



In Conversation with Chin-Chun Yi

Interview by Gisela Redondo-Sama

Chin-Chun Yi is a distinguished research fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. She received her B.A. in Sociology from National Taiwan University, M.A. in Sociology from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Ph.D. from the Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota. Dr. Yi's research interests include changing families in Chinese and East Asian societies, the intergenerational transmission of values to children, and the growth trajectories of youth from early adolescence to young adulthood. She has served as the principal investigator for many research projects in family and youth studies.

Chin-Chun Yi has been an active member of the ISA since 1990 and has numerous experiences with editorial work including serving in the editorial board of *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *International Sociology*, *The Sociological Quarterly*, *Sociological Inquiry*, *Sociology* or as the guest editor for *Journal of Family Issue*, *Current Sociology*. Among the edited books, Dr. Yi has published *The Psychological Well-being of East Asian Youth* (Springer, 2013); *Family and Marriage: Taiwan Social Change from 1985-2005* (co-edited with Y.H. Chang, in Chinese, Academia Sinica, 2012); *Changing Female's Family Status in Chinese Societies: A Comparison among Taiwan, Tianjin, Shanghai and Hong Kong* (Co-edited with Y. H. Chen, in Chinese, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2006). She also led and edited special issues in English academic journals on youth and family over the last two decades. Dr. Yi was appointed the National Policy Advisor for the Taiwan

President (2011-2016), the Commissioner and Honorary Advisor for Taiwan Provincial Government (1994-1998) when she initiated and established the child protection program in Taiwan.

Gisela Redondo-Sama (GRS): Thank you very much for accepting this invitation, it is a privilege to have this interview with you and to know more about your inspiring work and contributions in the sociological field. I would like to start by asking you about your contributions and research on family and youth that have inspired the work of young scholars in different regions of the world. How the context in Taiwan influenced your work at the beginning of your academic career?

Chin-Chun Yi (CCY): I received my BA in Sociology from National Taiwan University in the 70s, then I went to the United States for my graduate studies. When I came back to Taiwan in the early 80s it was the time when Taiwan was moving from the traditional to modern society. It was exciting, and you can call it revolutionary, and we had a drastic economic development during that time. Accompanied by the economic progress, political, social, and cultural changes also occurred at the same time. I'm proud that Taiwanese sociologists have been very active in the democratization process. Even critics now called Taiwanese sociologists during that period an important driving force, enhancing the speed and scope of the rapid social change in Taiwan.

For me, when I came back, it is hard not to notice that emerging changes in the family institution. As you know, family is the fundamental institution in Chinese societies, it has been and is still considered as one of the most basic stones in society. Structural, functional, and relational changes occurred at the same time. For example, I remember in the 80s, an often discussed phenomenon was how the educated daughters-in-law not being fully submissive to their mothers-in-law. The elderly woman has the traditional authority, the young woman has education as a high personal resource. When it comes together, how they face the conflict and resolve the problem.

I was lucky in a way to be at that cohort. I think I was probably the number 10 PhD in Sociology at that time from abroad. We were young and enthusiast. When I launched my studies in Taiwan, I immediately noticed the unique context different from the West. For example, an important research issue is to examine how cultural norms affect people's attitudes and behaviors. Taiwanese context has the advantage to expand to other Chinese societies such as China or Hong Kong, it can also be expanded to Korea, Japan or Vietnam or these neighboring countries because Confucianism is a shared cultural heritage. In the last two decades, I have been doing comparative work and cross-national comparisons. Most results confirm the dominant influence of normative factors even in the contemporary era.

GRS: How we, as sociologists, can create and support synergies across countries to advance knowledge in the field of family and youth research? Which are the main challenges we face?

CCY: I have to stop and think back. I think I like to start answering these questions by... what is the universal versus particular? This is a common research concern, especially meaningful in a context like Taiwan. Let me use two examples to illustrate my point.

In youth studies, we always talk about that youth has diversified growth trajectories... Of course, you can categorize different variables and analyze them. If I take psychological well-being as the outcome variable and use depression or depressive symptoms as the

index, then you can see the difference between Taiwan and the West. The first I show is a typical or what I called the typical biological maturation model. Teenagers start to develop their depressive symptoms at the age of 15, which increases highly at 18, then slow down. Females are higher than males universally. It remains the same if all the structural or institutional arrangements are similar. But this is not what a typical youth face in Taiwan or in East of Asia. Because in this part of the world, the educational competition is exceedingly high. A typical teenager is always studying... you know, they only sleep 5 or 6 hours a day in order to prepare for two entrance examinations. Data related to this is taken from the longitudinal panel study that I had the privilege to participate. We followed teenagers from age 13 to 32 and we took depressive symptoms to examine their growth trajectory. Female is higher than male, but at the age of 15, when they need to take the first comprehensive examination to enter senior high school, the depression has a sharp increase. And in the first senior year, it goes to the very low. Then in the final senior year, there is another college examination and it rises high again. So, you can see how educational competition produces significant consequence on youth. As you know, it is a family honor for children to enter into prestigious schools, you probably also see films or documentaries talking about extracurricular schools because the pressure there is real. These structural mechanisms will alter the natural biological model. I think this is a very particular context we need to pay attention to.

Another example I like to use is from family studies. East Asia has been characterized by the lowest low fertility issues in recent years. For example, in Taiwan, year 2010 had the lowest total fertility rate of 0.895 in the world and in fact, a recent report forecasts that Taiwan will remain having the lowest low fertility globally. For the last 70 years, the total fertility rate has been declining. Many studies documented this trend, but here I want to point out how important culture matters. For thousands of years, Chinese always value to have a dragon son. We have twelve animals representing the zodiac calendar years. Years 2000 and 2012 were dragon years, so newborns at that two years were dragon babies. In the course of

continuing declining fertility, one can observe that one out of every 12 years (i.e., during the specific dragon year), the total fertility rate would go up. On the contrary, the tiger year is the year that people do not want to have children which resulted in the tiger year of 2010 having the lowest-low fertility in the world. The next tiger year will be 2022 and Taiwanese scholars are worried about the negative population growth. Because even in 2020, the total fertility rate was already down to less than one (0.99), coupled by 2020 being the unfavored marriage year or “the lone bird year” with a low crude marriage rate of 5.16, it is unlikely to have a optimistic view for the next years.

How does the government respond to this situation? Let's see the marriage rate. The Chinese lunar calendar has a year named “the lonely year”. That's the year when most people try to avoid getting married because the word of mouth says that marriage will not last if you get married at the lonely year. In 2009, the latest lonely bird year, the marriage rate was as low as 5.07... and it was followed by the tiger year of 2010 (as shown above with the lowest fertility rate). The government was really anxious and what they proposed was also from the cultural aspect. Since 2011 was the one hundred anniversary of the Republic of China. Chinese say that in all the marriages, the most ideal situation is the newly wed will enjoy a harmonious union lasting a hundred years. In addition, 2012 was the dragon year again. So government really advertised and promoted, and the marriage rate of 2011 jumped from 6 (2010) to 7.13. As expected, the dragon year of 2012 received a high fertility rate of 1.27! Both the government and the elderly parents were very happy! In other words, normative effects are prominent in the family behaviors, with fertility being the lowest in the tiger year and the highest in the dragon year. This is so cultural!

If I could make a very brief statement about what is the challenge we face in doing family and youth research? I think is to pay special attention and concern to your particular context. In my situation, I have worked on how the interplay between cultural norms and individual resources interact. I think this is a vital consideration for doing research in any transitional society.

GRS: In some of your reflections, you have raised the relevant role of passion for those dedicated to sociology. Could you share with us something about this insight?

CCY: Once upon a time... I like to talk about that! It is very natural. Every time when we meet a student, an initial question is: “what is your research interest?”, and that interest can be floating, can be adjusting, and can change of course. But I think that one thing important is your genuine and sincere concerns. I am not talking about the value neutral study but at least, you should not be antagonistic to your target group. It is a very basic formula. At least your genuine concern, your sincere concern, and your positive concern. If not, please do not choose that subject because you may fall into a very strange interpretation if your motive is not from a scientific academic motivation.

I think passion is also a natural outcome. For example, when I started my research on family, of course family structure is something that I am interested in. In the US or Europe, family structure often refers to intact family and non-intact family. But divorce rate has been low in Taiwan (about 4). For us, very meaningful categories in family structure are the nuclear family, stem family (or patriarchal stem) and extended family. How different family structure affects the family dynamics becomes a focal issue. So, I started by looking at family structure and marital power. The reason I chose marital power because it is controversial yet quite interesting. I started collecting dyadic couple data in Taiwan, both quantitative and interviews. Then, after I secured funding to replicate the research framework in China, I collaborated with sociologists in Tianjin in the north and Shanghai in the south. Later on, we also expanded to Hong Kong. So, there are four Chinese societies under the same framework but with different political systems. We found comparable intergenerational interactions in the family context, but noticeable differences with regard to scores of marital power among the four societies.

Another research project coincided with my personal life course is “the Taiwan Youth Project”. Back in 1997 or 1998, a group of us, around 12 or 13 sociologists in different universities, met. Since our

children started entering teenagers, we talked about doing a collective project on youth development. So we followed 5000 teenagers aged 13 to 15 to examine their growth trajectories. For a group mostly composed of sociologists and social psychologists, the primary goal is to conduct a longitudinal panel study across different life stages, or from early adolescence to young adulthood. It turns out that for the last twenty years, I have been mostly devoted to this interesting project. In a way, I'm very lucky because in a joint project you can discuss with colleagues of similar interests, and enjoy the collaboration as well as intellectual stimulation. It is hard but it is something that you'd like to know. So, I think it is very natural.

Passion also comes from your life opportunities, it is a natural outcome. Just yesterday I thought of one thing. Sometimes it occurs unexpectedly in your career, you can accept it, not avoid it. Back in the 80s and 90s, Taiwan suffered from a serious social problem, the teenage prostitute... or the human trafficking issue at that time. It just happened that I was invited to serve as the governor's commissioner from '94-'97. I told the governor, children do not have votes but if we do not take care of them, society will pay even higher cost. The governor agreed so we started the Taiwan Child Protection Programme which includes different official bureaus because as a commissioner, I was entitled to liaise with the cross-department project. A 24-hour child protection hotline was established in a year, which is now expanded to include abused females and is still working with vitality.

What I want to say is our career starts with having a genuine concern or passion. In the end, to become an unbiased professional. Because if we want people to respect our science, we must show our professional ethic. So, I think it is very important.

GRS: Recently, you have edited the volume "Sociologies in Dialogue – Sage Studies in International Sociology" jointly with Sari Hanafi. What is the purpose of this contribution and the main debates that the reader will find?

CCY: For readers who have the chance to read... and

it is a collective product from the National Associations meeting taking place in Taipei in 2017. Sari Hanafi, who is the current ISA president, was the vice-president at that time of the national associations and he planned, designed, and pushed the whole programme. I was serving as the chair of the local committee and at the end, Sari Hanafi was most gracious to invite me to serve as the co-editor. In the Introduction, we explain quite extensively what is the purpose of this book and from my point of view, I think that there are at least two contributions that I can see about this book. The first is that we want to promote cross societal, cross-national, and cross-cultural debates and dialogues among different sociologists around the globe. Sociology and sociologists in different societies are our concern because there were more than 60 representatives from different national associations. Postcolonial, global sociology, or multiple modernities..., all these concepts, were our common concerns. In brief, we want to see how local sociology in each society think and how they do in practice. There were a substantial proportion of attendees from Africa, South America, and the Arab world, so, in this book, we also try to show diversities of sociologies, arisen from different historical, political, and economic, and social contexts. At the same time, we also attempted to point out the connectedness or the similarities across the globe.

The second contribution can be referred to the characteristics of authors. As you can see, this book has a special aspect. It intends to challenge the existing hierarchies of knowledge production between the global north and the south. We were able to do so because the contributing authors represent different continents. I think that for people interested in global sociology, this will be a very useful book.

GRS: Finally, what advice would you like to share with young women starting their careers as sociologists?

CCY: I have three points to make here. First, I think it is very important when you begin your career to set up a clear and feasible life goal, even may be temporary. Because when you start to work, you maybe in

university, in NGO, in industry, or research institutes. Even in universities, you have research universities, teaching universities, they all have different missions and different visions. As a newcomer to the work context, you must understand if this fits your life goal because every work context shape and help in your future career development. There is no way you can avoid it. I think this is so important. One suggestion I'd like to make is to actively engage in professional circles, or even better to look for opportunities for collaborative work. You need stimulation, collaboration, and collegial support at every period. This is my first advice.

For women, when we talk about gender equality, we can have the law, the rules, the regulations as guidelines. But in most parts of the world, gender is still unequal. So, how can young female sociologists move forward... maybe not smoothly but at least, moving along with a long breath. I think one needs to accommodate with the personal surroundings. This is the area when we talk about work and family balance. Again, work and family balance need to consider the family life cycle. When children are small, they have the priority; but do not worry if you are seemingly behind your male counterparts. There are still other phases when you must adjust to different family priorities. Just try your best to hold on and then, you can continue. And maybe you will get more insights from your life experiences. It should be flexible and adjustable. And that is why the collegial support is so important. Of course, the situation now is much better than thirty or forty years ago, but I think still in many parts of the world, females are not enjoying equal opportunities. In a way, in a very small way, in a personal way, is to accommodate with your personal situation, people will understand because people do not judge you just from one phase but from the work you accomplished in your lifetime.

Probably the last advice I'd say, at least from family and youth studies, I expect to see increasing interdisciplinary collaboration. As sociologist, you participate or join this group, then always remember what is your most important sociological perspective. I am saying that you should have dialogues with different disciplines, but what is your unique sociological con-

tribution? I think is the structural, the institutional mechanisms, that we try so hard to delineate. Let me use the divorce study for illustration. Thousands of papers discuss divorce, and most are focused on the relational or the financial issues. But as a sociologist in Taiwan, I can examine the structural factors. If you live in a three-generational household, this residential pattern is likely to produce a higher divorce rate because there are more complicated relations. And also, if there is a higher disparity or difference between husband and wife, the likelihood of divorce is higher. We do not even need to look at the relational aspect, nor into the psychological reaction yet, just the structural and already, we can estimate the likelihood of divorce. I believe as sociologists, there is something we should hold on so as to make a significant contribution. Lastly, for ISA participants, please try hard to actively engage in the international academic forum. Just for the 2017 national associations meeting, for example. I always feel blessed because it is the opportunity to share with so many sociologists from different continents which opens your horizon and enriches your academic life.

GRS: Thank you very much, it has been a pleasure to have this conversation, that will inspire and encourage the future of Sociology!

CCY: Thank you very much!



Chin-Chun Yi