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Tales of the bitter and sweet

A study of a Taiwanese master story and transgression narratives as shared cross-generationally in Taiwanese families

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Recent research in Taiwanese families has found that children's transgressions are narratable and parents encourage children to confess and reflect upon their faults. Little, however, is known if adults do the same when talking with children or other adults. This study examines transgression stories from interviews with 102 adult participants in Taiwan. It finds adults often tell stories about the faults of close family members such as spouses, parents, children, and aunts and uncles. However, they are less likely to tell stories of their own faults. Furthermore, they say telling transgression stories to children must take into account the child's age and the story's potential didactic value. The study also finds that many stories, especially those told by older adults, i.e., grandparents, articulate part of a "master story" lamenting how they persevered from a bitter past to a much better present. Such a story shapes cross-generational narrative and lends greater moral authority to elders. Finally, implications are discussed how this study sheds light on a theory of confessional narratives by authority figures across different cultures.

Keywords: Taiwan, narrative, families, transgressions, master story, Chinese

In an insightful essay Bruner (1986a) iterates the relationship between experience and expression: expressions are not simply equivalent to reality, rather they "structure experience," are "culturally constructed," and "performed" as stories or dramas (pp.6–7). This is because humans are self-reflexive beings who actively engage in the interpretation of experience through interaction with others; and

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interpretation is guided by the situatedness of personal and social beliefs, or local “culture,” which according to Geertz (1973/2000) functions both as a “model of” and “model for” action (p. 93). Stories, therefore, are an important means of expression as they can be examined both as a model of local values and beliefs, and as a performance that demonstrates a model for action. This study intends to build upon these perspectives by looking at stories told in one domain, the family, involving participants from one cultural setting, Taiwan.

Storytelling in Taiwanese families has received interest in recent years from research conducted by Miller and colleagues (e.g., Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, & Mintz, 1990; Miller, Sandel, Liang, & Fung, 2001; Miller, Wang, Sandel, & Cho, 2002; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997). They claim that Taiwan presents an interesting case for research as it is a society deeply rooted in the Confucian tradition (Chang, 1997, 2001; Miller et al., 1997) and hence, differs from the more familiar European American culture that is the focus of much research. They have also looked cross-culturally at a particular type of personal narrative, transgression stories of past wrongdoing, told to and by young children and have found a number of differences: while Euro-American parents tend to underplay or rarely narrate the transgressions of their young children, Taiwanese parents frequently narrate such stories and engage the young child in reflecting on his or her wrongful acts (Miller et al., 1997). Euro-American parents may share stories of their past transgressions when speaking with their children, claiming that such stories may be told in fun or to build a sense of intimacy and trust with the young child, showing the child that Mommy is “human” and made mistakes in the past just like the child. In contrast, Taiwanese parents never tell such stories to their children. They believe a parent’s duty is to clearly explain and model right versus wrong behavior, and if they tell the child their past misdeeds, this would greatly confuse the young child (Miller et al., 2001).

In a related line of research Wang (2004) has studied stories told in Chinese and Euro-American families involving young children. She finds Euro-American parents scaffolding the child’s participation in an event, drawing out what the event looks like from the child’s point of view. In contrast, Chinese parents develop narratives whereby the child is seen as acting as a member of a group, assuming an identity as part of the collective “we.” Furthermore, Chinese parents, like those in Taiwan, often construct didactic stories, teaching the child to confess his or her faults, then leading the child to explain the proper way to behave in the future. Wang (2004) claims this practice is influenced by the Confucian concept of *ren* (仁) “the supreme virtue of benevolence, moral vitality, and a sense of concern for others” (p. 290). (Mandarin Chinese words are represented without tone marks in Pinyin.) *Ren* calls on people to engage in self-reflection (*zixing* 自省), examining one’s past mistakes in order to perfect the self.

Finally, Sandel and colleagues (Cho, Sandel, Miller, & Wang, 2005; Sandel, 2004; Sandel, Cho, Miller, & Wang, 2006) have looked closely at stories told by Euro-American and Taiwanese grandmothers. The former, like Euro-American mothers, tend to frame interaction with their young grandchild in a self-lowered position: grandmothers describe themselves as literally “sitting on the floor” with the child, serving as the child’s “playmate, companion, and friend” (Sandel et al., 2006, p. 267). In contrast, none of the Taiwanese grandmothers see themselves as their grandchild’s playmate or companion. Rather, they see themselves as the child’s caregiver who meted out discipline when necessary: “A good grandmother corrects them [children] when they are wrong and encourages them when they are right ... that’s the most important [thing], the rest doesn’t matter as much” (p. 268). When examining transgression stories, Sandel (2004) found that Taiwanese grandmothers do not tell stories iterating their own faults to grandchildren or their adult grandchildren. Rather, they tell stories demonstrating how other people are at fault, such as departed elders (rarely living elders), or members of younger generations, such as a grandmother’s daughter-in-law. Likewise, young mothers rarely tell stories that clearly portray their elders (e.g., mother-in-law) as committing transgressions.

In sum, an analysis of stories of transgressions in Taiwanese families finds that while young children’s misdeeds are narratable and should lead to the child’s self-examination, parents and grandparents infrequently tell stories that portray *themselves* as committing a transgression. This contrasts with Euro-American families where young children’s misdeeds are underplayed and parents and grandparents may confess and tell their own faults to members of younger generations in the interest of building common ground. Taiwanese parents believe it would be wrong to confess their faults to young children as it may complicate their understanding of right and wrong behavior. Rather, they believe it important to narrate and model correct behavior, while casting distant or unknown others as examples of wrongdoing (Miller et al., 2001).

In this paper I intend to extend this line of research by looking at the kinds of stories Taiwanese adults tell to each other. A finding of storytelling involving young children in Taiwanese (Miller et al., 1997), or Chinese families (Wang, 2004), is that parents often tell or lead the child to confess his or her faults. This then leads us to ask if Taiwanese adults tell stories that portray and confess their own faults. Another finding is that Taiwanese parents claim it important to show the difference between right and wrong to their children, and that they do this by telling stories of wrongdoing involving distant others, such as criminals portrayed on television, while parents portray themselves or familiar others as demonstrating proper behavior (Miller et al., 2001). The question that follows is if Taiwanese adults, when speaking with other adults, similarly tell stories that portray only

distant others as wrongdoers, while familiar others or the teller is narrated as doing what is right. A final question to be addressed comes from the work of Bruner (1986b) who has identified what he calls a “master story.” Citing the example of stories of Native Americans, Bruner claims that in the 1930s and 1940s ethnographers and the accounts that they collected narrated a story of the present as a time of decay and loss that contrasted with a “golden past.” However, beginning in the 1970s the master narrative changed as Indian life was described as entering a time of resistance and forward looking vision for Native Americans. This master story, he claims, can be seen as shaping and running through individual stories, because stories, as expressions of experience, are a present-day interpretation of past events, which in turn guide the interpretation of a future course of action — or future storytelling. The question then arises if we can identify a Taiwanese “master story” associated with stories of transgression, and, if so, how does the master story shape individual narratives?

Method and procedures

Data for this study were collected during two periods of fieldwork in Taiwan conducted during the summer months of 1998 and 1999, including 102 participants, (70 from Taiwan and 32 the United States). During the first period I conducted in-depth interviews with 23 participants, including older and younger adults: the former were grandparents or great grandparents, and the younger were parents. Interviews with older adults were open-ended and often designed to elicit a life story narrative, usually through asking a question such as “What are the differences between life today and in the past?” Participants were also asked to comment on the kinds of stories they tell to other family members. Interviews with younger adults were also open-ended and elicited a life story narrative. They included questions about the participant’s past childhood and more recent experiences caring for a child. During the second period of research in 1999 when 81 participants were interviewed (2 were also interviewed in 1998), questions about their early childhood experiences and differences between life today and in the past were asked in order to elicit a life story narrative. In addition, many were asked questions based upon a protocol designed to uncover folk beliefs about childrearing that was part of a cross-cultural study conducted in both Taiwan and the United States (see Miller et al., 2002). Most participants were women (86/102), and many were either mothers (44) or grandmothers (39) of young children and/or grandchildren. In addition, 5 young unmarried adults, 9 fathers, and 5 grandfathers participated as opportunities arose (see Miller et al., 2002; Sandel, 2000, 2004). Interviews were conducted by a team of researchers including the author, his spouse, and another graduate

student, and conducted in the local languages of Taiwan: Mandarin Chinese and Tai-gi (also called Taiwanese, Hokkien, Hoklo, Southern Min, see Sandel, 2003 for a discussion of what to call this speech code). They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the original languages. Excerpts were then translated into English by the author. All told, 102 participants were interviewed for this study, including 47 younger women (mothers and unmarried women) aged 16 to 49, 39 older women (grandmothers or great-grandmothers) aged 48 to 86, 11 younger men (fathers and unmarried men) aged 15 to 48, and 5 older men (grandfathers) aged 54 to 67.

Research sites and participants

As discussed in previous research, Taiwan is a place that in recent decades has witnessed dramatic changes (see Rubinstein, 2000). For the first half of the twentieth century, during the childhood and youth of older participants interviewed for this study, Taiwan was an agrarian society under Japanese colonial rule. Then following the end of World War II in October, 1945, control of Taiwan was transferred to the Chinese Nationalist Government (Kuomintang or KMT). The early years of rule by the KMT were not peaceful, but marked by discontent between the local populace and new immigrants from the Chinese mainland, which sparked the short-lived uprising of February 28, 1947 (see Kerr, 1965; Phillips, 2003). Then when the Communists took control of the Chinese mainland in 1949, Taiwan became host to millions of mainland refugees, many of whom were soldiers of peasant background who had been drafted into the Nationalist army. Thus, conditions in Taiwan went from bad to worse in the aftermath of the war, as political instability and the rapid increase in the population made life very difficult. However, over time and assisted by support from the U.S. government, Taiwan's economic situation slowly improved; nevertheless, the island was still subject to strict political control as the KMT declared a state of emergency and established martial law, which was not lifted until July, 1987.

By the late 1990s when data for this study were collected, Taiwan had become a free and democratic society, exemplified by the first popular and direct election of the President of the Republic of China, Lee Teng-hui, in 1996. The economy had also been transformed from one that was primarily based upon agriculture to an industrial powerhouse, exporting a range of high and low tech goods to the United States and other lands. There had also been changes in the settlement patterns of the island, as many young people had moved from rural areas to live in Taiwan's growing cities, making it one of the most densely populated lands on earth. Urbanization and economic prosperity, however, did not signal the end to many traditional practices and beliefs. For example, most Taiwanese families still

followed traditional religious practices involving a mix of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian beliefs (Stafford, 1995). The number of multiple generation households was also high, especially in rural areas where a married son was expected to live with and support his parents. And as we found, many grandmothers took on the role as full-time caregiver for their young grandchildren so that the child's mother could continue to work full-time outside the home (Sandel et al., 2006). While looked upon from the outside Taiwan appears to be a wealthy and technologically advanced society, a closer look reveals that the land in many ways is still rooted deeply in a tradition passed down for many generations.

Participants for this study were recruited through the author's personal contacts. Prior to data collection he had lived in a city in northern Taiwan for many years and had many friends there. He was also related by marriage to a large Taiwanese family rooted in a rural community in central Taiwan, but like many other families in Taiwan had family members who had moved away and lived in cities in Taiwan's northern and central regions. Thus, while the largest number of participants were recruited from Chhan-chng (a pseudonym), a rural community in central Taiwan, others were recruited who lived in or near Taiwan's large cities such as Taipei in the north, and Taichung in the center. Thus, data for this study can be said to be representative of the kinds of stories that are told in many families across Taiwan. (These data did not include participants from Taiwan's south and east, and such ethnic groups as Taiwan's Hakka, Aboriginal, or Chinese mainland born populations.)

Data analysis

Data for this study draw from a variety of sources including published memoirs and speeches, and narratives collected from research sites in Taiwan and the United States. The latter come from interviews transcribed verbatim into the original languages, resulting in hundreds of pages of typed transcripts. These were then read through by the author and other researchers looking for emergent themes and inductively constructed folk theories, some of which have previously been discussed (e.g., self esteem: Cho et al., 2005, Miller et al., 2002; kinship address: Sandel, 2002; language ideologies: Sandel, 2003; the grandmother's role: Sandel et al., 2006). This study reexamines these data by focusing on stories of personal experience involving a didactic message and/or a narration of a misdeed or wrongful act. Most stories were told to the researcher directly in response to an interview question. However, many other stories were told spontaneously in the flow of conversation established during the interview. Since interviews were conducted in participants' homes and framed as a "conversation" rather than the more formal "interview" (see Briggs, 1986; Miller et al., 2002), often visitors or family members

were present during the course of an interview and would join in the conversation or serve as audience members to the topic at hand. Thus, participants often guided the conversation and “performed” their narratives in a manner similar to how they talk when speaking with family or friends.

Results

Looking across the transcripts of 102 adult participants, many stories of a transgression or wrongdoing, and/or a didactic message were found. These were told by members of both younger and older generations, parents and grandparents, and men and women. This is not unexpected. What is interesting, and the focus of this paper, is to look more closely in order to determine (1) if a master story can be identified, (2) if they portray familiar others (e.g., spouses, parents, other adult family members) as doing wrong, or (3) if participants tell stories that confess to or admit their own wrongdoing. Each of these questions is examined in turn.

Master story: A bitter past and easier present

When talking with older folk, the question, “How is life today different from life in the past?” invariably was answered with the same response: In the past life was *kan-kho* (bitter); now it is *khui-oah* (quick lived and easy; Tai-gi words are represented without tone marks in the phonetic system of Taiwan’s Presbyterian Church). Taiwan was very poor and faced economic hardship during the 1940s when it was controlled by Japan and subject to allied bombing (Tang, 1999), and the early decades of KMT rule from the 1950s to the 1970s, a time when many of the folk we interviewed were married and had young children. As described by Margery Wolf (1968/1985, 1972/1987, 1978) in her ethnographies of rural communities as witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s, few rural households had running water, women on average gave birth to many children, and few mothers had much time to devote to childcare; often children were cared for by the child’s grandmother or older siblings, usually an older sister. The men and women we spoke with gave voice to a narrative of a difficult, bitter, and “ill-fated” past, followed by a much easier, sweeter, and “quick-lived” present.

A co-narrated story by two women, Mrs. Kho (a pseudonym, age 71, and born in 1928) and Mrs. Liao (age 72 and born in 1927) illustrate this theme. This story was performed in the midst of an interview with Mrs. Kho and her husband. After talking with them for about an hour, as often happened in this community, a neighbor, Mrs. Liao, stopped by and joined the conversation. About a week prior to this conversation, another researcher who was involved in the project had gone

to Mrs. Liao's home and interviewed her from the protocol about early childhood development. Mrs. Liao then began the following co-narrated story.

Mrs. Liao: That Miss [researcher] came to my home [and] asked me how in the past did I rear children. I immediately started to cry. We raised children; all [had a] bad life; every day [I] had to go to the fields to work, [and] came home late at night. The children would be crawling on the ground, their whole bodies black with dirt, [and] already asleep. [I] would carry them to [their beds] to sleep [and they] didn't eat and didn't bathe.

Mrs. Kho: Before 1945, before that no children drank cow's milk. In the past all children were breastfed. [We would] come back from working in the fields, put the children down and then go back to work in the fields. The children had nothing to eat, there wasn't enough milk, just [put them] on the ground; let them cry. [I] had to carry the water, fold up the kindling wood for the stove. When it was dark, [I] had to quickly prepare the stove fire, carry the water. It was all so hard and bitter. *What a bitter life!*

Mrs. Liao: Now children eat cookies and drink formula. They have everything! They eat all day, have a much better life... In the past it was very *phai^m-mia* 歹命 [bad-fated-life]...

Mrs. Kho: In the past [we] bundled the kindling [wood for cooking], [and] carried the water [inside]. Now you have running water in your home. It's very *khui-oah* 快活 ["quick-lived" or easy]. Now it's very *khui-oah*.

Mrs. Kho and Mrs. Liao co-constructed this narrative, overlapping, echoing and amplifying each other, speaking as one person. Ostensibly this narrative performance has been repeated many times in conversations among friends and family members, indicated not only by this instance, but by the fact that so many others we spoke with shared a similar story. It paints a portrait of life in Taiwan in the late 1940s through 1950s when homes did not have running water, used kindling instead of natural gas for cooking, and everyday tasks for running a household took up much time and energy, most notably when contrasted with life in the present. It also indicates that many children received little attention and from today's perspective, may have suffered from neglect. However, while these women lamented the fact that their children were poorly cared for, neither framed the narrative as a "confession" of their poor parenting.

Instead of a confession, many narratives of a difficult past conveyed a didactic message of "perseverance." Mrs. Ong at age 55 was nearly twenty years younger than Mrs. Liao and Kho, but she too spoke of life in the past as much more difficult

than the present. She said that when she was young her “dad loved to gamble” and because of this they had to sell their land, possessions, and water buffalo to pay off his debts. Their life was “very bitter” at the time. But then later her father stopped gambling, life improved, and the bitter passed. However, Mrs. Ong said that because of this childhood experience today she is “very frugal.” She contrasted herself with others saying, “I’m not like other people who carelessly spend money. I’ve already [got] the habit of being frugal.” She then explained how this life story is used as a didactic resource when talking with her sons and daughters-in-law.

I have talked with my sons and with my daughters-in-law that in the past I suffered hardship [*kan-kho*]. If my sons and daughters-in-law have any difficulties, at that time I will tell them that when I was young my days also passed with hardship and pain. I tell them that we people are also all to persevere. If there are any problems [you] must persevere. After persevering, the days will be easier...

I often say that placed in front of us in our lives is a bowl of sweet soup, and a bowl of bitter soup. This bowl of bitter soup, if [you] drink it first, then afterward that bowl of sweet soup will taste even better. This bowl of bitter soup, it tastes bad, [but] if [you] drink it first, then that bowl of sweet soup will sooner be drunk. [But] if this bowl of sweet soup is drunk first, this bowl of bitter soup that is drunk later will be very hard to drink. Right? ... Is it not like this? If [you] can’t persevere then there is no way, no way. We people are like this.

Mrs. Ong’s account indicates that she engaged in what Fung (1999) has identified as “opportunity education,” or teaching a message to one’s children when the circumstances warrant it, which in this case is when Mrs. Ong’s children are facing “difficulties.” During such moments she will tell them stories of the difficulties she faced in the past, conveying the message that eventually she “persevered.” The didactic second part of this narrative is illustrated with the metaphor of bowls of sweet and bitter soup which must be drunk. (In Mandarin and Tai-gi usage soup is “drunk” and not “eaten.”) Often the circumstances you face are not chosen, but rather presented before you, and it is your responsibility to take what is set before you. The good news is if you first drink bitter soup, later in life you will have sweet soup, and it will taste even better because you have persevered through a time of bitterness. However, the lesson also is a warning that if now you partake of sweet soup be advised that you may later have bitter soup, which will be much harder to swallow.

We end this section by claiming that the story of passing from a bitter past to a much better one in the present can be seen as a Taiwanese “master story” (Bruner, 1986b) that is told in many homes and from one generation to the next. Evidence can be found in the autobiography of the former President of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian (1999). While he was known as very intelligent and a graduate of the law school of National Taiwan University, Taiwan’s most prestigious university, he was

popular in part because he spoke Mandarin Chinese like a “country hick” and not someone who grew up in a wealthy or educated family. When he was campaigning for President in 1999 and 2000 many who supported him would say, “He is one of us.” This connection can be seen in an excerpt from his autobiography as he reflected upon his early childhood:

During that poor generation, Taiwan’s women suffered the most hardship: They had to labor to support the family and to take care of children. My deepest impression is that of my mother carrying me on her back [to and from] the fields. Before she started to work, she would dig a hole in the soil, and put me in it, so as to prevent me from running off and getting into danger. Then when it was time to go home, she would pick me up again. At that time, because of working hard all day, her whole body was covered with sweat, and my whole body and all my clothes would turn wet as she carried me home on her back. (author’s translation, pp. 49, 50).

Chen expressed a story that could have been uttered by many others, who worked very hard just to survive during a difficult period. This articulates a Taiwanese “master story” which may serve both as a model of Taiwanese culture and its past, and a model for interpreting how to live and face difficulties in the present. What is noteworthy, however, is that while this hints at problems in the past — children were neglected, fathers would gamble — blame is not assessed. While many suffered, no one was explicitly blamed for such suffering. In the next section we look at stories where someone is narrated as blameworthy.

Narratives of others’ faults: Distant or near?

Previous research involving stories told in Taiwanese families with young children indicates that while parents often narrate their child’s misdeeds (Miller et al., 1997), they do not tell stories of their own misdeeds, nor of familiar others (Miller et al., 2001). Research by Sandel (2004) indicates that when women have disputes with their mother-in-law or other members of an older generation, they tend not to openly display their discontent, claiming that the community watches and censors those who complain about their elders. In this section we look at how participants framed their stories, and to what extent they were willing, or not willing, to say that a close family member had committed a transgression.

Many stories were found whereby the interviewee told a transgression story, and clearly stated that a family member was wrong: husbands told stories of their wives’ misdeeds, wives told stories of their husbands’ faults, adult daughters (or daughters-in-law) narrated stories of their mothers’ (or mothers-in-law’s) transgressions, mothers and fathers spoke of their child’s misdeeds, and even aunts or uncles were singled out and portrayed as violating some norm or value. For

example, like we saw in Mrs. Ong's story above, the problem of gambling was narrated. In one family a story was co-narrated by several participants about both living and departed relatives, who because of gambling — by some of the men in the family — lost large sums of money, forcing them to sell tracts of farmland to pay off their debt. In another interview, a middle-aged man, married and a father of two teenage children, told a story about his son's transgression as a young child: his son stole money from his father's wallet. When he discovered his son's misbehavior, "I punished him. Because this kind of act, after you've grown up you cannot do it, this kind of behavior. So I severely punished him." In light of past research this kind of story is unsurprising. However, he also told a story of his wife's misdeeds, namely that she has a history of playing "some sanitized mahjong." When he discovered that his wife was playing mahjong, and playing for money, "At first I was, very angry... I said [to her], 'You can go and listen to music, or sing music [karaoke], I won't object. But when I saw you, on the card table there was money [there], I felt I was *huo mao san zhang* [literally 'fire blasting out thirty feet', i.e., very angry]."

In an interview with a middle-aged woman, married, and with three teenage children, the woman told stories illustrating her husband's transgressions. She claimed that he did not trust her, would cheat on her, had a drinking problem, did not provide sufficient financial support, and said that he would kill her. In response she went to the police station to report on her husband. At the station her husband asked the police if he could hit her, to which the police incredulously responded that he cannot hit her at the police station. In other words, this woman was in an abusive relationship (years later she divorced her husband and obtained court-ordered protection from the police).

Taiwanese adults told stories of their spouse's transgressions involving such problems as money, drinking, gambling, and violence, much as we find in other cultures. However, some of these stories had features not often found among Euro-American stories. For instance, Mrs. Ong told a story of transgression involving her aunt (called *Toa-m* in Tai-gi, indexing the wife of her father's older brother). This woman lived in the countryside, and like many young people, her married son and daughter-in-law moved to a city for better business opportunities. The daughter-in-law had two sons, ages four and two, and was pregnant with a third child. At that time the mother-in-law said, "Your oldest son you take with you; the second you leave with me to take care of." The boy lived with his grandmother for many years and saw his parents only on weekends or holidays — an arrangement not uncommon in Taiwan. However, what was unusual, and the point of the story, was that the grandmother did not teach the boy to "call" or address his parents. Thus when his parents visited, the boy did not perform the culturally important act of kinship address (Sandel, 2002): he did not address them as "Daddy"

or “Mommy.” Mrs. Ong said it was her aunt’s fault for not teaching her grandson how to behave properly.

In other transgression stories we found a type of social influence reflecting Confucian values. For example, one man, Mr. Lim, said that in the past, when his children were young, his wife was a very severe disciplinarian: “Their mother [his wife] was half a black face [and] would hit [the children] with her hand... Their mother, for even the smallest thing, would pick up a stick and hit.” Mr. Lim and his family lived with and supported his mother, fulfilling his filial duty as his mother’s youngest son. Therefore his wife’s disciplinary style was visible to his mother on a daily basis. She told her son: “Your wife, [she] hits the children. Hits them so severely and you don’t do anything!” Because of this Mr. Lim would quarrel with his wife. When asked whose side he would take in this quarrel, he replied:

I would always stand on my mom’s side. I would certainly, as long as my mom was alive I would always support my mom. And then ... when my mom was not present, I would tell my wife, tell her, “You look. I was definitely not borne by you.” ... And then, whenever she [his mother] was present, [I told my wife], “I ask you to be gentler. You listen to me. You respect her. When she’s not around, you want me to do anything it’s okay. You occasionally hit them, that’s okay. But you cannot hit them in front of her, or scold them... Because you will hurt her heart.”

In disputes between his wife and mother, Mr. Lim took his mother’s side. His mother was the one who gave birth to him, and was the one to whom he owed the debt of his very life, not his wife. He also exhorted his wife to change her behavior in front of her mother-in-law, because not changing would “hurt her heart.” Thus, we see in the above an expression of the cultural belief that respect and deference should be shown to one’s elders, and that such deference is more important than the respect that should be shown between husband and wife.

The final transgression story to consider is one which shows that narrating and expressing blame in Taiwanese families — toward one’s parent — is not simple and is complicated by cultural beliefs. The woman mentioned above, whose husband abused her, also told stories about her relationship with her mother. One story recalled a time in her childhood when her youngest sister, six years her junior and one year old at the time, came down with polio that resulted in a “crippled” leg. She said that at the time her mother was very busy, spent most of the day working outside the home on her small plot of land, or selling vegetable oil and other sundries to earn extra money. Thus, like many families observed by Wolf (1972/1987), as an older sister it became her responsibility, and the responsibility of her younger sister — two years her junior — to look after their baby sister.

Because of Limei’s [youngest sister’s] leg, me and Huijen [younger sister] were yelled at most severely. Now her [youngest sister’s] leg became like that because of

a fever when there was an outbreak of that, polio. At that time Limei had a fever. Because it was me, and Huijen [younger sister] who were caring, it was the two of us who cared for Limei. And so the two of us were yelled at, yelled at most severely... And so my sister moved out when she got older because she said, I feel that she couldn't take mom's nagging [*laodao* 唠叨]. [Mom] would often yell at us.

The background to this story is one that unfortunately affected thousands of children when the Salk polio vaccine was first administered in the 1960s. As has been explained to me, the vaccine was not given uniformly to all children as it is today, and the result was a series of outbreaks of polio which could have been prevented. But this story must also be understood in the context of the master story articulated above, that this was a time when families were struggling just to get by, women tended to give birth to many children, and they were too busy to care for all their children, especially those who were youngest. Thus, child care often became the responsibility of older sisters (see Wolf, 1972/1987). Tragically, the result was that the youngest daughter in this family, who was cared for by her two older sisters, came down with a case of polio. And their mother blamed them, her two daughters ages 5 and 7 at the time, for this sickness. Therefore, this woman characterized her mother in very unflattering terms, a word commented upon several times in the interview, as someone who is *laodao*, or an incessant nag.

The question then became, how did the young girl, or many decades later the middle-aged woman who reflected upon this event, interpret and understand it? Was her mother simply *laodao*? The story continued.

So other people told me, my grandma told me one thing, "When your mom yells at you, you can't listen to it and then let it go. That's not right. You've got to listen and then let it go, and then don't pay any attention to her." So other people, my daddy told me, "After all she is your mother. She wants to do what is best for us." And then my mother told me that when she was young life was also very difficult... So I felt, she had it rougher than me, right. Because she ... when she was 13 she had to go out and work, like I had to ... But I was willing to work. In the past mom was forced. Their parents forced them and they had to do it ... My story is that I was willing [to work].

Here we see how she came to another understanding of her mother's behavior. Her grandmother and her father both tried to convince her not to heed her mother's scolding, and to let go of the blame, believing that at heart her mother "wants to do what is best for us." This new interpretation could then be seen from her mother's perspective, as someone who at a young age was forced by her parents to go out and work full-time. This comparatively was more difficult than this woman's experience, who after graduating from elementary school (at the time mandatory education was only through the 6th grade), willingly decided to not further her

studies, and instead worked on the family farm and did other jobs. This re-interpretation shows the cultural constraints against blaming one's parent, or in this case one's mother, for doing something which seemed very wrong, meriting a label as someone *laodao* (an incessant nag).

Narratives of self-faults: Confession or mitigation?

In this third and final section we look at narratives whereby a participant confessed or told a story of his or her own faults. In this Confucian-influenced society where the practice of *zixing* (self-reflection) is valued (Wang, 2004) and young children are often led to tell stories narrating and reflecting upon their own faults, did adults do likewise? Did they confess and reflect upon their own faults? Before answering this it is helpful to briefly consider findings from research conducted with Euro-American parents.

Euro-American self-transgression stories. As reported by Miller et al. (2001), many parents in a community in Chicago enjoyed telling "hell raising" stories that recounted their "adventures" as children, such as sneaking out of the house, setting a fire in the garage, or tricking one's mother in order to escape punishment. In another study conducted with Euro-American parents in Centerville (see Miller et al., 2002), mothers were asked if they tell transgression stories to their children, or if in the past they were told such stories by their parents. Many stories were recalled. For example, one mother said that her "dad would tell us stories about shimmying up the drain pipes at the church and you know spitting down on people and things like." Another said this is something she and her husband do regularly with their children:

We tell Mommy and Daddy stories. We used to do it every night... Mark [husband] has a better memory than I do and will often tell, not always stories that were bad choices or anything. But some of them are and some of them are just funny stories or just when I was a little boy kind of stories... I think one of the first ones I told was a naughty Mommy story about when I was little and we would, there were two or three of us in the neighborhood that were the same age and then there was this one boy who that was four years older. And we would play hide-and-seek. And we would just go hide somewhere where we knew he could never find us. Like in somebody's house where, you know. And we'd play there the rest of the day and he'd be outside wandering around wondering what happened to us, you know. And, it wasn't kind. And, I think they need to know, first of all, that that's not kind and also that yes, Mommy did naughty things too or Daddy did naughty things too and, you know, cause they, talk about guidance, you're guiding them through a situation that hasn't happened yet by just telling a story that happened to you. So, it's a way of sharing your guidance without having the situation actually come up.

This mother and her husband had a large family with five children, the older ones they home-schooled, an arrangement motivated in part by their strong Christian beliefs. The above excerpt demonstrates, however, that telling stories to their children played an important part in their children's socialization, and that these stories involved the parents' "self-lowering" by portraying themselves as transgressive selves. Similar to stories analyzed by Miller et al. (2001), these had a didactic element, demonstrating to the child that their parent was less than perfect when young, and could be "redeemed" later in life.

Other parents, however, said they did not tell such stories. One mother was asked if her parents ever told her stories of their transgressions: "Not in my family. My parents were, they never did anything wrong. At least from what I can tell. I'm telling you, my mother even to this day, she is just an angel. She never. I don't think she ever did anything wrong as a kid and she is very um. I don't know one person who doesn't like her." When asked if she tells things she has done wrong in the past to her children, she said she does not. Another mother took a middle approach. She did recall her parents telling stories of their transgressions, and she tells similar stories to her children, but she does not want to tell them *everything*, fearing that it would grant her children permission to do wrong: "So I think you have to, it's more of a picking your battles kinda thing that if we if we did every single thing that they did wrong then that's all that's all we would do and they would have a TERRIBLE self-esteem because we would be spending EVERY second correcting them for something."

Taiwanese self-transgression stories. We now consider how Taiwanese parents and grandparents told stories and if they talked about their own faults or misdeeds. Interestingly, very few of the older participants, i.e., grandparental generation, told stories of their own faults. Some of the younger, parental generation, however, would tell such stories. For example, one father said that he will "sometimes" tell his children stories of his past faults. He does not require his children to get high test grades: "Because I will tell them, 'Your Daddy was also, in the past at school he also did not score high on tests. All I want you to do is improve, and work hard at your studies.' I will not say that if they get bad scores that I will blame them." Similarly one mother said, "I'll tell them, things about when I was an elementary or junior high school student, and didn't get good grades. It was very embarrassing [literally *hen diu lian* or lose face]. I'll tell them." She then explained that the purpose of telling these stories is "to encourage them." "Like my daughter doesn't do so well in sports, and doesn't exercise enough. So I'll tell her, how Mommy in the past was able to overcome it." Another mother said she does not tell stories of her past misdeeds to her children as this might confuse their sense of right and wrong. But she said sometimes her husband will tell stories of things he did wrong in the past. Nevertheless, most said that they did not tell such stories. Nor did

any say that in the past their parents told them stories of their misdeeds. Furthermore, none of the Taiwanese participants narrated transgression stories that were as elaborated as the stories told by some Euro-American mothers.

The general avoidance or careful treatment of telling stories of one's faults can perhaps be understood from the comments of one father. He said telling transgression stories must take into consideration the age of the child, and that younger children may not understand them. He cited the example of the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree and recalled that the first time he heard it, it left a deep impression. The time to tell a transgression story is when the child is older: "If you tell that [Washington story] to a first grade child, the child won't understand it, he [Washington] cut down that tree because he wanted to eat cherries." Older children may understand transgression stories, and it may be appropriate to tell them at the moment when they themselves have done something wrong.

Another way to look at this issue is to consider not the transgression stories adults told their children, but those shared with other adults. Two highly elaborated self-transgression stories stand out. One was told by a young mother, another by a grandmother.

The first story involved a conflict between two women, a young woman, Mrs. Chen, and her mother-in-law. As Mrs. Chen told the story, she had recently started to potty train her young, two-year-old, son. She also had a full-time job outside the home, and during the daytime her mother-in-law was her son's caregiver. One day she decided not to put a diaper on him, but to have him wear pants. His grandmother cared for him during the day, and after he urinated helped him pull up his pants. However, Grandma was "careless" and pulled up the zipper too far, and it got caught on the boy's penis. Mrs. Chen then asked the researcher, "Now let me ask you. This matter. Whose fault is it? Is it mine or is it her [Grandmother's] fault? From your objective point of view, what is your opinion?" The researcher innocuously responded, "She [Grandmother] carelessly zipped it up," a comment which merely describes what happened and does not assess blame. The mother then proceeded to narrate what happened next. After Mrs. Chen returned home from work, her mother-in-law confronted her and "kept on blaming me, repeated it and repeated it and repeated it and yelled at me in a loud voice. Even when I was outside she repeated it, blaming me saying, 'You shouldn't put those pants on him. If you didn't that wouldn't have happened.'" Mrs. Chen then said she "unintentionally" offended her mother-in-law: "I couldn't open my mouth to apologize; I couldn't say it. But hastily I said, because he [son] was crying. Then later, I had just come home from work and was tired. 'What are you doing? This thing you yourself can't take care of and you keep blaming me! ... You were the one who was careless. What are you doing, blaming me?'" Instead of apologizing to her mother-in-law, Mrs. Chen was first silent. Then, because she was tired, her son was crying,

she hastily replied in an unapologetic and unkind manner, “What are you doing, blaming me?” After this quarrel erupted, Mrs. Chen spent the next few days trying “to make up” to her mother-in-law by cooking and preparing nice meals for her in-laws. However, they did not forgive or forget. In closing the story, Mrs. Chen added the didactic coda, “Have you heard it said, ‘If a daughter-in-law unintentionally says a few [unkind] words, her father- and mother-in-law will hate her for the rest of their lives.’”

This story by Mrs. Chen demonstrates a complex array of social and cultural constraints on assessing blame. The researcher was someone Mrs. Chen considered to take an “objective point of view,” and hoped would take the perspective that Mrs. Chen’s actions were most reasonable, and her mother-in-law was the careless party and should be blamed. However, the mother-in-law asserted the child’s injury was her daughter-in-law’s fault because she had him wear pants, and not presumably a diaper. The problem was further compounded by Mrs. Chen’s subsequent action, when instead of showing deference to her mother-in-law and accepting blame, she defended herself and blamed her mother-in-law. Notice how Mrs. Chen carefully included a number of mitigating factors: she spoke hastily, she was tired, and her son was crying. These point to the constraints on storytelling when a younger person is trying to justify herself and reassess blame upon an older person, i.e., one’s mother-in-law.

The second story, like the first, involved a conflict between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. However, in this case the conflict spanned many decades, and the daughter-in-law was a grandmother and mother-in-law to her adult son’s wife. It is also helpful to understand the living arrangement of these women. The focal woman, Mrs. Li, lived in a three-story home with her two adult sons, daughter-in-law, and two granddaughters. This is a typical arrangement for many families in this community. However, what was unusual was that Mrs. Li’s mother-in-law, who was still alive at the time of the interview in 1999 (she has since passed away), did not co-reside with her daughter-in-law. Instead, the family matriarch lived in a one-story home with a separate entrance, which was attached to Mrs. Li’s house.

At one point in the interview Mrs. Li was asked a question from the protocol we had used for other participants, “Will you tell your children or grandchildren what you’ve done wrong?” When this same question was asked of other participants of this generation, all replied that they would not tell such matters. However, Mrs. Li’s response was different. She began to tell a story.

Mrs. Li: Now I will tell A-Cheng [her daughter-in-law]. When I was young all I did was work. Your uncle [Grandma Li’s husband], they have already gone back [died]. If they weren’t dead you could ask them about me. I never did anything that would make them angry... From the time I

was born, I've never done anything that would make my parents angry. [Speaks softly] Right now it just is, because my mother-in-law criticizes me, so I'm really angry.

Researcher: What did she say about you?

Mrs. Li: Said that I didn't marry into their home until I was 25. Said that I'm someone no one wanted.

Researcher: Twenty-five is still very young.

Mrs. Li: Said that I'm someone no one wanted. It was because I was very *koai* [obedient] and very quiet. In our village a lot of people wanted to arrange a match for me. But your great-uncle often said, wait until your second brother is married, then you'll get married. I was married to here, because your great-uncle, it was through your grandma, asked her to check, said to her, "Is this a good family?" Your grandma told your second uncle to tell your great-uncle to tell him, "It's a good family." But after that [the marriage], your grandma told me, "Because your marriage is so bad, so I rarely come to your house."

Mrs. Li: [Cries]

Researcher: In the countryside all mothers-in-law are like that...

Mrs. Li: My mother-in-law told my husband, "You damn kid. Under all of heaven, [she's] someone no one wanted. I don't see her in my eyes. She is not important enough." I told her, "Didn't you say that I, a person, am not like a person, not even like a monkey. And you still want to live with me?" She said that I, a person, am not like a person, not even like a monkey.

Mrs. Li: [Cries]

Mrs. Li: I told A-Hiong [husband] a long time ago, I would have killed myself a long time ago. But I couldn't let my parents lose face.

This story has been analyzed elsewhere (Sandel, 2004). What we want to point out in this analysis is the way Mrs. Li, as narrator, was both constrained and aided by a cultural model of how to justify oneself, and how to assign blame. The unstated accusation was that Mrs. Li was unfilial and a poor daughter-in-law by not living under the same roof (or same stove, see Wolf, 1968/1985) with her widowed mother-in-law. This transgression apparently was something she felt the need to explain to her own daughter-in-law, A-Cheng, with whom she shared a stove. To counter this charge Mrs. Li presented a case, first explaining her merits: she was a hard worker, she had never done anything that would make her parents angry, and at the time of marriage she was considered to be very *koai* (an important virtue

meaning obedient and well-behaved). She also called attention to a number of witnesses, both living and dead, who could vouch for her virtues: her husband, parents, the researcher's uncle and grandmother. Then she laid out the charge against her mother-in-law: she always criticizes, said that when Mrs. Li was married she was unwanted, and most egregiously, did not address her as a person (see Sandel, 2002), but compared her to a monkey. Each of these charges was made in consort with a number of commonly shared values and beliefs in this community, with the most important being that one's elders must be respected and obeyed. Unfortunately, in this dispute with her mother-in-law Mrs. Li ostensibly could never achieve total victory, because she was invoking the authority of her elders to challenge the authority of another and very important elder, her mother-in-law. Her only way to achieve total victory was to outlive her mother-in-law, which happened years after the interview took place (see also Wolf, 1972/1987, for a discussion of the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that stories told by older folk, those who were young adults or children during Taiwan's difficult decades of the 1940s–1960s, invariably articulate some part of a “master story” lamenting a difficult past and much better present. Also, Taiwanese adults engage in telling transgression stories about familiar others such as spouses, children, parents, aunts and uncles. Furthermore, some, although not all, tell “confession” stories describing their own past transgressions. These narratives, however, tend to be fewer in number, less elaborate, and/or exhibit more mitigating factors than stories of others' transgressions. Moreover, when told to young children some parents indicate that such stories must be treated carefully, tailored to meet the child's age and level of moral development, and be told at an “opportune” moment when the child may have committed some transgression.

These findings both support and extend earlier research that cross-culturally compared Euro-American and Taiwanese family narratives involving young children. Taiwanese parents and grandparents tend to tell stories that convey a moral and didactic element, and few involve a self-transgression narrative. These patterns are similar to those reported by Miller and colleagues (Fung, 1999; Miller et al., 1997; Miller et al., 2001) which compared stories told in Euro-American and Taiwanese families. However, these data show that when talking to other adults, both intra- and inter-generationally, transgression stories involving familiar others (spouses, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, children) are often told. This may indicate that like narratives told by or about young children, adults'

transgression stories may serve as a didactic resource when told to other adults; they may serve as a warning to avoid certain behaviors such as gambling or stealing, and to encourage others, such as frugality or displaying respect toward ones elders. These findings fit well with the values associated with a Confucian- influenced society.

A new perspective on this topic, however, can be found when we consider some of the implications of this study and what they say about how Confucian values, such as deference toward elders, are communicated and maintained. The master story of a difficult past and a much better present, for a number of reasons, perhaps is one which works well for Taiwan's older generation in order to construct a generational hierarchy: elders invariably have the upper hand in this kind of family discourse.

First, consider that the Taiwanese master story of a difficult past and better present is tellable and, as found in this study, told on many occasions by older participants. This contrasts with other contexts where members of a generation who went through a difficult past, such as war, may not always deem such events tellable. Agar (1994) illustrates this with two events experienced widely across one generation — Americans who fought in the Vietnam War and Austrians who were alive when the German Nazis were in control. When Vietnam veterans returned to the U.S., many found that their battlefield stories were unwelcome in the climate of a nation which had turned its back on the war effort; thus, many remained silent about what they experienced. Similarly, after the end of World War II the allied powers created a master narrative that Austria had been Nazi Germany's "Hitler's first victim" and that "Austria's Jews had 'emigrated,'" which contrasted with what many older Austrians who had lived through the period thought and believed (Agar, 1994, p. 194). For many, Hitler was a popular figure and the Austrians fought willingly on the German side during the war. The conflict between the official and "lived" experience resulted in a generational silence, meaning that parents who lived through the Nazi period did not talk to their children about what they experienced. When comparing these Austrian and American patterns of silence with the Taiwanese case, the difference is seen more clearly: the Taiwanese construction and telling of a master story of persevering through a difficult past and arriving into a much better present is, as Bruner (1986a) claims, a present-day interpretation of the past.

Second, the Taiwanese master story, because it narrates events of an irretrievable past, lends authority to those who experienced it and can tell it. Consider, for example, the middle-aged woman who at the age of thirteen discontinued her studies in order to work full-time. She could have lamented that her childhood was very difficult. However, when she contrasted her experiences with those of her mother, who at the age of thirteen was "forced" to work, her "bitter struggle" was

comparatively mild. That is, members of younger generations ostensibly are unable to tell a bitterness story that is more difficult than that told by someone from an older generation, meaning that elders always have the upper hand. And while it cannot be claimed with absolute certainty from these data, it seems that telling the master story is one way an elder can cover up or perhaps gloss over a variety of personal transgressions. The implication is that the one who “persevered” through a difficult past cannot be challenged or sanctioned for recent faults by the younger person whose life has presumably been so much sweeter.

Finally, the master story may gloss over a number of past transgressions committed by members of older generations. Because mothers and family members had to work long hours and struggled just to survive, many children received insufficient care and/or were neglected. Parents may have disciplined their children too severely, to the point of being abusive, as was told by some middle-aged parents as they reflected on their early childhood. These and other transgressions may be glossed over, left unexplained and undefended, because the master story of surviving a difficult past trumps all.

For these reasons, cross-generational family narratives tend to privilege the position and perspective of older members. Furthermore, the elevated moral status of elders may also explain why few uttered self-confessional narratives, despite the Confucian ideal of engaging in self-examination (*zixing*) and identifying one’s own faults. The interest in upholding and demonstrating moral clarity to others, especially those in a position of lesser authority, may run at cross-currents and, therefore, negate the confessional story.

Lastly, we look beyond the Taiwanese context to consider implications that can be applied to other contexts. For some insight we consider the well-publicized events involving President George W. Bush and members of his cabinet as his administration came to a close. Perhaps cognizant of his low level of popularity and fearful that historians of the future will not look kindly on his presidency, President Bush conducted a number of “exit interviews” near the end of his term. One question that came up in many interviews was if he made any mistakes. Many wanted to know if he would publicly confess the faults of his administration, which the American public and many outside his administration thought were many. President Bush, however, admitted few mistakes, and those that he did admit, such as prematurely displaying the “Mission Accomplished” banner on the deck of an aircraft carrier, were thought to be trivial. Why would he not engage in a “confessional” narrative and tell the public that he made mistakes?

There are two possible answers, each of which draws upon insights from this study. One is that a “master story” glossed over and explained away any past transgressions; the other is that those who perceive themselves as occupying a position of high moral authority find it difficult to admit their faults when talking to

others lower in rank or authority. Regarding the first point, the Bush administration attempted to make the case that the tragic events of September 11, 2001 explained the need for the administration to take whatever steps necessary in order to achieve its stated goal of protecting the American public from future attacks. This was used to explain the war in Iraq, and the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” or torture, carried out on Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters held at Guantanamo base, Cuba (see Sands, 2008).

The second point was articulated in an interview with Philippe Sands (2008), author of *Torture Team*, aired on the program *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross on January 7, 2009 (Gross, 2009). In his book Sands carefully documents how the U.S. government made the decision to authorize torture, turning its back on decades of U.S. support for the Geneva Conventions; he also interviewed many of the key players in this decision. When discussing the issue of admitting fault, he told Gross:

What was striking for me, as I talked to people who’d been involved in this decision making process, was that when I talked to people who were, if you like at the bottom of the decision making process, ... they would say to me precisely that, “Look, we thought we were doing the right thing. It now seems with the passage of time we may have got things wrong and we take our responsibilities, *for* that.” As you go up the chain of command, that type of approach has fallen away, there seems to be a real unwillingness of people to take responsibility for what they’ve done. I mean that is most evident in the exchanges I’ve had with Doug Feith about his role in all of this. I mean he seems very keen to pass the buck onto the lawyers ... I haven’t picked up from him any hint of recognition that any errors may have been made, or any sense of personal responsibility for the abuses that have been heaped on we now know a very large number of people. (author’s transcription)

As Sands (2008) uncovered what most in the U.S. and international community would consider to be a moral wrong, some of the participants to this decision-making process, namely those “higher up” in the chain of command, did not admit to any wrongdoing. This position bears similarities with the position of elders, grandparents, and many parents in Taiwan, when talking with members of younger generations: they may fear that by narrating their faults this undermines their moral authority (or they may believe that their elevated status means that they do not commit wrongs). The similarities between these cases of narratives told across different cultural contexts may indicate a means by which moral authority is conveyed in cross-generational and/or hierarchical talk.

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