Ching-Ying Tien
is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World, ANU

To Divorce or not to Divorce — Stay-behind Taiwanese Wives and their Husbands’ Overseas Affairs

Drawing on in-depth interviews among Taiwanese first wives, this paper aims to present an insight into their life experiences on discovering their husbands’ overseas affairs. Whether they decide to get a divorce or to stay in their marriages, their decisions are usually long and tortuous because of the basic tension between their traditional gender roles and the new female paradigm.
Since the late 1980s, Taiwanese enterprises have invested heavily in China. Both the patterns of investment and the habit of keeping mistresses that Taiwanese businessmen followed in China have since been replicated elsewhere. For example, after Vietnam’s Doi Moi policy opened the country to foreign investment and it became Taiwan’s second biggest target for overseas investment, familiar patterns of behaviour emerged. This has created problems for Taiwanese businessmen’s first wives, who stay at home to take care of their children and parents-in-law. Traditional gender norms, concepts of family, social duties imposed on women, economic circumstances, and life experiences have all influenced the reactions of first wives to their husbands’ overseas affairs. Women in Taiwan now have better socio-economic status, higher education, and an increased sense of self-identity and autonomy; and social support for divorcees is also available. But are such resources enough for Taiwanese women to challenge the expectations of the traditional Confucian ideology that shapes their everyday lives? Drawing on in-depth interviews among Taiwanese first wives, this paper aims to present an insight into their life experiences on discovering their husbands’ overseas affairs. Whether they decide to get a divorce or to stay in their marriages, their decisions are usually long and tortuous because of the basic tension between their traditional gender roles and the new female paradigm.