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Taiwan Women in Long-Term Perspective: From 1950's 'Adopting a Daughter to Marry a Son (as Household Slave)' to 2000's Refusal of Marriage and Childbearing

The current situation for women in Taiwan would be familiar to those in Europe and other post-industrial societies: equal education, late marriage, and very low fertility, about 1.2 total fertility rate. Women work almost as much as men, own property, and have little qualms about premarital sex. Some reservations about commercialization of body image and sexual exchanges, import of subservient women, and the superficiality of the middle-class women's movement will be aired later. However, first I wish to start with my own experience in 1960's and 1970's Taiwan, the period of rapid industrialization when young women began large-scale employment outside the household. Traditional Taiwanese and South Chinese society was known for a strange marriage custom: "little daughters-in-law", adopting girls of age 1-5, to marry at puberty to boys born or to be born to the family. These girls were often treated virtually as household slaves, more so than daughters. When I was studying factory girls in the late 1970's, some interviewees were such adopted girls. I will describe the logic of work and property in the traditional Taiwanese (and Chinese) society, the context and effect of this custom, and how the roles of women changed from traditional obedience to "the feminine mystique" (romanticizing dependence on men) with early industrialization. But now 45 years later, Taiwan is a post-modern society. It could appear to be a great advance for gender equality, except that heavy workloads gut personal life for both sexes, and imported women are convenient commodities.