

Full Length Research Paper

Reframing studies of female marriage migrants' educational involvement: A study of Chinese and Southeast Asian female marriage migrants in Taiwan

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This study looks at female marriage migrants' involvement in their children's education in Taiwan. This phenomenon must however be seen within the context of international hypergamy which has become an increasingly notable trend in many countries especially those of East Asia. Female marriage migrants coming to Taiwan chiefly from Southeast Asian countries and from China, often are depicted by the mainstream discourse of media, government, and school, and even in academic studies as being incapable mothers, based on their cultural-linguistic difference and arguably low socio-economic status. This paper cautions against this viewpoint for it often ignores the agency of the female marriage migrant by looking upon her degree of involvement in her children's education as a direct result of her linguistic capital or her family's socioeconomic status. The author seeks to reframe such studies by taking into account the female marriage migrant's active role in shaping her own unique adaptation strategy.

Key words: Taiwan, female marriage migrants, children's education, academic studies.

INTRODUCTION

Inter-national marriage, and especially inter-national hypergamy is a burgeoning phenomenon in such East Asian countries as Korea, Japan and Taiwan¹ (Asakura, 2002; Kim, 2006, 2011; Lee, 2003; Nakamatsu, 2003; Ochiai et al., 2006; Piper and Roces, 2003; Montlake, 2010). The specific form of inter-national marriage known as "hypergamy," an anthropological term that refers to a cultural consensus forbidding women to marry men of low socio-economic status is often thought of as having been brought on by the unequal developments of capitalism within an age of globalization². It occurs when a nation's

disadvantaged men seek to "import" marriage partners from their region's less "developed" countries (Wang, 2001; Xia, 2002). This has become a natural alternative to the traditional norm of women "marrying up" and not only for men coming from semi-peripheral countries who are relatively disadvantaged in their native marriage markets but also for females from low-wage peripheral countries who are seeking work in countries that provide higher wages (Piper, 1999). Such marriages often are made through broker agencies or personal networks. The latter may mean friends and relatives who work or have relatives in the target countries, or whose wives also are female marriage migrants (hereafter referred to as FMMs). Certainly in today's Taiwan, the female immigrants – whether they be domestic workers or marriage immigrants – have become quite the notable phenomenon, one that reflects a global trend.

All around the world migrant workers offer the middle-class, double-income family an affordable solution with

¹ In Korea, international marriage comprised 13.6% of all marriages registered in 2005, according to the Korean Statistical Information System (KOSIS). Marriages between Korean men and women coming from China, Southeast Asian countries and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) of the old Soviet Union increased 9.2 times over the period 1990 to 2005 (Kim, 2006). In Japan, the percentage of international hypergamy slowly grew from 0.43% in 1965 to 0.93% in 1980, but by 2004 it had 5.46% with Chinese women having the largest number of 35.7%, followed by Brazilians (19.1%), Filipinos (14.3%) and Koreans (10.2%) (Ochiai et al., 2006).

² Scholars warn us against this viewpoint of reducing such marriage to "mail-order brides" to a form of capitalist market exchange. By treating these brides

as victims, one can easily reinforce or replicate the orientalist stereotype (Constable, 1995).

regard to domestic work (Constable, 1997; Parrenas, 2001). Meanwhile, lower- and lower-middle-class males are fueling the trend toward inter-national hypergamy as they seek to fulfill their need both for domestic labor and for someone to carry down the patrilineal “ancestor line” by having “their” children (Wang, 2001). Thus the marriage migrants end up playing the double role of “wife and maid,” to use the term coined by Piper and Roces (2003). Among the East Asian countries, Taiwan has one of the lowest birth rates and the highest percentage of inter-national marriage (Jenning, 2010; Shay, 2010). The number of FMM has been rising rapidly in recent years in Taiwan. In the year 2003, for example, 1 out of 3 Taiwanese men married internationally, mostly with women from Southeast Asian countries or mainland China. Indeed, this trend of inter-national hypergamy is gradually changing the definition of being a “Taiwanese.” According to statistics from the Ministry of Interior, in the year 2003, 13.37% of Taiwan’s babies were born to women immigrants from Southeast Asia – more than double 1998’s figure of 5.12% (Ministry-of-the-Interior, 2004). In other words, in the year 2003, about 1 out of every 8 newborn babies was born to a woman immigrant from Southeast Asia or mainland China. This trend clearly is going to remain high; in 2003, 31.9% of Taiwanese men, or 1 out of 3.1, married a woman from a Southeast Asian country (Ministry-of-the-Interior, 2004). Although the government has tightened visa controls and banned for-profit marriage brokers in 2008 foreign brides still were accounting for almost 15% of Taiwan’s marriages (Ministry of the Interior, 2009).

In the year 2010, 7.23% of the children in elementary schools were born to FMM (Ministry of the Education, 2010).

LACK OF FRAMEWORK FOR FEMALE MARRIAGE MIGRANT STUDIES

Traditionally, most of the debates with respect to sociology of immigration have been set up as being contended by assimilationists on one hand – stressing the cultural-linguistic factor above all – and structural determinists on the other – insisting that socioeconomic factors impinge most heavily on immigrant lives. The present paper strives to emphasize a third hitherto under-appreciated factor – the FMM’s agency. At any rate, the trend toward international marriage in Taiwan has pointed up the fact that the two old viewpoints on immigrants still tend to dominate the mainstream ideology. For even in the absence of any convincing body of empirical evidences or systematic research, the children of the FMMs often are portrayed by the media as being low academic achievers. Such portrayals have been based on the mother’s distinctive cultural-linguistic status and, in most cases, the low socioeconomic status of her receiving family, and they have gone on to infect the discourses of Taiwan’s media (Chen, 2004; Gao, 2003),

its government (Han, 2004), its legislators (Chen, 2004; Ke, 2006), and its schools and teachers (Wang et al., 2006), and even some of its academic studies (Liu, 2002; Hsu, 2011). In other words, the perception fostered by both conventional wisdom and academic research with respect to the female marriage migrants and their children in Taiwan carries both an assimilationist undertone – seeing “learning Chinese” as the panacea for all of the FMM’s “problems” – and a structural-determinist one – believing that the low socio-economic status of the FMM and her family is the real problem. Both of those views have come together to foster an unsubstantiated myth as to the existence of an achievement gap between native Taiwanese students and students born to Southeast Asian FMMs.

Many have especially noted a supposed achievement gap between the children of the Southeast Asian FMM (but not those of the Chinese FMM) and native Taiwanese children (Li et al., 2006). Even though such studies do not directly point it out, the connotation taken from them by many members of the public is that the Southeast Asian mothers must be incapable, owing to their lack of language ability. All of this raises the question of the lack of a sound theoretical framework in the studies done thus far on the female marriage migrants. Most of these have not been sufficiently informed by and connected to the broader immigration literature. In the immigration literature, the issue of the educational performance of those minority-group immigrants whose parents both are immigrants (hereafter referred to as “traditional immigrants”) has been framed by the debate between cultural discontinuity theory and structural inequality theory. The former theory takes an assimilationist stand and assumes that immigrant students’ differing cultural-linguistic backgrounds give rise to their educational problems (Erickson, 1984; Erickson and Mohatt, 1982; Gordon, 1964; Warner and Srole, 1945). Proponents of the latter view refuse to accept ethnic traits as a factor; they perceive the problems experienced by traditional immigrants as being outgrowths of social stratification in the host society or as byproducts of economic inequality (Vernez et al., 1996). More recent studies of the children of traditional immigrants in the United States have tried to synthesize these two views, and they also have sought to contextualize this issue by bringing in both the immigrants’ stocks of capital and the structures of their reception contexts (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001).

The idea behind segmented assimilation,³ a term first

³ These researchers argue that while assimilation remains the norm for immigrants, it no longer guarantees upward mobility. The “modes of incorporation,” including governmental policies, societal perceptions, and presence or absence of a coethnic community, all come together, they believe to create a unique disposition for each immigrant group, one that either enhances or inhibits the development of capitals and that leads to various adaptive outcomes for the second generation.

coined by Portes and Zhou (1993) as part of their adaptation model for post-1950 immigrants to the U.S., is that the variable success of immigrant groups hinges not only upon individual capital but also upon the structural conditions of the host society (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Somewhat akin to the debate on the educational performance of immigrant minorities, the current studies of the FMMs' involvement in their children's education are addressing only parts of the problem: on the one hand the FMM's lack of cultural-linguistic affinity for the new nation, as that is seen from the assimilationist viewpoint, and on the other hand her receiving family's low socioeconomic stratum as that is seen from the structuralist viewpoint. Both of these perspectives ignore the agency of FMM. The present paper hopes to go beyond the debate between the assimilationist who stresses the cultural-linguistic difference and the structuralist who focuses solely on socioeconomic status, doing so by focusing on the FMM's agency and especially on the strategies she adopts in response to the context of reception.

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the difference between the FMM and the traditional immigrant, I propose to take the FMM as my primary unit of analysis and to examine the key role played by her receiving family. Given that the fundamental factor distinguishing the FMM from the traditional immigrant is that she is the only immigrant in the family she has "married into," this family must be treated as the most basic context of reception, if my paper is to depart from the framework set up by the traditional immigrant studies. The two primary data-collection methods used in this study are the in-depth interview and participant observation. In order to ensure confidentiality, the paper employs pseudonyms for both the interviewees and the localities visited in the course of the fieldwork. In order to explore the contextual effects of locality, FMM were selected from two very different localities – the first one is a prosperous community within the capital city of Taipei, while the second one is a rural community in Chia-Yi county in the southern part of Taiwan. Both Chinese FMMs and Southeast Asian FMMs are included in this study. These two groups have been chosen primarily because of their difference in language – the FMM from China speak Mandarin, whereas those from the Southeast Asian Countries usually cannot do so until they have "married into" Taiwanese society. This approach also, however, allows me to explore the immigrants' capitals and to see how these help them both to interact with and to compensate for the various contexts of reception.

The author reported that on his first trips to Taiwan to do a research for this study in June 2005, he visited each participant at her home two or three times a week for three weeks, at least six times in all, with each visit lasting for approximately two hours. When the situation permitted him, he also talked to other family members (in-laws and/or husband), the children, and the children's school teachers or principal. At all times, his greatest concern was to avoid arousing any uncomfortable feelings in the FMM, or to make her think he might "give away" to the rest of her family members something she had told him in strict confidence, especially when she was experiencing tense times with her receiving family members. During follow-up periods of fieldwork, which occurred in the summers from 2006 to 2010, the author re-interviewed the FMM, seeking to fill in gaps in the original interviews

to see if there had been any significant changes in the women's worldviews or outlooks, and to ascertain whether their new responses were consistent with his emerging understanding.

Modes of adaptation and their implications for FMM involvement in education

My findings tend to discount the assimilationist view that predominates in the studies done to date on female marriage migrant's involvement in their children's education. For, whereas such studies see language as being the sole culprit in this regard; my study has found that even though the Chinese participants in my study speak better Mandarin than do the Southeast Asian ones, this does not necessarily have disadvantage on the latter when it comes to their aspirations for and involvements in their children's education. As for the structural determinists, by focusing so exclusively on the socioeconomic condition of the locality and the family, they tend to neglect the role played by a woman's own free agency in shaping her involvement in her children's education. Through the author's interviews and observations, he found mothers who come from both linguistic groups, and who have hugely different receiving families and communities, but are all actively and enthusiastically participating in their children's education. Thus, both the assimilationist and the structural-determinist tend to oversimplify the complexity of maternal involvement. My findings suggest that in reality, a FMM's personal, and especially linguistic, capital intertwines with the treatment she gets from the receiving family and community to form her overall perception of both context of reception and her own capitals. That perception then forms her overall adaptation strategy with this inevitably including her attitude toward getting involved in her children's education.

Based upon the author's interviews and observations of the FMMs, this study has been able to discern four basic adaptation strategies these women employ largely, but not entirely as a reaction to the treatment they receive from the context of reception. It must be remembered that these four modes of adaptation are more ideal types than fixed categories, and that what matters most to us here is their relation to the women's attitudes toward and involvements in their children's education. Finally, let it be noted that this study seeks to illustrate these four modes of adaptation by introducing four FMMs who closely fit each of the ideal types.

Resignation

Xiaomei is a Chinese FMM living in the city. She is the wife of a truck driver, and she holds three jobs that keep her working from 3 a.m. to 10 p.m. to help her family make ends meet. Most of Xiaomei's disappointment in life is based not on economic hardship, however, but rather the sense of relative deprivation she experiences in the

city. "Here (Taiwan) is good, but good only for others. We have no connection to the good things in Taiwan." Xiaomei thinks she has no chance of succeeding in Taiwan, given that everyone else is "rich and powerful" as she puts it. Her socio-political apathy is revealed by such statements as: "do not keep too much hope! No one will listen to you here (in Taiwan). It is useless to say anything!" This sense of hopelessness seemed to infect her attitude toward her children's education, as when she turned to her child and asked: "what rank are you in school? It must be bad, right?" Xiaomei does believe that education leads to social mobility. She has simply gotten so used to thinking of herself and her kids as invisible that she has internalized the blame for her failure to get involved in her kids' education: "there is not much i can do; i do not have the money, and my children have no talent for my children to succeed in school; the teachers would not listen to us (because) my children are very ordinary kids, not too bad, not outstanding." She said again and again: "We are not like other people. It is better not to have too much hope."

Negotiation

Although Juanjuan's background is not all that dissimilar from Xiaomei's – she is a Chinese FMM living in Taipei with a high-school education – she has adopted a very different strategy. Granted, she is fortunate in having gotten the help of her extremely supportive husband who helped her find the job she likes as a saleswoman for an insurance company. In her own mind, however, the reason for her view of the receiving society has changed for the better through the years is that she has learned to "take the initiative" in changing what she thinks and how other people view her. Typical of her newfound confidence is the remark: "when people call you 'mainland girl' or something like that, they do not necessarily mean something negative – it is just a term; in fact, I think 'mainland girl' sounds kind of cute!". Juanjuan's optimism, and her sense that an immigrant must learn to "negotiate" with the receiving environment, have certainly spread to her involvement in her son's education: "what a mother does and thinks is very important to her child; it is a mother's responsibility to give her child confidence and happiness. . . . Do not just think that you are isolated by others, for then you will have low self-esteem; if you feel you are inferior you will not have confidence and then you can do nothing; you cannot educate your children, either; your children will sense it." This confidence has led Juanjuan to actively participate in her son's schooling and to hold high expectations for him.

Empowerment

At first, Ah-niao, a FMM from Thailand who lives in a

small village in the southern part of Taiwan, struck me as being not different from any other female marriage migrant. As the only breadwinner for her family, Ah-niao holds several jobs and she does not have much leisure time. And yet, in fact Ah-niao is quite famous as the "foreign bride" everyone talks about in the village, and this is mainly owing to her passion for her children's education and her willingness to invest all of herself in promoting it. Unlike Juanjuan, Ah-niao has a very unsupportive husband who "drinks all day without doing anything." And yet her very negative receiving family has not led her into disappointment. To the contrary it has instilled in her a great passion for her children's education, for she sees this as the only way out, both for her and the kids. Thus, Ah-niao says: "I will do everything to make more money so I can afford MeiMei's (her daughter's) cram-school tuition." She asks everyone she meets – customers, neighbors and friends – such questions about her children's education as: "what are the best school districts or cram schools? How do I get my children motivated?" Certainly, Ah-niao has found a way to turn the negatives of her environment into reasons to empower both herself and her children. Her intense pride was evident when she told me one day: "people say that even though I am a foreign bride, I know how to educate my children!"

Resistance

Hong, a Chinese FMM living in rural Taiwan has a very unsupportive receiving family. Her husband is crippled and jobless, and he drinks all day. The in-laws have restricted her right to talk freely with friends and will not let her send money back to mainland China. Thus it comes as no surprise that Hong feels deep resentment about her life in Taiwan: "my in-laws do not treat me decently. Taiwan is not as good as i imagined, either; i hate the life here." Hong's resentment is aggravated by the sense of entitlement she has, which comes from her shared-language status allied with her proud sense of being "ethnic Chinese." She freely admits that her hometown in China was economically backward but she still thinks of it as being more culturally advanced than her receiving community, and "people here in rural (Taiwan) are just plain stupid." She says she expected much more from the context of reception. Unlike Ah-niao who takes an optimistic view despite her difficulties and Xiaomei who internalizes the blame for them, Hong externalizes the blame to the members of her receiving family and to the community: "I do not want to argue with anyone anymore. It is not worth it. I will just make my money, and then maybe someday i will go to the United States – the land of freedom." This attitude of alienation and resistance to adaptation is reflected in Hong's total lack of faith in Taiwan's education system. She says that: "education is rich people's business," something that has nothing much to do with her and her children. She also

asks: “who will leave the child in your hands in Taiwan?” referring to constant in-law interference and to the patrilineal inclination of Taiwanese life: “I will just let him (my son) go (do whatever he wants)! Why bother?”

The various adaptation-paths that this study has brought to light have arisen directly out of my observations of and interviews with the FMM who are trying to shape strategies to cope with their new lives in Taiwan. We have found in our study that FMMs’ higher capital “on paper,” and especially the C-FMM’s language advantage does not directly translate into higher aspirations for or involvements in their children’s education – with the cases of Xiaomei and Hong being the illustrative ones in this regard. The broader lessons here are that FMMs who have similar backgrounds and stocks of capital may still have very different adaptation experiences when they encounter two very different localities and receiving families, and that language cannot safely be treated as an ultimate and definitive factor when it comes to an FMM’s adaptation to her new society or to her perceptions of and involvements in her children’s education. This study also suggests that the two factors of language and locality must be looked at together. In the countryside, for example, where FMM have few life-options, they often are not able to make use of their stocks of capital. And when a rural FMM feels constrained and resentful toward the context of reception, she often is forced to try out very different adaptation strategies from those employed by an urban FMM. So too, an FMM’s cultural-linguistic background will influence both her perception of her relationship with her children and all of her coping strategies.

To put it in another way, a mother’s stocks of capital will influence how she perceives herself, the context of reception, and her position within that context, with those perceptions in turn influencing the way she views her children’s education and shapes strategies to help her children make a success of it. As for the C-FMM in particular, they so strongly identify themselves ethnically with the natives that their occasional unfriendly encounters with Taiwanese, or quarrels with neighbors or in-laws are interpreted as revealing not discrimination but rather the local people’s vulgarity.

Conclusion

This paper argued that such factors as an FMM’s linguistic status (native speaker or non-) and her locality (rural or urban) do not automatically determine her perception of, or degree of involvement in her children’s education. All factors, but most notably her own capitals and the context of reception, and her perceptions of both of those, intertwine and work together to influence her formation of her unique adaptation strategy. Thus the paper contends that every cogent analysis of maternal involvement must recognize that strategy matters. Every FMM has to be treated as an actor who is actively

adapting herself to the environment she finds herself in. My emerging understanding of these remarkable women’s adaptation strategies has led me to believe that they are intimately linked to the FMMs’ attitudes toward their children’s school success, and thereby to their future general success in society. The broadest function of this paper is to caution against the assimilationist viewpoint on this issue, which too readily assumes that it is the marriage migrant’s language deficiency which solely accounts for her failure to get involved in her children’s education. The paper hopes to bring a deeper appreciation of the many difficulties the FMM encounters as she seeks to gain such involvement doing so; above all, by showing that it comes as no automatic byproduct of a mother’s capital, as a structural-determinist might wish us to believe. To the contrary, a negative context of reception and especially a negative receiving family can almost force a woman to shape a negative perception of her context of reception, a defensive adaptation strategy, and a passive view of education, thus shying away from getting involved in her children’s education. Also, an FMM can find herself in a thoroughly negative situation and yet gain empowerment through it (like the empowerment woman Ah-niao) or at least devise tactics for resisting it (like the resistance woman Hong).

All of the aforementioned suggests that there is more to any FMM than just her stocks of capital and that the successful transfer of capital requires immense help on the part of a broad range of individuals within family, community, and school in the context of reception. At the very least, this paper hopes that, by raising awareness of the complexities of this issue and of the difficulties the FMM faces, it has helped to remove some of the stigma of blame from the marriage migrant mothers. All too often it does get placed there as we have seen by the way Taiwan’s mainstream media, and even its academic studies have unfairly blamed the FMM, and especially the Southeast Asian FMM for her child’s low level of educational achievement if it exists. Ultimately all societies now see an influx of FMM will succeed in their efforts to help them get involved in their children’s education only if we stop focusing so exclusively on the enhancement of their language capability and instead strive to create more positive receiving environments for them.

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