Social Contradiction and Symbolic Resolution: Practical and Idealized Affines in Taiwan

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Marriage in Taiwan creates contradictory social relations. Brides guarantee the continuation of the family, yet they also threaten its solidarity; in-laws are potential allies, yet they are also dangerous meddlers. How do these contradictory social relations affect symbolic expressions of kinship?

Some recent theories suggest that people accept a single, idealized image of the affinal tie regardless of the underlying contradiction. They hold that such "idealized kinship" supports kin structures of dominance, often by disguising fundamental contradictions in the social order. Bourdieu (1977:30-71), for example, argues that the official ideology of parallel-cousin marriage among the Kabylia supports lineage power by disguising the basic tension in the relation between brothers.

Another possible symbolic solution for a social contradiction manipulates the contradiction in pursuit of individual goals. In such "practical kinship," people calculate which aspect of the affinal tie to emphasize on each occasion, and every occasion thus potentially creates a unique solution to the contradictions of marriage. Barth (1966), for example, suggests that kinship structures result from many individual transactions based on a few fundamental principles. Practical kinship is the realm of strategic choices to manipulate the potential dangers and benefits of marriage and affines.

In the end, idealized and practical kinship identify opposing but equally real tendencies. The distinction is based on Bourdieu (1977:34): "Marriage provides a good opportunity for observing what in practice separates official [idealized, in my terms] kinship, single and immutable, defined once and for all by the norms of genealogical protocol, from practical kinship, whose boundaries and definitions are as many and as varied as its users and the occasions on which it is used." He (1977:35) goes on to distinguish official versus practical kinship in terms of "the collective as opposed to the individual; the public, explicitly codified in a magical or quasi-juridical formalism, as opposed to the private, kept in an implicit, even hidden state; collective ritual, subjectless practice, amenable to performance by agents interchangeable because collectively mandated, as opposed to strategy, directed towards the satisfaction of the practical interests of an individual or group of individuals." Marriage may create such a situation in many societies, but the problem has been little explored. What determines when each kind of kinship exists?
The basic goal of this article is to determine the contexts of the two types of kinship in Taiwan, rather than simply to characterize kinship as practical or idealized. After the next section, which establishes the social basis of the affinal contradiction, each of the following sections examines one of the major idioms of Taiwanese kinship. When do the contradictions of marriage create idealized kinship and when do they create practical kinship?

The work of Maurice Bloch suggests an answer—certain social contexts lead toward idealized kinship. He maintains that formalized rituals generally create static descriptions of a contradiction-free society (idealized kinship, for the purposes of this article) that support the people who control the ritual (Bloch 1974, 1977). Ritual symbolism controlled by traditional authorities, he argues, is so formalized and inflexible that it cannot express referential meaning, and it cannot be questioned. Its only meaning is illocutionary—it legitimates the social order by making the social structure appear changeless, and it legitimates the traditional authorities (the lineage elite, for example) by making them representations of that order. Ritualization outside elite or specialist control may not lead as strongly to idealized kinship, although this is a possibility that Bloch tends to ignore.

Non-ritualized contexts outside of elite control should lead to pragmatic expressions of kinship. In addition to elite-controlled, ritualized social contexts, the specific content of the affinal contradiction in a particular context also influences whether practical or idealized kinship appears. Contexts in which affines are directly involved (like weddings or use of affinal kinship terms) are open to more practical manipulation; situations that avoid the more problematic aspects of marriage (like funerals) and where affines do not in fact have much practical importance, are more consistently idealized. The degree to which each idiom represents either idealized or practical kinship thus depends on two aspects of the social context: (1) whether the idiom is ritualized and controlled by specialists or elites; and (2) whether the idiom must face the real content of the affinal contradiction because affines are directly involved.

**THE AFFINAL CONTRADICTION**

Ideally in Taiwan, each family is the momentary expression of an eternal patriline, and each forms a solidary unit, independent of all other patrilines. Even though marriage invariably compromises the ideal, families and patrilineages are nevertheless important components of productive and social relations. Families carefully manage their human and natural resources to create a successful, often diversified, communal economy (Cohen 1976). Lineages, where they exist, typically center on communally-owned plots of land (Pasternak 1969; Potter 1970). The income from this land frequently goes to support lineage ritual; to the upkeep of the elaborate hall that lineages and their segments construct; to the education of promising lineage children; and to the welfare of needy members. When this critical mass of land disappears (through sale or land reform, for example), the lineage organization itself usually weakens (Gallin and Gallin 1982).

Marriage creates a contradiction for the idealized independent, solidary patriline, because reproduction of the line requires an alliance with members of other lines. The ensuing affinal alliances create both an internal challenge to the solidarity of the family (by allowing an outsider in), and an external challenge to the independence of the line (by creating an alliance with another line).

Margery Wolf (1972) has emphasized in particular the internal challenge of the affinal contradiction in Taiwan—the combined threat and promise a wife creates for her husband’s family. In her role as mother, the woman makes a vital contribution to the family. Yet as daughter-in-law, she is a threat because of her divided loyalties, and even worse, because she will attempt to alienate her...
husband and their sons from the rest of the family in order to create an independent base of her own. Frequent battles between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law reveal the salience of the threat, as does the stereotyped view that brothers divide the family only in response to their wives’ maneuvers.

The external challenge of the affinal contradiction is the threat to the independence of the patriline. Families allied through marriage often make special demands on each other, and affines are thus potentially both a welcome source of help and a drain on scarce resources. Gallin (1966:58, 66, 176-178), for example, shows how affines can provide labor, loans, and political support for each other. On the other hand, the external challenge of the affinal contradiction sometimes appeared during lineage feuds, where some lineage members might give away strategic secrets to their affines in enemy lineages: the affinal tie thus created dissension within one lineage, but help for the other (Gallin 1966:184; Lin 1948:29). Affines also interfere in the internal affairs of the family, especially where the position of their sister is concerned. The rituals discussed below consistently emphasize the meddlesome privileges of mother’s brothers and especially wife’s brothers over their affines. People generally try to avoid both affines who live too close (because they may too easily become enemies), and affines who live too far (because they may be unavailable when needed) (Baker 1968:179; Gallin 1966:150, 176).

Affines are helpful and desired allies who guarantee the continuation of the line, yet simultaneously dangerous and mistrusted meddlers who threaten the solidarity and independence of the family. The contradiction of marriage creates “a general lack of definition in Chinese society of the norms governing the relations between affines and between a married woman and her agnates” (Freedman 1967:271). The following sections examine the ways in which various idioms of kinship treat this “lack of definition” in different contexts.

**Kin Terms**

This section distinguishes two sets of terms: (1) the very idealized fictive kin terms, which avoid the affinal contradiction entirely; and (2) the kinship terms for affines, including a somewhat idealized set of formal terms, which treat affines as respected allies, and a practical set of informal terms, which accede to the real problems of marriage. Fictive kin terms fully idealize actual kinship relations. Fictive kin groups differ from genealogical kin groups in one important way—they do not reproduce biologically. The compromises of marriage are thus unnecessary to fictive kin groups, leaving them free to create their ideal of kinship—a purely patrilineal family. In organizations united by master-pupil ties (including Buddhist sects, schools of martial arts, and many more) students typically address their master as *su-hu* (teacher-father) even if the master is a woman. The master’s master is teacher-grandfather, and the master’s co-students are teacher older/younger (depending on seniority) paternal uncle, regardless of sex. Female terms are used in the “sibling” generation. The various real kin terms for women of a senior generation (all of whom should be married) and for men on the mother’s side are fully ignored, and only the terms for sisters (who may not have married, and who will one day also be called teacher-father) appear. Freed from the constraints of marriage, fictive kinship creates an ideal family—patrilineal, independent, and male. These terms are idealized because they can avoid practical dealings with real affines entirely. The problems of marriage, and the practical manipulations that they create, are irrelevant to fictive kin; the idealization of the idiom stems from its unproblematic content.

Terms for actual kinsmen in Taiwan express everyday relations of personal authority. The underlying relationship is open to manipulation, and people thus also manipulate the terms. Unlike the fictive kin terms, terms for affines must face
the contradictions posed by marriage, because they involve direct contact with affines. Real kin terms thus lead into the area of practical kinship.

There are special terms for the senior affines: wife's parents are *tiu-lang* and *tiu-m*, husband's parents are *ta-kua* and *ta-ke* (all these are terms of special respect), and the parents-in-law of a sibling, child or grandchild are called *chin-ke* and *chi-m* ("related family"). These respectful terms for the senior affines emphasize the formal alliance between the two lines. They lump together affines of many generations, disregarding distinctions of relative generation that always characterize terms for agnates. The senior affines thus appear in the terminology as a relatively undifferentiated, but respected group. These terms recognize affines (unlike the fictive kin terms), but they still idealize the marriage tie by recognizing only one of its aspects, the formal alliance between two groups.

People use a very different strategy for affines who are generationally junior to the married couple creating the tie. These people are treated (at least terminologically) like members of the family. People address them by name (the usual form of address for junior agnates), and refer to them descriptively ("my wife's nephew") or by the same terms their spouse uses ("my nephew"). While the terms for senior affines emphasize the formal alliance of two independent lines by using special affinal terms, the terms for junior affines emphasize the creation of new family ties by using terms used for agnates. This strategy toward juniors might appear to undercut the independence of the two lines, but this is not really a problem: the junior affines do not threaten the line, and the content of the affinal contradiction need not be addressed. These terms stress the close union that creates a new family. They stress it, however, primarily for juniors who do not constitute a major threat.

Affines in the same generation as the couple who create the tie (spouse's sibling, sibling's spouse's sibling, child's spouse's sibling, etc.) pose the affinal contradiction most sharply. Does one treat them as independent allies or as new family members? These are the affines most open to the manipulations of practical kinship; they are junior enough to receive informal treatment, but they will be treated respectfully at rituals (Ahern 1974) and when they are in positions of temporary or permanent power. The kinship terms allow for either treatment by providing two alternative strategies. The first strategy emphasizes the creation of informal new family ties by adopting the same strategy used for junior affines—wife's older brother, for example, is "older brother," and son's wife's brother is "daughter-in-law's brother." The alternative strategy emphasizes the marked, formal, and respectful relationship between affines. As my informants put it, one uses the same terms one's child uses—thus both wife's brother and son's wife's brother would be called "maternal uncle."

In any given context, the speaker must choose only one of these strategies. People are more likely to use the formal, respectful strategy (1) when the context is public rather than private and personal (thus reference terms are often more respectful than address terms, affines who see each other rarely are often more respectful than those who have close relations, etc.), and (2) when the referent has authority over the speaker (thus males, people with more authority in the family, and wife-givers often receive the more respectful terms) (Weller 1981). 3 To give just a single example, girls who are adopted into families and later marry their step-brothers (*sim-pu-a*) get along with their in-laws much more successfully than ordinary brides, because the bride is an insider from the start. Affinal ties with the girl's natal family are relatively unimportant, and the usual internal challenges created by a new wife are defused (Wolf 1968; Wolf and Huang 1980). As a result, *sim-pu-a* are more likely than other brides to use familial terms for the husband's family—the formal aspect of the affinal relationship is not important.

Because the affinal tie is contradictory, daily patterns of authority are constantly open to practical negotiation. Use of one kinship term or the other provides one
method for negotiating temporary resolutions to the affinal contradiction. The informal strategy recognizes the affinal dilemma most strongly: treating affines as siblings shows that they are potential allies, yet it also symbolically sacrifices the independence of the line. The formal strategy also uses agnatic terms for affines, but it creates more social distance by skewing the generations. Idealized versions of kinship, like the fictive kin terms, carry this tendency even further—they ignore problems marriage creates, treating affines as a totally independent, largely irrelevant group, from (or to) whom a woman has been passed.

Although the formal, respectful strategy for address is more idealized than the informal strategy, affinal terms are on the whole flexible and responsive to the needs of practical kinship, because they are part of the everyday negotiation of authority. They constantly face the content of the affinal contradiction, as affines try to make use of their ties to each other. The fictive kin terms are instead totally free from the constraints of marriage, and thus express idealized kinship in its pure form.

**ANCESTRAL ALTARS**

Worship at ancestral altars, like the use of kinship terms, is an everyday event for many people. Unlike the terms for affines, however, ordinary worship is ritualized—there is no room for flexibility. A representative of the family (usually a wife) offers several sticks of incense before the ancestral tablets on the family altar every day, and makes elaborate food offerings twice a month.

The usual picture of Taiwanese ancestor worship shows the same idealized kinship system as the fictive kin terms. The tablets ideally represent patrilineal forebears and their wives. Patrilineages thus appear independent: they fully integrate their wives, and there are no affines. Occasionally one may have to worship non-patrilineal relatives, for example when a wife's parents have no one else to worship them, but the tablets for such people are never placed in the lineage ancestral hall, and will probably not be placed on the family's domestic ancestral altar. They are generally found in dark corners of back rooms.

Strong lineages help promote the social contexts that lead to idealized kinship: an elite of lineage elders may put forward an idealized view of patrilineal unity through its rules and rituals. For example, official sets of lineage rules, written by the elders, required wives to serve and adapt to the patriline (Liu 1959). Some idealized kinship went so far as to forbid uxorilocal marriage, which is otherwise common in much of China (Kulp 1925:81–82). Strong lineages also promote the ideology of unity by holding communal rituals in elaborate halls that they build, by conducting communal feasts for their aged members, and by leading communal worship at the graves of focal ancestors. Even within such strong lineages, idealized kinship appears most strongly in the most ritualized, elite-controlled contexts: lineage altars are strictly unilineal, yet family altars sometimes accept outsiders; only lineage elders perform major communal worship, yet women generally carry out daily ancestor worship at home. Wives of the powerful Hong Kong Teng lineage, for example, worship in the lineage hall only at their weddings, but they may worship and be worshipped at each family’s domestic altar (Watson 1981:611). Strong lineages thus idealize kinship on their altars because (1) they provide the elite-controlled ritual that Bloch suggests will be relevant, and (2) they provide a strong social network that obviates the need for extensive practical relations with affines.

The Sanhsia (Taiwan) village of Chi-nan (Ahern 1973), for example, follows this idealized pattern closely: there are communal lineage halls that forbid the tablets of nonpatrilineal relatives, the graves of focal ancestors are ritually important, and so on. Several other nearby villages, however, show a very different pattern. In both Ploughshare (Harrell 1976) and Kiu Kiong Kiou (Weller 1980) there are no lineage halls, and about half of the domestic ancestral
altars hold tablets for two or more surnames; one household in Kiu Kiong Kiou worshipped ancestors of four different lines. Unlike Ch'i-nan, which has four powerful lineages and extensive land, Ploughshare and Kiu Kiong Kiou consist primarily of land-poor laborers. Such villages generally have very weak lineages (or none at all), and little communal kinship ritual. There is less mechanism to promote the idealized kinship system than in areas with strong lineages, in part because there are no specialist-controlled, public lineage rituals, and no elite control over what tablets people place on public altars. Furthermore, where lineage ties are weak, and where people are poor, ties through marriage become an especially important social resource, and village endogamy increases (Harrell 1976). Villages like Ploughshare or Kiu Kiong Kiou thus face the affinal contradiction more squarely than villages with strong lineages, because affinal (and other dyadic ties) may outweigh agnatic ties. Practical manipulation of affines is an important part of daily life. Such areas address more of the content of the affinal contradiction than strong lineages, and have less elite control of ritual. Their ancestral altars reflect this by equalizing the status of the patrilineage and various outside lines. Ancestral altars thus comment on only one aspect of kinship relevant to affines: they index the degree of independence of the line.

Like the real and fictive kin terms, ancestral altars accede more to the affinal contradiction in more informal situations like family worship, and idealize it in more formal, elite-controlled situations like lineage ritual. Ancestral altars emphasize idealized kinship especially in areas where there are strong lineages, because such lineages have large, elite-controlled communal rituals, and because they depend less on affines than other areas. Where lineages are weak, often in land-poor laboring or fishing villages, there is no organization to promote idealized kinship, and the altars emphasize the practical compromises of strong dependence on marriage ties. In contrast to what Bloch might predict, ritual formalization alone does not automatically lead to the idealization of patrilineal kinship—all ancestor worship is ritualized. The keys lie instead in who controls the ritual, and in how much the ritual must actually address real dependence on affines. Control by a lineage elite, in combination with relatively little social reliance on affines, promotes idealized kinship in powerful lineages; independent control by the family, especially where affines are important, promotes practical recognition of the affinal contradiction where lineages are weak.

FUNERALS

Funerals comment primarily on two aspects of kinship—property rights (Wolf 1970) and filial debts. They thus differ from the kinship terms, which comment on personal authority. For example, the kin terms distinguish older and younger brother—an older brother has more authority in the family than a younger brother. Mourning dress does not distinguish among brothers—all have equal rights in property (Wolf 1970:205).

Funerals combine both contexts that lead to idealized kinship: (1) Affines have neither filial duties nor property rights in relation to the deceased, and funerals thus need not address the more threatening aspects of the affines. (2) Funerals are, in addition, the kinds of infrequent, expert-controlled rituals that Bloch expects to promote idealization. Ritual experts must be hired to conduct funerals, and local leaders (generally the elected village head in Kiu Kiong Kiou) direct the general proceedings. Funerals cannot ignore affines the way fictive kin terms or some lineage altars do, but they do idealize affines primarily as independent, non-threatening allies.

This is shown, first of all, by the most obvious idiom of kinship at a funeral—mourning dress. The colors, textures, and shapes of mourning dress create a complex code that makes detailed distinctions among the descendants of the deceased (Wolf 1970). Affines (including a dead woman's brothers) all dress
essentially identically. They wear white robes, which indicate their social equality with the deceased; friends and generational equals within the lineage also wear white robes. Affines make this claim of equality even though they may be of a lower generation than the deceased (for example, a son's brother-in-law)—the fact of being affines makes them equal, in spite of usually salient differences in age or generation. The more formal kin terms for affines, as discussed above, similarly ignore generation. Affines also wear rectangular hats (which distinguish them from the equals and friends of the deceased) with a vertical red stripe. Red is worn for supernatural protection, but only by people with no claims in the estate (Wolf 1970:194). Mourning dress thus gives a simple message about affines by addressing only one aspect of the complex social relationship: a dead man's affines are his social equals, and they have no rights to his estate. Mourning dress stresses the idealized alliance between sets of affines; it downplays the closer, familial relationships and the potential conflicts of practical kinship. Funeral dress idealizes kinship for most mourners because it is specialist-controlled ritual, and because the practical problems of the affinal contradiction do not really come up at funerals.

The internal challenge of the affinal contradiction, however, is less clearly idealized at funerals. The filial duties of a virilocally married woman or an uxorilocally married man are ambiguous. These people have married out of their natal families, but they remain their parents' children; their loyalties are not clear. The ritual context is the same as for other mourners (it is, after all, the same ritual), but the content changes—funeral ritual addresses the problems that the affinal contradiction creates in the filial loyalty of virilocal wives and uxorilocal husbands. The problematic role of these relatives by marriage can lead to a more practical negotiation over their role at the funeral.

Conflict over the appropriate mourning dress reflects the conflicting loyalties of these people in practical kinship. The status of a virilocally married daughter mourning for her parents, for instance, led to disagreement among Wolf's (1970:202-203) informants:

Whereas some people are willing to accept the fact that a married daughter belongs to her husband and prescribe te-a-po [the second degree of mourning] as the proper mourning dress, others claim that a married daughter's head is still theirs and prescribe a headdress of mua:-po [the highest degree of mourning, worn by a son or unmarried daughter]. Still others compromise by prescribing a headdress of mua:-po with a patch of te-a-po "to show that the woman is married."

Wolf (1970:203) gives other examples of disagreement over correct mourning dress, and concludes that "the only way to avoid variation in mourning dress without imposing an arbitrary code would be to resolve the conflicts that it reflects." When people actually attend funerals, of course, they must commit themselves to one or another of the variant possibilities. The alternative they choose is a claim of practical kinship about family loyalties and about property rights; controversial choices may lead to arguments (Wolf 1970:205). Like using a kin term or placing a tablet on the ancestral altar, each occasion when a virilocal wife or an uxorilocal husband puts on mourning dress makes a practical commitment about how to resolve the affinal dilemma.

Affines also have some formal ritual responsibilities at funerals in Taiwan (Ahern 1974). The affines, led by the brother of a dead woman or by the wife's brother of a dead man, help worship the dead soul, first emphasizing that they are not descendants, and second helping to eradicate the presence of the dead among the living (Ahern 1974:295-299). Through each ritual, the descendants treat the affines with exaggerated deference, kneeling to them before each major step. As with mourning dress, this deference shows the social equality (or even superiority) of the affines to the deceased, and emphasizes the formal tie that unites
them. Just as for mourning dress, these rituals can idealize affines because their content concerns relatively unproblematic aspects of the marriage tie.

Yet the affines also have certain rights over the descendants, and here they are again meddlers who threaten the independence of the line, as well as formal allies. The senior affine (a dead woman's brother or a dead man's brother-in-law) has the right to inspect the corpse to ascertain that there was no foul play. This is actually done through a mock coffin-nailing, where the (wife's) brother of the deceased pretends to nail the coffin shut. (It is, in fact, already sealed.) After pretending to nail the four corners of the coffin, he lightly taps the nail into the coffin's head. The eldest son of the deceased must then remove the nail with his teeth. This last ritual depends on the importance of puns in Chinese ritual. The word for "nail" (tieng) is a pun on the word for "sons." The ritual thus acts out the gift of the affines—they have provided a woman and with her, sons for the line. The ritual seems to resolve the problems created by marriage: the affines have provided the line with sons, and they need no longer interfere on their sister's behalf. Indeed, their status does change and simplify after the funeral. The senior affine is no longer a wife's brother, related to the lineage elders by marriage, but has become instead mother's brother related to a younger generation by blood.

This role difference between mother's brother and wife's brother is clearest when brothers formally divide the family estate. The wife's brothers of the people involved each step in on the side of their sister's nuclear family, again illustrating the divisive threat of affines. Yet the affines of the senior generation—the mother's brothers of the people involved—often mediate for the whole family (Fei 1939:86-87; Lin 1948:123). Funerals clarify this change of status from problematic wife's brother to friendly mother's brother.

Funerals emphasize above all the social equality of affines, the formal tie between them, and the end of their meddlesome responsibility for their sisters. They give the most internally coherent, and the most consistently idealized view of affines of any of the idioms of kinship, because they are public rituals controlled by experts, and because affines have no major social involvement in funerals, which address only relatively unproblematic aspects of the marriage tie (property rights and filial debts). The practical negotiations over affinal ties that characterize the other idioms occur at funerals only when affinal loyalty becomes a problem—for the mourning dress of virilocal brides and uxorilocal husbands.

Weddings

Marriage is the only idiom of kinship that is directly and primarily concerned with the affinal tie. It combines the controlled ritualization that leads to idealized kinship, with the problematic content that leads to practical kinship. As a result, weddings make the richest and most complex statements about affines, and they include commentary on every aspect of the contradictions discussed so far. Freedman (1967:272) has emphasized the contradictory messages of marriage ritual:

Taking all the rites together, we may say that under the threats from outside (from the wife's agnates) and the threats from inside (from the wife herself) marriage is shown to be an impossible institution. Men are made to fear what they know they must want and to be wary of all the failures implied in their best intentions.

Marriage ritual illustrates the contradictory relationship between the two sets of affines at several points. First, much of the ritual addresses the internal challenge of the affinal contradiction: the position of the bride. (See Suzuki [1978(1934)] or Cohen [1976:ch.6] for a full description of the ritual.) The major message of the ceremony—like most public, ritualized events discussed so far—idealizes the situation. It illustrates the apparently unequivocal transfer of the
bride from her natal family to her husband's family. This begins on the day of betrothal when the groom's mother places a ring on the hand of her future daughter-in-law. It continues on the wedding day when the bride is transferred to her husband's house in a typical rite of passage; she and her dowry are ritually cleansed; now in a liminal state, she is ritually transferred to a waiting taxi; she undergoes the supernaturally dangerous journey to her husband's house; she is ritually cleansed again; and she is finally reintegrated into her husband's family by worshipping the gods, and by worshipping his ancestors (Freedman 1967:265-268). Several stages of the ceremony also include hopes that the bride will soon bear sons.

Several traditional manuals describe how the rituals ought to be performed, and they describe the etiquette of these rituals in detail. Lü (1975[1880]:106-171), for example, includes extensive discussion of the proper form for invitations, the places everyone should take at the ceremonies, and the proper order of the rites. He never departs from a prescription for idealized kinship; he does not address the contradictions that the marriage creates. These ritual manuals were written by the traditional elite, and they idealize kinship consistently.

All this represents the idealized, benevolent aspect of the bride—the new mother who will guarantee continuation of the line. The rites, however, also contain a practical counterpoint that indicates the more dangerous aspects of the bride. The specifics of this counterpoint vary from place to place; they are not as standardized as the idealized rite of passage, nor are they approved by the marriage manuals. Each example shows practical kinship in action, as future affines negotiate over their coming rights and roles: (1) When the groom's mother puts the ring on the bride's finger, the bride may bend her second joint to prevent her mother-in-law from getting the ring all the way on. If the bride succeeds, her mother-in-law will not dominate her in the future (Ahern 1974:283; Wolf 1972:125). (2) Freedman (1967:268) reports a belief that whoever enters the wedding chamber first—the bride or the groom—will dominate the relationship. (3) There is another belief that the groom must place his robe over his wife's in order to be dominant in the future (Freedman 1967:268-269; Lin 1948:44; Suzuki 1978[1934]:197). (4) If the bride steps on the groom's shoes on the wedding night, she will dominate (Suzuki 1978[1934]:197). Some other unofficial rituals indicate the continuing ties of the bride to her natal family: (1) During a feast at the bride's house, the groom is served a soft-boiled egg. Breaking the yolk indicates breaking the bride's natal ties. Brides' mothers are sometimes said to hard-boil the eggs, thus retaining their ties with their daughters (Wolf 1972:135). (2) Finally, "it is said of one area that when the girl leaves her natal home she drops a lock on the ground which is then attached half open to the door to signify that while she has been sent away the house is not completely closed to her" (Freedman 1967:271). This counterpoint shows what the major theme of the wedding disguises—the bride is not fully detached from her natal family, and she thus creates a threat to the solidarity of her husband's family. Where affines are socially unimportant, this counterpoint of practical kinship may not be as strong. When brides marry into the powerful Hong Kong Teng lineage, for example, their brothers do not give ambiguous messages about leaving the door unlocked, but instead give the bridal sedan chair an unambiguous kick out of her natal household (Watson 1981:600).

Weddings also address the external challenge of the affinal contradiction—the benefits and threats of an alliance between two groups. Before the wedding, the two families about to be united engage in a complex dialogue of gifts and counter-gifts. Although the ritual presents the occasions for giving and the approximate content of the gifts, the two sets of affines must negotiate the quality and quantity of each gift, and their negotiations in such practical kinship often become tense and acrimonious (Fei 1939:43; Gallin 1966:179; Wolf 1972:119-124). These gifts
are thus simultaneously acts of friendly reciprocity and battles for prestige and profit; they illustrate the contradictions in the long-term relationship to come—an idealized alliance superimposed on a practical manipulation of the tie. Suzuki (1978[1934]:173) gives a ritual example of this combined reciprocity and conflict: the groom’s family includes in the bridewealth several symbols of its prosperity (including a chicken, a duck, and dried longan fruit); these must be returned to the groom’s family immediately, or else the bride’s family is thought to be trying to steal the prosperity of their future affines. Gift exchanges thus publicize the reciprocity of the idealized affine tie, yet the actual contradictions and tensions of practical affinal kinship can compromise idealized weddings through acrimonious negotiation and through symbolism that recognizes the threat in the new bride.

Weddings also involve the affines of the senior generation: the mother’s brother and father’s mother’s brother of the groom must sit at the table of honor at the marriage feast, along with the bride’s father or brother. (Lin [1948:115] adds father’s brother’s wife’s brother.) In addition, grooms in some areas had their mother’s brothers brought to the wedding in a sedan chair (Chiu 1966:8), and in other places they worshipped at the ancestral altars of their mother’s father and their father’s mother’s father on the day before the marriage (Cohen 1976:153). These are all displays of idealized affinal kinship.

Once again, however, the contradictions of the affinal dilemma come into play unofficially. Ahern (1974:292-293) cites several examples of prestige battles involving the treatment of affines at marriage and other ritual feasts. In one case, for instance, a mother’s brother did not get along with his sister’s son, so he sent his young son to a feast instead of coming himself. The sister’s son reciprocated by not giving the boy the seat of highest honor, and the boy countered by taking food reserved for the guest of honor (Ahern 1974:293). Ritual feasts show the life-long dilemma of affinal relationships: affines are honored guests, yet at the same time they are interfering meddlers.

Watson’s (1981) analysis of the Hong Kong Teng again shows how the existence of a powerful lineage, where affines are not socially important to most people, may accompany less representation of practical kinship at weddings. Male affines do not attend wedding feasts, and female affines are not placed in seats of honor. Even here, however, the practical results of negotiation over marriage payments lead to differences between rich and poor within the lineage, and compromise the idealized unity of the lineage. Watson (1981:609) states:

In relation to the ideology of fraternal unity, affinity was seen by the Teng as a divisive force. It was divisive not only because ties to affines could lead to potentially disruptive contacts with outsiders, but also because affinity highlighted economic and social differences within the lineage. In Ha Tsuen [the Teng village] the uniform set of marriage rites denied that there were differences between agnates, while marriage payments and affinal behavior highlighted and enhanced these differences.

Weddings express both practical and idealized kinship at once: relations between affines are friendly and reciprocal, yet simultaneously formal and tense; the bride is a welcome new member of her husband’s household, yet simultaneously a dangerous threat who is tied to outsiders. The rites are complex and contradictory because they speak directly about the contradictory ties they create and they involve direct practical contact with the new affines; the content of the affinal problem is unavoidable. The other idioms of kinship comment about only limited aspects of affinal ties, and they generally offer at least temporary resolutions of the affinal dilemma—more idealized solutions where the affines are not a social problem, and where the event is ritualized and specialist-controlled, and solutions that accede to the affinal contradiction where practical kinship is at stake. Weddings are very traditional, formalized expressions of the family, and this context demands idealized kinship. A wedding that showed only the
threatening aspect of the affinal contradiction would be a disaster. Yet at the same time, weddings create the affinal contradiction, and involve the first manipulation of it. Thus the content of the event forces people to address the realities of practical kinship, capturing symbolically the basic contradiction they create.

CONCLUSION

How people manage symbolically the social contradictions of affinal ties depends on two aspects of the context: how problematic is the aspect of the affinal tie in question; and does the occasion require specialist-controlled ritual. This conclusion grows out of the work of Bourdieu and especially Bloch, but expands on them at two points. First, Bloch's emphasis on ritual as a way of mystifying the world (in this case, idealizing affinal kinship) must be qualified. Many of the idioms of Taiwanese kinship are ritualized, but not all of them idealize kinship. Ritual idealization occurs primarily where a religious or political elite controls the event, or when affines are not very important socially. Thus ancestor worship may be less idealized at home than in lineage ritual and weddings have a less idealized counterpoint to the officially sanctioned rites. Bloch's association of elite control with idealized ritual is useful, but the data from Taiwan also require examination of less idealized ritual outside of elite control.

Second, content is as important as elite-controlled ritual. Practical kinship occurs when the idiom cannot avoid the most troublesome aspects of affinal ties; this occurs independent of elite-controlled ritual. Thus, real kin terms for affines are always more practical than fictive kin terms. Ancestral altars are more practical when affines are more important socially than when agnatic ties dominate marriage ties. In each case, more practical kinship accompanies a problematic realization of the affinal contradiction. Weddings, in particular, must have a practical counterpoint because they create these problems in the first place.

Content promotes idealization when recognition of the affinal contradiction would undercut solidarity (as for fictive kinsmen, or for strong lineage altars), and promotes more practical kinship when people negotiate relations of power with their affines (as for real kin terms, for ancestral altars where affines are important and lineages are not, and for wedding arrangements). Content may be irrelevant when affinal ties are not a primary concern, or when only unproblematic aspects of affinal relations are involved (as for filial duties and property rights at a funeral). Ritual controlled by elites or specialists may also promote idealization (as for ancestral altars in strong lineages, and for funerals), although such ritual may be irrelevant in ordinary interactions (as for informal kin terms).

Different contexts thus create different treatments of the affinal contradiction. Kin authorities tend to promote idealized kinship, but people also express the real problems of relations with affines where these are too important to paper over. Such symbolic resolutions may either idealize or recognize social contradictions, depending on who controls the idiom and on how strongly the idiom addresses those contradictions. The material from Taiwan supports Bourdieu's distinction between practical and official (idealized) kinship, and suggests that ritualization, elite control, and problematic content may frequently explain when each idiom of kinship occurs.

NOTES

1. Evidence for this article comes primarily from Sanhsia Township, Taipei County, Taiwan, and includes field research over a period of about twenty months during the years 1976-1979, as well as the work of other anthropologists who have studied Sanhsia (including Emily Ahern, Stevan Harrell, and Arthur Wolf). It also draws on studies of kinship elsewhere in Taiwan and in traditional China. Research for this article was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, by the Social Science Research Council, and by the National Science Foundation. An early version of this paper was delivered at the 21st Meeting of the Southeast Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Chapel Hill, 1982. I am very grateful to Richard Fox, Alice Ingerson, and William O'Barr for their helpful comments on various drafts.
2. Not all of Bloch’s ideas are accepted here. He seems to view religious ritual as permanently associated with traditional authority; the analysis below shows that this need not be entirely true. He also envisions an alternative to ritual mystification based on objective knowledge of the world. While this paper also recognizes an alternative to mystification, it does not insist that such an alternative is clearly more objective.

3. Weller (1981) explores this data in more detail. The problem of the relative superiority of wife-givers and wife-takers remains thorny. Although wife-givers are clearly ritually superior in Sanhsia, it is not clear that they are socially superior, or that they are superior in any sense in other parts of China.

4. Peasants in the Teng lineage have surprisingly little contact with affines by Taiwan standards, largely because the Teng lineage is larger and stronger than most Taiwan lineages. The Teng elite has more extensive ties to its affines, because its business and political connections require more contacts outside the lineage.

5. In fact, the generation of the affine is recognized by attaching a small patch of cloth to the hat; generation is distinguished, but not emphasized.

6. There is no direct elite or specialist control of weddings. Nevertheless, the basic outline of the ceremony found in the marriage manuals is public knowledge, and specialists may be consulted for help with details. There is thus indirect specialist influence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


