



Teng 疼 (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 *thia*ⁿ 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

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- Sandel, T. L. (2015). *Brides on sale: Taiwanese cross border marriages in a globalizing Asia*. New York: Peter Lang.
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