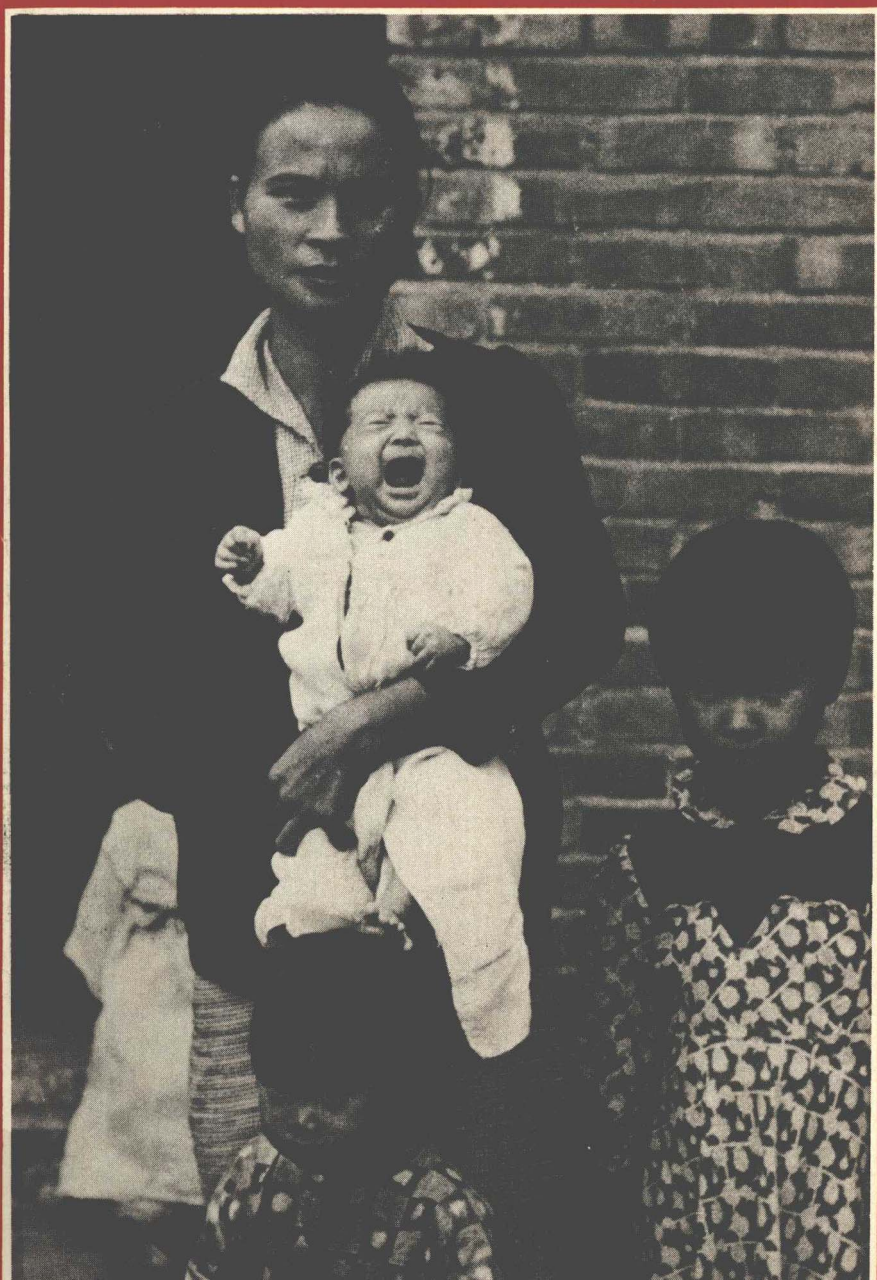


# Margery Wolf Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan



*Margery Wolf*

Women and the Family  
in Rural Taiwan



*Stanford, California*

1972

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California  
© 1972 by the Board of Trustees of the  
Leland Stanford Junior University  
Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN 0-8047-0808-8  
LC 70-183895

## *Preface*

The wife of an anthropologist finds it nearly impossible not to be something of an anthropologist herself. In the course of my husband's several field trips to Taiwan, I have lived in a variety of places in the Taipei basin: in the capital city of Taipei, with a farm family in a country village, and in a small market town on the edge of the mountains that rim the basin. Unlike the United States, Taiwan is a place where much of life is carried on in full view of the neighbors. Religious ceremonies, marriage processions, and the elaborate rituals of death seem designed to draw crowds of onlookers. In the villages, routine chores are done in the doorway within chatting distance of several neighbors; child-training takes place where the children are, which is to say, outdoors in all but the heaviest rains; and, sooner or later, family conflicts are brought out of the house to be judged by village opinion. It is impossible *not* to make observations and eventually to ask questions about what is observed. Almost without exception, the questions are graciously answered. This book about Taiwanese country women has grown out of these casual observations, some interviewing, and many raids on my husband's field notes. I am greatly indebted to him and to his field staff.

A book by a woman about women in a culture known for its androcentricity is always in danger of becoming a critique of that culture. I have tried to avoid that temptation—with,

## *Preface*

I admit, varying degrees of success. Those who feel strongly about the Women's Liberation Movement in the West, pro and con, will no doubt find ample material to support their assertions about the nature of womankind and her relations with her menfolk. As a woman, I cannot be without bias on these issues, but I have tried to control my biases and to label them, when I cannot. I think, however, before the reader dismisses some of the unorthodoxies he finds here as distortions resulting from the sex of the author, he should consider whether they are not the natural result of the theme. Authors, both male and female, select from the totality of life those aspects relevant to their topic. When that topic is China, the perspective has nearly always been male. When the other half of Chinese society is the focus, the "reality" of Chinese social life looks different. If I have done a fair job of presenting that reality for the women of Taiwan, he who finds it distorted must look to his own biases.

The body of the book follows the life cycle of women in rural Taiwan, but the first four chapters are devoted to general background material: a brief historical sketch of the island and a description of the settings in which my observations were made; a chapter describing the history and present situation of a particular family, written with the conventional focus on the male descent group; a brief chapter that presents some of the ideas I have developed in trying to relate Chinese women to the Chinese kinship system; and a short chapter describing the interrelationships among women in the community with which I am most familiar. Although the historical sketch may seem unnecessary, I feel required to include it in order to lay a ghost familiar to those who have studied Taiwanese culture. Taiwan is ethnically Chinese, just as Chinese as Peking is. To be sure, the Taiwanese have customs that differ from those in Peking, but so do the people of Shanghai, and indeed so do the Chinese who live in small villages forty

## Preface

miles from Peking. My insistence on the Chineseness of the Taiwanese should in no way be construed as a political statement. The question of who rules Taiwan is a matter that should be decided by those who live there.

Frequently in the pages that follow I will make use of the pronoun "we." This is not the ubiquitous editorial "we." The conversations and interviews from which I quote were recorded by several members of our field staff on different field trips, both independently and in combination with my husband or me. To label each quotation properly would be difficult and in any case would make rather dry reading.

Hokkien words and names are romanized according to the system devised by Nicholas C. Bodman in his text *Spoken Amoy Hokkien* (Charles Grenier & Son, Kuala Lumpur, 1955). Tone marks have been omitted. All personal names and surnames are fictitious, as are the place-names of the village of Peihotien and its market town, Tapu. I owe particular thanks to Margaret Sung (Yan Mian), who stumbled up mountain paths and through paddy fields with me, smiling even after the dreariest of interviews and an encounter with a snake. Even now, many thousands of miles from where we met, she continues to help me with the difficult romanization of Hokkien names. I am also indebted to Don DeGlopper, Roxane Witke, Norma Diamond, and Stevan Harrell for their suggestions.

There are many other people who have helped me, a number of them without realizing that the end product would be this book. The women of Peihotien and Sanhsia rank highest on this list. Some may say I have exploited them. It is certainly true that I took a great deal from them and that they freely gave me a great deal, but they are none the poorer as a result. I do not deny my debt; indeed, it is in recognition of how much I owe them that I have written this book. It is my hope that through the book these women and the many lives

## *Preface*

they represent will be given a more prominent place in the history of our species. The reader, too, in turning these pages will be exploiting the women of Taiwan and may even come away a richer person as a result of his contact with them; but this is the kind of exploitation that leads to understanding and perhaps to friendship, and hopefully makes us all a little more human.

M.W.

# *Contents*

1	Some History and Some Geography	1
2	The Ongo of Peihotien	14
3	Uterine Families and the Women's Community	32
4	Friends and Neighbors	42
5	Little Girls	53
6	Older Girls	80
7	Engagement	100
8	Marriage	128
9	Waiting	142
10	Taking Charge	158
11	Girls Who Marry Their Brothers	171
12	Girls Who Have No Brothers	191
13	Filial Daughters	205
14	The Rewards of Old Age	215
	Index	233

## *Some History and Some Geography*

Taiwan's early history is not unlike that of North America. Portuguese explorers "discovered" the island early in the sixteenth century, and various commercial interests, as well as Japanese and Chinese pirates, laid claim to it for different periods thereafter. The aborigines, a Malayo-Polynesian people, were robbed of their land, their dignity, and often their lives by the Chinese colonists who followed the explorers. They did not submit with docility; well into the twentieth century there was an "aborigine problem." Unwary travelers and forest camphor-workers were prime targets for headhunters, but raids were also conducted against villages on the plains. Taiwan's treacherous shoreline witnessed many shipwrecks, and it early became apparent to pirate and naval captain alike that those who survived the surf rarely survived their first contact with the aborigines. In the nineteenth century the Ching court, which ostensibly governed Taiwan, refused to pay indemnities to countries thus injured and even admitted its inability to control the aborigines. As a result, both Japan and the United States at different times led punitive expeditions onto Taiwan in search of the tribes who had massacred their shipwrecked nationals. Neither country was entirely successful. Today these fierce fighters, like many Indian tribes of North America, are a picture of apathy, living in poverty and

### *Some History and Some Geography*

squalor in the mountains, defeated less by military might than by alcoholism and the diseases of civilization.

*The Chinese culture hero in Taiwan's history is Koxinga (Cheng Ch'eng-kung). Koxinga and his father were pirate-merchants of humble origin who eventually controlled the trade along most of the southeast coast of China. For a few years after the Manchu conquest of China, Koxinga's father remained loyal to the defeated Ming dynasty, but in time he succumbed to offers of rank and autonomy in exchange for token submission. According to some reports, he was captured by trickery soon after and taken to Peking in chains.\* His Japanese wife, Koxinga's mother, committed suicide rather than be taken prisoner. Koxinga, who had refused to join his father in submission, became even more determined to reinstate the Ming after this turn of events. He increased his trade (and pirate) activities and with the increased revenue raised an army. After several successes, the army suffered a major defeat when it attacked Nanking, and in 1662 Koxinga was forced to abandon his hold on the South China mainland. Looking to Taiwan for a new base, he drove out the Dutch East India Company, which had been in control since 1623, and took over the island as his own kingdom.*

Taiwan's new ruler, who was in many ways its first ruler, put his defenses in order and then set out on a famous tour of his realm. The mythology that quickens the hearts of many children in Tapu and Sanhsia claims this tour took Koxinga as far north as the Taipei basin, where he subdued a great man-eating bird near the town of Yingke and permanently choked off the poisonous vapors emanating from the mountain that overlooks Sanhsia. In fact, Koxinga never seems to have gone much farther north than Taichung, but his status

\* I lean heavily in this historical section on the old but excellent account of Taiwan's early years by James W. Davidson, *The Island of Formosa: Past and Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1903).

### *Some History and Some Geography*

as a culture hero is deserved even if he did not slay monsters. He was an able administrator as well as a skillful diplomat and soldier, and had he not died shortly after his tour, Taiwan's history might have followed a different course. His son ruled ably despite a youthful reputation as a wastrel, but he too died an early death, leaving Taiwan's rule to the vagaries of palace intrigue. The illegitimate son he had carefully trained to succeed him was assassinated, and the eldest of his legitimate sons, aged twelve, was put on the throne. Within a year the boy and his incompetent advisers were forced to submit to the Peking government and hand over the administration of the island to the governor of Fukien.

For the next two hundred years Taiwan was virtually ignored by the Ching government. When attention was called to the island it was only because troops and money were needed from the mainland to put down another of Taiwan's periodic insurrections. Officials sent out to administer the island (as a prefecture of Fukien) knew that their term would be short. They tended to fill their pockets as rapidly as possible and to take little responsibility for the development of the island. The maintenance of order and the upkeep of the few existing roads depended entirely on the local population, and in general the job was too much for them. The Chinese population had continual skirmishes with the aborigines and at the same time were involved in endless disputes within their own ranks. The immigrants from Fukien quarreled with the Kwangtung immigrants. The Fukien settlers came primarily from two small districts near Amoy: Chuanchou to the north and Changchou to the south. Under frontier conditions it was good to have a claim of obligation and loyalty beyond that of kinship, and the theft of a Changchou man's pig by a Chuanchou man might well bring on a battle between large groups called on to protect the rights of their "brother." These same people might another day be redivided when the Ongs and

### *Some History and Some Geography*

the Lims of Changchou had a falling out over water rights. A short journey of twenty miles was so full of hazards that few attempted it without armed escorts. It is not surprising that the Taiwanese gained a reputation for being quarrelsome and rebellious; they were.

It was not until 1887 that the Ching government recognized the economic and political importance of Taiwan by promoting it to the status of a province. By then Taiwan had a flourishing agricultural economy and a lucrative foreign trade in camphor, tea, sugar, and rice. It needed only improved communications and a stable administration to make it into one of China's most valuable provinces. Liu Ming-chuan, an extraordinarily progressive administrator for his time, was appointed the first governor. He thoroughly reorganized the island's government, moved the capital north to the city of Taipei, paved the capital's streets and lighted them with electricity, took the first census (by 1893 the Chinese population had grown to 2,546,000), laid telegraph cables to join Taiwan to the world's communications, and built the island's first railroad. Not all the projects worked out—the railroad in particular fell prey to graft and technical incompetence—but the most serious failure of Liu's administration concerned the aborigines. He tried to undo several hundred years of brutalization with a border pacification plan. Lowland tribes were paid to till land that lay between the Chinese settlements and the territory of the hill tribes. Unfortunately, both of the militant groups attacked the buffer communities, setting off a new series of even bloodier encounters. The lucrative camphor industry was brought to a virtual halt. This state of affairs did not make Liu popular with either his superiors or the merchants, or for that matter with the common people. Even worse, to pay for his many improvements he had to devise new means of taxation, and his reorganized administration put into important positions more mandarins who required

### *Some History and Some Geography*

more payoffs. There was so much hostility toward Liu that he did not dare travel in some districts on the island. When he retired in 1891, his successor made few attempts to carry on his progressive plans.

In 1895, at the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan was ceded to the Japanese, who spent the better part of the next year trying to take possession of their new colony. The Taiwanese had no genuinely nationalistic feelings to weld them into a resistance force of any power, but the ragtag private armies of some wealthy men, bands of robbers, and the usual Chinese hostility toward any outsider combined to provide the Japanese troops with considerably more harassment than they had anticipated. Even so, the Japanese suffered the majority of their casualties from the diseases endemic to the island.\*

During the next fifty years, the Chinese population of Taiwan was under the administration of the Japanese government. Although fifty years is little more than the life span of one islander, some scholars imply that it was sufficient to destroy the essence of a culture several thousand years old. It is true that the Japanese had a remarkable effect on the stability, economy, health, and communications of Taiwan. However, it should be noted that the new rulers made intensive studies of Taiwanese customary law in order to properly enforce it, not destroy it. Inter-marriage with Japanese was prohibited until 1932; taking a Japanese name was not allowed until 1942; education in Japanese schools was not encouraged, and college education was limited to training doctors and public health workers. The advantages of making loyal Japanese

\* Harry J. Lamley has written an interesting paper on this war: "The 1895 Taiwan War of Resistance: Local Chinese Efforts Against a Foreign Power," in Leonard H. D. Gordon, ed., *Taiwan: Studies in Chinese Local History* (Occasional Papers of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University, 1970).

### *Some History and Some Geography*

citizens out of Taiwan's population evidently were not considered seriously until the 1930's. Whether they wished it or not, the Taiwanese were given little opportunity to acquire the values or the modes of Japanese culture. The Taiwanese probably spoke and read more Japanese during the 1950's than they ever did under Japanese rule, but they clearly did so as a form of social protest, a statement of disappointment. It may have been on the basis of observations made during this period that foreign observers (and some Chinese) reached their mistaken conclusions about the influence of Japanese culture on the Chinese population of Taiwan.

When Taiwan was handed back to the Chinese in 1945, the economy was viable, if shaky. Under the Japanese, the Taiwanese had come to assume certain standards of efficiency, health, justice, and living. The military government imposed by the infamous Chen Yi, the brutal mass murders of Taiwanese leaders and potential leaders after the 1947 rebellion, and the systematic looting of the country's industry left the island far worse off than it had been during the war, Allied bombing raids notwithstanding. When Chiang Kai-shek arrived with one million refugees in 1949, the Taiwanese population had been transformed from the naïve welcoming kinsmen of 1945 to resentful subjects. After twenty years some of the wounds inflicted in this bitter period (by both sides) have healed, but the scars are almost as painful and certainly as apparent as the original wounds.

Thanks to the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction, an effective and honest organization and an admirable example of Sino-American cooperation, great strides have been made in strengthening the economy of Taiwan—but the basis for this economic success was laid by the Japanese. They provided the farmers of Taiwan with major agricultural innovations, not the least of which was the island's large, complicated irrigation system; they built the railroad; they brought

### *Some History and Some Geography*

electricity even to the remote villages (a source of great amazement to arriving mainlanders, some of whose country relatives had never so much as seen an electric light); and they began the industrialization of Taiwan. Obviously, the Japanese development was not altruistic, and much of it ceased during the later years of the war. But the foundations were laid. It is easier to repair or rebuild neglected or bombed-out factories and railroads than to design new ones from scratch. To maintain or even replace a communications system once it has been established is quite different from creating such a system. And anyone acquainted with Taiwanese farmers knows they would not revert to less productive farming methods unless they had no choice. When the Nationalists took over the island, they found an economy weakened both by the immense strains the Japanese put on it during the closing years of the war and by the irresponsible usage it had received in the 1945-49 period, but an economy still capable of recovery. Thanks to the impartial guidance of the Joint Commission, American aid, and the capacity of the Taiwanese for hard work, Taiwan in the last twenty years has been able to absorb the additional strain of a massive government bureaucracy and has almost managed to return to its prewar position of maintaining the second highest standard of living in the Far East. It probably has more to fear now from its skyrocketing population than from any other single problem. The government, far more conservative than the farmers, has finally allowed a rational birth control program to replace the illegal abortion mills that maimed so many women. In spite of the people's strong values on having many sons, the Taiwanese have accepted the program eagerly. As early as 1958 the unsophisticated women I knew in Peihotien were aware of the seriousness of the problem in their own families. They were ready for help (and asking foreigners like us for it) long before it was available.

### *Some History and Some Geography*

This, then, is a too brief outline of the past of a young nation with a long history. I present it so the reader may place the chapters that follow in some context, and to clarify once again the origin and culture of the people of Taiwan. Taiwan was a frontier province of China, and as such was no more or no less cut off from the mainstream of Chinese life than any other frontier province. The fact that Taiwan is an island was no more a detriment to its relations with the rest of China than some of China's mountain ranges are to other provinces. The mainland city of Amoy was, after all, one of Taiwan's markets for fresh pork and garden produce. Taiwanese unity—nationalism, if you will—developed during the island's years as a colony of Japan, but there remain important differences within its population. Like the rest of China, Taiwan is ethnically diverse. Hokkien-speakers, whose ancestors came from Fukien province, distinguish themselves from Hakka, the Chinese immigrants who traditionally have arrived on the last wave of every migration and eked out a living on the poorest land. (In Taiwan they fared considerably better.) The majority of Taiwan's population are Hokkien-speakers, and I follow the custom in this book that justifiably irritates the Hakka and the anthropologists who study them: I use the term Taiwanese to refer to Hokkien-speakers. "Mainlander" is the term I use for those from other provinces who immigrated after the fall of the mainland.

The Tamsui, a major river twisting and turning through the Taipei basin, provides one of the borders of the city of Taipei. Many miles upstream, on one of the river's many bends, is the village of Peihotien. Here my husband and I spent two years living with a farm family, studying the subjects that attract anthropologists to remote villages in distant countries. In summer it would have been difficult to find a more comfortable place to live in Taiwan. The nearby river

### *Some History and Some Geography*

gave at least the impression of coolness, and plentiful shade trees gave some truth to the semblance. The Lim family with whom we lived had (like most of their neighbors) an old-fashioned brick farmhouse with thick walls and a steep tile roof—perfect protection from tropical summer sun. In winter Peihotien was no more uncomfortable than any other village in northern Taiwan. The temperature in this area rarely goes below freezing, but the endless rain creates a damp chill that permeates everything. The only source of heat in country homes comes from the brick cooking stoves, and they are fired at most twice a day.

In 1959 the population of Peihotien was approximately five hundred people. At that time the majority of the families owned some farmland and derived at least a part of their income from the land. The nearby market town of Tapu and the larger towns closer to Taipei had small industries that provided jobs for many of the younger men of Peihotien and those of the unmarried girls whose parents allowed them to work outside the village. Although Taipei was less than an hour's trip away (half by foot and half by train), there were two old ladies in the village who claimed with apparent pride that they had never been there. A good many of the children made their first visit to the city as part of a school outing in the fifth or sixth grade.

When we returned to Taiwan in 1968 for a much shorter stay, I found many things changed. The oxcarts and pedicabs were gone from Taipei's streets, and the skyline was totally altered by the many-storied Western-style hotels and office buildings. Tapu, the market town nearest Peihotien, has expanded beyond recognition, with rows of ugly apartment houses filling the once open fields. Unfortunately, prosperity and change have scarred the tranquility of Peihotien too. Its proximity to Taipei made it an ideal spot to raise chickens, both for market and for egg production. Many of the irides-