

## Sim-pua: The predestined fates of women in Taiwanese history

### 台灣歷史裡宿命的女性：媳婦仔

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對 e 世代的年輕人而言，「媳婦仔」一詞是個陌生、模糊或未曾聽過的古早名詞，而對外國朋友來說，「媳婦仔」更該是一個前所未聞的字；但是，對老一輩台灣人來說，這個名詞並不陌生，若換成「養女」或「童養媳」，也許更能喚起許多人的印象吧！

If “*Sim-pua*” is an ancient expression that is strange, vague or totally unfamiliar to young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all the moreso is it to foreigners. But for an older generation in Taiwan, there is nothing peculiar about the term, and if we exchange the word for “adopted daughter” or “adopted child bride,” the expression might jog many people’s memories.

「媳婦仔」與「養女」、「童養媳」都是漢人傳統農業社會裡一種特殊的女性角色，她們都是經由「收養」的程序，自小離開親生家庭，成為另一個家庭的成員；所謂的「養女」是指那些被收養來當作女兒的女子；「童養媳」是指那些準備將來長大後嫁給養父母的兒子而事先收養的女孩。「媳婦仔」則是福佬人的用語，和中文的「童養媳」相同，但是在台灣的北部及澎湖地區，「媳婦仔」不只是指「童養媳」而已，它也含有「養女」的意涵。這些地區的人們對收養的女孩——不論將來要讓她成為女兒或者媳婦——在未結婚之前，一律稱她們為「媳婦仔」。

“*sim-pua*,” “adopted daughter” and “adopted child bride” are all names for a special role played by women in traditional Han agricultural society. These women all went through an “adoption” process, and left their own families as children to become members of other families. The “adopted daughters” were girls who were adopted as daughters by their new families. “Adopted child brides” refer to an arrangement where, when the girl had grown up, she would be married to the son of her adopted parents. “*sim-pua*” is a Hokkien term, with the same meaning as “adopted child bride,” but in the north of Taiwan and in Penghu, “*sim-pua*” meant more than just that: it had connotations of “adopted daughter.” People in these areas called these daughters “*sim-pua*” before they were married, regardless of whether the girls would grow up to be their daughters or their daughters-in-law.

### 「媳婦仔」風俗起源與在台盛行背景

台灣這種收養女子的風俗根源於中國漢人傳統社會之傳宗接代與重男輕女等思想觀念，而在清代漢人移民的特殊歷史背景以及經濟社會因素影響下，逐漸形成、盛行。

### The origins of the “*sim-pua*” custom, and its popularity in Taiwan

This Taiwanese custom of adopting daughters has its origins in the concepts of traditional Han Chinese society that demanded sons to carry the family name, and encouraged valuing sons over daughters. The special historical background to Han emigration from China in the Qing dynasty and the influence of economic factors gradually shaped the custom and ensured its prevalence.



傳統婦女命運的具體縮影

The very epitome of traditional women's fates.

清代，大量閩粵漢人迫於生活，紛紛冒險渡海來到台灣。初期清廷為了治安，施行嚴格限制移民的政策，因而來台者多以偷渡方式進入，導致人口性別比例嚴重失調，成年男子婚娶困難、成家不易。1790年，清廷准許搬眷之後，女性人口雖然逐漸增加，但早先女口稀少而珍貴，加上民風競尚浮華的結果，娶媳婦動輒千金，嫁女之嫁妝亦必豐厚，而此時的移民經濟能力已不若以往強盛，一般中下家庭不僅無力負擔兒子的婚娶費用，甚至無法扶養過多的子女。

During the Qing Dynasty, life was very hard for vast numbers of Chinese in Fujian and Guangdong, and they risked their lives by crossing the sea to Taiwan in droves. At first, for the sake of public order, the Qing court implemented strict policies limiting emigration, and as a result, many of those who came to Taiwan did so as stowaways, which led to an imbalance of the sexes among the population. It was difficult for adult men to find wives and start families. In 1790, after the Qing court permitted the emigration to Taiwan of a man's dependents, the female population gradually increased, yet previously women had been precious rarities. Added to this, folk traditions meant that people competed among one another for flamboyance. So taking a wife could easily cost a fortune, and the trousseau of a bride also required vast expense. However, the economic power of immigrants at this time was not as strong as it had been in the past, so most middle and lower class families were not only unable to bear the burden of their sons' bride payments, they could barely even afford to raise their children.

在此歷史背景下，生家基於扶養困難、爲了解困或減輕生活負擔等種種因素而將親生女兒送走；養家則是爲了減省聘金、婚禮花費、增加勞動力等理由而收養媳婦仔。此外，爲了緩和傳統家庭的婆媳問題、希望擁有女兒以及有關生育的民間俗信等，也是常見的原因。正因爲媳婦仔本身兼具多方功能，其身份又充滿轉換的彈性，故能滿足傳統社會不同時期的不同需求，於是早已盛行於閩粵地區「媳婦仔」風俗，便隨著移民傳入台灣，盛行各地。

With this historical backdrop, families found it incredibly hard to support their own children. In order to resolve their hardships and alleviate living expenses, factors such as these led to families giving away their own daughters. Other families would take in a *sim-pua* for reasons such as saving on bride price and the expenses of a wedding ceremony, and increasing the workforce within a household. Other common reasons for taking in a *sim-pua* included those of trying to mitigate the problems which arose in traditional families between mothers and their daughters-in-law; the desire to have daughters; and the folk belief that held that having a daughter would help the family to have more children. Because the *sim-pua* herself had many functions, her status was flexible and prone to change; so at different times, these girls fulfilled different needs for traditional society. The custom of having a *sim-pua* flourished early on in Fujian and Guangdong, and followed immigrants to Taiwan, flourishing everywhere.



傳統社會需要大量勞力，這也是「媳婦仔」習俗的起因之一  
圖是日治時代婦女編織大甲草帽的情形

The primary cause giving rise to the custom of *sim-pua* was traditionally the massive labor requirements. Shown here are women weaving straw hats during the period of the Japanese occupation.

### 「媳婦仔」風俗的消失

1920 年代以後，由於交通建設、現代教育推展、衛生環境改變，經濟也大爲發展，台灣社會逐漸現代化。教育程度的提高與工業化的發展，提高年輕男子的自主權力，得以反抗父母的威權；戰後經濟發展也使媳婦仔的工作機會增加，使她們更有

### The disappearance of the *sim-pua* tradition

By the 1920s, with the establishment of a transportation system and the spread of modern education, improvements in hygiene, and also great economic development, society was gradually modernizing. The raising of educational levels and the spread of industrialization brought an increase in autonomous power among young men, and the power to rebel against their parents.

能力反抗養家的約束。再者，戰後的法律也保障婚姻自主權，父母便難強迫年輕男女結婚。「送做堆」(媳婦仔和她對象的結婚方式)的童養媳婚，因而在年輕男女的反抗與家長的妥協中逐漸消失。

Post-war economic development also increased the work opportunities available to *sim-pua*, giving them the power to rebel against the constraints put on them by their foster families. In addition to this, post-war laws also protected the rights of young people to make their own decisions about marriage; parents found it increasingly difficult to force young men and women into marriage. The “pushing together” (the method of marriage between a *sim-pua* and her betrothed) of *sim-pua* who had been adopted for wives as children gradually disappeared owing to resistance from young men and women, and their parents’ compromise in the face of this.

而隨著家庭經濟的改善，家長不必擔心無力撫養女孩；家長也不再擔憂無力負擔婚禮花費而預先為子弟收養媳婦仔。教育的普及、嬰幼兒死亡率的減低以及智識水準的提高等因素，更使基於迷信而將收養或出養女孩的風氣逐漸消失；戰後，節育政策的推展、女子經濟能力提高以及思想觀念的改變等等，使家長不再將女孩視為「賠錢貨」而輕易送人，許多有意再收養媳婦仔的人家，已無可收養的對象了。媳婦仔風俗便在台灣社會經濟變遷之下，自 1920 年代起逐漸消退，至 1970 年代已幾乎消失。

In the wake of economic improvement for families, parents no longer needed to worry about being unable to feed and clothe their daughters, and they also no longer worried having to adopt *sim-pua* for their sons in case they were unable to bear the burden of wedding expenses. Widespread education, a falling infant mortality rate, and better information were all factors behind the gradual phasing out of adopting girls in and out of families, such folk practices being based in superstition. After the war, the promotion of birth control policies, increased economic power for women, and changes in people’s thinking meant that parents no longer regarded daughters as “money-losing propositions” who could be given away without too much thought. There were still many parents who wanted to adopt *sim-pua*, but no longer enough parents who were willing to give their daughters up for adoption. As social and economic conditions changed, the *sim-pua* custom gradually faded away starting in the 1920s, and all but disappeared by 1970.

## 媳婦仔的生活與遭遇

一般來說，大多數的媳婦仔都是在四歲以

## The lives and experiences of the *sim-pua*

Most *sim-pua* were forced to leave their mothers for their

前就被迫離開媽媽送到養家。進入養家之後，有的人備受養家長輩喜愛，有的則受盡冷落或虐待，各有各的遭遇與生活樣貌，也各有不同的心路歷程。進入養家之後，她們就「屬於」養家的人，養親有權決定她們的一切，她們本身毫無自主的權利，只能如棋子般任人擺佈，一生命運幾乎完全操於他人之手。從小到大，她們得認份工作，鎮日不得清閒，幾乎等同於奴婢一般；倘若不得養親喜愛，還得忍受苛責與凌辱；在行動上或教育上，也比一般女孩受到更多的限制；萬一養家遭逢困境，最先被犧牲的也往往是她們，被轉賣成為娼妓是很常見的事。

adoptive homes before the age of four. After they entered their new homes some of these girls were accorded love and affection from their adoptive parents, but some were neglected or abused. They encountered every different experience imaginable, and every kind of psychological development. After entering their adoptive families, they “belonged” to their adoptive parents, who had the right to decide everything for the girls. These children had no power of autonomy whatsoever, and were no more than pawns at the mercy of others, their entire fates virtually in the control of other people. From childhood to adulthood, they knew that work was assigned to them, and they worked without rest all day long, almost exactly the same as servants. If their adoptive parents did not love them, they would have to endure severe criticism and humiliation. They were more constrained in their actions and their educational opportunities than were normal girls. If their adoptive families should encounter dire straits, these girls were the first to be sacrificed, and it was not uncommon for them to be sold once again, this time into prostitution.



許多「媳婦仔」極容易被迫成為娼妓  
這三位是日治時期的藝妓

So many *sim-pua* were forced into prostitution. Seen here are three *geisha* of the Japanese period.

在婚姻方面，她們的遭遇往往也比一般女子更為艱難與不幸。通常媳婦仔到了適婚年齡時，家長就安排在過年除夕那天晚上，讓她和事先預定的對象同床共眠，就這樣完成婚禮。沒有慣例的婚姻程序，沒

When it came to marriage, they were frequently far more unlucky than other girls. Once a *sim-pua* reached marriageable age, it was common for parents to arrange for the girl and her pre-arranged husband-to-be to share a bed together on New Year's Eve, and to have the “wedding” dealt with in this

有歡慶的喜宴，更別提美麗的白紗禮服、豪華禮車以及浪漫的蜜月旅行了。雖然「送作堆」的夫妻中，不乏相偕相敬的例子，但是從小長期的相處使雙方缺乏新鮮、浪漫感受，且婚前有意或無意的區離，也影響婚後的親密感與婚姻品質，如果雙方個性不和或性關係不良等，極易導致外遇、離婚等悲劇。

way. There was neither conventional wedding procedure nor celebratory wedding banquet, and it goes without saying that there was no beautiful wedding gowns for her wear, no extravagant wedding sedan chair, or romantic honeymoon trip. Although there were cases of “pushed together” couples who were well-matched and enjoyed happy marriages, the fact that husband and wife had grown up together resulted in a lack of novelty and romantic sentiments, and if there was a period of separation, either deliberate or inadvertent, prior to the marriage, this also influenced feelings of intimacy after the marriage, and hence the quality of the marriage. If the personalities of husband and wife were incompatible, or their sexual relations unsatisfactory, unhappy situations such as extra-marital affairs and divorces often ensued.

據研究指出，童養媳婚的離婚率確實遠高於一般嫁娶婚。然而她們的婚姻方式及對象，是別人早已預定好的，她們只是執行者而已，就算極不願接受，也無拒絕的機會與能力，許多人就是在無可奈何的心情下步入洞房的。

Research indicates that the divorce rate among *sim-pua* was definitely higher than average. However, since their method of marriage and their fiancés had been decided a long time in advance by other people, they were simply the girls who had to carry out these arrangements, so they were extremely unwilling to accept this. Lacking both the opportunity and the ability to refuse, many of them had no alternative but to enter into the marriage.

### 傳統婦女命運的具體縮影

綜觀媳婦仔的生活與遭遇，雖然有人能被善待，但是受到不平等待遇者也不在少數，難怪許多人感歎：「甘願做散赤人查某囡，不願做好額人媳婦仔」！從她們身上，可清楚看到傳統婦女在男性中心社會下所遭受的歧視與低落的地位。她們被家長以「物品」般「賣」給養家，從此屬於養家，養親對其身體有主宰權，可以使之勞動、任意加以責罰或再次將她們「轉賣」他人，有時甚至還會遭受身體的侵犯。她們對自己的身體並沒有自主權，這反映

### The very epitome of traditional women's fates

A comprehensive survey of the lives and experiences of the *sim-pua* shows that although there were those who were treated well, still those receiving unequal treatment were in the majority. So it's no wonder that many people would sigh and say: "Better to be a daughter in a poor family than a *sim-pua* in a rich one." From the experiences of the *sim-pua* we can see very clearly the prejudicial treatment and lowly position to which women were traditionally subjected in a male-centered society. They were regarded by their parents as goods that could be sold to adoptive families, and from this point on they belonged to their adoptive families. Their adoptive parents had the right to control their bodies, and could make them do physical labor, punish them at any time, or sell them yet again to other people. Sometimes they would even be physically abused. These girls had no autonomy over their own bodies, and this reflects the powerlessness of women to rule and control

出女性生理人格被操縱與控制的無奈。其次，她們從小即被迫由「女兒」身份成為「媳婦仔」，長大則成為人之妻、婦、妾、婢，甚至淪為娼妓。在各種身份的轉換中，她們從未有自主權力，這種身份的不得自主，即是女性社會人格之被歧視與壓迫的反映。媳婦仔從小被迫與家人分離，形成孤立的處境，且在社會承認其身份地位的情況下，任何加諸她們身上的一切拘束均被合理化。在毫無反抗能力、機會之下，她們被迫接受一切，甚至認同客觀環境所施以的約制，並內化為主觀的角色期待，這種心理層面的不自主，導致所謂「媳婦仔型」與「媳婦仔體」等人格特質，這反映出女性心理人格被壓抑與箝制的悲哀。在上述身體、身份與心理三層面的壓迫與束縛之下，她們只能被動的任人擺佈，默默承受一切合理與不合理的待遇，進而以「宿命」的人生觀，將自己所遭受的一切哀傷與無奈合理化而忍受之。

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## 結語

過去，常有人把「媳婦仔」拿來比喻台灣，指出台灣的歷史命運就如同毫無自主能力的媳婦仔一樣，任人擺佈。如今，台灣婦女撐起了半邊天，往日的媳婦仔已經出頭天，台灣人也將勇敢站起來，邁向獨立自主的新世紀。

their bodies and their own dignity. Moreover, from childhood, their status was forcibly changed from “daughter” to “*sim-pua*”. Once they grew up, they became somebody’s mate, wife, concubine or servant, sometimes even sinking to the role of prostitute. At no time of change in status did they ever have independence or autonomy, reflecting the prejudice and oppression to which women’s dignity was subject in society. *Sim-pua* were forced apart from their family as children into a predicament of isolation, and, given the recognition that society accorded their status and position, every restraint placed upon them was rationalized. With no power or opportunity to rebel, they were forced to accept it all, even to identify with the restraints which the environment imposed upon them, and to internalize their own expectations of their role. This lack of independence of this psychological role led to such personality quirks as the “*sim-pua* type” and “*sim-pua* style,” which reflect the sorrow of the constraints and repression of women’s psyche and moral dignity. With these three levels of oppression and restraint -- of the body, of status and of the psyche -- these women were manipulated by others, and silently endured all kinds of reasonable and unreasonable treatment, acquiring a fatalistic philosophy, and bearing all their experiences with sorrow, with no alternative but to rationalize and endure.

## Conclusion

In the past, people often used “*sim-pua*” as an analogy for Taiwan itself, pointing out that its historical fate prevented Taiwan from being able to claim autonomy, putting it as much at the mercy of others as the *sim-pua*. These days, women in Taiwan really do hold up half the sky, and the *sim-pua* of the past have freed themselves. Likewise, people are daring to stand up and move towards a new world of independence and autonomy.

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