

# **Unmarried Women in Their 40s in Taiwan.**

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### **台灣四十多歲未婚女性訪查紀要**

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## **The Flight from Marriage in Asia**

“Asians are marrying later, and less, than in the past. This has profound implications for women, traditional family life and Asian politics.” (Economist 20 August 2011)

This is a huge change, given the fact that up to the recent past, all Asian women were married, with marriage the only ‘career’ choice and perspective for women’s social advancement and security. In East Asian Confucianism, the family is the center of life, and considered the root of social stability, education and of the country as a whole. Confucianism defines girls as outsiders in their birth family. They are supposed to marry and become a member of the husband’s family. A girl should thus not be emotionally attached to her own mother, as her husband’s parents will become her ‘true parents’ later. They are the only ones she has to care for in their old age, fulfilling her duty as required by filial piety. Without marriage, women were not part of any family and could never be worshiped by descendants in the ancestor cult. In addition, no relative provided care in their old age. Times have changed dramatically, and the Confucian family is no longer attractive for modern, well-educated women with professional jobs and incomes of their own.

## **Background**

The incentive for this research project was the popular 2008 Taiwanese television series ‘My

Queen' (敗犬女王). The series has a happy ending, as reflected in its English title. The plot centers around successful journalist and reporter Shan Wushuang. Although she is eight years his senior, the future medical doctor Lukas considers her to be his 'queen' and is intent on marrying her as soon as he can afford to do so. The TV series was rated by Taiwanese viewers as quite realistic:

“‘My Queen’ addresses a number of social prejudices against women in the form of a fictional story, preventing direct criticism. On the other hand it uses many backgrounds that are well known, reported on daily by the media, and are easy for the audience to recognize and understand. Media concerns around later marriage and non-marriage are included in an entertaining story format.” (Cai Peihui, unmarried land reform activist, interview of 14 March 2015).

The series addresses a number of ‘hot issues’ in the debate around women’s marriage and changes in forms of marriage. Successfully broadcast in Taiwan, the series was also sold to the Republic of Korea and Japan, where it was shown both on regional and national TV. Korea even decided to film a domestic version, with Korean stars. In the Korean version, the age gap between the two lovers was increased to 14 years!

## **Older Women Marrying Younger Men**

‘My Queen’ portrays a historically different form of marriage. In Lun Yu, the classical collection of his thoughts and sayings, Confucius determined that it was appropriate for the man being married to be somewhat older than his wife. Legend has it that Confucius himself took a much younger wife later. Nevertheless, throughout Chinese history, marriages of older women to younger men have been common for rich as well as poor families and were very popular in Taiwan.

Poor families were known to adopt a girl as their future daughter-in-law, because she would cost much less than an adult bride, in terms of the expected dowry. Furthermore, the girl could be a servant, and grow up close to her future mother-in-law. Her marriage to their son could be a simple and inexpensive affair. As well as poor families, rich families were concerned with the daughter-in-law – mother-in-law relationship. They also hoped to have heirs as soon as possible, which was easier to achieve with the bride already chosen and readily available. It was the responsibility and duty of the parents to guarantee the marriage of their children,

whatever the cost. This becomes evident in today's purchase of immigrant brides for Taiwanese farmers and handicapped men who would otherwise never be financially able to marry.

In 'My Queen' the 'elder sister with younger brother' (姐弟戀) relationship and marriage is questioned by Lukas' friends and, primarily, by Shan Wushuang herself. The film ironically shows her attempts to seem younger (as in sexy doll nurse dressing), but also Lukas' lack of interest in younger women. The series also details the importance of the respective parents' acceptance. In the end, Shan Wushuang's mother marries a junior husband herself, and Shan Wushuang behaves as a dutiful daughter-in-law having meals with Lukas' widowed father. She is not overly eager to marry, and it is Lukas and his father who press her to agree, while her schedule is filled with other activities.

A 2009 survey showed that in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, acceptance of marriages between older women and younger men is very high. In Hong Kong, over 70% of women between 26 and 40 years of age considered a husband five years their junior to be acceptable. In Singapore, 60% of unmarried women and men believed that a younger husband is acceptable. At the end of 2009, the statistics department of the Taiwan Executive Yuan counted 460,000 couples where the wife was older than the husband. Seventy-five percent of unmarried men did not consider it a problem to marry women older than themselves, but only with an age gap of from two to six years.

## **The 'Leftover' Single Women in China and (Unspoken) Marriage Deadlines**

While an older wife can be the 'queen' for a younger husband, unmarried women over 27 were officially defined as no longer marriageable 'leftovers' (剩女) by the All-China Women's Federation, by Chinese mass media and the government in 2013. The Women's Federation *Fulian* (婦聯) sees the women at fault for not marrying, and repeated the traditional view that a woman's life is impossible outside of marriage.

In recent years, the age of first marriage for women in Taiwan is nearing the 30s (2014: 29.7). 'My Queen' Shan Wushuang is 30 years old and plans to wait to marry until Lukas finishes his studies abroad.

In Japan, which is where Taiwan imported the term ‘baiquan’ (敗犬) - literally meaning ‘looser dog’ – with the image of single women standing at a distance, yapping senselessly - 34% of women in their 30s had not married in 2012, and 10% of women in their fifties had never married. Japan created the term of ‘arafuto’ (“around forty”) for unmarried women in their forties. From a series of informal talks with Taiwanese women around 30 – 35, this author gained the impression that unmarried Taiwanese women under 40/45 are still expecting to marry and lead a married life.

### **Single Women as a Symbol of Social Modernization**

As late as the 1980s, unmarried women were considered as posing a danger to families. With terms like ‘public danger’ (單身公害), unmarried women were considered potential seducers of married men, who could destroy their families. Nevertheless, the number of single females is growing throughout Asia. These women are mainly urban, highly-educated professionals, affluent because of their management-level jobs and thus not forced to marry for economic reasons.

Due to their backgrounds, their expectations for a future husband are high. Male candidates should be as equally educated, with high-income careers, and able to provide necessities like a house and car. Research has found that the main reason why marriages are not agreed to, or result in divorce, is not an age gap, but rather the situation of women earning more than their husbands. Obviously men cannot stand a wife who earns more than they do or has a higher-level job. Men would complain that their wives do not take care of the household, and women would excel in homework and resign their career perspectives to counter this criticism, one widely shared by the majority of society (Cain Miller, Claire; Bui Quoc Trung 2016).

### **Research Interest: Unmarried Women in Taiwanese Society**

The focus of my research became unmarried women in their late forties. After age 40, only around 10 percent of Taiwanese women and 15 percent of men are still unmarried (Yang Wen-Shan 2015). At the same time, while having children outside of marriage is increasingly common in Western Europe, it is still unthinkable in Taiwan. Only 4% of children are born out of wedlock in Taiwan, as compared to more than half of all newborns in France. And among the single women over 40 I interviewed, not one had a child. As there are many women in this situation, I wondered why they do not organize. Non-governmental organizations are very

popular in Taiwan, and if one worries about formalities, they can be informal, while still meeting regularly. The lack of such an organization was one reason that finding interviewees proved difficult and was only possible among close friends or relatives. Yet the large number of single women in their forties became clear when I noted that everyone I asked knew of at least one. Nevertheless, many women in this situation refused to meet or even talk informally. Being unmarried as an older woman is obviously a source of shame, and a fact best kept hidden.

Interviews were only possible with a personal introduction and are therefore neither numerous nor can they be considered as representative. All those interviewed are college/ university graduates, from primary school teachers to university professors. The primary teachers feel especially vulnerable, because over 90% of them (teaching staff only, no administrative staff) are female, and thus it is hard to find a husband at the workplace:

AT:

“We are only women here (Tainan City No 1 primary school). I was aware of the fact that it would be quite impossible to find a husband here. Our only male staff is the housekeeper. He is already married and old, but anyway, I never considered marrying someone less educated than myself. That is why I joined a gymnastics club and an Ikebana class in my free time. But both places only had women only like myself, and in the end I dropped both.”

If a woman over forty wants to marry, elder, married colleagues often willingly undertake the responsibility to help. If the women and their parents have already given up hope, a fortune teller might still hold out promise of a marital union. A married female colleague in her fifties went to the fortune teller on behalf of my interviewee AT and reported back: “There are women who cannot have a child. You are one of them. The fortune teller said that if you did have a child it would surely die. And if you become pregnant, the pregnancy would endanger your life. So he said it is lucky that you have not married yet. Now a prospective husband would not expect you to have a child. Last year, the fortune teller was not optimistic about your marital prospects. But this year he was very positive. He promises a husband for you not this year, but next. You do not need to do anything, just concentrate on your job.”

## **Parents and Siblings**

The role of the family, of parents and siblings, but especially of the parents, is decisive.

BT:

“My father wanted me to marry. He introduced me to several of his friends. But at the same time, he did not feel that any of them was qualified to be my husband. In the end, however, my father had nothing to say about it, since he had left my mother for another woman when I was still small. Nevertheless, I kept contact with him, but my mother decided in all things. I lived with her until she died, and she did not mention my marrying even once. She did not need to say much: When I was in the US, I got a very good job offer and would have stayed there. But then during a phone call, my mother mentioned in passing how lonely she was. At that time my younger brother had already married and had a daughter, and they were living across the street. My mother did not complain. No need. I refused the job and came back here.”

## **A Huge Generation Gap**

Those women in their early and late forties today were born from the late 1960s when Taiwan's economy was already flourishing and children rarely went hungry. Inexpensive channels for higher education were open to girls, who no longer depended on parents to pay for their schooling. They grew up in a modernizing, industrializing and urbanizing society, whereas their mothers had grown up in mainly rural, traditional surroundings, where the latest age for women to marry was 20, and having a first child at age 21 was considered late. This is why the mothers proposed adopting a child if their daughters were not yet married at age 35. Adoptions are often informal and do not depend on the married status of the adoptive parent. The adopted child is often a relative and stays with his family. However, even at age 35, the women born in the 1960s were still in no hurry for marriage, childbearing or adoption.

Many of the older single women I interviewed felt that men of their age were stuck in their parents' generation, with traditional role models for wives and women in the family, and very patriarchal family concepts.

## **Inheritance**

The other important question besides the parents' wishes and marriage for the women singles today is that regarding the inheritance of the property they assemble in their full-time qualified professional careers. Traditionally, the only property women could have was their dowry. Therefore, female property ownership was linked to marriage. Otherwise, property, especially land, was usually inherited by male kin. In Taiwan, deeds have been preserved of women

exceptionally inheriting because there was no son or close male relative.

Daughters and sons had equal inheritance rights starting from the first Republican inheritance law of 1931, but practice did not conform to the legal text. Daughters are requested to relinquish their inheritance rights with marriage. In many cases, they are compensated with a dowry. But mostly the dowry does not include real estate holdings or land, and if calculated, does not measure up to the inheritance itself. If the inheritance is big, daughters are often required to sign a written waiver. But what if a daughter does not marry?

H:

“My father trusts me more than my younger sisters and brothers. That might be because I am the oldest. I come from a farm in Southern Taiwan. Of course farmers are very traditional. Only the sons can inherit. I have a younger brother and two younger sisters. When my brother inherited everything twenty years ago, our parents forced him to inherit together with me. The neighbors still believe that he got it, and that I have nothing, because I am a girl. I was a kindergarten teacher at the time, and my parents simply trusted me more. They still do. They complain that my brother's wife is only interested in her birth family and is loyal to them. Therefore they prefer me to have some control, although they admonished me never to quarrel with my brother about the land. Currently he runs a shop and needs the land rent we get. I do not need it and let him have it. When our parents gave us the land, they kept the house and some land and told us they want to divide this among the four of us when they are dead.

Now my father's son-preference goes towards his grandson. He is my youngest sister's child. Our brother's only child is a daughter. Originally, my father complained that my sister's son is only a “waisun” 外孫 and no true grandson, but then my mom accused him of being old-fashioned. Besides, my sister is living very close to our parents' place and often visits with her kids.”

L (50 years old, university professor):

“I did a will. And I encourage everybody to do it. If you are not married, at least half of your property goes to your brothers and sisters. I had an apartment, and I transferred ownership to my younger sister last year. She has a son, who is currently studying in the US. I hope that if I need old age care in future, he is going to feel responsible, because he has my flat.”

Even though highly educated and internationally experienced, and although aware of the

possibility to will her property to a third party, L only considers the family and close family members for inheritance. In her words: “Inheritance and property are family affairs. They belong with the family as does old age care. For unmarried women, their birth families are even more important than to those who have their own family.”

## **Preliminary Conclusion**

N:

“Women who study law never want to marry after having studied it. Practising law has the same consequence: Female lawyers rarely marry.”

There are many and individually different reasons not to marry. Although the motives differ, lifelong single women have become a collective phenomenon all over Asia. Unlike the situation in Europe, women’s reluctance to marry directly impacts the birth rate. The prejudices against unmarried women extend to single mothers. Teachers classify the children of aborigines, of foreign immigrant mothers and of single mothers as incapable and as non-achievers.

In Asia, the Confucian family tradition seems incompatible with the real life situations of highly educated, working and independent women. Parents’ sense of obligation to marry their children seems to be weakening. On the contrary, ever more parents prefer to keep their daughters to provide old-age care. There is a continuous development of caring schemes: Whereas today’s elderly still rely on the family and on children for old-age care, they no longer insist that a daughter-in-law fulfills the caring duties. Acceptance is growing for daughters feeling responsible for their birth parents first. Therefore, parents do not insist on her marriage any more. The generation of children in their forties does not rely on family care plans any more. Thus women do not feel pressed to marry and to bear children. They would rather rely on having the property and personal savings needed to hire careworkers. If these are still, although remote, relatives and family members, so much the better. They can be attracted economically, but cannot be recruited on an emotional basis of children’s piety.

Scholars warn that women who do not marry and have children become a state security risk. That without enough people who are young and working, the state pension plan will fail. But the women they address do not rely on state care services, but on their own economic power that allows for self-organized care, if needed. Such women are neither dependent on their



family nor on the state. While families begin to organize themselves in the new model, and may even favor it, and parents' relationships with their own daughters grow closer, the state makes use of highly qualified and able women while at the same time wishing to reduce them into motherhood. Men who have long been favoured by society and by families need to modernize and adopt gender values as their own. To these men, a non-patriarchal family and extended affordable child-care facilities would seem an evident necessity to demand from state services. Then younger women would be able to integrate job and children, and the generation of unmarried women in their forties would be an exceptional one.