Teng (Hierarchical love)

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What is it?

Teng is a Chinese word with two meanings: (1) to be fond of someone of lower status (e.g., a child) and (2) to ache or suffer pain. In everyday usage in Taiwan, the former meaning is more common and used to mark the emotional quality of a relationship of a superior and subordinate, often marked by gender and age. That is, a husband (male) may teng a wife (female), and a parent (elder) may teng a child (younger), but never the reverse. The same word (pronounced as thiaⁿ in Taiwanese/Hokkien), appears in the Hokkien Bible as Shiong-te thiaⁿ li" (God on high loves [teng] you), just as the superior (god) may teng the subordinate (human).

Teng is expressed primarily through actions, not words. If a mother prepares a special dish for a child, it shows that she teng[s] her child. If a teacher treats his students well by giving them help with assignments outside of class time, or a boss treats her employees to meals and bonuses, these acts signify that these superiors teng their subordinates.

Who uses the concept?

Unlike such words as “like” or “love” that may be uttered as performatives (e.g., “Wo xihuan ni” or, “I like you”), one cannot say, “I teng you.” Rather, teng is used to describe how one person relates to another (e.g., “Wo Baba hen teng wo” “My daddy teng[s] me very much”).

Teng has rarely appeared in the academic literature. While it is a well-understood and commonly understood “folk” concept, it has not received much attention.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

In Taiwan's “foreign spouse” families where a woman from China or Southeast Asia is married to a man from Taiwan, the term teng often emerges. If a husband treats his wife well, it could be said he teng[s] her. If not, there is no teng. Similarly, the government of Taiwan is often framed as having an obligation to teng such women, much as they would teng their own daughters. Thus, teng may be used to frame an issue of intercultural relations as something that is emotional and intimate.

What work remains?

Little work has been done on teng. This contrasts with the better known and similar term, guanxi, that describes relationships of those with similar social status. Teng is a term rich in meaning that maps onto emotional qualities, actions, and cultural/social hierarchies. It thus warrants further study.

Resources


