

DOWRY AND FAMILY IN CHANGING RURAL TAIWAN

Rita S. Gallin

(ABSTRACT)

Most students of China ignore women's property when they explain intra-family relations and family division. This paper argues that the omission of women's property from discussions of family partition reflects the narrow view of what constitutes a socially valued resource and that property has both a material and non-material form. To direct attention to the dual nature of property, the paper examines the relevance of a woman's dowry—defined as both the tangible objects and intangible resources (e.g., knowledge, skills, or traits) with which a woman is endowed and which she takes to her marriage—to family division and the assets of the independent units established. Using ethnographic data collected in one rural community at two point in time, it shows how an expanded definition of women's property can reveal many of the subtleties of family life heretofore not usually considered.

Key Words: China, Intra-family relations, Property, Dowry, Family division.

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Definitions of dowry usually include reference to the property brought by a bride to her marriage and indicate that the new conjugal unit ultimately with constitute an autonomous family (Chen 1985: 117; Cohen 1976: 177; Harrell and Dickey 1985: 105; Tambiah 1973: 62-63; Watson 1981: 607). Students of China base such definitions on the assumption that property is a commodity and, when writing of dowry, they focus their descriptions on the objects given to a bride by her natal family. With rare exceptions (Cohen 1976; Gallin and Gallin 1982a), however, this material property is ignored in their discussions of the division which establishes the new family as an independent unit. The endurance of the large family, it is argued, revolved around the joint unit's estate, and division occurs when brothers lay claim

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to their shares of family assets by encouraging or allowing their wives to sow dissension (Cohen 1976: 201; Freedman 1979: 246).

The omission of a woman's property from discussions of family partition is, in part, a reflection of the idea that this property is not productive. But the omission is also, in part, a reflection of the narrow view of what constitutes a socially valued resource. Because property is seen to consist only of material goods, the notion that it can "take a non-material form" (Hirschon 1984:4) is not considered. Intangible resources, such as the knowledge, skills, or traits with which a woman is endowed and which she takes with her to the groom's family upon marriage are seen as irrelevant to the maintenance or dissolution of the joint family or to the conjugal estate of an independent unit.

The purpose of this paper is to direct attention to the dual nature of property by examining the relevance of a woman's dowry to family partition and to the assets of a conjugal unit. I define dowry as both the tangible objects and intangible resources with which a woman is endowed and which she takes to her marriage. In the paper, I examine how the contents of dowry have changed with economic development in Taiwan, and how this change is related to family division and the material base of the independent units established.

The research on which the paper is based covers the period from 1957 to 1990 and focuses on one rural community—the Taiwanese village of Hsin Hsing.⁽¹⁾ I begin the paper by describing Hsin Hsing and showing how it changed in response to development. Then, I examine the relationship of the village's economic transformation to marriage, dowry, and family division. In the final section, I comment on the implications of the commoditization of dowry for our understanding of the family in China.

(1) The first field trip, in 1957-58, consisted of a seventeen month residence in the village. This was followed by two separate studies, in 1965-66 and 1969-70, of out-migrants from the area. Three trips then ensued for village research which spanned two months in 1977, six months in 1979, and one month in 1982. The most recent field trip, in 1989-90, involved research with out-migrants from and residents of the village. During these visits, my colleague, Bernard Gallin, and I collected data using both anthropological and sociological techniques, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, surveys, censuses, and collection of official statistics contained in family, land, school, health, and economic records.

Development in Hsin Hsing

Hsin Hsing, one of 22 villages in Pu Yen township, Chang-hua county, is located approximately 125 miles southwest of Taiwan's major city, Taipei. Its people, like most in the area, are Hokkien (Minnan) speakers whose ancestors emigrated from the Chuanchou and Changchou areas of Fukien several hundred years ago.

The registered 1958 population of the village was 609 people in 99 households (*hu*) or economic families (*chia*). Approximately four-fifths of the population was between the ages of one and forty-four years, and slightly less than half was male (see Table 1). Conjugal families predominated, accounting for 66 percent of village

Table 1.
Population of Hsin Hsing by Period and Age, 1958-1979

Age	1958		1979	
	N	%	N	%
1-15	269	44.2	151	39.5
16-44	235	38.6	129	33.8
45-64	90	14.8	78	20.4
65 and older	15	2.5	24	6.3
TOTAL	609	100.0	382	100.0
Sex Ratio (m/100f)		95		113

Sources: 1958, Household Record Book, Puyen Township Public Office; 1979, Field Interviews

Note: The figures for 1958 are for all people registered as members of Hsin Hsing households, regardless of whether they were resident or only registered there. An estimated 509 people actually lived in Hsin Hsing in 1958. The figures for 1979 record only people resident in the village; 606 people living in 170 households, however, were registered in the records of the township office in 1979.

Although the sources of data contained in the Table differ, correlations with other statistical materials confirmed the accuracy and comparability of the two data sets. These materials included enumerations based on the our own surveys and interviews with individual village families cultivating land, maintaining livestock, and owning farm implements.

families (56 percent of the population). In contrast, only 5 percent of village families (10 percent of the population) was of the joint type, while the remaining 29 percent of families (35 percent of the population) lived in stem families.

During the 1950s, when no significant industries or job opportunities existed locally, land was the primary means of production. almost all families were agriculturalists, deriving most of their livelihood from two crops of rice, marketable vegetables grown in the third crop, and, in some cases, wages from farm labor. Men worked in the fields, taking care of tasks such as plowing, harrowing, transplanting, irrigating, and harvesting. Women managed the house and children, weeded fields and dried rice, preserved crops, raised poultry, and, in their "spare time," wove fiber hats at home to supplement the family income.

The situation in the village began to change in the mid-1950s and early 1960s as the growing population pressure on the land created problems of underemployment and farms too small to support family members.⁽²⁾ Increasing numbers of men began to migrate to the larger cities of the island to seek jobs and supplemental income (Gallin and Gallin 1974). The stream continued throughout the 1960s and labor shortages became acute, farm profits decreased, and agricultural production declined. (In Taiwan as a whole, production leveled off and varied by a small amount from year to year in the late 1960s [see CEPD 1979: 59].) The stream of migration and decline in production might well have continued in Hsin Hsing but for certain national and international developments in the 1970s.

The government's policy of export-oriented industrialization had brought about rapid urbanization and migration from rural area to cities during the 1960s. Large segments of the rural population had been absorbed by urban industry, and the value of a farmer's production in 1972 was only one-fifth that of an off-farm worker's production (Huang 1981: 3). To stem the stagnation of agriculture, in 1972 the government abolished the rice-fertilizer barter system; in 1973 it instituted a guaranteed rice price and enacted the Accelerated rural Development Program (Yu

(2). Despite implementation of the Land Reform Program and changes in the tenancy/ownership ratio, most families cultivated small farms. In 1957, 45 percent of the village families cultivated below 0.5 hectare, and 84 percent cultivated below 1.0 hectare. (See B. Gallin 1966 for a detailed discussion of the village in the 1950s.)

1977). The implementation of these policies created a climate in which farmers believed they could derive profits from the cultivation of their land, and it accelerated the move of industry—which had begun in the 1960s—to the countryside.⁽³⁾

These attempts to invigorate agriculture were followed by the oil crisis of 1974 and the world recession and inflation of 1974-75. The pace of industrialization in Taiwan's cities slowed (CEPD 1979: 78), and more than 200,000 urban workers lost their jobs (Huang 1981: 163) when some factories shut down and others cut back production. The city began to lose the aura of El Dorado as the countryside began to acquire one of promise.

A comparison of the structure of the village population in 1979 with the population in 1958 suggests one of the outcomes of these developments.⁽⁴⁾ By 1979 only 382 people lived in Hsin Hsing, but the proportion of males had increased to 51 percent (see Table 1). In part, this increase reflected a decline in male emigration and a rise in the migration of unmarried women to urban areas. But the difference also indicated the return of earlier migrants in response to rising costs and intense competition for jobs in the cities, relative to rural areas.

Further examination of the data suggests another way in which the villagers responded to national and international developments. By 1979, conjugal family households no longer predominated in Hsin Hsing; only 45 percent of households no longer predominated in Hsin Hsing; only 45 percent of households (30 percent of the population) was of the simple type. Fully 18 percent of family households (34 percent of the population) was of the joint type, while the remaining 37 percent of family households (36 percent of the population) was of the stem form.

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- (3) Industry began to disperse to the countryside to gain access to low-cost labor and raw materials. By 1971, 50 percent of the industrial and commercial establishments and 55 percent of the manufacturing firms in Taiwan were located in rural areas (Ho 1979). Ho's data are not disaggregated by area, but our observations suggest that throughout the 1960s industry mainly penetrated towns and rural areas within commuting distance to cities, not the more distant countryside such as the Hsin Hsing area.
- (4) The village census data for 1989-90 have not been analyzed completely and figures for 1979 are used in all instances but one; data on the work status of women, discussed below, are from 1989-90. The raw data for the current period suggest, however, that the demographic profile of the village has remained fairly constant since 1979.

The reasons for this increase in complex families have been documented in detail elsewhere (Gallin and Gallin 1982a; R.S. Gallin 1984a, 1984b). Here it is sufficient to emphasize that the villagers believed an extended family provided the means for socioeconomic success in a changing world. A family that included many potential wage workers, as well as other members who could manage the household, supervise children, and care for the land, had a better chance of diversifying economically than did a family of small size.

Economic change also accompanied national and international developments. Labor-intensive factories, service shops, retail stores, and construction companies burgeoned in the local area. By 1979, seven small satellite factories, three artisan workshops, and twenty six shops and small businesses had been established in the village, and resident families derived 85 percent of their income from off-farm employment (Gallin and Gallin 1982b). Work in the agricultural sector, however, was not abandoned. Fully 84 percent of village households continued to farm, and households engaged in both farming and off-farm work were by far the most common.

The Change in the villagers' mode of employment was not simply a response to rural industrialization. Despite implementation of new policies, agriculture remained an unprofitable venture; on average, Hsin Hsing farmers realized less than NT\$2,000 (US\$52.63) from the rice they grew on 0.097 hectare of land in 1979. Nevertheless, they continued to cultivate the land because: (1) it was a source of food, specifically, rice; (2) the mechanization and chemicalization of agriculture obviated the need for either a large or a physically strong labor force (see R.S. Gallin and Ferguson 1988); and (3) the decreased size of family farms—in 1979 the average acreage tilled per farming household was 0.63 hectare—required less labor.

As might be expected, males comprised the largest proportion of the population working off farm; eighty percent of married men were engaged in paid production. But the females of the village also assumed roles non-traditional for women. Approximately two-thirds of married women identified their primary activity with non-domestic roles, although two-fifths were employed in jobs that allowed them to accommodate domestic responsibilities and demands (see Table 2). An additional four-fifths indicated that they also engaged in activities non-traditional for women. In point of fact, only one-third of the women identified housekeeping as something

Table 2
Primary and Secondary Activities of Hsin Hsin Married Women, by Age
November 1989 – April 1990

Activity	Age				Totals	
	25 to 39		40 and older			
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary Activity						
Wage Laborer	4	14.8	23	85.2	27	100.0
Entrepreneur	1	33.3	2	66.7	3	100.0
Worker in family business	6	33.3	12	66.7	18	100.0
Farmer	—	—	12	100.0	12	100.0
Pieceworker in home	7	46.7	8	53.3	15	100.0
Housekeeper	17	53.1	15	46.9	32	100.0
Retired	—	—	10	100.0	10	100.0
TOTAL	35	29.9	82	70.1	117	100.0
Secondary Activity						
Wage Laborer	1	50.0	1	50.0	2	100.0
Entrepreneur	1	50.0	1	50.0	2	100.0
Worker in family business	2	66.7	1	33.3	3	100.0
Farmer	3	9.7	28	90.3	31	100.0
Pieceworker in home	7	50.0	7	50.0	14	100.0
Housekeeper	5	50.0	5	50.0	10	100.0
TOTAL	19	30.7	43	69.3	62	100.0

Source: Field Interviews

they did.⁽⁵⁾

In the next section attention turns to the way in which these changes were related to dowry, marriage, and the dynamics of family life in the village.

1950s: Marriage, Dowry, and Family Division

During the 1950s, the family in Hsin Hsing was structured by Chinese tradition. An authoritarian hierarchy based on gender, generation, and age governed relations between family members. The father, who served as family head (*chia chang*), had ultimate authority over all members of the large family and control of the joint treasury, into which all members contributed their income and which was used to support all within the unit. His wife, however, usually played an important role in the making of family decisions, especially those related to household affairs.

As in most of Taiwan during this period, marriage followed a traditional pattern.

Inquiries . . . [were] made in a girl's family by a go-between sent by a family seeking a bride; genealogical and horoscopic data . . . [were] sought by the go-between; the girl's horoscope . . . [was] matched with the boy's; the betrothal . . . [was] clinched by the transfer of gifts; the date of the wedding . . . [was] fixed; the bride . . . moved [Freedman 1979: 290; cf. B. Gallin 1966: 204-13].

Nevertheless, because even in the 1950s Hsin Hsing was a village in change, a mother—who took an active part in negotiations for her son's bride—realized that it was advisable to allow her son some voice in arranging his marriage. Two years of compulsory military service and, perhaps, migration to urban centers for employment had provided him with opportunities to meet women and even to have an affair. Mothers had witnessed cases in which a young man was unwilling to marry

(5) To determine people's activities or occupations, we asked villagers two questions: What do you do most of the time? What else do you do? Our observations indicated that women's reports were congruent with their behavior—with one exception. Many women failed to note that they did piecework in the home. I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me that "what women actually did and what they identified themselves as" represent different conceptual categories.

a woman sight unseen and chosen for him by others and were anxious to avoid such unfortunate events in their own cases.

Therefore, once arrangements for a marriage were underway—through the aegis of a matchmaker—and the two families entertained favorable attitudes toward one another, a brief meeting was arranged at which the young man and woman could see each other. After the meeting the son and, in turn, his prospective bride were each asked for an opinion about the tentatively chosen mate. But given the brevity of the meeting, the young people could not really judge each other, except perhaps by looks. Further, if they were at all filial and respectful of their parents, they could say little more than “the boy looks all right” or “she is not too pretty but if you think she is acceptable, then it’s all right.” Few young people disobeyed their parents and, consequently, men married women—and women married men—with whom they had no further contact after the “initial meeting.”

Upon marriage, the new couple had clearly defined tasks which they performed as members of a cooperative enterprise in which all property belonged to the family as a whole, with the exception of certain possessions given to the bride and groom at the time of their marriage. Most of these possessions were items brought by the bride as part of her dowry.⁽⁶⁾ They included bedroom furnishings and decorations, as well as clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry intended for the woman’s personal use; other dowry items which could not be kept in the couple’s private room, such as pots, pans, and dishes, were considered family property. Ideally, a woman’s dowry also included “private money” (*sai khia* [Hokkien] or *ssu fang ch’ien* [Mandarin]), which was intended for the woman’s personal use and control. Few Hsin Hsing brides, however, began their married lives in the 1950s with a substantial amount of private money; the practice of giving *sai khia* was severely limited by the villagers’ poverty.

In addition to tangible objects, a bride was endowed with intangible resources

(6) The cost of the dowry was supplied by the groom’s family which provided a bride price that was, in turn, used to purchase the dowry. Although some families might augment the brideprice by buying a larger dowry than covered by the money received, most did not. Some families even sent a dowry that was smaller in value than the brideprice received (B. Gallin 1966: 208).

which parents hoped would benefit the large unit. Although sometimes match-makers attempted to deceive a family seeking a mate for their son, the groom's parents usually trusted that the bride would be a healthy, strong, and capable woman who could do the necessary work in the house and fields, and who would be able to bear children. They also expected she would be tractable, obedient, and respectful, since such traits were considered necessary for the successful integration of a stranger into the household and for the stability of the family.

During the first few months of her marriage, a bride usually strived to meet these expectations. She was compliant and submitted to the wills and whims of her mother-in-law, who was charged with supervising and disciplining her. Not all brides, however, were endowed with similar skills, knowledge, or attributes; some were more able, adroit, and clever than others. Over time, the inevitable surfacing of these differences created difficulties in the relationships between and among the women of the household.

The mother-in-law abandoned the allowances she had made for her new daughter-in-law's lack of familiarity with the ways of the household. She became intolerant of the younger woman's clumsiness and seeming inability to learn and treated her in unfeeling and, sometimes, harsh ways. The young woman, however, had few resources with which to bargain for better treatment. Her husband had been taught that the goal of marriage was the continuation of the family and he was expected to side with his mother in her dealings with his wife.

The young woman's sisters-in-law were not a source of help or solace, either. Given the authoritarian hierarchy that governed relations within the family, young women had little power—either as individuals or as a group—to temper their mother-in-law's treatment. Further, it was in a woman's best interest to encourage her mother-in-law's dissatisfaction with her sisters-in-law; it shifted attention away from her, thereby providing some relief for her own intolerable situation. A shrewd young woman, then, curried her mother-in-law's favor to gain advantages for herself at the expense of her sisters-in-law.

The tensions and strains generated by the lack of solidarity among sisters-in-law, as well as the resentments fostered by a mother-in-law's favoritism, frequently erupted into quarrels among the young women of the household and, eventually,

into agitation for family division. Usually, the wives' demands for partition coincided with their husbands' dissatisfaction with the large family. Like their wives, they saw few benefits in cooperating with their brothers and their families on the small family estate. In their view, the family's inadequate income was caused by each of their other brothers' lesser contributions to the family enterprise.

Husbands, then, joined in alliance with their wives to gain autonomy for their conjugal families by dividing the family's limited wealth. Although customary law prescribed that each brother receive an equal share of the family assets, a couple tried to maximize the benefits coming to it from partition.⁽⁷⁾ A young woman who had cultivated her mother-in-law's favor was in a particularly advantageous position to further this goal. Since her mother-in-law was pivotal in terms of the division of household furnishings and equipment, the wife could influence the older woman in order to enhance the share of the estate her family received. Thus, better quality, and often a greater quantity, of goods frequently was distributed to the family of the daughter-in-law whom the mother-in-law preferred.⁽⁸⁾

Distribution of the large family's land also was open to manipulation during the division process. When landholdings were fractionated, as they were in Hsin Hsing, not all of the family's land was of the same quality. Some plots or parts of plots, for example, were better situated in terms of access to water than others; the location of a plot was thus critical in determining whether a particular field had a sufficient water supply. In such a situation, a clever and skillful young woman capitalized on her good relationship with her mother-in-law by persuading the older women to use her influence on behalf of the younger woman's family. Her conjugal unit thus was likely to inherit a sizeable portion of the joint family's best land. A less well endowed woman, in contrast, began her life as a member of an independent family

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- (7) A complete description of the division process can be found in Cohen (1976: 194-225). In both Hsin Hsing and in the village studied by Cohen, mediators were brought in either to witness the formal partition or to negotiate the terms of the property division. Although the use of mediators implies that the outcome of the process was relatively equitable, Cohen (1976: 203-04) also reports that couples tried to maximize their share of the family estate. He does not, however, discuss the outcome of their efforts.
- (8) Most older women remember in detail the share of the family's joint possessions given to their conjugal family. According to one woman, she received "some rice, ten small bowls, two broken pots, and three big soup bowls."

with a more limited material base.

1980s: Marriage, Dowry, and Family Division

We saw above that, in the 1950s, the ultimate authority for all members of the large family lay with the family head who controlled the unit's economic assets; by the 1980s, although a similar arrangement was common, it had been modified in response to development. A joint treasury, controlled by the family head, covered the cost of gifts and household and medical expenses, provided investment capital for family businesses, and met all educational expenses. But the contributions of family members to this treasury were not equal.

Only the family head deposited his total earnings into the common coffer. Married sons contributed only a portion of their income, while daughters-in-law retained whatever money they earned as salaries and wages to use for the clothing and recreation of their individual conjugal units and for investments or future business ventures. Thus, although some family members made a lesser contribution than others to the large group's assets, all members of the family had the same rights to the joint unit's material resources.

Each individual conjugal family also had rights to personal property, consisting of the possessions given to the couple at the time of marriage. As in the 1950s, most of these possessions were articles brought by a bride in her dowry.⁽⁹⁾ A dowry in the 1980s, however, was far greater in size and value than it had been in the 1950s. It was no longer limited to a minimum of household and personal goods; rather, it included items such as a refrigerator, television set, stereo console, and

(9) In the 1980s, however, the cost of a dowry weighed much more heavily on the bride's family than the groom's. As one woman said, "Today people not only do not keep the brideprice, but they add things to the bride's dowry." Although laws have been enacted in Taiwan to alter traditional patterns of inheritance and provide women institutionalized access to family property, in Hsin Hsing customary law continues to be applied in practice. Village women do not claim their inheritance but rather accept their dowries as their patrimony. Their compliance with customary rather than statutory law may reflect the high value the villagers attach to affinal ties and, accordingly, women's reluctance to jeopardize a relationship that is a foundation for economic, political, and social activities (see Gallin and Gallin 1985; R.S. Gallin in press).

motorcycle, all of which were intended for the couple's use, as well as a sizeable sum of *sai khia* for the personal use and under the personal control of the bride.⁽¹⁰⁾

In addition to these tangible objects, the contents of a bride's dowry included the intangible resources with which she had been endowed by her natal family. A groom's mother and father hoped, of course, that her attributes would serve the interests of the large family, but the interpretation of what constituted "good" traits was in some, though not all, ways different from that of the 1950s. On the one hand, the definition of "capability" was no longer confined to the requirements of domestic and farm work. In the 1980s it also reflected the needs of the industrial sector; parents hoped the bride possessed the skills and knowledge which would allow her to join the off-farm labor force to earn money.⁽¹¹⁾ On the other hand, the interpretation of the traits necessary for the stability of the family remained unaltered. Parents assumed that the bride would be respectful and compliant, thereby contributing to domestic harmony and family longevity.

In the 1980s, however, a mother-in-law could no longer depend on compliance or even respect from her daughter-in-law (R.S. Gallin 1984b). This was so because, in response to development, marriage arrangements had changed and parents' monopoly on mate-selection had disappeared. They were still involved in the negotiations—the maintenance of family continuity required that they retain some control—but opportunities for jobs in the rural and urban areas had expanded free mate choice among the young.

(10) On family division, a woman's *sai khia* was merged with the property inherited by her husband, and she lost control of her private fund.

(11) Among the criteria one woman listed for her son's potential mate was a knowledge of book-keeping. The family operated a metal-spring factory and the mother explained that the family needed someone to help with the business's accounting. It might be expected that the skills and knowledge (acquired through education and work experience) a woman brought to her marriage would give her a personal advantage in her relations with her mother-in-law. While it is true that younger women were better educated than older women in Hsin Hsing, in 1989 over four fifths (83 percent) of married women had received six years of education or less and on average they had only four years of schooling. Disparities in levels of education, then, did not seem to affect the way relations between women in the family were played out.

Sometimes, young people met at work, liked each other, and asked parents for their consent to marry. In some such cases, the prospective bride was pregnant and parents had no choice but to acquiesce to the marriage (see also, Hu 1984). Few parents, however, were willing to veto the bride choice of their son. No longer tied to the land and dependent on their patrimony, sons could sell their labor power and, if they chose, provide for a life independent of the larger family unit. Accordingly, to secure their sons' good-will and loyalties, parents acceded to their wishes.

Other times, however, young people met through the introductions of kin or neighbors. In such cases, the introducer would suggest to a mother that she knew a suitable mate for her son. If the mother agreed with the introducer's appraisal, she would talk with her son about the young woman. He then decided whether or not he wanted to meet the potential bride and, if he did, arrangements were made for a chaperoned meeting. After the meeting, if the young couple were agreeable to each other, they began to date. This dating process concluded in one of two ways: the couple discovered that they were not disposed to each other and severed their relationship; the couple decided they were compatible and negotiations between the two families to arrange the marriage began. Regardless of whether a couple met themselves or through the intercession of others, the dating that occurred prior to marriage meant that a bride brought to her relationship with her mother-in-law a decided emotional advantage. The young couple had developed a mutual affection that challenged the mother-son bond on which the older woman depended to subjugate her daughter-in-law.

In addition to this emotional advantage, a daughter-in-law had an economic advantage as well. A young woman entered her husband's household with *sai khia*. If she worked for wages and kept her earnings, her *sai khia* could grow substantially. This private fund represented a sizeable portion of the seed money for the conjugal unit which she and her husband eventually would establish and which her husband would head. Thus, a man's wife was in a position to make a substantial material contribution whereas his mother's command of the assets important in the world of the 1980s was minimal.⁽¹²⁾ Further, family land—the disposition of which a mother had some control of through her ability to influence her husband—represented only

(12) The older woman's *sai khia*, if any, had long since either been spent during her early years of marriage or been surrendered to her husband for use by their conjugal unit upon family division.

a secondary source of income and sons had a lessened interest in it as an inheritance. The disparity between women's control of resources thus meant that an older woman was no longer assured of the loyalty and support of her son in confrontations with his wife.

Perhaps for these reasons, a daughter-in-law's transition into the household of her husband was far less traumatic in the 1980s than it had been in the 1950s. The mother-in-law undertook her integration with moderation and tolerated the young woman's perceived inadequacies. Moreover, once a young woman fulfilled her obligation to produce heirs, the mother-in-law frequently assumed some of the young woman's role responsibilities so that she could be free to earn money for the use of her individual conjugal unit.⁽¹³⁾

The older woman's loss of her imperious mother-in-law role lessened many of the strains built into her relationships with her daughters-in-law. Her rigid discipline, arbitrary demands, and inequitable distribution of responsibilities and rewards had caused considerable tension, and with their removal, the potential for bitterness and resentment toward her waned on the part of her daughters-in-law. A young woman might grumble to her husband about a mother-in-law's demand which she considered unjust, but she did not use the incident to initiate a suggestion for early family division.

A mother-in-law's weakened authority also improved the relationships among sisters-in-law. An older woman's favoritism toward one or another daughter-in-law had been a source of jealousies and disagreements and had encouraged the competing interests of the younger women. The modification of the arrangements of the large family, which allowed daughters-in-law to use their earnings for personal needs, removed much of the older woman's power to pit one against the other in a struggle for her favors. A daughter-in-law might resent the advantages, real or

(13) A mother-in-law performed what traditionally was her daughter-in-law's duties in order to ensure her own security. With rural industrialization, many of the supporting features of filial piety have been compromised and the situation of women without daughters-in-law in the village is fraught with uncertainty. As a result, mothers-in-law assume the role responsibilities of their daughters-in-law to provide the younger women with very practical reasons to fulfill their filial obligations. For a detailed discussion, see R.S. Gallin 1986.

imagined, which went to her sisters-in-law, but she no longer translated her discontent into a call to her husband for family partition.

It is clear that the diminished control of a mother-in-law over her daughters-in-law promoted domestic harmony and heightened the chances for a large family's longevity. Yet, the peace that was maintained was characterized by a cool, but cordial, distance among the daughters-in-law, not affection and intimacy. Obviously, not all divisive factors in the family had been eliminated. A young woman, however, had very practical reasons to ignore these problems, since her wrath could threaten family unity.

She, like her husband, was not prepared to do this. A young woman was committed to keeping the family intact until her conjugal unit was ready to assume economic independence and to prosper on its own. Her *sai khia* would make an important contribution to establishing this independent unit's self-sufficiency, and the communal arrangements of the large family allowed her both to use her skills and knowledge to earn wages and to garner and safeguard her private money (Gallin and Gallin 1982a; R.S. Gallin 1984b). It was in the woman's interests, therefore, to foster the endurance of the joint family.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The focus of this paper has been the impact of economic development on the contents of dowry—defined as both the tangible objects and intangible resources with which a woman is endowed and which she takes to her marriage—and the relevance of this change to family division and to the assets of an independent conjugal unit.

We saw that during the 1950s when most villagers were tied to the land for their livelihood, few things in a woman's dowry were convertible, in terms of their cash value, into productive property. With the other members of the large family a woman worked the farm which, because of its small size, could not be exploited to expand the unit's capital. Her difficult life often was made intolerable by a domineering mother-in-law and opportunistic sisters-in-law. A woman realized few benefits in keeping such a family intact and sought release in the division of the large

unit. It was in this context that the intangible resources with which she had been endowed took on critical importance. A clever and skillful woman was able to ensure the relative sufficiency of her individual family's economic base, whereas a less well endowed woman began her life as a member of an independent family with a more limited material base.

We also saw that, during the 1980s, with rural industrialization, most income was derived from off-farm employment, and a woman's dowry included tangible objects (cash) and intangible resources that had the potential to generate wealth. The structural arrangements of the joint family were modified and family dynamics changed. Women gained access to and at least temporary control of cash; mother-in-law, daughters-in-law, and sisters-in-law maintained peaceable relations. In a woman's view, the benefits of remaining united outweighed the costs of dividing the large family. As a member of such a unit, a woman with resources important in the world of the 1980s could promote the future prosperity of her conjugal family. A woman without these resources was dependent on good luck and enterprise to increase the property with which she, her husband, and their children began their life as an independent family.

The purpose of my discussion has been to direct attention to the dual nature of property and to examine the non-material dimension of dowry as a central concern of social life. In the past, students of China have failed to recognize this duality. They have taken the objects in a woman's dowry as a category of analysis, used them to interpret the meaning of inter-family relations (Ahern 1974: 279-307); Freedoman 1970: 141-185), and then turned to men's property to explain intra-family dynamics.

Yet, as I have shown, we also can learn much from an analysis of the tangible and intangible resources that comprise women's property. Such a focus reveals many of the subtleties of family life heretofore not usually considered. It demonstrates that women are not passive bearers of gender but rather are active, political strategists who manipulate family situations—over which they ostensibly have little control—to promote their own interests and those of their husbands and children. It also demonstrates that, despite change, differential access to property continues to divide women. In this sense, then, the commoditization of dowry has masked much of the reality we seek to understand.

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THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE LOW INCOME-RECEIVING FAMILIES IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In this study a sample of 2,010 household of the low income-receiving social category in the Kegalle district is examined to discover the social and economic status of rural women. In the context of the present research the term 'status' is used in the broad sense and aspects such as the relative role played by women in the family economy, and their contribution to the well-being of its respective members and the recognition given to them by the family and the community is examined. It has been found that a definite contrast exists between the official statistics which normally provide the data base for socio-economic studies as against the data collected by means of field investigation. It is observed that so called "economic inactivity" of most of the rural women is not a result of their idleness, but is a result of a large number of interrelated facts such as inadequacy of income, minimum employment opportunities other than household agriculture, low opportunities for vocational training, restricted access to assets like property, and other facilities such as credit and marketing.

Although women's contribution to a household unit is of vital importance to a family, the recognition given to such contribution is almost negligible because much of it is utilized for home consumption and therefore not valued as a direct economic contribution. The educational level of women has advanced during the last intercensal period yet, its effectiveness in promoting the status of women in rural society is not apparent. Their participation in social organizations is not prominent. Yet, the vitality of women's contributions is a well noted feature within the family domain especially in ensuring the household crop production and family welfare. Still a majority of the rural women of the poorest category are non-wage earners and are individuals who devote time for the uplift of the family welfare, yet, receive no remuneration what so ever. Therefore it is felt that the improvement of women's social status is a social requisite that is to be achieved gradually by a reformulation of social attitudes and a change in the cultural norms. The aspects discussed in this paper are to be taken into consideration in the process of identifying, formulating and implementing development programmes. Although this study is restricted to one administrative district, the situation highlighted here can be widely seen across Sri Lanka.

Key Words: Status, Subordination, Employment, Opportunities, Participation.