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Actually existing Chinese matriarchy

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Having read, as a graduate student, about the patrilineal and patriarchal foundations of Chinese society, I was a little disconcerted when I got to know my first real Taiwanese family – this was back in 1987 – and realised that, so far as I could tell, there were no men in it.

I suppose I was, at least to some extent, in the position of the naïve reader mentioned by Francesca Bray, the type ‘acquainted only with stereotypical images of “traditional” Chinese women as dependent victims of patriarchy cut off from the significant male stage...’ (1997:370). I’d been living for a few weeks in the teacher’s dormitory of the lower middle school in Angang, a rural Taiwanese township, which I’d been told was a highly conservative and traditional kind of place. Schools being intrinsically dull, I started following the lead of the more adventurous students in jumping the fence and spending my afternoons loitering in the surrounding village. Adjacent to the school there was a small food shop run by a woman and (in rotation) her four daughters, all of whom were high school age or above. They were a force of nature. The mother was a smart and ambitious operator, and she and her daughters ran a tight ship. They were also extremely warm-hearted and funny, and the local people seemed to like and admire them very much. The mother clearly loved her daughters, and amongst other things invested heavily in their schooling. I spent a pleasant hour or two in their shop most days, sometimes helping them roll betel nuts in leaves for their steady stream of customers.

Eventually I did learn that they were, in some respects, an anomalous family unit. The township was overwhelmingly “Hokkien” Taiwanese (almost all residents were descendants of migrants from Quanzhou prefecture in Fujian), and yet the mother was from a Hakka background, while her husband – from whom she appeared to be

irreconcilably separated – was a “mainlander”. For most of my fieldwork period, he was living elsewhere in Taiwan. As a result, mother and daughters effectively operated in a world of their own, with what seemed to be complete autonomy. From what I could see, the mother ran the show.

Of course, their autonomy – and, by extension, the lack of subordination they experienced as women – is a matter of perspective. Thanks to her “mainlander” husband, the girls’ mother had, after all, left her natal community far behind, and in her new place of residence she had neither his nor her kin to rely on. I also never learned much about the financial basis of the couple’s separation. It’s possible, and perhaps even likely, that the husband had a claim on the profits of the shop in which his wife worked so hard. It might have also been the case (although I have no evidence of this) that their separation was caused partly by her failure to conceive a son. I do know that she, for her part, regretted not having a son, and at one point had even notionally “adopted” a local military service cadet as a kind of consolation prize.

Bearing all of this in mind, what still impressed me most at the time, rightly or wrongly, was the extent to which these bright, articulate and assertive women appeared to be in control of their own lives. To portray them in terms of patrilineal “failures” of various kinds would have seemed, to me, very odd. In any case, because I was primarily interested in issues of learning and child development (cf. Stafford 1995), I found myself asking: what have these daughters, growing up in this particular family, learned along the way about Chinese family and kinship and gender?

The second family I got to know was a more conventional one, at least in local terms. The middle-aged couple at the head of it were both “Hokkien” Taiwanese, and the husband (who ran a small construction business) was a local man by birth. His father had died some years before. But his elderly mother often lived with him in his house (as part of a “meal rotation” system for elderly support), and he also maintained close ties to his brother and sister, both of whom lived within a short walking distance. However, his brother and sister didn’t live quite as close as his wife’s relatives – for it turned out that

she too had been born in Angang. Indeed, his wife's mother lived literally around the corner from them, and as far as I could tell the couple had more to do with her family than with his. Perhaps partly as a result of this, the wife was, at least in my experience, extremely assertive with her husband; she certainly wasn't dominated by him in any very obvious way.

They had three children, two boys and a girl, who they doted on in various ways. But at the time of my fieldwork the heaviest educational investment was being made in the daughter, simply because they considered her to be the smart one. Again, I found myself asking: what have these children, with these parents, learned about Chinese family and kinship and gender?

But allow me to cut a long story short. As I moved around Angang, adding families to my vanishingly small sample, a pattern emerged. This multi-surname community appeared to be a place with a fairly high degree of (township) endogamy, and quite a few uxorilocal marriages. Affinal ties were as important, in most cases, as agnatic ones. The daughters I met were unfailingly treated with warmth and love, and given uncompromising support – so far as I could tell from the evidence seen in everyday village life. As you might expect, people in Angang did repeat to me the classic formulation that amongst the Chinese “men are more valued than women” (zhongnan qingnü). But it was a little bit hard to see how children could actually *believe* such a thing, given their experience of the local world. The adult women I met were, for the most part, assertive, bright and funny (sometimes obscenely so), and they seemed in many respects to be the equals, if not the betters, of the men around them. Among other things, I was struck by their physical strength and, as I saw it, toughness. I recall a fisherman joking roughly (if affectionately) with one woman – not a relative – about the fact that she was much too hard on her husband, to the extent of even hitting him if he got out of line. She responded to this slur by shouting back at him and then eventually, when he wouldn't stop the teasing, grabbing a slipper off the floor and whacking him, very hard, right on the top of his head.

Local people often told me, in the months that followed, that Angang women were known to be lihaj – i.e. fierce, terrific, impressive. What could explain this? Clearly, the tendency for Angang women to live close to their natal families after marriage might have helped them resist domination by their husbands' kin.ⁱ Angang is also a fishing community, i.e. the kind of place in which anthropologists might reasonably expect agnatic kinship – not to mention the day-to-day subordination of women – to be relatively weak.ⁱⁱ And of course this was Taiwan in the 1980s, not Shandong or Anhui or Sichuan during the Qing dynasty or earlier. Why shouldn't the Taiwanese women I met at the end of the 20th century, even in the countryside, have been relatively liberated? Yet another possibility (one addressed in Ellen Judd's contribution to this collection) is that the 'strength' I saw in Angang women was itself, at least in part, a creative response to women's subordinate roles in Chinese/Taiwanese society and culture.

One afternoon, I found myself discussing all of this with a friend, a young artist from Taipei who had taken up residence in Angang for a couple of months. She too found the local women remarkable. But then she added that, after all, 'China is a matriarchal society'. For outsiders, she said, this might be difficult to see; but to her it was completely obvious.

Women at the top

Could she be right? Surely China is, in fact, simply another one of the many places around the world in which "matriarchy" exists primarily as a negative fantasy – i.e. as an object lesson about the risks of giving too much power to women. For instance, during the Tang dynasty, according to Jay, we find decidedly odd accounts of "kingdoms of women" at the edges of the Chinese world in which snakes, monkeys and ghosts are taken as husbands. Then there are somewhat more plausible accounts of matriarchies or quasi-matriarchies in nearby Thailand, central Asia and Tibet, not to mention significant traditions of actual female rule in Japan and Korea. In the latter two cases it was, tellingly, the introduction of solid Confucian standards from China that helped put an end to all that (Jay 1996).

Meanwhile, within China itself, empress dowagers are known to have controlled affairs from “behind the curtain” during a number of dynasties, notably the Han, Northern Wei, Liao, Song, Yuan, and Qing.ⁱⁱⁱ But as Yang Lien-sheng notes, this was criticised

... as early as the Later Han period, when in 107 Tu Ken, a court gentleman, and one or more of his colleagues criticized Empress Dowager Teng and petitioned that she return governmental power to the Emperor. Infuriated by this request, she ordered these gentlemen to be placed in heavy silk bags and beaten to death in the imperial court (Yang 1960:56-7).

However, Tu Ken managed to survive this punishment and reportedly ‘fled to an obscure place where he served incognito as a waiter in a wine shop’. He was later honoured for his actions and his story went on to provide ‘an inspiring example for literati-officials as late as the end of the Manchu dynasty’ – that is, incredibly, some 1750 years later (1960: 57).

Then there is Wu Zetian, the one woman in China who actually *became* emperor rather than ruling “behind the curtain” (for overviews, see Twitchett & Wechsler 1979, Guisso 1979). She is said to have risen to power, in part, by killing her own infant daughter and blaming her main competitor, the empress Wang, for the terrible deed. Once this plot succeeded, Wu Zetian reportedly had Wang and another enemy killed ‘by having their arms and legs cut off and leaving them to die in a wine vat’ (Twitchett & Wechsler 1979:251). As you might expect, however, it’s difficult to know what is true when it comes to accounts of this powerful woman. As Jay observes, ‘traditional Chinese historians have condemned her short rule as an anomaly, a gender reversal and a violation of nature comparable to having hens instead of roosters crowing at dawn’ (Jay 1996:228). Jay also reminds us that, in any case, Wu Zetian

... was neither a matriarch nor the head of a matriarchy. The society remained patrilocal and patrilineal ... Hers is a case in point that having a woman on the throne does not signal female dominance ... (1996:228).

The power of ordinary women

So much, then, for patriarchy at the top. But what about the world of ordinary mortals? Over the years, anthropologists of China and Taiwan have written a great deal about (ordinary) women's power and influence, or the lack of it. And it has always been recognised that women – and more specifically, married women with male children – could exercise very real power on the domestic front. In an influential formulation, Freedman observed that:

When we discuss the household and family ... we cannot fail to take account of the importance of women (1958:32).

But then he adds that:

When we turn our attention to wider kinship units we may conveniently think of these groups as being composed primarily of men (1958: 32).

It should be noted that for Freedman, as for others, the importance of women in domestic affairs (household and family) is intrinsically linked to their potential, as daughters-in-law, to *seriously exacerbate the strains of family life*, and specifically to make worse the intrinsic rivalries between brothers with competing interests. In short, women's power, when it exists, is typically construed in negative terms and vis-à-vis patrilineal principles.

Similarly, Emily Martin and Gary Seaman have discussed the fact that the real or imagined ability of women, as disruptive outsiders, to wreak havoc within their husbands' families is sometimes given symbolic form in ideas about "dangerously polluting" menstrual fluids and childbirth (Ahern 1975, Seaman 1981). And then, of course, Margery Wolf famously wrote about the influence (typically more benign, but sometimes not) which is exercised by Chinese mothers through their "uterine families", and in particular through emotional entanglements with their sons. But this exercise of power, Wolf suggests, is best understood as a subaltern coping mechanism:

Women, in their struggle for some security in their day-to-day existence with the all-powerful male-oriented family and its larger organisation, the lineage, worked like termites hollowing out from within places for themselves and their descendants ... Uterine families were in fact only a way of accommodating to the patriarchal family (Wolf 1985:11)

Then there is Ellen Judd's important research on the previously neglected topic of women's ties to their natal families – something which, as I've already noted, may help mitigate patrilineal dominance – and her research on women's very considerable agency in the context of China's changing political-economy (Judd 1989, 1994, this collection). Judd remarks, however, that her informants in north China often only *implicitly* recognised women's roles in making things happen, and that more generally 'The culture of rural China is marked by a pervasive devaluation of women that is' – ironically – 'constantly denied in the practice of everyday life' (Judd 1994:254).

In short, almost all anthropological discussions of Chinese women, including the ones which are specifically about their power and agency, have been centrally framed by the facts and/or ideologies of their subordination (at least beyond the domestic realm). Obviously, anthropologists have meanwhile stressed the great variability of Chinese gender relations over time and space, including during the late imperial and modern eras in which our research has been concentrated (notably Wolf 1985, Watson 1991, Davis & Harrell 1993, Judd 1994, Gates 1996, Bray 1997, Brandtstädter this volume). However, most commentators agree that even the concerted post-imperial policies which have been explicitly intended to improve the lives of Chinese women, to help free them from patriarchy, have produced at best mixed outcomes, and in some cases may have made things even worse (Croll 2000).

To be sure, images of powerful and autonomous women do sometimes come through in the literature and in everyday discourse. Among a range of interesting examples, Gates cites the comment of a Hong Kong administrator in the early 1900s about 'the paradoxical situation of the average [Chinese] farmer's wife, who, being entirely at his mercy, rules him with a rod of iron' (Gates 1996:198). But isn't this precisely the kind of joke which might be made – and in fact probably is made – with reference to women in every patriarchal society?

Undoubtedly to be taken seriously, however, is Yunxiang Yan's account of changes over a period of fifty years to kinship, gender relations and "private life" in Xiajia, a farming community in Heilongjiang, northeast China (Yan 2003). Yan describes, among many other things, the recent increase in households which, according to local people, are wife-dominated – i.e. in which the wife "has the final say" (shuole suan), even in matters involving *external* relations. The villagers suggest that whereas something like 19% of households are husband-dominated, a full 35% are wife-dominated, while in 46% percent they see husband and wife as having equal status. (Again, I wonder what children in the 81% of households which are *not* husband-dominated learn about family and kinship and gender?)

Yan accounts for these remarkable figures, in part, by telling us of dramatic changes to the status of the conjugal unit within Chinese kinship (2003:86-111), and of changes in particular to the position of women (as daughters, brides and wives) in relation to marriage transactions and family property (2003:140-161). Speaking of what has transpired, he even goes so far as to refer to "the collapse of patriarchy" (2003:158). But I suspect that many readers might doubt, in spite of Yan's meticulous evidence, that things really could have taken such a dramatic turn. This is because there is meanwhile, of course, plenty of evidence to suggest that the position of women in China and Taiwan remains problematic, even precarious.

Consider evidence about educational attainment. Broaded & Liu conclude that in urban China as recently as the mid-1990s girls whose abilities were equal to those of boys were, for a variety of reasons, aiming for lower academic qualifications. Since then things have almost certainly moved on.^{iv} But the informants of Broaded & Liu considered it risky for girls to follow academic tracks because they would, in any case, almost certainly be discriminated against in employment after graduation. They also had to contend with the widely-held view that wives should not be more educated than their husbands. As a result, they tended to systematically opt for, and/or be pushed towards, less prestigious vocational streams (Broaded & Liu 1996, see below). Perhaps this isn't evidence of

patriarchy, as such, but it is certainly symptomatic of recent discrimination against girls and women in education and employment.

Or consider evidence that in spite of wholesale revisions of China's marriage and property laws, 'Traditional ideological constructs' relating to women and property, and to women as property, 'are very much alive today ...' (Ocko 1991:337). Writing of the People's Republic in 1991, Ocko says:

There are still parents who attempt to determine (sometimes brutally) their daughters' marriage choices ...; husbands who, whether or not they have paid substantial betrothal gifts, continue to treat their wives as property over which authority has been conveyed to them by marriage ...; and even kidnappers of and traffickers in women who persist in seeing women as a valuable commodity from which a profit can be made (1991:337).

Then, of course, there is evidence about the resilience and even *strengthening* of some forms of son preference in recent years, during a period when overall fertility rates in China have declined markedly. This is observed, among other things, in the fact that the "sex ratio at birth" has gone up dramatically above the norm since the 1980s in favour of boys, presumably through the use of pre-natal selection (Croll 2000:21-40). It is also observed in the fact that although infant and child mortality has improved significantly since the 1950s, researchers have nevertheless found 'an increasing disadvantage for females in survival' relative to males (Li & Feldman 1995:9; Li et al 2004). More specifically, a highly detailed study in one county found that girls who had sisters, or who had both brothers and sisters, had lower survival rates than those who did not – a result consistent with a son-biased "family building" strategy. According to the researchers, 'The main mechanism of excess female child mortality', as they refer to this phenomenon, 'is lack of use and effectiveness of curative health care rather than nutrient deficiency or a lack of preventive health care'; but female infanticide is almost certainly a contributing cause (Li & Zhu 1999: 21; Li et al 2004). The scale of the son preference issue is starkly conveyed in one statistic cited by Elisabeth Croll in her comprehensive overview of the position of "endangered daughters" in China and more generally in Asia.

Surveys in Hebei in the 1980s showed that, at that time, ‘If only one child was to be permitted [under family planning regulations] then a mere 2.2% [of the population] wanted a daughter’ (Croll 2000:22).

Reconciling the conflicting evidence

Again, things may have moved on since then, and indeed almost certainly have done so in some respects, and in certain locations. But how can we reconcile the undoubted evidence which does exist of ongoing discrimination against girls and women (in schooling, property, health, etc.) with Yan’s observations about the “collapse of patriarchy” in Xiajia, or my own observations about the power and autonomy of (at least some) women in Angang?

One consideration, already mentioned above, is that women’s status might vary not only in time (e.g. before and after the introduction of new birth control policies or new marriage laws) but also in space. As I pointed out, my Taiwan fieldwork site of Angang – with its “fierce, terrific, impressive” women – is marked by a high degree of endogamy and uxorilocal residence. For this reason, I was particularly interested to read the demographic research of Li et al (1998) about the transmission of son preference in two counties in Shaanxi during the 1990s. They suggest that one of these counties, Sanyuan, exhibits ‘the core elements of the traditional Yellow River culture’, with large family clans, a ‘strict patriarchal family system’, patrilocal marriage, few adoptions, etc. Here the sex ratio at birth (SRB) for 1990-96 ‘was as high as 117 [meaning 117 boys were born for every 100 girls], much higher than the normal worldwide SRB of 105-107’. In multi-surname Lueyang county, by contrast, large family clans are ‘few and unimportant to village life’, the patriarchal system is weak, there are a large number of uxorilocal marriages, and there is a high rate of adoption. As a result, son preference in Lueyang appears to be weak, as evidenced by a sex ratio at birth of only 105 – which, as the authors point out, is ‘quite normal [by world standards] and very different from that in Sanyuan’ (Li et al 1998:4-6; cf. Li et al 2000, 2003). In brief, one implication of this

demographic research is that people in Lueyang appear to have *learned*, from the evidence of their own senses, that daughters, after all, are as good as sons.

Perhaps one could say that if Chinese patriarchy, and all that goes with it, were to collapse in Lueyang county, it wouldn't have too far to fall. And the same might be said for my Taiwanese fieldwork township, Angang, and (from what I understand) of Xiajia village, where Yunxiang Yan conducted his research. For it turns out that Xiajia, too, is a multi-surname community where 'village endogamy has been practiced for several generations', with the result that 'many villagers are bound by affinal ties' rather than agnatic ones (Yan 2003:37). The authority of patrilineages there is notably weak. Under these circumstances – specific to given communities at given times – we might expect the ability of women to participate in, and even dominate, domestic and public life to be enhanced.

Consider, by way of contrast, the township of Protected Mountain, in western Yunnan, where I carried out research in 2000-01. (See also the very interesting comparison, in terms of kinship and gender, between two villages with differing political-economic histories in Brandtstädter's contribution to this collection.) Protected Mountain is a place in which lineages exist in a very substantive way (with ancestral halls, corporate worship, etc) and where patriarchal ideals and Confucian rhetoric are very strongly in evidence. I was told that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when out-migration to Burma (Myanmar) was common from this township, wives were expected to sit dutifully at home – sometimes for decades at a time – serving their husbands' parents. Such women were sometimes called "living widows" (*huo gua*): that is, even though their husbands were alive (and in many cases had taken second wives in Burma) the women were meant to act out the chaste and sombre life of a widow back at home. As a result, people in this region are said to have warned each other:

Don't give your daughters to Protected Mountain!

A whole lifetime playing the widow,

and then half a lifetime actually *being* a widow!^v

Having said this, one of the first public events I witnessed there was the funeral of a woman who, precisely, had gone with her husband in the 1940s to Burma, where they jointly ran a successful business. She had returned to China in order to die at home and be buried next to her husband – who predeceased her – and in the event she was given a spectacular and expensive funerary send-off. From everything I heard about this woman, it seemed clear that she had led a remarkable life, and was far from being the retiring wife who lived in her husband's shadow. More generally, I think it would be seriously misleading to juxtapose, in a simplistic way, Angang (as a modern, non-patriarchal place, where women have autonomy and power) with Protected Mountain (as an old-fashioned, lineage-oriented place where women submit to men). Among other things, it should be noted that women from Protected Mountain, back in the Republican era, actually attained higher levels of education than would have been the norm in the Chinese countryside, and that the township had a strong “reforming” movement directed precisely towards (among other things) women's liberation.

In Protected Mountain, too, I met a number of powerful and impressive women, including one who was so tough, especially when it came to business deals, that behind her back she was jokingly referred to as the “Iron Goddess”. At the opposite end of the social scale, I met the married-in wife of a pig farmer. This incredibly jovial woman made a considerable amount of money in the reform era by walking many miles every day to sell cooked food to men who were working on construction projects. Her husband openly acknowledged her talent at business and human relations – including a talent for enduring hard work without complaint. I was told by others that she was, without doubt, the “boss” of this particular family. She had, among other things, invested very heavily in education and healthcare for her daughter (who had been seriously ill).

My point is that although Protected Mountain is, in some ways, more obviously patriarchal in outlook than Angang, I could easily produce, from my fieldnotes, a narrative about the (publicly acknowledged) power and influence of women there. And even if demographic research proved that, for instance, son preference is stronger there

than in Angang, the power and influence of women in lineage-oriented Protected Mountain would still, I think, require explanation.

In other words, I'm trying to suggest that the illustrations of "impressive" women given at the start of this paper – drawn from fieldwork in Angang – might not be as exceptional across time or space as they might at first seem. In support of this, one might note the recent evidence that "modern", and heavily "westernised", Taiwan is in fact more culturally conservative in some respects than the People's Republic, including in ways that impinge directly on the autonomy of women there. In a fascinating article, Martin Whyte has suggested that support for the urban elderly in Taiwan may actually follow a more traditional pattern than it does in China. The young Taiwanese women in his sample are more likely than their Chinese counterparts to live with their parents-in-law. They are also more likely to be either unemployed or employed by family firms – and thus to end up with primary responsibility for the care of their husbands' parents (Whyte 2004). Certainly, the community of Angang, in spite of its tough and seemingly liberated women, is said – both by local people and by those from outside – to be an unusually conservative kind of place, one in which Daoist and Buddhist and Confucian ideals heavily organise everyday life for many residents. As one outsider (a person from Taipei sent to work in the local government) remarked to me, 'The people here ask the gods before they do anything – even going for a walk'. It was only a slight exaggeration. Women in Angang appear to have power and autonomy, but they spend an awful lot of their time and energy worshipping gods and visiting spirit mediums, thereby helping to reproduce and spread the (generally conservative) values and precepts of Chinese popular religion.

Reproducing patriarchy?

Obviously, women sometimes exercise their agency in ways amenable to patriarchy. But perhaps it is useful to distinguish, as many authors have at least implicitly done, between the "ideological" and "pragmatic" reasons behind this (these are ideal types, of course, and typically merged in practice). On the one hand, a woman might sincerely believe,

thanks to a kind of indoctrination, that men are intrinsically superior, that it is morally right for patriline to be continued *ad infinitum*, and that her primary job on earth is to bear and nurture sons. (The actual production of the desires and dispositions that underpin patriline is, of course, a hugely complex business; cf. the thought-provoking discussion by Sangren 2003.) On the other hand, a woman might recognise that women are just as good (and bad) as men, that patriline comes and goes, and that there's more to life than making sons for somebody else's family. Still – given the realpolitik of Chinese gender, notably the facts about old age security for rural women – she might conclude that, all things considered, she prefers to have a son. Perhaps the practicalities help blur the more far-fetched claims of the ideologies?

With reference to the research on girls' educational attainment I noted above, a similar distinction between “ideological” and “pragmatic” motivations can be made. The authors suggest that mothers with high levels of education may have been ‘instrumental in reinforcing gender differences in high school enrolment patterns, nudging sons toward [academic] schools and daughters toward [vocational] schools’ (Brooded & Liu 1996:77). Similarly, they find that mothers with “intellectual” jobs (e.g. lower-grade professionals) tend not to encourage their daughters to pursue academically-oriented subjects. Is this because they actually believe the stereotypes implicit in Chinese gender ideologies? Perhaps, but the authors stress more pragmatic concerns, or at least a combination of the two:

One wonders whether the reason [for not encouraging daughters] might lie in intellectual mothers' assessments of the relative risks of commitment to the academic track for boys and girls. Intellectual mothers are, after all, in the best position to assess from personal experience both the costs and the benefits of pursuing higher levels of academic schooling and the intellectual careers to which such schooling may lead. Awareness of pervasive male preference in the workforce, coupled with concerns about the marriageability of highly educated daughters, might lead some intellectual mothers to discourage their academically capable daughters from following in their footsteps. It is also possible, of course, that daughters draw these

kinds of conclusions from their observations of their mothers' experiences, without the mothers advocating any particular course of action (1996:80-1).^{vi}

At this point – i.e. on the question of what conclusions daughters might draw from experience – let me return to where I started, with my first real Taiwanese family: a mother and her four daughters. Given that, as I've said, the mother appeared to be irreconcilably separated from her husband, I was somehow a bit surprised (although I probably shouldn't have been) to learn that she continued to worship one of *his* ancestors at the altar in her home. This was not simply an occasional thing. The ancestor was honoured by a wooden tablet placed on the domestic altar, next to the Buddhist and Daoist gods she worshipped. Every day she burned incense for them all, and showed them all respect. Rather like her stated disappointment in not having a son (which I'm convinced was genuinely experienced as a failure), this seemed a confirmation that China's patrilineal ideologies – in spite of her apparent independence and autonomy – were continuing to define her life. But the reality is a bit more complex, as I later learned from the daughters, and in some ways it relates to some very "pragmatic" issues. Briefly, it seems that during childhood, and for prolonged periods, one of the four girls had been seriously ill. At the time, her mother consulted a spirit medium about this problem, and the medium quickly identified the source of it – her husband's deceased father. As a father-in-law whose spirit was not being properly nurtured (thanks to her husband's rushed departure from the mainland), he caused the girl's illness. A tablet was thus produced for him, and placed on the family altar – almost certainly not at her husband's insistence. One could say, I suppose, that she was deluded in offering incense to it, but I wonder to what extent she was deluded specifically in the service of patriarchy. (And what did her daughters learn? That their mother respected their father's patriline? I doubt it: they themselves appeared to have little respect for their father.)

Discussion: women's actual power

Since 1987, I've conducted fieldwork in four different places – two in Taiwan, two in China. Of these four places, I would make the following (perhaps rather predictable) statements:

- (1) That women play important roles in enacting and thus reproducing traditional values, including those associated with religion, patriarchy and patriliney;
- (2) That they have both “ideological” and “pragmatic” reasons for so doing;
- (3) That no boy or girl growing up in these places could possibly avoid learning that women are typically strong, tough and impressive, and that they often dominate men.

On the last point, it probably helps, in the specific case of Angang, that “private” life tends to be relatively public there, so that domestic issues are frequently aired in full view of the world, thus revealing to children some of the complexities of the balance of gender power – and not only in their parents' households. For example, at spirit medium sessions (which even very young children often attend) family matters of various kinds may be discussed openly – if sometimes a bit too poetically for easy comprehension. Probably easier for children to follow is the (often good-natured, sometimes more serious) bickering between husbands and wives which occurs on the streets and back alleys of the township, or in the family sitting rooms which are effectively public thoroughfares. The soap opera of township life is recounted here and elsewhere, and moral judgements passed around for public consumption. In much of this, at least in my experience, women often have the upper hand, and they seldom show signs of being seriously intimidated by the men around them, including the senior ones. To the extent that real women have substantive power, at least in the context of “private life”, children surely know it.

Boys and girls in Angang could also not help but learn, from years of direct observation, that many women are highly effective economic agents (hard workers and skilled businesspeople), and (in the Taiwanese economy, where so many firms are *family* firms) they could not help but connect domestic economic activity and family life with the wider economic world beyond the borders of the township.

It is also the case that they inevitably encounter, in various contexts, what might be called the “mother worshipping” tendency in the Chinese cultural tradition. This is clearly observable in religious practice (especially in the worship of Mazu), but also (as conveyed by things like school textbooks) in the veneration of the mothers of historical figures as diverse as Mencius and Chiang Kai-shek. To the extent that the Chinese tradition openly reveres women, especially as mothers – whether as a matter of popular sentiment or national orthodoxy – children surely know it.

Then there is something else that boys and girls in Angang (but also in my other three fieldwork locations) unfailingly encounter throughout childhood, which centrally involves women – but this is a rather complex and diffuse thing, one which is difficult to explain in a sentence or two. Basically: women are observably key agents in the production of relatedness, and especially of the intense emotions associated with it (see Stafford 2000a, 2000b, 2003; see also the comments on women and emotion/affect in the papers by Friedman and Brandtstädter, this collection). Of course, every child will eventually encounter the idea that who you are, in kinship terms, is effectively *given* to you by birth or marriage or adoption into a patrilineal unit. But they will also know, from direct experience which starts very early in life, that within the main cycles of familial and communal reciprocity – where relatedness (including of the patrilineal kind) is explicitly seen to be *produced* by human action – it is women who typically have the pivotal roles. Most obviously, women have responsibility for the nurturing and care (*yang*) of children themselves, and are also frequently responsible for the day-to-day nurturing and care of parents, parents-in-law and grandchildren, as well as the broadening of ties to others beyond the scope of the family.^{vii}

For these various reasons, but especially because of their roles in the production of relatedness, I want to suggest that in places like Angang – but also in more lineage-oriented places such as Protected Mountain – children cannot help but encounter and learn about a form of actually existing Chinese matriarchy.

Of course, if by the term matriarchy we can only mean a way of life based around matrilineal descent and/or matrilineal residence and/or political power being solely in the hands of women, then the term could hardly apply to Angang. But if we mean a way of life in which considerable power and authority is vested in women (and in wives and mothers in particular) to the extent that they often “have the final say” over men, including in public discussions, while also often significantly dominating the emotional dispositions and outlook of their children, then there is something worth exploring – not only, I would say, in Angang and Protected Mountain, but also potentially much more widely in China and Taiwan.

The importance of women in the domestic realm – and specifically in their roles vis-à-vis children – has never been doubted by anthropologists of China. But I’m not referring here to a kind of hidden power, nor to one that is unremarked, nor to one that can be construed primarily as a form of “resistance”. If this is a secret, it is an open secret. More to the point: all people – male and female – observe and learn about this matriarchy, years before they become experts in anything resembling patrilineal ideology. To put it in Bourdieu’s terms, their “primary habitus” is often, I think, heavily matriarchal in orientation. (For this reason, by the way, the idea that household and family can be separated out from Chinese kinship – as if a distinction of this kind would be made in the minds of our informants, all of whom started life as children – strikes me as highly implausible.)

But has this phenomenon really been overlooked?

Taking a long historical view, Francesca Bray writes of the extent to which Chinese perspectives on the domestic realm, and on the proper roles of women, have varied significantly across imperial history and between different classes (Bray 1997, see also her contribution to this collection). She finds especially significant, for instance, the process whereby “a revised view of women” emerged during the Ming and Qing, one in which “reproductive roles were much more prominent than productive roles” (1997:272). However Bray is keen to stress, throughout her survey of these transformations, that

women's activities as producers and reproducers were an essential, indeed foundational, element in the creation of a "distinctively Chinese civility" – and, crucially, that they were always seen to be so within China (1997:371).

A similar point is made by Gail Hershatter in a highly thought-provoking paper on the fate of "the private" in revolutionary China. She notes the undoubted (and sometimes extreme) limits set on women's freedoms in imperial China, but then observes that:

... at the heart of imperial political thought was the precept that activities and values inculcated in the family, usually by women, were the very foundation of social order and state function. The domestic, in this sense, was not at all private. Women's role in household production was also linked to a wider public world. Late imperial statecraft writers ceaselessly promoted women's handicraft labor as crucial to the health of the agrarian economy and hence the stability of the state itself. Imperial state officials did not stop exhorting, rewarding, or regulating at the gate to a "private" or domestic realm. On the contrary, they regarded this realm both as the foundation of their power and as an appropriate subject for their encomia (Hershatter 2003:258).

But then, according to Hershatter, political activism in the early 20th century produced a new outlook on all of this, generating an unrelentingly negative evaluation of the domestic/traditional realm, and of women's (by definition, exploited) role within it (Hershatter 2003:259). Eventually, she suggests, the socialist state came to deprive "the domestic realm of causative status":

No longer a major location from which modernity was supposed to emerge, the domestic was regarded as a merely residual, reactive realm of human activity. Hidden from history, unvoiced, it became, arguably for the first time in Chinese history, private (2003:262).

I suppose I wonder, among many other things, to what extent this perspective – as filtered through our post-imperial informants in both China and Taiwan – has influenced anthropological perspectives, leading us to misconstrue women's roles both now and in the past.

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ⁱ Although note the comments by Ellen Judd (this collection) about some of the *disadvantages*, for women, of uxori-local marriage arrangements. In other words, staying close to one's natal kin should not be assumed to be uniformly beneficial for women.

ⁱⁱ This is by contrast with farming communities, where the need to control land is often thought to increase the need to control women (cf. Acheson 1981.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that, as Patricia Ebrey explains, it was common for elite women – and elite widows in particular – to play crucial roles in the Chinese system of succession to high office (Ebrey 2005).

^{iv} Andrew Kipnis notes, for example, that in his recent research on education in China the increasing importance of daughters' education was strikingly evident (personal communication and his essay in this collection).

^v See also Hom (1987:111-147) for comparable lamentations about wives who were left behind when their husbands "sojourned" to San Francisco.

^{vi} As noted above (endnote iv), Andrew Kipnis's recent research suggests that attitudes towards daughters' education is changing, seemingly very rapidly, in at least some places in China. However I cite this (earlier) research because it relates to the way in which a version of patriarchal conservatism – or, more simply, the expectation that women's possibilities will be more constrained than those of men – can be reproduced by women.

^{vii} Although note the important comments by Bray in this collection, on the striking historical variation in women's parenting roles and also in the social valuation of these roles.