

Together and Apart: Spatial Tactics of Women in Seafaring and Commuting Households in Taiwan

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Abstract

Split households may be viewed as a spatial tactic used to achieve work-life balance. Seafaring and commuter marriages represent two frontiers of this tactic. Previous studies on commuter marriages in Taiwan have emphasized male experiences and practices of parenthood, ignoring the experiences of their female partners. Similarly, studies on seafarers in Taiwan have focused on male employees, but not their marriage and families. In order to understand the decision-making process, spatial tactics, use and influence of Information Communication Technologies, division of housework and individuation of women in seafaring and commuter marriages, we carried out ten in-depth interviews with women from these two modes of marriages through snow-ball sampling methods.

We find that these women seek information and accounts of first-hand experience from others before the separation. However, the information and experiences which are constructed on the patriarchal, “mainstream” values of society make women anxious. During separation, various types of spatial tactics are applied to respond to the social norms and the emotional needs of couples. Separation enables women to be more mobile, and a feedback relationship exists between the mobility and the individuation of the women. In split households, the distribution of housework still falls along gender lines, but husbands are more willing to take over household matters or share household chores. By a comparison between our results and other postmodern split households, we suggest that the split households may alter gender norms in two ways. In commuting and rural-urban migrant households, the married women leaving home to work can cross the boundary between reproduction and production, and in seafaring and “astronaut” families, the separation would provide women with the opportunity to control their lives.

Keywords: Split households, commuter marriage, seafaring marriage, individuation, spatial tactics, feminist perspective, qualitative research.

Introduction

Like many other countries after World War II, Taiwan has experienced the processes of urbanization and industrialization, and more lately, has created a neoliberal economy. The KMT (*Kuomintang*) government fostered export-oriented industries and promulgated export-oriented policies by setting up the Export Processing Zones in the late-1950's (Rodrik, 1995). The export-oriented policies stimulated the development of shipping industries and increase of the manpower requirement in shipping companies.

In addition, Taiwan's economic growth provided many new employment opportunities in the 1980's. Meanwhile, with social and economic changes and the women's movement, more and more women have joined the labor force and pursued careers. The women's right activists in Taiwan published a magazine (*Awakening*) from 1982 that was devoted to reducing gender discrimination in employment and encouraged women to pursue their self development (Ku, 1988). Having been through a long period of stagnating growth, the employment rate of women rose from 39.13% in 1978 to 49.64% in 2010, and dual-career couples in Taiwan became more

common in the last two decades. The lives of these married women have two cores, struggling between their career (production) and home (reproduction) (Hardill, 2002).

In a split household family, one of the family members lives far away and is responsible for earning a living, while housework, emotional labour, socialization and consumption are carried out by the other members (Glenn, 1983; Chee, 2005). In contemporary Taiwan, there are many situations that lead to couples living apart that are in need of being studied. These situations include “astronaut families”¹ (Chee, 2005; Chiang, 2006; 2008), businessmen who live in Mainland China with their families staying in Taiwan (Chen, 2008; Wang, 2002; Fang, 2004; Sha, 2006; Shen, 2005), one spouse serving in the military, and commuter and seafaring marriages.

If we viewed split households as a kind of spatial tactic used to achieve work-life balance, seafaring and commuter marriages represent two frontiers of this spatial tactic. While the history of seafaring marriages can be dated back to the Age of Discovery in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when men would crew ships for expedition or trade, commuter marriages did not get much attention until the 1980’s (Gerstel and Gross, 1984; Winfield, 1985). The husbands in seafaring marriages are always the breadwinners, but in the commuter marriages, both husbands and wives can have careers. Husbands in seafaring marriages seem to have more relative power (Okin, 1989) due to earning more income than their wives. Gerstel and Gross (1984) also mentioned that in sailing marriages, the husband’s needs take priority, while commuter marriages are more egalitarian. We think that a closer examination of these two types of marriages may help to clarify whether split households strengthen or weaken gender expectation in the patriarchal family culture. Moreover, the comparative discussion among commuter marriages, seafaring marriages and other types of split households can be helpful in understanding women’s situations in their marriages.

Methodology

Split households, though common, are not known through statistics. Our qualitative study used the snowball sampling method to contact interviewees. We conducted semi-structured face to face in-depth interviews in Mandarin and Taiwanese with ten female interviewees in all. We subscribe to the notion that research with the case-studying approach serves to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) (Yin, 2003). In our study, the questions that we asked are open-ended, and the interviews of seafaring wives and the wives in commuter marriages lasted two hours or more.

Table 1 summarizes the background of our interviewees. The women were between 30 to 59 years old. Four of them were female commuters, two had husbands as commuters, and the other four were wives of seafaring husbands who were Merchant Marines. The education of our informants ranges from primary school, vocational school, to University and above. The University teachers all commute to smaller cities to teach, as jobs in Taipei, where their husbands live, are hard to find. The first author did most of the interviews and recorded all of the conversation with digital voice recorder with the permission of the interviewees, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts from the individual in-person interviewees average 13 single-spaced pages each in Chinese. The transcripts and the audio files were reviewed several times, to ensure accuracy of what the interviewees wanted to express. Several interviewees were revisited twice or more to clarify the details of their previous interviews.

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees

No.	Ages	Education	Years of Marriage	Marriage Mode	Years of Living in Separate Households
1	50+	Junior high school	25	Husband as seafarer	25
2	30+	Junior high school	12	Husband as seafarer	12
3	30+	University	8	Husband as seafarer	8
4	30+	College	2	Husband as seafarer	2
5	50+	Senior high school	25	Husband as commuter	12
6	60+	Elementary school	33	Husband as commuter	20
7	30+	Ph.D.	8	Self as commuter	3
8	40+	Ph.D.	20	Self as commuter	20
9	50+	Ph.D.	32	Self as commuter	2
10	50+	Ph.D.	30	Self as commuter	6

By using interviews, we hope to probe into the diverse situations and experiences of the interviewees' marriages during the separation periods. This includes looking at the decision-making process for being apart, the spatial tactics used to cope with separation, the role of Information Communication Technologies (ICT), the conditions of division of housework, and the women's individuation processes.

Decision-Making Process of Being Apart

We find that women in both commuter and seafaring marriages seek information, especially first-hand experiences from others before the separation. However, the information and experiences constructed on the patriarchal, "mainstream" values of social norms often make women anxious. For commuter marriages, both the wife and the husband can be the commuter. But in the present study all female commuters face negative opinions from their husbands, in-laws, kin and even friends, due to the different gender expectations in society. On the other hand, there are none or at least many fewer negative opinions when the husband is the commuter.

After my friends and relatives found out that I want to teach in C. County (central Taiwan), they would say: "C. County is very far away, have you ever considered how your child would be taken care of?" (#7)

My husband is a commuter, and he has to travel on official business regularly. There is no voice of objection about it because that is his job. (#5)

Tsao (1978) studied Hong Kong Chinese seamen and their families and concluded that a woman's main reasons for marrying a seaman are that the marriage is an arranged one and/or she is herself from a seafaring family. Tsao's findings imply that seamen's wives rarely have the

chance to decide to be or not to be apart. However, all our interviewees are neither married by arrangements, nor do they have a seafaring ancestry. The difference between Tsao (1978) and our study is that arranged marriages are seldom practiced in Taiwan. Although there are women seafarers in Taiwan (Wang, 2005), we failed to contact any of them, nor were we able to infer their marital status in the present study. It would be interesting to look for arranged seafaring marriages or seafaring marriages with seamen ancestry in Taiwan in future studies.

The Spatial Tacticsⁱⁱ

Various spatial tactics are used to respond to the social norms and the emotional needs of couples being apart. Among these tactics, different attitudes toward where to live in relation to work and the phenomenon of wives moving back to stay with their parents are noteworthy.

Commuter couples may have “second homes” to stay overnight at the places where they work. However, these “second homes” are used as temporary residency, thus drawing a clear line between work and life spatially. On the contrary, the container ships are thought to be space for working; but as shipping companies in Taiwan are trying to improve their employee welfare, some seafaring wives are now allowed to accompany their husbands in short sea shipping routes. Some seafaring wives may also travel to other countries where their husbands have a few days off during ocean routes.

I know that my husband expects me to accompany him, and therefore I would go with him or I would fly to another country to meet him. (#3)

Most contemporary marriage-scapes involve women who move to marry (Constable, 2005). In Taiwan, a recent survey reveals that only 1.43% of married couples live with the wife’s parents (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, 2006). However, married women who move back to stay with their parents are not uncommon in our studies. Gerstel and Gross (1984) noted that about 25% of the commuters relied on their kin, especially their parents, but only in a few cases did the spouse move back in with parents of either husband or wife, and establish their homes there.

When I work in P. County (southern Taiwan), I live in my parents’ home. They can help me take care of my children, and they really support me in this way. I think they are glad that I can live with them after I got married. (#8)

There is a Chinese saying with patriarchal underpinnings: “married daughters are like spilled water”, meaning that married daughters are not expected to return to live with the brides’ parents unless they have serious disputes with their husbands and/or in-laws. Only on the second day of the Lunar New Year would a married daughter be expected to come back to visit her parents with her husband. Our cases do not seem to follow this ancient adage. Compared with either commuter marriages in the United States or traditional marriages, there seems to be more flexibilities/varieties of living (spatial) arrangements in both commuter and seafaring marriages in Taiwan.

The Role of Information Communication Technologies

Commuter couples have much freedom to choose from a variety of personal communication tools, such as cell phones, telephones, e-mail, and various kinds of instant messaging software and real-time cameras on computers connected to the World Wide Web, etc... Using the case of Merchant Marine A-Yu and his wife in Yang's novel (1979: 93) as an example:

A-Yu asked his friend to bring a recorder and a tape back to me. [...] I put the tape into the recorder immediately, and pressed the button. A-Yu's rough, deep and familiar voice came out, making my whole body very excited at one time. [...] I swallowed each word and sentence of him in a greedy way.

Very few people (if any) communicate in this way today. Although Merchant Marines will not have many choices for personal communication when they are on board, they still find choices comparable to those of commuter couples.

Innovations of the ICT have helped split household families to maintain relationships, and reduce their sense of anxiety. The sheer existence of split households is a challenge to the traditional marriage, which requires two persons living together to maintain this relationship. The ideology of traditional marriage claims that two persons should live together to maintain their relationship, but split households employ the alternative approach to maintain their relationship by ICTs. One of our interviewees who teaches in a university in P city (southern Taiwan) while her husband teaches in Taipei maintained:

Over the years, we developed an understanding like this: he always called to tell me what he does, or where he goes, so that I would not be worried. I also tell him what my daily schedule is like. (#8)

We also find that many seafaring wives share their own marriage experiences on Internet forums, message boards, as well as personal blogs, where ICT help to form communities that provide emotional support, with messages like 'we are not isolated in our own marriages.' With multiple functions as stated above, ICT will continue to be a key factor to weaken the influence of patriarchal norms on commuter and seafaring marriages.

Gendered Division of Domestic Labor in Split Households

The distribution of housework in split households seems to be inevitably gendered during the absence of a spouse. But when compared with other types of split households (for example, Taiwanese families where husbands are businessmen in Mainland China, see Shen 2005, Peng 2006), the husbands in the present study are more likely to take over household matters or share household chores when they are at home. To be more specific, husbands of our interviewees perform routine housework and childcare, demonstrating the flexibility in gendered division of housework.

My husband did all the housework, such as cleaning, taking the garbage out, washing dishes, laundry, and keeping company with my child. When I go home, he also does all of this. (#7)

When my husband is at home, he does most of the housework. As he is seafaring for most part of the year, he does housework for about three months in the year. (#4)

Zvonkovic *et al.* (2005) noted that in fishing families and trucking families, wives' leisure and meal preparation activities change dramatically relative to their husbands' presence or absence. We also observed this change in seafaring marriages where in order to keep the emotional connections between fathers and their children, the children occasionally leave their schools as long as one month to catch up their father's vacation schedule.

When my husband comes ashore, I applied for a leave from school for my children, so that he can be with his children. (#3)

In either seafaring or commuter marriages, parents face short-term separation from children and are thus unable to perform certain parental roles during their children's growth due to time constraints. Similar conditions can be found in single-parent families; nevertheless, there is not enough social support, in terms of welfare and family benefits for split households from the public sector.

Individuation

Bernard (1972) argued that every marriage contains not just one marriage, but two: "his" and "hers." For split households, this may be especially true, as separation enables women to be more mobile, and a feedback relationship exists between the mobility and the individuation of the women. In the 'Tamil Nadu bicycle project' (India) which teaches women how to ride a bicycle, Nitya Rao claimed that women become more independent and confident after they can ride. Moreover, women used this skill to raise their status at home, and they were more able to control their lives before (Fernando and Porter, 2002). As one of our informants stated,

I think women should be able to drive, whether they want to be autonomous or not. Their personal mobility would be limited if they accept rides from others. I therefore think that women should learn to drive. I feel good about my mobility and agency. (#7)

It should be noted that the individuation processes of women in commuter marriages and seafaring wives are not quite the same. Women in commuter marriages are more economically independent, and more devoted to their professional careers. On the other hand, seafaring wives have plenty of leisure time, which also lead to possibilities of self actualization other than having professional careers. Therefore, women in split households seem to be more likely to be relieved from the everyday life details to do what they are interested in, thus empowering female subjectivity.

I work because I think that if women want to be independent, they must have money. If we are divorced one day, I still have money to live with, and lead a decent life without depending on my husband financially. (#5)

If I have time, I will go study in the community college, like studying computer before... (#2)

The women's movement in Taiwan is full of vigour and vitality, and their motto includes encouraging women to pursue what they are entitled to, such as employment opportunities and the right to inheritance. The social and ideological transformation would help to change the appearance of spilt households and challenge the gender norms in Taiwan.

Discussion and Conclusion

Urbanization, industrialization and neoliberal economic processes seem to create chances for couples to have more flexible and diverse relationships, living patterns and lifestyles, which are characteristics of postmodern households (Hardill, 2002; Coles and Fechter (eds) 2008). If we compare our results with other postmodern split households, such as rural-urban migrants (Fan, 2003; Jacka, 2006; Kung, 1994) and "astronaut families" (Chiang, 2010; Hibbins, 2006; Tam, 2004), we suggest that the spilt households may have altered gendered norms in several ways.

In the study of rural-urban migrants of Taiwan in the 1970s, Kung (1994) documented that many women, including married ones, moved from the countryside to cities to find jobs in the factories. They attempted to earn additional income for their families and to keep their economic autonomy. Similar phenomenon also occurs in other parts of Asia. Fan (2003) concluded that rural-urban migrants in China consider the city as merely a place to earn wages, which discourages them from pursuing permanent migration and explains their toleration of a long-term split-household arrangement. Accordingly, migrants in the city spend little on housing and other consumption in order to remit the bulk of their income back home, thus supporting the rural economy and social bases for their eventual return (Fan, 2010). Jacka (2006) also mentioned that the principal consideration of married migrant women is to provide income for their children and family in their hometown. These migrant women identified themselves as "outsiders, not urbanities", and people from the same village can play the important roles in their social networks.

The scenario of married female rural-urban migrants is reminiscent of that of female commuters in the present study: both of them trying to meet the demand of their home as their priority. Since the spatial separation of 'public' and 'private' spheres constructed by the patriarchal society can also be related to the gender division of labor (production/reproduction), both married female rural-urban migrants and female commuters stride over the boundary that restricts women in the domestic field when they leave home to work.

On the other hand, "astronaut families" are not uncommon in transnational families, whereby wives and children live in the countries of immigration, while husbands work in Taiwan or another part of the world as a common tactic to maximize advantages for new immigrants to English-speaking countries where they send their children to obtain a western education. In most cases, the household in the destination country consists of the "lone mother" rather than the "lone father" living with children. The consequences of separation can be different for men and women

as noted by Tam (2004) who has focused on the independence of women in the case of Hong Kong. She proposed that the women in the astronaut family noticed that the husband would reduce participation in the family when the wives increase the ability to exercise control over their own lives. The “lone mother” also played the role of father and made the decisions of everyday life, while they also extended their ability to drive a car and handle the finances (Tam, 2004). Increasing status vulnerability has been discussed by Hibbins (2006) referring to men who are absent from their families for long periods of time, to become bread-winners by returning to their home countries to carry on transnational business. As summarized by a Taiwanese-Chinese immigrant who left Taiwan for New Zealand in 1994, became an “astronaut” wife, and was reunited with her husband six years later:

Most wives worked in Taiwan before immigration, and they became very independent after their husbands returned to Taiwan a few months after landing. When the husband comes to New Zealand after retirement and re-unites with his wife and children after a few years, his English is not as good as his wife’s and children’s. He is unfamiliar with the environment and cannot drive. While the wife expects her husband to share housework with her, he may not be willing, or is incapable of doing so. The husband who came to visit his family cannot act like the head of the household anymore, and his relationship with his children is estranged because of his long separation from his family. The hardest part of his adaptation is to be recently retired, and to have lost his ‘stage’ in his life (Chiang, 2010).

“Astronaut families” and seafaring families are similar, in spite of the transnational nature of the former. Husbands in both types of households are usually the bread-winners and they usually move across the national border. As a result, the wives have to handle everyday life alone, and most of them find it difficult to retain their earlier careers. However, this household burden has provided the wives with chances to improve their ability to move. The mobility of women, either spatial or social (used here to mean being more involved with social and community tasks), is not encouraged in the masculine culture. When couples are apart in split households, the seafaring wives have to travel to meet their husbands in another city or even another country, and the “astronaut mothers” have to drive their children to schools and to go for grocery shopping. Thus women in seafaring marriages and migrants seem to have improved their ability to move in different spatial scales. By moving independently, they developed self-esteem and confidence, which are important parts of the individuation. Therefore, in seafaring and “astronaut” families, the separation created chances for women to control their lives, and the power relationships in their marriages are changed as a result. On the other hand, the commuter family and the “astronaut” family are similar in social class, as indicated by the high educational attainments of women. In our sample, all of the women are teaching in universities and have Ph.D degrees. It is common for women in astronaut families to give up their careers to accommodate the needs of their family (Chiang 2008).

In sum, our results suggest that couples make the decision together for wives to be commuters, serving as good examples of joint decision-making like other things in their marriages. Though seafaring wives may not have the same influence over their husbands’ occupations, at least they were married on their own accord. After living separately, there are various spatial tactics being used in commuter and seafaring marriages. Among them, wives’

returning to their natal homes is a peculiar one as it deviates from the Chinese patriarchal tradition. ICT help split household families maintain relationships and, indirectly, to challenge the tradition requiring two persons living together to maintain a marriage. In addition, many seafaring wives also form supporting communities with one another by using ICT in Taiwan. We found that the husbands of our interviewees are more likely to take over household chores, including routine housework and childcare, demonstrating the flexibility of gendered division of housework. Separation enables women to be more mobile, and a feedback relationship exists between the mobility and the individuation of the women. Women in split households seem to be more likely to be relieved from everyday life activities which allow them to pursue other interests, thus empowering female subjectivity. Lastly, we strongly recommend studying how the split-family formation due to commuting and seafaring changes men's and children's lives.

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Notes

ⁱ “Astronaut family” is a family that migrates, but the breadwinner, usually the husband, returns to the home country and leaves his wife and children at the new destination while he will fly back and forth for periodic visits (Chiang, 2008). It is also a form of split household (Chee 2005).

ⁱⁱ We use the word ‘tactic’ here after Michel de Certeau (1984).