arrangements in day-to-day contexts for Tom and his partner was operationalised via the cultural production of a traditional gendered habitus – 'like a fish in water: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992: 127). Their cooperation in carrying out chores was realised via a 'feel for the game'; the question of who should do what, for whom and under what circumstances was worked out, not by them, but by their shared gender values.

Yet, the elder generation and their sense of 'obviousness' for domestic arrangements can turn into conflict and disjuncture when they interact with their children. Specifically, there is an increasing tension between *what the parents want their children to do* and *what their children prefer to do*. This was illustrated in Tom's decision to send his son to study in America, who preferred to stay in Taiwan with his girlfriend. Constant arguments and conflicts were involved between Tom and his son. This leads us to wonder why he insisted on such a costly and tendentious decision. As Tom explained, both he and his partner were working in the university, knowing that a degree from America increased the opportunity to teach in a university in Taiwan. Yet, this led him to a dilemma. By sending his son to study, Tom was able to fulfil his cultural ideal of being a responsible father, who could choose a 'safer route' for his

children. Nevertheless, he could face the situation that his son wanted to live abroad permanently. In response, Tom needed to *reinterpret* what kin practice meant to him:

‘We felt that we needed to adjust ourselves, to accept that our children want to have their own life. It’s selfish for us to ask them to stay with us... Society is different now. In our generation, being able to support our parents financially and take care of them physically when they are old is very normal, since there is a need for it. But for us, we simply would like them to spend more time with us.’

A similar account could also be found in Scott (a 58-year-old professor in mechanical engineering), who suggested how the disembedding of tradition and its ritual practices were simultaneously re-embedded through the invention of modern technology:

‘[T]he loosening up of tradition is a necessary process ... particularly under globalisation, where old values can be carried out with new practices.... We were expected to live around our parents. Nowadays young people may have to work far away from home or even in another country. Although they don’t often see their parents in person, the family connection can be maintained through modern technology. For example, my daughter now is in America studying for her PhD. We Skype at least twice a week, communicating on a daily basis through LINE [an application for instant messaging on smartphones].... You [the researcher] asked me if the filial piety has changed, I think the practices are different but the value itself speaks through a modern way....’

The distinct feature of retraditionalisation in contemporary society is in how (strong) tradition opens itself up for reinterpretation as meaningful practices. There is no exception for the elder generation. Specifically, for Tom, whose life was informed by traditional values, to be a filial son was to follow what his father said. Yet he realised that he could not expect the kin practice between his son and himself to be the same as that between him and his own father. The traditional gender language for kinship, therefore, had transformed itself from financial support and physical care to companionship. The reinterpretation of filial piety seems to be a necessary strategy for the elder generation to accommodate the tension between the values with which they grew up with and the changing filial practices at the present time.

Additionally, despite the fact that the ritual practice of tradition is challenged by a new global condition, the ‘uprooting’ of filial piety can be ‘re-mooring’ through modern technology in which tradition and its filial piety can be spoken within a contemporary vocabulary, as Scott suggested (see also Thompson, 1996: 99-104). Thus, in line with Adams (2006), we suggest that when the values of local tradition are coterminous with emerging global conditions, a new gendered space is created that allows, even demands, investment, negotiation and creative appropriation from the reflexive agency to produce meaningful gender identifications and practices.

While the process of detraditionalisation is less apparent among the elder generation, the process of retraditionalisation – similar to the younger generation – involves reinterpretation of tradition as meaningful practice, where reflexive agency is the mechanism for the continuation of strong tradition. Yet, it is one thing to suggest

that the elder generation in our research were able to reinterpret kin practice with a contemporary language. It is quite another to suggest that such cultural practice was accessible to all. Economic resource is of key significance here. As Tom clearly indicated, “unlike our parents, we can financially support ourselves and take care of ourselves”. The reinterpretation of kin practice as companionship rather than financial support is therefore privileged for those who are not pressured by money. Thus, in exploring gender reflexivity as a cultural artifice for retraditionalisation, one needs to bear in mind where it speaks from and how it speaks (Skeggs, 1997).

Conclusion

This article has contributed to the under-explored notion of tradition in a late modernity framework, which overestimates the extent to which tradition declines in significance as the capacity of reflexive agency increases (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). This dismissal of tradition is partly the result of the legacy of early modernisation theory’s dualistic and oppositional logic between tradition and modernity (Alexander, 1996). Furthermore, theorists of reflexivity tacitly presuppose a disembedded agent and, as a result, do not consider entrenched gendered experiences that confront the transposition of gender habitus into different fields of action at a time of rapid global change (McNay, 1999). This particular stance becomes apparent if one explores the sense of uneasiness as an amplified gendered awareness rendered by the tension between (dis)continuities of gendered practices in contemporary Taiwanese society. Accordingly, McNay’s social conceptualisation of gendered reflexivity, as an irregular manifestation dependent on a particular configuration of power relations, provides a counterbalance to influential late modern theories of gender, as voluntary transformations that fail to situate changes and their complex implications for the play of power relations. We further deploy Williams’ (1977) notion of hegemony in order to explore the internal and actively generated structure of strong tradition. This also enables us to capture another dimension of gendered reflexivity that comes from agency and its active appropriation, selection and use of local tradition and its cultural material for making the gendered self. From this perspective, we maintain that it is necessary to understand gender relations in late modernity as *both social and cultural*. By only focusing on the former, one fails to understand that gendered reflexivity may not necessarily transform but further perpetuate the existing gendered structure. In prioritising the latter, one may risk overlooking the ambivalent feelings one may have towards conventional masculinities/femininities. Through a social-cultural approach, we are able to situate gendered reflexivity, and then to sketch out how strong tradition is culturally lived out by agency via negotiation, resistance or complicity.

Notes

¹ By noting how the concept of ‘tradition’ has been radically neglected in Marxist cultural thought, Williams (1977: 108–20) appropriates Gramsci’s notion of hegemony in order to develop his notion of tradition (as a continuing and ‘active’ process) and its mechanisms for domination (as well as limitations that it encounters).

² After the Chinese Nationalist Party fled to Taiwan in 1949, following its defeat by Communist forces, Taiwan was fighting against poverty. In 1961, the average national income in Taiwan was \$143 per capita, with an average of \$104 in private consumption

per capita (Taiwanese dollars) (See, <http://www.stat.gov.tw/public/data/dgbas03/bs4/nis93/ni.pdf> (in Chinese).

³*zǔxiān pai-wei* (ancestral tablet) is a placard traditionally designated as a symbol of ancestor veneration.

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