

Stratified Foreign Bodies and Geopolitics of Desire:  
Gender, Class and Race in the Transnational Marriage Market in Taiwan

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation investigates the market formation of transnational brokered marriages between Taiwanese men and foreign women mainly from China, Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. It aims to look at what kind of desire and needs in the rapidly global circulation of capital and labor is created to trigger the formation of the transnational marriage market. Adopting a multi-sited ethnographic approach and a feminist perspective, I followed marriage groups to bride-sending countries including Vietnam, China and Ukraine to conduct participatory observation. Main issues of this dissertation includes: First, how “foreign brides” became a social phenomenon and how their bodies are racialized, sexualized and commodified according to their geographic origins. Secondly, how the politics of gender and representation work together in creating a market demand, and how economic relations become intertwined with ideas of romantic love embodied in the business of transnational brokering marriage in the context of

consumer capitalism. Thirdly, how men's and women's motivations and desires for transnational marriages are triggered economically and non-economically and how they perceive themselves in the market process. Lastly, how the governments and women's groups respond to the bride trade and the flow of migration—the circulation of desire, needs, hope, labor and capital in the transnational bride trade. Through illustrating the interconnectionality among poverty, structural violence and neoliberal desire of migrant women, I challenge the binaries of victim/perpetrator and real/fake marriage, demonstrate a dual sense of subjugation and agency of these women, and blur the distinction between liberation and exploitation in the making of “foreign brides” in the affective economy. Last, I argue that foreign brides are not a homogeneous subaltern group that can be essentialized and represented by a representative. Instead, we need trans-national and trans-class perspectives to understand the differences among them. In addition to listening to their various voices, we should also seek to decipher the meaning of their silence. Without this careful consideration, the governmental policy of banning the profit-oriented marriage brokerage will end up serving the liberal middle-class feminist imagination of global moral order.

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Apparently, I fail to fulfill my filial obligations, because I broke my promise and made them worry about me a lot. As a traditional Chinese parent in Taiwan, my mother invested in her daughters' higher education as a dowry for a good match. However, without carefully calculating the risk of encouraging children to study hard in the beginning, she let things get out of control in the end— in the marriage market, owning a Ph.D degree is by no means a blessing for a woman. I acquired interests in feminism in college and in anthropology in graduate school, one discipline that would scare away traditional men and one discipline that would keep my life humble forever. I feel sorry for my parents and appreciate them for not asking me to give up, while I am happy for myself to be on the right track to live in a meaningful life: anthropology has opened my eyes to the big world and made me experience it in a way different from others.

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This dissertation is just a start point of my academic trip. I hope I can insist on

staying on this trip till the end no matter how harsh the environment and how bad the weather might be along the way.

## Chapter One: Introduction

*Why do people here not respect foreign brides? Do we have anything bad? Couldn't we be called with a new name, such as "Taiwan new women", or something sounding cuter?*

*--Ran Yanhong from Vietnam, 2003*

*I was a foreign bride when I arrived here. Six or seven years passed in a flash. Now I have got my identification card. I'm a master of the future. I have already forgotten I am a foreign bride, but it is still fresh in people's memory!*

*--Li Xueling from Indonesia, 2003*

One boring Taipei afternoon in 2002, I was channel surfing as I lay upon my couch in the living room at home. All of a sudden, my eyes were caught by the scenes from a matchmaking service on the T.V. screen. Differing from other dating TV programs, there were no male but only female guests to be interviewed on the show. These women all dressed like they were attending a beauty pageant as they introduced themselves with their numbers and names, told the audience why they came to the show, and answered questions posed by the host about their impressions of Taiwan and Taiwanese men. These women were from Guizhou Province, China, and were looking for Taiwanese husbands. In the conversations with the host, they endeavored to present themselves as ideal wives for consideration by their prospective husbands. Without exception, they all described their personalities to be tender, easygoing, family-orientated and attentive to their lovers; and not surprisingly, they were all interested in cooking and wanted to have babies. In the end of each interview, every interviewee was asked to perform a talent show, singing, dancing, or playing a musical instrument to demonstrate her versatility. In the bottom of the screen, a scrolling text was running, "*lai lai lai, lai Guizhou, Guizhou meinv duo; qu qu qu, qu Taiwan, Taiwan jinqian duo* (來來來, 來貴州, 貴州美女多, 去去去, 去台灣, 台灣金錢多; come,

come, come, let's come to Guizhou. There are many pretty women in Guizhou; go, go, go, let's go to Taiwan, there is a lot of money in Taiwan).

I was shocked that the marriage brokering company would audaciously advertise foreign women as ideal wives on TV. The women were packaged as if they were commodities in a TV shopping channel, featured for their housework capability and docile personality. Unlike ordinary objects that are placed upon a shelf to be gazed at by shoppers, these “commodities” spoke to their potential consumers directly. Their glamorous smiles were matched with a scrolling text running underneath the screen that seemed to convey the message: “come enjoy our beauty with your money!” This image struck me in that it seems to tell a very different story of the transnational brokered marriage, which is frequently perceived by NGOs and women’s advocates as nothing more than human trafficking. Obviously, these women are not “victims” of trafficking in need of rescue, nor are they “proud women” waiting for men to kneel down in front of them for a “yes” in the dating show. They were not simply represented or autonomously representing themselves; they were coached to present themselves in a certain way. I see the binaries of freedom and coercion, agency and submission, and in general, realness and fakeness, getting blurred in their efforts to perform themselves, or I should say, in the construction of themselves to become “foreign brides.” This scenario left an impression on me so much so as to entice me to look deeper into the heated “foreign bride” phenomenon and ask: What kind of desire and needs are created within the rapidly expanding global circulation of capital and labor so as to trigger the formation of the transnational marriage market?

### **Geopolitics of Desire and the Value of “Foreign Brides”**

As one of the newly developed industries in Asia, Taiwan has attracted a considerable

number of marriage migrants from developing countries in Southeast Asia and mainland China. According to 2006 statistics, one out of every five marriages in Taiwan is transnational, or cross-strait in the case of mainland Chinese brides.<sup>1</sup> Most of these marriages are made through brokerage and mainland Chinese brides constitute the majority in the market. When the modern matchmaking business was just blooming in the early 2000s, advertisements of foreign brides flooded the street and the Internet, which has drawn a lot of attention of scholars, women's advocates and the government to the new "foreign bride phenomenon."

The origins of the business of introducing Chinese and Southeast Asian brides to Taiwanese men has its history in terms of Taiwan's political, economic and cultural relationships with these bride-sending countries. For example, after the martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwan opened up to mainland China, which led to people's frequent contact across the strait through economic investments, tourism and hometown visits. The same language and culture shared by people in mainland China and Taiwan has contributed to an increase in cross-strait marriages. Taiwan's policy of economic investments in Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, also helps widen the opportunity of transnational marriage between Taiwanese and Vietnamese women. These political economic relationships have indirectly shaped Taiwanese men's feelings of "desire" and "needs" for foreign brides from these countries.

Interestingly, beginning in 2002, several brokerage companies started to engage in introducing brides from Eastern Europe, mainly from Ukraine and Russia, to Taiwanese men. This new direction challenged the stereotype of "foreign brides" in society as these white women

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<sup>1</sup> In 2003, every one out of three marriages was transnational, which hit the historical record. The decrease in the number of transnational marriages after 2003 could partially be attributed to a stricter immigration policy the government employed.

were never depicted as poor, innocent, or opportunists who used marriage as a strategy for a better life as other Asian brides were often depicted. Rather, the white brides were very often promoted for their sexy appearance and their high levels of education, such characteristics that are widely thought to be helpful in improving the quality of the Taiwanese population of the next generation. They are not expected to play the traditional role of housewife as Asian brides would, which suggests that the men's expectations of women's reproductive labor in the household and the gender relations in the marriage vary with race and ethnicity.

There is also cultural logic of thinking of race behind the different prices of marrying foreign brides. Marrying a Ukrainian woman would cost approximately \$25,000 to \$30,000<sup>2</sup> or even more while marrying a Vietnamese woman would cost only \$7,000 to \$8,000. The price discrepancy roughly reflects the class distinction among male clients in terms of economic status. That is, "white women" are meant for middle-upper class men while Asian women are for the lower class. What causes the difference of value among foreign brides embodied in the market prices is what has compelled me to investigate Taiwanese cultural image of "white women." What kind of desire is it if women's reproductive labor is not considered a main reason for a man to marry a foreign bride? Moreover, it has been seen that young middle-class men also join the ranks of those looking for Southeast Asian and Chinese brides. This trend challenges people's perception of what middle-class marriages ought to be and shows that economic factors that were frequently regarded as the sole motivation to marry women from other Asian developing countries are no longer valid for all cases. If economic factors are not the sole reason for these middle-class men to look for life mates abroad, what other factors can explain the phenomenon,

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<sup>2</sup> It is about 1.6 times of marrying a Ukrainian woman in the United States (Peterson 2003: 109).

especially at this moment when there is still social stigma attached to the brokered marriages in Taiwan? To answer this question, I look into how Asian brides are constructed as ideal wives to satisfy Taiwanese men's nostalgia for the earlier Taiwanese society in which women were more traditional, docile, and willing to sacrifice themselves for the family.

In short, this dissertation primarily deals with the formation of the transnational marriage market in Taiwan, and it is in this market that the question of how women's race and nationality determine their respective market value is central in the analysis. Starting with their representation in the mass media, I investigate the following dimensions of the foreign bride phenomenon: First, how "foreign brides" became a social phenomenon and how their bodies are racialized, sexualized and commodified according to their geographic origins. Secondly, how the politics of gender and representation work together in creating a market demand, and how economic relations become intertwined with ideas of romantic love embodied in the business of transnational brokering marriage in the context of consumer capitalism. Thirdly, how men's and women's motivations and desires for transnational marriages are triggered economically and non-economically and how they perceive themselves in the market process. Lastly, how the governments and women's groups respond to the bride trade and the flow of migration—the circulation of desire, needs, hope, labor and capital in the transnational bride trade.

### **"Foreign Brides": a Catachresis Analysis**

It is definitely not new to see foreign women marrying Taiwanese men in Taiwan. Taiwan has seen a certain number of foreign wives residing in Taiwan for the past several decades, but they were never identified as "foreign brides" in the way that such brides are perceived today. "Foreign brides," including mainland Chinese brides, were not recognized as a social category

until the influx of marriage migrant women from Southeast Asia and China in the late 1990s. With increasing social problems attributed to the low quality of the migrant women, such as prostitution, domestic violence and high divorce rate, “foreign bride” gradually became a visible social phenomenon and the term has been used specifically to refer to foreign women marrying Taiwanese men through a broker in ordinary people’s daily language use. Foreign brides from Vietnam are called *yuenan xinniangu* (越南新娘; Vietnamese bride) or *yueniang* (越娘) in an abbreviated form and Chinese brides are called *dalu xinniangu* (大陸新娘; mainland bride) or *luniangu* (陸娘). The abbreviation of the calling is widely used in news titles and sex-related entertainment stores featuring exotic and cheap services. In the official language, “bride” is replaced with “spouse,” such as “foreign spouses” and “mainland spouses.”

The association between “foreign bride” and “social troublemaker,” “backwardness,” “victims of human in trafficking” or “prostitute” in the mass media has made “foreign bride” a negative term for its perceived discrimination towards marriage migrant women from developing countries. In 2003, the Awakening Foundation, a NGO for women’s rights in Taiwan, initiated a name rectification movement for “foreign brides.” The movement called for new naming for these migrant women by inviting them to vote for what they wanted to be called by the public. In the press conference *Do not Call me “Foreign Bride,”* the foundation maintained that:

“Foreign bride” as a name cannot properly represent the identity of the new generation migrant women. Many “foreign bride” friends argue that a woman’s identity as a bride is not permanent. Someone pointed out the problem that “I am already a *laoniangu* (老娘; old woman), but how come I am still called *xinniangu*<sup>3</sup> (新娘; bride)?” In fact, the term, “foreign bride,” only reinforces the connotation that these new migrant women

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<sup>3</sup> In Chinese, the word *xin* (新) means “new” and *niang* (娘) could refer to “mother” or “wife.” The term *xinniangu* (新娘) implies a woman’s status as a new comer in the husband’s family.

are “outsiders” and that their identity can only be formed based on their relationship with the husband’s family, which totally ignores the subjectivity and independence of these women. (婦女新知 2003)

The foundation held a composition contest, “Please Call Me...,” for marriage migrant women to talk about themselves and the name they wished to be called. Later on, it invited marriage migrant women to vote for their favorite name from the awarded compositions and the term *xinyimin nvxing* (新移民女性; new migrant women) got the top vote. The foundation then endeavored to advocate the new name to the public, urging people to get rid of the discriminatory term, “foreign bride.” In 2005, a book, an edited volume of awarded compositions titled *不要叫我外籍新娘 (Do not Call Me Foreign Bride)* was published and in 2007, a TV drama called *別再叫我外籍新娘 (Do not Call Me Foreign Bride Again)* also came out. With their efforts for years, “new migrant women” is now widely used in scholarly works, NGO brochures, propaganda materials, and governmental documents.

All of the names from “foreign bride,” “foreign spouse,” to “new migrant women,” I argue, are catachreses. Catachresis refers to a special kind of misuse of the terms. In Gayatri Spivak’s words, it is “a concept-metaphor without an adequate referent (1993).” According to her, concepts are unstable because there is no consolidated one to one correspondence between concept and the referent. That is to say, there are no “true” examples that can represent the ideal and universal concept; each connection between the two is a meaning production in a socially or historically specific context. It is similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981[1935]) describes about heteroglossia where different types of speech co-exist and conflict with each other that makes the meaning suffused with social struggle. Valentin N. Voloshinov (1973) has also pointed out earlier that language is never just a tool. It is the medium of ideology, and cannot be separated from ideology.

For example, the term “foreign bride” refers to the female foreigner who marries a local man. It carries no discriminatory meaning in its original definition. However, in the evolution of the language use in the daily life of Taiwan, it deviates from this universal definition and becomes a discriminatory term referring specifically to foreign wives from developing countries. This is a catachresis also because, if we consider the term literally, “bride” should only refer to a woman’s temporary status during the wedding ceremony, the liminal period in the rite of passage (Turner 1967), rather than her long-term identity to be recognized in society. Confining the woman to the liminal space implies her being expected to act as a bride who is supposed to be shy, innocent, and have no desire for power in the husband’s family permanently, even after they become mothers. To avoid this misappropriation of intent, the government uses “foreign spouse” to address the marriage of these migrant women. However, the daily reference to the two terms in ordinary people’s language use makes the concept of “foreign spouse” also shift away from its original and universal referent and fall under the category of “*women who are marriage migrants from Southeast Asia and China residing in Taiwan*” as the concept of “foreign bride.” This empirical embodiment of the referent excluding other possibilities of representation such as male spouses from America living overseas shows how a catachresis is grounded in a local context.

However, it is this absence of true referent that makes this notion analytically valuable. In her analysis of women as a historical catachresis, Tani Barlow (2004) points out that “calling attention to how catachreses work is a good way to illustrate how universals and particulars operate in ordinary language and therefore how much historical and theoretical meaning simple terms carry (2004: 33).” According to her, woman is a catachresis in the sense that as a universal concept, there are no “true” examples of the “true” woman. She analyzes the keywords such as *funv* (婦女; women) as a catachresis in the hope of revealing explored historical experiences

behind their linguistic meanings. Informed by this analytic approach, I consider “foreign bride,” “foreign spouse,” and “new migrant women” catachreses to explore the social meaning of the violent linkage between these signifiers and their concrete referents in reality, the un-categorizable migrant women being addressed in different contexts.

Paying attention to the substitution of a new name for the “improper” one allows me to reflect on the issue of naming as violence and the myth of neologism as proper name, from which to unpack how a specific group of marriage migrant women became problematized in relation to other marriage migrant women who are not perceived as “foreign brides.” I argue that “new migrant women” as a neologism is just another catachresis, still a form of epistemic violence. Even though this “new” positively suggests “progress,” it also perpetuates their “newness” and keeps them from normalization. Therefore, in the abovementioned example where an old foreign wife complaining about being addressed as *xinniàng* (新娘; bride), I argue that it is also problematic to call her *xinyimin* (新移民; new migrant) or *xin Taiwan nvxing* (新台灣女性; new Taiwanese women) because as a long-term resident or a citizen, she was not *xin* (新; new) at all.

I contend that creating neologisms for marriage migrant women can never erase given social discrimination attached to them. The utopia of language neutrality only exists in linguistic world. Without changing people’s perception of this group of women in reality, society will only end up creating an endless chain of neologism substitution pursuing a non-existent proper name.

Although I claim there is no proper name for this group of migrant women, however, I contend that there is still a need of naming in order to depict their statuses. In this dissertation, instead of choosing a less controversial name, such as “foreign spouse” or “new migrant women,” I still adopt “foreign bride” for two reasons. First, I want to emphasize that the women

I describe here are the marriage migrant women who marry Taiwanese men through brokers and currently reside in Taiwan. In my discussion, this group of women also includes women from mainland China<sup>4</sup> unless I specify otherwise. The term “foreign spouse” does not work well in my analytic framework as it does not single out female migrants, who, rather than men, constitute the major marriage migrant group in Taiwan. In the same manner, “new migrant women” is not a good choice as well in that it covers all types of migrant women and is incapable of differentiating migrant women through marriage from others through non-marriage channels. Second, I want to emphasize these migrant women’s subaltern status due to social discrimination. Therefore, keeping the discriminatory connotation in the use of the term is necessary.

To make it clear, by doing so, I do not intend to oversimplify these migrant women as a subaltern group and echo the violent production of “foreign bride” as a catachresis. Instead, I take it as a writing strategy similar to what Spivak (1996[1985]) coined, “strategic essentialism.” In Spivak, strategic essentialism refers to temporary solidarity claimed by a group of people for a certain political agenda. In order to achieve the goal, people have to temporarily eliminate differences among themselves in order for the group to claim an “essentialist” position. For me, I strategically “essentialize” this specific group of marriage migrant women in my writing in order to portray their disadvantaged social status. I do not consider them, in reality, a homogeneous subaltern group where all members share the same interests and that can be represented by a

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<sup>4</sup> The special relationship between Taiwan and China makes Chinese migrant women’s status ambiguous in Taiwan. They are considered neither local people nor foreigners, so the immigration regulation applied to them is different from the one applied to migrants from other countries. Chinese migrants are subject to *the Regulations on the Relation of People between Taiwan and Mainland China* (台灣地區與大陸地區人民關係條例; hereafter referred to as the “Cross-Strait Relations Act”) (Ministry of Justice 2011) while other foreign migrants are subject to *the Immigration Law*.

representative. Instead, I regard them as heterogeneous individuals and give meanings to their various voices, including silence. Therefore, when I use the term “foreign bride” with a resistant sense, I put quotation marks to differentiate it from its normative meaning.

## **Getting into the Field**

I decided to study this topic after being intrigued by the TV programs of matchmaking. In the summer of 2004, I conducted pilot research in Taiwan. Having no relationship with any marriage brokering companies, I started by searching for *waiji xinniangu zhongjie* (外籍新娘仲介; foreign bride brokerage) on the Internet. I targeted brokers who engage in introducing Vietnamese, Chinese and Ukrainian women respectively. Filtering off suspicious websites that would involve prostitution, I chose some which provide more serious and detail information and looked more trustworthy. I introduced myself as a researcher and asked to join their matchmaking group (相親團; *xiangqintuan*). To ease their suspicion, I stated that I was willing to wait until I obtained all of the members’ agreement on my participation in the group before I would begin research. It was not an easy job at all. I was rejected by one group after another. Most proprietors agreed to talk to me, but refused my request to join the group. It is understandable that they do not want to invite a stranger to monitor their business. In the same manner, most clients do not want to be “observed” or even “reported,” especially when they take coming to a broker as a personal secret that has to be kept from their colleagues and relatives. It took me a lot of time and effort to convince the brokers to allow me to conduct research as I was often suspected as a business spy sent by another brokering company in the guise of doing

research. I waited for almost one year to get the first chance to go to Vietnam after I first contacted a broker by the name of Hui Ge.<sup>5</sup>

In the summer of 2005, I went to the north of Vietnam with a matchmaking group organized by Hui Ge. Through his introduction, I met his business partner Tung, Taiwanese grooms Guochang, Yunpu, Kunsheng, and their brides Hong, Van and Neng. They are my key informants in this research. Tung is a native Vietnamese but speaks fluent Mandarin. He is a big matchmaker<sup>6</sup> (大媒人; *dameiren*) who plays the role as a “foster mom” (養媽; *yangma*) to take care of the brides before they leave for Taiwan. He has several small matchmakers (小媒人; *xiaomeiren*) recruiting young women from rural areas for him. I vividly remember Hui Ge told me behind Tung’s back: “Now I introduce Tung to you. However, I cannot guarantee that Tung will help you out. It is up to your efforts. You have to understand that in Vietnamese society, money is everything. Without money, you hardly establish any relationships.” To my surprise, Tung helped me a lot without asking for a single cent when I was there. It was possible that he regarded me as a poor student and so never wanted to squeeze any money from me. He shared with me lots of his business secrets and provided information as much as I needed. For example, after visiting my poor guesthouse in Hanoi, he invited me to live at his house, where lived his family and several brides who are waiting for a visa to go to Taiwan in Halong Bay. Tung’s invitation was a gift that granted me a chance to closely observe the brides’ daily life and the matchmaking industry from a local perspective. Also, by following him everywhere, I got to know more how this industry works and meet more male clients from Taiwan and local women.

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<sup>5</sup> All of the names in the stories are pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> In this dissertation, I use “matchmaker” to refer to the local middleman in the bride-sending country and “broker” to refer to the owner of a brokering company in Taiwan. Sometimes the two terms are exchangeable if no specific context is assigned.

In the fall of 2005, I went on another matchmaking trip to Kiev, Ukraine, organized by Mr. Su, who owned a marriage brokering company that specialized in introducing Eastern European women to Taiwanese men. In early 2007, I went to Fujian, China, with another matchmaking group organized by Yangdong. I met his clients, Chinghui and Hongmei, and his newlywed mainland wife, Libin, whom he selected at a matchmaking meeting that he organized. In late 2007, I went to Ho Chi Minh City, the south of Vietnam, alone. Instead of finding a matchmaking group to join in Taiwan this time, I decided to “intercept” matchmaking groups there. Through Hui Ge, I met a big matchmaker based in Ho Chi Ming City, and was connected to another Taiwanese broker, Mr. Lin. Lin played an important role in my fieldwork in the south of Vietnam. He pointed me toward a couple of hotels that were known for being major matchmaking venues. He suggested me going there to “intercept” more matchmaking groups. With his assistance in the south of Vietnam, I got to know more and more Taiwanese grooms and Vietnamese brides and follow some of them back to the bride’s hometowns in the Mekong Delta from time to time.

Through the initial connection with Taiwanese brokers, I fortunately extended my relationships to local matchmakers in the bride-sending countries. But not all of the brokers were as “helpful” as Hui Ge, and their willingness to share their networks with me was essential to this research. For example, despite the fact that Mr. Su allowed me to join his group to Kiev, he tried very hard to prevent me from contacting his local secretary there and selectively released information about his business. I was asked to stay with him whenever a matchmaking meeting was held and not to ask questions at the dining table. He even coached me regarding what to see and what to ask for my research. Without other channels to get me into the matchmaking industry and connect me to women seeking matchmaking in Ukraine, I ended up having to adjust

my research structure, taking the case study of the Eastern European bride market as contrast against the Chinese and Vietnamese.

I started with marriage brokerage in order to better understand how the market has been formed, and how the matchmaking is practiced differently in these regions. I consider that marriage brokerage creates something similar to what Anna Tsing calls “friction” (2005) in the study of global connections. She challenges the assumption that globalization will clash with local cultures as the flow of goods, ideas, money, and people travel cross borders freely, while she also avoids overestimating the autonomy of cultures that enables them to resist the absorbing power of globalization. Instead, she argues that the encounter between the global forces and local cultures is like “friction.” “A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere. Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. In both cases, it is friction that produces movement, action, and effect (2005: 5).” Friction suggests the unequal and heterogeneous encounter between global power and cultures, which would lead to possibilities of new arrangements of power. Tsing uses “roads” as a metaphor to help us image how friction works. Roads make motion easier and more efficient, but at the same time limit our direction (2005: 5-6). Marriage brokers, in my consideration, are the nodes that connect men and women from different places in the global networks. They direct the traffic of desire, value and capital in the global circulation flowing to specific localities. This business paves the pathways for men and women to meet each other more efficiently, but determines the direction where their desires can flow in the global marriage market. The friction occurs when matchmaking takes place. Its results, for instance, the impacts on the women’s natal families and the couple’s future lives, are so unpredictable that we cannot simply celebrate or condemn this type of marriage.

Another reason to start with marriage brokers is that I want to ensure the couples I study were introduced to each other through a marriage broker rather than their friends or relatives. In their study on transnational marriage brokers in Taiwan, Wang Hongzen and Chang Shuming (2002) have pointed out the difficulty in identifying whether a couple's marriage is brokered or not. The social stigma attached to brokered marriages has made most couples in this type of marriage hesitate to admit it was brokered. Therefore, getting connected with grooms and brides through brokers allowed me to establish trust with them in a short time and observe their marriages from the beginning. For example, after meeting the couples, I was often invited to visit the brides' homes and attend their weddings during my stay in Vietnam. After they moved to Taiwan, I was invited to accompany some of them back to visit the wife's natal family from time to time. These long-term relationships enabled me to get to know more about their ideas of their marriages. Moreover, only when getting connected with couples through brokers could I ascertain that the couples met each other not through friends' or relatives' introduction but through profit-oriented matchmakers. I assumed that marriage migrants involved in the NGOs are more likely to be either those whose marriage are not brokered and their husbands are open-minded and supportive or those who suffer from domestic violence and come for legal assistance. I heard a lot that most husbands in brokered marriages prefer that their wives stay at home. They would prevent their wives from actively contacting the outside world lest they be contaminated by "bad friends." Therefore, the best way to contact these kinds of families is to know the couple, especially the husband, from the very beginning.

Nevertheless, NGOs as well as the immigration officials are still important information resources to this research. During my fieldwork in Taiwan from late 2006 to mid 2008, I attended numerous conferences, workshops, and meetings organized by NGOs and the central and local

governments. I also sat in some language classes for new migrants, attended official meetings by the National Immigration Agency, and conducted interviews with NGO representatives and scholars involved in the policymaking of the marriage brokerage ban. The participatory observation and discussions with different parties led me to reconsider several issues raised in the debate over the state regulation on the matchmaking industry, such as the relationship between the state and market, the representation of “foreign brides” by the women’s groups, as well as women’s commodification and exploitation.

### **In the Making of Multi-Sited Transnational Ethnography**

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) point out that anthropology as a “field science” has to reflect on its fundamental assumption of doing fieldwork in a well-defined physical site. Facing globalization today, Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues, we need to focus more on the cultural dynamics of what is now called “deterritorialization”:

“[A]s groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic "projects," the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscapes of group identity- the ethnoscapescapes- around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious, or culturally homogenous. (Appadurai 1996: 48)

Rapid globalization and the increasing mobility of capital, humans, and goods across national boundaries have forced us to reconsider cultures and identities in a transnational framework. George Marcus (1995) makes it clear that ethnography needs to “move from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that

cross-cut dichotomies such as the ‘local’ and the ‘global,’ the ‘lifeworld’ and the ‘system’(1995: 95).” Migration would be an exemplary study that entails multi-sited ethnography and “following people” as a way to blur these dichotomies. It is not merely concerned about the movement of the subjects from one place to another, but about the formation of their sense of belonging in the other sites or connection with the original site (1995: 106).

My research manifests Appadurai’s “ethnoscapes” and “deterritorialization” in that it involves people from different racial and cultural backgrounds and it is concerned more about their transnational migrant experiences than their living experiences bounded to their territory of origin. This factor led to my multi-sited research design in which I did not station at a specific place but “followed the people.” Also, because I started the project from marriage brokers, the brokers’ decision of where to go for foreign brides determined where my field sites would be. As a result, the traditional concept of “the field” that refers to a fixed location becomes insufficient to explain the “flowing” nature of my field sites. I consider my field sites built upon the “trajectories” of transnational marriage tours, which generated more trajectories upon the couple’s marriages and relocation.

It was these trajectories that allowed me to get access to individual groups of people, such as brokers, immigration officials, NGO representatives, men and women in a brokered marriage, without being known by other groups. These relationships could be easily manipulated by different parties involved in the business because they did not co-exist in a boundary well defined space. For example, the brokers tried to get business secrets of each other from me; women wanted to have me stand with them when they bargained with their husbands. The immigration officials asked me to provide information about illegal brokers and “fake husbands” I met in the field. Each party actively roped me in to work with its members in the hope of

gaining secrets or useful information from other parties. “Playing naive” when I was with one group became a strategy for me to avoid getting involved in complicated interest conflicts among these groups. For example, some brokers would want me to help facilitate their visa applications using my relationship with visa consular officers, and the immigration officials would want me to help ferret out illegal matchmaking activities using my relationship with the brokers. Moreover, some brokers would want to get others’ business secrets from me, and the others would treat me as a business spy sent by another brokering company. In order to gain the trust of those in the marriage markets, I had to artfully construct my own image so as to be regarded as “the one allying with you” when gathering my research.

Lies and truth were interwoven into the making of the reality in the matchmaking industry. Trust would come after being betrayed many times; it could also be destroyed all of a sudden due to a tiny misunderstanding. As a researcher, I clearly knew that I could not stand outside the lying game to get to understand what was going on inside. I kept in mind all the times that I had to step in their world and restrain myself from making moral judgments on what I have seen in the field. For example, I went to a karaoke bar, where there were hostesses accompanying their clients to sing, drink, and play sex games, with a group of grooms, who were brought there by the broker to celebrate their successful matchmaking. I had to find myself a balance between being a feminist advocate and a research observer in the matchmaking group. I wanted to blame these men for paying no respect to their brides while at the same time I appreciated their consideration of me being as “one of them.” As a broker said to the group when he invited me to join their “evening activity,” “A-Hui, as an anthropologist, you should know everything about the business. I can show you around by bringing you with us to some interesting places here.”

I saw how some husbands “betray” their wives from the beginning of their marriage, and

also heard several stories about how the wives “betray” their husbands in a similar manner. Stories about how brokers cheat their clients into getting married with each other were not unfamiliar in my fieldwork. Despite my feminist belief, I refrained from depicting women as innocent subjects and demonizing marriage brokers as criminals. I was cautious about what I saw and heard and endeavored to get different versions of the story from different parties in the hope of juxtaposing different “truths.” The longer I engaged in the fieldwork, the more I realized how difficult it was to figure out who tells the “truth” and who tells “lies.” Therefore, I do not want to position myself as a judge to determine who is right and who is wrong in this industry. Nor do I intend to represent any group of people as if I am authorized to speak for them. Instead, I admit to my difficulties in transcending power relations with different parties, which would in return influence my perception of this industry. Yet I still try hard to provide what I found in the field and hope my limited findings will contribute to some new understanding of the matchmaking industry.

Figure 1 Field trips from Taipei to the bride-sending countries: Kiev, Ukraine; Fuzhou, China; Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam



## Chapter Two: “Foreign Brides” as a Cultural Phenomenon

I can not forget the scene that when I first time talked with a professor in Taiwan about my research, he laughed loudly and pointed his fingers at his wife who stood not far from us. “She is a ‘foreign bride’! She is from Poland, the region you also look at,” he said in a joking tone. People on the site all burst into laughter for his using “foreign bride” to refer to his intellectual wife. I laughed embarrassingly and explained in return that she would not be eligible for being my research subject because she did not meet him through brokers. Indeed, she can be addressed conventionally as a foreign bride because she is originally from a foreign country. Yet she is not perceived as a “foreign bride” because she is too intellectual to be socially categorized as such. It was the very perception gap of people that made the professor’s address of his wife as a “foreign bride” sound funny.

Problematization of “foreign brides” would be the key here to understand how foreign wives in Taiwan become so-called “foreign brides”. The problematization, rendered by Foucault,

“...doesn’t mean the representation of a pre-existent object, nor the creation through discourse of an object that doesn’t exist. It’s the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.). (Foucault 1996[1984]: 456-7)”

Absolutely, foreign wives do not appear in Taiwan only in the past decade, but these early arrivers never become a “phenomenon” that can be seen, discussed and further regulated as “foreign brides” nowadays. The visibility of the phenomenon requires not only an increasing of the total number of marriage migrants, but also a process of turning these foreign women into the object of discourse. Foucault’s excavation of how objects of knowledge are formed in certain material conditions unquestionably gives us an insight. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he looks into how it is that one particular discourse appears at a specific period of time rather than

another. Instead of looking into the relations of signs inside the linguistic system, he seeks the answer through investigating the external relations between language, object and social action (Foucault 1972).

He argues that discursive formation is made possible by a group of relations established among what he defines as “rules of formation”—authorities of emergence, delimitation and specification. First, according to him, we have to map the first surfaces of the emergence of where individual differences, which are accorded various statuses according to the degree of rationalization, conceptual codes, types of theory, and so on, emerge and then be designated and analyzed. Second, we have to describe what the major authorities are in society to delimit, designate, name and establish something as an object. Last, we have to analyze the grids of specification, the systems according to which different kinds of the object are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, and classified (1972: 41-44). He emphasizes in particular that it is the positive conditions of a complex group of relations that make an object of discourse appear. The relations, states he, “are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioral patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization” (Foucault 1972: 45). In other words, we should also consider under what material conditions that objects of discourse are formed according to the rules.

What Foucault’s discursive formation informs us regarding the problematization of “foreign brides” is to carefully look at, first, in what situation a certain group of foreign wives start to be differentiated from the others so as to be designated and analyzed; second, who, or what institutions, are the major authorities in society that delimit, name, and establish the certain group of foreign wives as an object; and last, how, and according to what principles, foreign wives from different backgrounds in terms of geographic origins and social status, are divided,

contrasted, derived from one another as objects of “foreign bride” discourses. At the same time, we should also carefully examine how non-discursive practices, that is, the material conditions, provide the discourse of “foreign brides” with a definite truth value.

Many studies and reports on transnational marriages through an introduction system, such as “mail-order bride” practices in the West, are frequently related to the global sex industry. Nicole Constable’s critique of Mila Glodava and Richard Onizuka’s work *Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale* (1994) shed light on how these studies have “vectored” women involved in the marriage as “foreign brides” in the direction of victims of human trafficking, sex exploitation and human rights abuse (Constable 2003: 69-90). The term “vector” was coined by Ian Hacking (1998), who uses it as a metaphor for force acting in a certain direction in his analysis of how “mad travelers” are historically constructed (Aradau 2008: 13). Borrowing this concept from Hacking, Claudia Aradau extends the meaning by taking its epidemiological sense of “transmitter” in her study on human trafficking. She argues that some of the elements of migration, organized crime and prostitution are “transmitted” to human trafficking, and the latter is in turn divided into, contrasted with and assimilated to the former in what she calls “a literature of vectoral transformation” (2008: 14). Likewise, there is a similar “transmitting process” between migration, prostitution, trafficking, and transnational brokered marriage reflected in the literature of research and news reports. Inspired by Aradau’s study, I’d also like to ask the same question: in what sense transnational brokered marriages have been vectored, and what are the results of the vectoring?

These texts, which are thought to serve to uncover the truth of “foreign brides”, in fact entail ceaseless self-reproduction, in which redundancy can always be recycled to be used in the

next text reproduction.<sup>7</sup> A result of the mutual reference is to construct and reinforce people's stereotypes of who the "foreign brides" are, where they come from and what they come for. These stereotypes represented in popular media are the key for problematizing foreign spouses from developing countries. Very often their images are not randomly but systematically constructed based on related knowledge, ideas, theories, techniques, social relations and economical processes (Foucault 1996[1984]: 418), and are reinforced by experts and authorities from time to time.

"Foreign brides" as a social problem is primarily embedded in the current discursive structure of human trafficking, prostitution, population quality control, national security and social order maintenance. By problematizing "foreign brides" in these dimensions, the given knowledge is vectored in the direction of helping to frame foreign brides as potential victims of trafficking in women who need to be rescued, suspects of "prostitution through marriage" who need to be ferreted out, or migrants of low quality who need to be re-educated. The resulting of the vectoring is a calling for techniques of governmentality for social order maintenance, organized crime prevention, and population quality control. The concept of governmentality, coined by Foucault (1991), construes government not only in terms of the state, but also in terms of any "conduct of conduct" (Dean 1999: 10). It incorporates the idea of mentalities that are socially and culturally collective, and requests not only the authorities, but also the ruled to attend to.<sup>8</sup> For the state, it requires policing strategies in addition to policy and law regulations,

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<sup>7</sup> Hsia Hsiao-chuan's study has shown some examples of how negative news and single-dimensioned reports about "foreign brides" are produced through journalists' plagiarizing from each other or copying governmental data in the newspaper industry (Hsia 2002:138-145).

<sup>8</sup> The art of governmentality, as Nicolas Rose has elaborated, is not limited to state politics played alone from top downward; rather, it has made its way to control a variety of objects through the techniques of "biopolitics," from individual's self to populations. It summons one's enterprise and autonomy for self-realization that meets the goal of

such as popular propaganda and education; while for “foreign brides”, it requires the skills of self-regulation and self-improvement. The individual capabilities of autonomy and enterprise are of more significance in neoliberal Taiwan as they represent these women’s potential to be transformed into good citizens after receiving cultural training, such as language learning and life adjustment classes.

“Where there is power, there is resistance,” says Foucault, “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1978: 95). The discourse of problematizing “foreign brides” as social problem makers encounters its discursive resistance coming from the urge of making Taiwan a multicultural society by some non-profit organizations for (im)migrants. Looking back the history of consciousness-raising of “multiculturalism,” we found that in fact it got raised in tandem with Taiwan’s political indigenization beginning in the late 1970s and culminated when the Taiwan independence minded Democratic Progressive Party (DDP) came to power in 2000 (Chun 2001). The indigenization movement pushes for recognition of diverse cultural and ethnic identities, which were repressed by the earlier mono-culturally Chinese nationalist project conducted by the KMT government. In this sense, the multiculturalism of Taiwan does not embrace inherently universal world values, but was formed in a more localized way in which the issue of multiple identities is essentially made according to place-based values. If the multiculturalism of Taiwan, as Allen Chun argues, is a product of political indigenization (Taiwan for “native born” Taiwanese), then how should “foreign brides” be positioned in the course of Taiwan’s pursuing its nation-state status? Also, how do these immigrants respond to the

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governmentality. The capability of self-enterprise, which consists of energy, initiative and personal responsibility, allows one to calculate his life and maximize his human capital. The capability of self-autonomy encourages one to define the goal and decide the way to achieve it with his powers (Rose 1996: 154-159).

climate, especially when they are faced with issues of their citizenship? Bearing the questions in mind, I will start with an introduction to the political economic backgrounds between Taiwan and the bride-sending countries and then look into the discursive formation of foreign brides. I will also examine how their images are manipulated negatively and positively in everyday life and how it provokes the complex of xenophile and xenophobia at the same time. Last, I will discuss how different power relations involving in shaping the immigrants' subjectivity, and how they react to the dominant culture, in the process of citizen-making.

### **Capital Flows and Marriage Migration in Transnational Asia**

Discursive formation of the foreign bride can not be separated from its conditions of political economy that cradle it. To discuss when and how "foreign brides" come to the public's attention as a socio-cultural phenomenon, we need to get to know the historical background of the transnational marriage market formation. I argue that the political economic dynamics between Taiwan and the bride-sending regions is a key in shaping a racial hierarchy of foreign brides in the marriage market of Taiwan, which will be discussed in more detail in next chapter.

Since the 40-year-old martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwan has experienced dramatic changes including economic liberalization and political democratization. Economic liberalization speeds Taiwan's participation in the global economy through loosening the reins of overseas investments and starting official-managed foreign labor importation. Before Taiwan deregulated overseas investments in 1986, the main countries for Taiwan's overseas investments were the United States, Indonesia and Thailand respectively, and the total amount of invested capital was only about 240 million US dollars (Shiu 2003:136). After deregulation, Taiwan rapidly shifted overseas investments from the United States to Southeast Asia and China. In 1990, Taiwan's

oversea investment in Southeast Asia surpassed its investment in the United States. After 1993, China superseded Southeast Asia to be Taiwanese businessmen's primary choice (Hsia 2002: 165-167).

Political democratization makes ethnic equality and multiculturalism on the island become conceivable. Taiwan's re-opening the door for cross-strait communication makes human interactions through marriage migration possible. Many veterans from mainland China get benefits from the Opening policy. They came to Taiwan with the KMT government after the Chinese civil war ending in 1949. Throughout the 1950s, the KMT government legally forbade them to get married in Taiwan in the name of national security maintenance. Many of the soldiers who remained in active service thereafter remained single. Not until the martial law was lifted in 1987 that they had a chance to visit their relatives and friends in mainland China. Many got married with women from the mainland and brought them over to Taiwan. Such marriages signal the first wave of cross-strait marriages in the 1990s (Chao 2004). Since the veterans had passed the marriageable age, the women they married were on the average older than other foreign spouses and many of them had been married before. In the late 1990s, along with a great number of Taiwanese men thronging to mainland China for business, there gradually appeared cross-strait marriages between Taiwanese businessmen and mainland women at their usual marriageable age. This kind of marriage reverses Taiwanese people's common image of cross-strait marriage as marriages for widows or divorced women on the mainland and old single veterans in Taiwan. Having social networks and local resources, many of cross-strait couples took the advantage to engage in matchmaking for their relatives and friends and developed it into a sideline later on. With an increasing market demand due to the more frequent communication across the strait, there appeared a considerable number of people attracted to this business. The

booming business little by little replaced the early matchmaking practice that relied heavily on introduction by relatives and friends of the client. Along with the trend growing, individual agencies were gradually transformed to or integrated into professional brokering companies, and made the profit-oriented business take off in the mid-1990.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to the cross-strait investment relation, Taiwan's increasing economic interaction with Southeast Asia also facilitates the mushroom of transnational brokered marriages. After the Plaza Agreement was signed in 1985, new Taiwanese dollar appreciated substantially. It caused a great increase of production costs, especially in terms of labor and land, in the traditional industry of Taiwan. Under the financial pressure, many companies of the traditional industry chose to move to China and Southeast Asia in the late 1980s. In the meanwhile, Taiwan government started to promote the policy of "Pragmatic Diplomacy"<sup>10</sup> after President Lee Tenghui took office in 1988. Its actively encouragement of the establishment of economic relationships with foreign countries quickly made Taiwan one of the main foreign direct investment (FDI) countries in Southeast Asia (Lee 2003). According to Song Jenjaw (1993), during 1986-1992, Taiwan's investments focused on Thailand and Malaysia where infrastructures were relatively better. The Philippines also attracted quite a bit of capital from Taiwan. Unfortunately the investment current ebbed due to its domestic political and social upheaval after 1991. Taiwan rapidly increased its investments in Indonesia after the Investment

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about the operation of the matchmaking business please see Wang and Chang (2002).

<sup>10</sup> The "Pragmatic Diplomacy" policy has been promoted in the hope of breaking through Taiwan's diplomatic predicament due to the "One China policy" that is widely adopted by most countries in the world. Pragmatic Diplomacy recognizes the fact that China has been divided into two and the government of Taiwan should not insist on its status as the only representative of orthodox China. Instead, Taiwan should actively participate in all international activities and seek to establish relationships with more countries through trade cooperation and civil communication. At the same time, it should not haggle over what the title Taiwan should be addressed too seriously, nor should it care too much about the diplomatic relationship between these countries and People's Republic of China (Tsai 1995; cited in Shiu 2003: 124).

Guarantee Agreement was signed by both governments in 1991 (Hsia 2002:166-167). As for Vietnam, after the economic reform *Doi Moi* in 1986, the socialist government started to import neoliberal market mechanisms and open its market to foreign capital. To perform “Pragmatic Diplomacy,” the Taiwan government has successively sent economic investigation groups to Ho Chi Minh City since 1988. In 1994, in order to cool down overheated investments in China, Taiwan government made the “Go-South policy,”<sup>11</sup> (南向政策) encouraging businessmen to shift capital from China to Southeast Asia. Vietnam, due to its wealth of cheap labor and a relatively stable investment environment, was promoted by Taiwan government for oversea investments. The encouragement resulted in a heat of Taiwanese investments in Vietnam after mid-1990s. According to a statistic of FDI in Vietnam, from 1998 to September of 2007, the top three investors were Korea, Singapore and Taiwan respectively (Vietpartner 2009).

One of the important impacts of capital flowing to less developed countries from more developed countries in transnational Asia is the counter-flow of migrants to more developed countries from less developed countries. Hsia has observed the correlation. For example, during the period of 1986-1991 when Taiwan’s investments in Southeast Asia primarily went to Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, there appeared a wave of marriage migration from Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>12</sup> Under similar circumstances, the number of foreign brides from Indonesia grew rapidly along with Taiwan’s increasing oversea investments in Indonesia after 1991. Shortly after the government of Taiwan encouraged investments in Vietnam in 1993 and

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<sup>11</sup> One of the main goals of making the Go-South policy is to diversify Taiwan’s investments so that Taiwan’s economy will not over-depend on mainland China. It is expected that Taiwan will thereby be able to better maintain its sovereignty and national security in the face of China’s political threat.

<sup>12</sup> There were only a few from Malaysia. It was probably because of Malaysia’s wealth compared to other Southeast Asian countries. It has also been seen that quite a few of Indonesian women migrate to Malaysia for marriage.

the waiting time for Indonesian brides to get a visa became longer, more and more marriage brokering companies engaged in Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriages (Hsia 2002: 169-170). Ever since then, Vietnam became Taiwan's primary invested country in Southeast Asia, and Vietnamese brides, following brides from mainland China, became the second majority among foreign brides in society.<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned in chapter one, since 2002, there have been several marriage brokering companies trying to introduce foreign brides from Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine and Russia, to Taiwanese clients. Although the number of successful matches has been very few, the advertising that caused a great sensation in a flash is noteworthy.<sup>14</sup> The economic dynamics between Taiwan and Eastern Europe is not as significant as it is between Taiwan and Southeast Asia or Taiwan and China that can be seen as a backdrop of transnational migration. In fact, Taiwan's economic interaction with Eastern Europe is just beginning. For a long time, Taiwan has engaged in so-called "economic diplomacy" with many other countries in the hope of enhancing its diplomatic relations that have always been opposed by the People's Republic of China. Czeslaw Tubilewicz (2007) describes Taiwan's interaction with Central and Eastern Europe through trade fairs since the late 1980s as "shopping for allies." Therefore, despite setbacks on political issues, Taiwan has successfully established "substantive" trade links with Belarus and the Ukraine, and exchanged representative offices, which performed consular

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<sup>13</sup> By demonstrating the correlation between economic dynamics and marriage migratory flow, I do not claim economic determinism. It cannot be denied that there were many other conditions playing together to make the marriage migratory wave from China and Vietnam to Taiwan become significant. For example, geographic and cultural distances are also important factors that influence people's choice of their spouses' nationality. I will address the relationship between desire and market in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon is of particular significance when we juxtapose different market strategies of promoting foreign brides from different regions. It reflects racial and class hierarchies, globally and locally. I will discuss this issue in the next chapter.

functions, with many Eastern European countries (176).<sup>15</sup> However, despite Taiwan's investments in Eastern Europe has increased rapidly in the past years (Taiwan Trade 2009), its total volume, which only accounts for 6.5 percent of the total trade volume in Europe, hardly helps us figure out why marriage brokering companies doing business in Eastern Europe brides emerged and caused a sensation. Indeed, most marriage brokering companies were formed by Taiwanese businessmen who traveled back and forth between Taiwan and Eastern Europe (my interview 2004), but we definitely need something other than the economic dynamics to explain the transient phenomenon of looking for Eastern European wives as a kind of "fashion" among high-tech middle-class men.

### **Discursive Formation of "Foreign Brides"**

Unlike Ukrainian brides who were thought to be women of high quality for their higher education level and physical beauty (white skin and tall), Chinese brides and Vietnamese brides are generally thought to be brides for lower-class men. Indeed, if we take 2003, the peak time of the influx of marriage migrants, for example, statistics show that Taiwanese brides on the average have a higher level of educational attainment than grooms. About 70 percent of foreign brides, including mainland Chinese brides, have a lower educational level than junior high school, while only 20 percent of Taiwanese brides account for it. From the perspective of hypergamy that men tend to marry women of lower status and educational levels, we can confirm that lower-class men are more likely than higher-class men to marry mainland Chinese

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<sup>15</sup> These countries include Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Russia, and Slovakia. Of these states, all except Latvia and Belarus established de facto consulates in Taiwan (Tubilewicz 2007:176).

and Southeast Asian brides. From the statistics we can also find some differences between mainland Chinese brides and Southeast Asian brides. First, although there is no significant difference in regard to their educational level, mainland Chinese brides are slightly higher than Southeast Asian brides. Secondly, in regard to spatial distribution of residence in Taiwan, mainland Chinese brides are relatively more concentrated in cities and surrounding urban areas, as well as in places where facilities for veterans are located. By contrast, Southeast Asian brides are more widely spread out into rural places (Tsay 2004:181-182). Thirdly, as for age composition, Southeast Asian brides' mean age is 23.6, much younger than mainland Chinese brides' mean age of 31.2 (Taiwanese brides' is 28.3). According to the Ministry of Interior in Taiwan, statistics of three abovementioned items over the past eight years basically displayed similarity to the record of 2003 (Department of Population 2009).

Since the number of Eastern European brides is too few to be perceived as a category of the so-called "foreign bride phenomenon," analyses and critiques of foreign brides are in fact aimed at Southeast Asian brides and mainland Chinese brides who get married through brokers. These Asian brides, due to their relatively low social status and educational level, have widely been seen as "poison bacteria" in society. The "bacteria" spread into society and cause infections through sexual contact and reproduction. They can further endanger social order, threaten national security and lower population quality through sexual contagion and reproduction. These foreign women's bodies, as carriers of the bacteria, should therefore be put into control carefully so as to reduce the possibility of "social pollution." The social anxiety of being "polluted" by foreign bodies exactly echo to what Mary Douglas (1994) analyzes about "purity" and "dirt" in society. "Dirt offends against order....In chasing dirt, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-organizing our environment, making it conform to an idea (2)." Dirt

and impurity are dangerous to social order, yet they are necessary existence for guarding the ideal order of society. The dangers of being punished and excluded threaten transgressors and ensure the social boundary. It is through the symbolic system of purity and impurity classification of things that society continually develops itself. Sex and body, according to Douglas, are two examples of how the symbolic system works to maintain its moral code. She stated,

“Dangers of sex pollution and bodily pollution are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system. What goes for sex pollution also goes for bodily pollution. The two sexes can serve as a model for the collaboration and distinctiveness of social units....Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolize an ideal theocracy”(Douglas 1996:4).

Body is a microcosm of society. Its boundaries represent social boundaries. We can see through the how powers and dangers that are produced by social structure are reproduced on human body in miniature. The discursive formation of “foreign bride” has primarily been vectored in the directions of social morality maintenance, national security and population quality control. They reflect the social anxieties of society being “polluted” by inferior outsiders’ blood through sexual contagion, and boundaries of social morality being blurred by invasion of inferior cultures that are “embedded” in foreign brides’ bodies. These anxieties therefore invoke the state to exercise its bio-political power over foreign brides’ bodies. Given that they cannot be excluded, at least they should by all means be regulated and trained to be like one of us.

The social anxieties of being invaded by “the inferior,” however, do not necessarily evoke homogeneously xenophobic reactions in society. In the case of the global foreign bride trade, we found that in addition to economic factors, there is another important factor that influences people’s decision to marry foreign brides. It is these women’s widely perceived traditional femininity, which is thought to have been faded out in economically more advanced countries

(Tien 2005; Honig 2001: 86-92; Tolentino 1999). Men's, and sometimes their families', nostalgia for traditional patriarchal family and fantasy of their masculine power over women make foreign brides who have less economic and cultural capital and thus appear more family-oriented become popular. The influx of foreign brides therefore evokes xenophilic responses from men who feel frustrated with the raising of feminist consciousness in society. Many highly educated Taiwanese women who have difficulty finding life-long mates would have the experience of being "threatened" by their male friends and parents that "if you don't conform to most men's expectation of being a more traditional, family-oriented woman, you will be defeated by those foreign brides and remain single forever" (my fieldnote 2008).<sup>16</sup> Reading from Douglas's angle, the effect of more and more local men's embracing foreign brides would be to summon the ideological regression of gender dynamics in society. In other words, by "threatening" native born women who have a high educational level that they are too "modern" to find a mate, the traditional boundary of a hierarchy between sexes that has been blurred is reaffirmed.

As mentioned above, "foreign brides" as a phenomenon has been culturally manipulated as symbolism that mirrors social anxieties of boundary maintenance. Its discourse is formed in the nexus of three primary concerns of the state: social morality maintenance, national security, and population quality control. In the following, I will give each an example to show how "foreign brides" are culturally and legally constructed, manipulated, excluded and included.

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, due to a larger number of women with a high educational level than men and the existence of marriage gradient in Taiwan society, these highly educated women will never become the target of lower-class men who have less human capital, and vice versa. Therefore, the marriage market for foreign brides will not be the market for highly educated women from local. Since these two groups of women would not in effect exclude each other, this kind of "threatening" narrative should not be able to stand. Unfortunately, it is commonly circulated and used to "warn" native born women with a high educational background. More analyses about foreign brides and local brides will come in a later chapter.

## Social Morality Maintenance

Asian brides from poor regions are very often portrayed on the mass media as either opportunists who take advantage of marriage to better their life or ignorant victims who are inveigled to marry foreigners by brokers. In most cases, they are described as marrying for the sake of money. Many negative stories revolve around how they swindle their husbands out of their life savings and then run away, or how they come for real employment through fraudulent marriage. Moreover, higher rates of divorce and domestic violence of transnational marriages than local marriages are deemed to be evidence that foreign brides are social troublemakers who come for social welfare benefits.<sup>17</sup> Their most common image in the mind of the public would negatively be related to entertainers in the sex-related industry, as the following report shows:

Title: Foreign Bride Bargirls Playing Crazy

“According to XX newspaper’s investigation, recently Taipei has seen nearly a hundred runaway Vietnamese brides swarming into the sex industry such as Karaoke bars, nightclubs, tea shops and so on. They are popular for cheap price and being fearless, daring to play any kind of games with customers. It is suspected that there would be a foreign bride brokering company in charge of recruiting and controlling those runaway brides, and forming the biggest “runaway bride sex service group” in North Taiwan...According to statistics by the National Police Agency, there are about ten thousand Southeast Asian women missing in Taiwan, and Vietnamese account for two-thirds. It is believed that most of them would have been trapped into the sex industry. (Apple Daily 2005)”

Using rhetoric such as “according to an investigation” or citing statistics issued by authorities is a common strategy adopted to increase trueness and reliability of a news report.

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<sup>17</sup> The questions whether or not “foreign brides” are the socially weak and how much proportion of social welfare should be distributed to them are controversial. This is a tricky issue which involves how NGOs and the state represent foreign brides, and how the foreign brides represent themselves as well. I will discuss this “politics of charity” in chapter five.

Drawing on Judith R. Walkowitz (1980), Chu Yuanhong (1998) questions this kind of statistics for “truth” is nothing more than statistics for “morality” in his study on prostitution in Taiwan (19-20). Without considering why the numbers come out as such and how they can be interpreted, taking statistics as a mirror that can truthfully reflect social facts would bring about public panic and push policymaking in a wrong direction.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, most researchers in ‘moral statistics’ view tend to see social problems as rooted in individual weakness, although they are willing to recognize that certain social situations can tempt and exacerbate the underlying moral frailty (Walkowitz 1980: 37). In the phenomenon of foreign brides as a social issue in Taiwan, data of foreign brides missing and engaging in sex-related industry are collected and encapsulated into numbers. Individual reports that fit the story line of “fake marriage, real prostitution” are accumulated to endorse the statistics that the government provides. Without inquiring into these women’s motivations or how they may have been “trapped” into the sex industry, the mutually reinforcing proof between the statistics and individual reports frame foreign brides as a whole to be potentially social problem makers who request the state’s intervention and solution.

### National Security Maintenance

“Taiwan’s exam institutions are very good, fair competition. You should give it a try.” Hsieh Hongmei was encouraged by her husband to take Taiwan’s national civil servant exam in 2001. Hongmei comes from mainland China and got married in 1991 when she was 20 years old. She moved to Taiwan in 1994 and got her ID four years later. Since she became a citizen of Taiwan,

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<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Walkowitz points out, social science that makes empirical surveys endorse a specific policy thus becomes “applied Christianity” (Walkowitz 1980: 37).

she thought of finding a stable job. Luckily, with her husband's support, Hongmei passed the exam and was appointed to work as a clerk at an elementary school. It was worthy of great celebration because she was the first "foreign bride" passing the competitive national exam of civil service. Journalists came to interview her one after another as her successful story became a model for learning. However, after working for almost one year, she was asked to leave the position for an unacceptable reason. That is, as an original citizen of mainland China, she was not allowed to serve as a civil servant for ten years after her household registration of Taiwan was granted. According to the first half of Article 21-1 of the *Cross-Strait Relations Act*, no person from the Mainland Area who has been permitted to enter into the Taiwan Area may serve as a public functionary unless he or she has had a household registration in the Taiwan Area for at least ten years. In other words, even though these mainland spouses have become citizens of Taiwan who can vote, they are not granted full citizenship.

Hongmei refused to submit to the unjust treatment. With help from several volunteer lawyers, she appealed for an interpretation by the Council of Grand Justices on whether or not the provisions of the first half of Article 21-1 of the *Cross-strait Relations Act* are unconstitutional.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the result still frustrated her and many scholars. The interpretation positions the *Cross-Strait Relations Act* as a *sui generis* law to justify the discriminatory treatment among "citizens" of Taiwan.

"The concept of "equal" as expressed thereunder shall refer to substantial equality. In light of the value system of the Constitution, the legislative branch may certainly consider the differences in the nature of the various matters subject to regulation and thus may create rational discriminatory treatment among the people accordingly...

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<sup>19</sup> Article 7 of the Constitution provides that all citizens of the Republic of China, irrespective of sex, religion, race, class, or party affiliation, shall be equal before the law. Thus, the people, who shall have the right of taking public examinations and of holding public offices under Article 18 thereof, shall be equal under the law.

The said provision is an extraordinary one with reasonable and justifiable objectives in that a public functionary, once appointed and employed by the State, shall be entrusted with official duties by the State under public law and owe a duty of loyalty to the State... Given the fact that a person who came from the Mainland Area but has had a household registration in the Taiwan Area for less than ten years may not be as familiar with the constitutional structure of a free democracy as the Taiwanese people, it is not unreasonable to give discriminatory treatment to such a person and not to the Taiwanese people of the Taiwan Area with respect to the qualifications to serve as a governmental employee, which is not in conflict with the principle of equality.... Therefore, the ten-year period as specified by the provision at issue is nonetheless a necessary and reasonable means. (Justices of the Constitutional Court 2006, no. 618)”

National security is always the state’s concern, for which different kinds of screening mechanisms for fraudulent marriages are conducted, such as the visa interview institution and nonscheduled family visits performed respectively before and after the married couples enter Taiwan. National security is deemed to be important in facing the influx of migrant workers and brides, especially those from mainland China. Due to the special relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, most Taiwanese people have a particular complex toward these marriage migrants from cross the strait. On the one hand, they are discriminated against for being of lower status and less educated than Taiwanese local women; on the other hand, they are unwelcome because they come from Taiwan’s political antagonistic camp, the rapidly growing country which never gives up threatening to take Taiwan back to his arms. Since China is neither “foreign” nor “domestic” to Taiwan, granting citizenship to people from there becomes a tricky thing. In Hongmei’s case, we can see how the “politics of fear” (Füredi 2005) is manipulated. The interpretation of the discriminatory treatment by the Council of Grand Justices overruling the claim of “equality” in the constitution presents the historical remainder of “collective communist-phobia” in the White Terror period in the 1950s. Theoretically and legally, Taiwan should not regard China as a belligerent after the “Period of Mobilization for the Suppression of Communist Rebellion” officially ended in 1991 and the Cross-Strait Relations Act replaced the

Martial Law to be the major law of regulating people and public affairs cross the strait. Yet the ideology of anti-communism and “*baomi fangdie*” (保密防諜; Keeping national secrets and taking precautions against communist spies) has become “common sense” that has been deeply implanted in Taiwan’s social mind (Chao 2005). I have also analyzed somewhere else about the representation of female communists from China in Taiwan’s newspapers of the 1950s. These women were insinuated as well-trained spies skillful in getting national confidential documents through alluring Taiwanese men and penetrating into Taiwan to undermine its social order (Tseng 2000). With the same logic of national imagination, nowadays migrants from China, no matter entering legally as mainland spouses or illegally through smuggling, are all categorized as “potential communist spies” who therefore need to be watched out for the sake of national security.

But what “national security” really refers to? Why can the state legitimate its discriminatory treatments among citizens by granting “security” an exceptional status that can overrule social equality guaranteed by the constitution, the uppermost principle of the state’s governance? I argue that the public imagination of the insecurity by China’s threat or other foreigners’ influx can be seen as an effect of the state’s manipulation of the politics of fear. The relationship between security and fear is paradoxical mutuality; greater security can be generated more in being feared than in being loved (Füredi 2005: 132). Security and fear, just like danger and purity, involves politicization of morality and social order defined by the rulers. The imagination of what danger “the others” would bring to us is socially constructed for the rulers’ political agenda, as Furedi has suggested, “politics has internalized the culture of fear,...[which can be] deployed as a political weapon by the ruling elites to coerce, terrorize and maintain public order” (2005:131-132). Putting in the context of Taiwan, the fear of national security being threatened

by Chinese migrants should be addressed in the framework of Taiwan's nation-building, which seeks Taiwan's sovereignty by distinguishing Taiwan from mainland China in all possible terms. Due to the historical complex of being annexed by China, mainland brides in Taiwan are easily seen as "vanguards" of the PRC regime. They are thought to be able to danger Taiwanese's national identity not only by their granted citizenship to vote and even run for public office, but also by their wombs to "unify" Taiwan symbolically.

Therefore, mainland brides unfortunately undergo double discriminatory treatments in Taiwan society. First of all, just as most of other Asian brides, their relative economical weakness earns them little social respect. Moreover, because of their political particularity, they are treated with more restrictive conditions than other foreign brides in terms of obtaining citizenship. It is under such historical and political conditions that national security becomes an issue tightly connected to the phenomenon of "foreign brides," especially mainland brides as the majority in the transnational marriage market.

### Population Quality Control

There have been a large number of female migrants from Southeast Asia and China engaging in low-paid jobs in hospitals, nursing homes, households, and the like, as caretakers or maids. People's biases toward these jobs in the so-called "three-D" industry (dirty, dangerous and difficult) lead to devaluation of female immigrants—they are frequently portrayed as poor and uncultivated on the one hand, while docile and domesticated on the other. Transnational marriages consisting of Taiwanese men and women from poor Asian countries would be harmful to Taiwan society because it is believed that bad cultural traits of low-class, uneducated Asian brides will be passed on to the next generation and thus reduce the quality of Taiwanese population in the future. Moreover, there was a debate over whether or not children born to

Vietnamese mothers have more problems, such as delayed growth and educational impediment, than those born to Taiwanese mothers do. Some research findings and statistics were found to be used in favor of this kind of statements. One example was an article entitled “Skinny immigrant babies spark fears” in the newspaper *Taipei Times* reporting that, according to records collected from 1998 to 2002, more than 40 percent of babies born to Vietnamese mothers weigh less than the accepted standard. It could lead to serious complications, the article concluded (Su 2003). Although this article did provide some possible explanations for the phenomenon from a non-genetic perspective, the statistic has been taken as scientific evidence of the prevailing belief that foreign brides bring in bad traits that would harm Taiwan’s population quality.

Not long after the research finding was given to publicity, another piece of news evoked great controversy again. The Administrative Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education, Chou Tsander, requested foreign and mainland spouses not to have too many children in a public speech. Citing statistics that every one out of eight children had been born to transnational parents in 2003,<sup>20</sup> he expressed a worry about Taiwan’s future. He argued that these new Taiwanese children will become a main productive power ten or twenty years later. However, since these children were born to less educated parents, they will decrease Taiwan’s competitive ability in the future (Liu 2004). Similar speech was delivered by another public figure. Legislator Liao Penyan made his bizarre remarks after a business trip to Vietnam. He asserted that Agent Orange used during the Vietnamese War has pervasively "poisoned" Vietnamese women’s bodies. He therefore urged that Taiwanese husbands with Vietnamese wives go for a health examination and the government take measures to prevent the spread of “poison” from “damaging” Taiwan’s

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<sup>20</sup> Data resource: the Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DGBAS) of Executive Yuan, Taiwan.

population quality (Lin 2006).

In fact, Taiwan has been faced with the serious problem of a low fertility rate and birthrate. The total fertility rate has dropped off from 1.680 in 2000, 1.050 in 2008 to 0.875 in 2010 (Department of Household Registration 2011). The crude birthrate also declined from 13.76‰ in 2000, 8.64‰ in 2008 to 7.21‰ in 2010 (Department of Household Registration 2011). The decreases indicate that Taiwan will become an aging society soon.<sup>21</sup> Although the government has been endeavoring to encourage married couples to have more than one child so as to maintain the current population structure, the effect is limited. For many traditional families, marrying a foreign bride who is ready to commit herself to family and marriage becomes the alternative. From the perspective of population structure maintenance, foreign women who are willing to give birth to “new Taiwanese children”<sup>22</sup> should be highly appreciated. Unfortunately, in reality they not only receive no gratefulness from society, but become the reason why the government considers adjusting the immigration policy accordingly. One official of the Ministry of the Interior pointed out that “Taiwan has no effective immigration policy and transnational marriage matchmaking has led to serious social problems. As a small island, Taiwan is not suitable to receive immigrants any more.” He further criticized the matchmaking marriages by taking the immigration policy of Australia as an ideal reference :

“People who would like to immigrate to Australia have to be either the rich or technological experts. But people who would like to become Taiwanese nationals can easily carry it out by virtue of marriage at their Taiwanese spouses’ expense of about 200,000NTD (7,000USD). Transnational matchmaking marriages are not ‘exotic

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<sup>21</sup> One reasonable explanation for the phenomenon is that more and more educated Taiwanese women, with an economic capability to live independently and a higher standard of selecting their lifelong mates, decide to delay their marriage, remain single or choose not to have babies.

<sup>22</sup> This is how children who are born to “foreign brides” from China and Southeast Asia are called in the media in Taiwan.

romance' but 'human trafficking' after all. To raise the marriage rate and birthrate, we should encourage people to have children. We can even consider allowing women to enjoy some benefits from having babies before marriage, but no way to accept more foreign brides. (Tseng 2006, emphasis added) ”

The narrative implied that even though “having more children” is an urgent need, the task should not be fulfilled by “outsiders” of low-quality but should be done by Taiwanese women regardless of their social conditions. Indeed, it could be seen as another milestone of Taiwan’s democratization and gender ideological revolution if unmarried parents can be guaranteed to enjoy the same benefits as other married parents by law. Nevertheless, it would still be a shame to have the dreamed policy come true at the expense of devaluating foreign spouses from developing countries.

It is sad to see governmental officials and public figures make such statements.<sup>23</sup> Despite the fact that their remarks did provoke protests by many social groups against racial discrimination and that they were forced to express apologies to the public, they have been widely circulated and implanted into the social mind. After being “endorsed” by the “authorities,” this kind of statement becomes powerful and is perceived as acceptable in ordinary people’s daily language. The result indirectly serves to legitimize a xenophobic ideology formed on the basis of the geopolitical and economic inequality between Taiwan and the laborer/bride sending countries. The xenophobic ideology, of course, also reflects the anxiety of Taiwan’s uncertain sovereignty. Here, the international political economy can no longer be

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<sup>23</sup> Although I criticize the remarks by the “authorities,” I do not hold the viewpoint that foreign spouses have no problem schooling their children. Being blind to differences between local and transnational families does not help to better the predicaments that the transnational parents would encounter, especially when foreign spouses need to educate their children at home. The point of the argument should be focused instead on how to provide these foreign brides, no matter where they are from, with more educational resources. As long as Taiwan needs more young population and foreign brides are willing to “give a hand,” the state should take the responsibility to guarantee good conditions for the transnational parents to raise children with “good quality.”

explained merely as a structural factor that works on people externally. Instead, it should also be considered something that functions from inside to shape people's attitude toward immigrants in society. This attitude is very often shaped by people's conception of regional/national/racial hierarchies, which is in fact a result of influence of a political economic inequality on the global scale. Unfortunately, these relationships are never reflected upon and discrimination based on biological and even cultural differences is taken for granted.

Discourses that represent Southeast Asian and Chinese brides as resembling either debauched prostitutes or docile servants and that problematize them as a potential danger to national security and population quality are highly related to the emerging racial discrimination. They serve to strengthen the insurmountable boundaries between Taiwanese and foreign wives, although no biological heredity is directly referred to as a cause of the racial hierarchy in the discursive formation. The new racism is based not on biological characteristics but on cultural and social differences, which is the very concept of what Etienne Balibar (1991) called "racism without races." According to him,

"The new racism is a racism of the era of "decolonization."... It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmount-ability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-style and traditions; in short, it is what P.A Taguieff has rightly called a differentialist racism" (Balibar 1991:21).

Robert Chang (Chang 2002) also criticizes the concept of racism based on people's biological characteristics. He attends to cultural racism that attributes certain characteristics to racial groups and explains racial differences as the natural outcome of meritocracy and the free play of the market (2002: 88). In the same critical vein, Yasuko Takezawa (2011) urges for a new approach to race and racial representations in Asia. She argues that the conventional usage of

“racism” in the West that is based on perceived physical differences, such as skin color, only identifies people of color as victims of racial discrimination. It ignores the fact that in many other non-Euro-American areas, many socially oppressed groups that are not physically different from the mainstream group are treated as different kinds of human species. Therefore, a new understanding of race that can take into account the experience of regions other than Europe and the United States is in need (2011: 8). That is to say, racial discrimination occurs not necessarily out of physical differences. It may happen to the minorities whose cultures are different from the mainstream and are regarded as being backward and low. Their cultures are marginalized and their people are excluded from mainstream society by the dominant majority. My observation of “foreign brides” in Taiwan fits the very analytical framework of “racism without races” in Asia.

“Foreign brides” becomes a “social problem” when knowledge about them is produced in the given framework of social problems. Tightly linked to the public concerns of social morality, national security and population quality, they are seen more like potential transgressors than wives and mothers. They therefore need to be carefully watched and disciplined, and the “problems” that they carry over and would bring about the feelings of “fear” and “insecurity” must be found and erased. I would like to argue, however, that foreign brides from developing countries are scapegoated for Taiwan’s existing social problems that should be resolved by the government or otherwise.

Take the state’s regulation of the sex-related industry for example. Most sex transactions taking place between Taiwanese male clients and female escorts do not attract mass media attention as much as those between Taiwanese male clients and foreign migrants, not to mention those taking place at star-level hotels between middle or upper class men and Taiwanese sex escorts, who are almost invisible to the police and to the public due to the hotel’s high privacy

protection. For foreign brides, however, getting involved in the sex-related business can make them rapidly hit the news. First, because of a lower price than local sex workers, they are preferred by men who cannot afford to consume such services at high-level entertainment places and hotels. Yet with less privacy protection, they are more easily ferreted out by the police at cheap hotels or their working places, such as betel nut stands at the roadside. In addition, for mass media, they are more noteworthy because they are recognized as foreigners. As a result, the image of foreign brides flowing to Taiwan for sex-related jobs and endangering the social order is amplified and this papers over the existing problematic governance of the sex industry.

However, informed by Rene Girard (1989; 1977), I argue that it is not the foreignness of foreign brides that makes them social scapegoats. On the contrary, they are conceived as “permanent foreigners” because they are social scapegoats. Girard’s scapegoat theory is of use to analyze the politics of foreignness, that is, “the cultural symbolic organization of a social crisis into a resolution-producing confrontation between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’” (Honig 2001: 34). According to Girard, scapegoating is a practice of social ritual for solidarity of a community. In the course of attributing a crime to a scapegoat, a spirit of unanimity is crystallized. The ritual murder of the scapegoat symbolizes the social cancer being cleansed and proper social order being reborn. Scapegoats are usually selected from marginalized figures, outcasts, or vulnerable people existing on the fringes of society. One or two crimes they commit do not distinguish them from others at first. However, during the crisis moment, these records serve to differentiate the scapegoat from others, and their physical, mental and cultural markers represent what Gregory Bateson simply called “information”: “a difference which makes a difference” (Fleming 2004: 48-49).

Attributing Taiwan’s unstable social and political order and decreasing competitive ability

in the international community to foreign brides' "low quality" and their untamable "foreignness" is a practice of scapegoating. It transforms the major group's fears and anxieties into hatred and discrimination towards the minorities through labeling the latter as the cause of the problems so as to reduce the responsibility of the dominant. Therefore, the immigrants are always labeled as uncultivated foreigners when needed. It is just like what we have seen that immigrant women are always recognized as "foreign brides" in the social mind, regardless of their citizenship status and time length they have resided on the island. It can thus be said that it is not because they are originally from foreign countries but because they are put in the existing pool of scapegoats that makes them become permanent "foreigners" within the country. Through the operation of scapegoating we see how their "foreignness" is manipulated to keep the distinction between "us" and "them." Nevertheless, I would like to point out that this "foreignness" is not necessary to be manipulated in a negative way. Rather, it is important to be used in a positive way too, for example, so as to demonstrate multiculturalism.

### **The Paradoxical "Foreignness"**

"Foreignness" of foreign brides is a floating and un-decidable signifier. It can be filled with various "information" for different agendas in the signification system. Different meanings of "foreignness" are made according to "information" selectively collected from "foreign brides" and their original cultures, negatively and positively. Negatively, the immigrants' "foreignness" is consumed in a discriminatory manner not only in the public sphere but also in the ordinary civil daily life. Positively, their "foreignness" has to be kept visible to the public as proof of the state's democratic governance appreciated by minority groups in society. It should be noted that, no matter whether in a negative or positive way, the manipulation of "foreignness" would serve

to enhance given stereotypes of “foreign brides” in the social mind.

How “foreignness” is manipulated negatively in constructing “foreign brides” as dangerous elements in society has been shown in the examples that I gave earlier to demonstrate how foreign brides become an issue after being vectored in the direction of given social problems. Here, I would like to give one or two examples of how this “foreignness” is translated into daily language with discriminatory connotations attached. One example is the use of the terms, *dalumei* (大陸妹; mainland little sister) and *yuenanmei* (越南妹; Vietnamese little sister), to ridicule a woman’s rustic appearance or poor dressing taste, such as “the way you dress is like *dalumei*,” or “she looks like *yuenanmei*.” These “adjectives” are commonly used in everyday life among friends and families, across class and generation. In fact, *dalumei* has been used for a long time, since human smuggling was the main channel for migrants from mainland China to Taiwan. Arrested female migrants were frequently called *dalumei* in the news report. With the chance of communication across the strait increasing, Taiwanese people gradually got to know the “dressing style” of women in China through mass media reports. Without considering the economic difference between Taiwan and mainland China in the early days and within China in the present, many Taiwanese people rapidly stereotyped mainland women’s “out-of-date fashion” appearing on the media as embodiment of “backward” China. The cultural-economic logic still dominates Taiwanese imagination of mainland women nowadays despite the fact that today’s China is no longer the China in old Taiwanese memory.

Compared to *dalumei*, *yuenanmei* tells an even worse scenario about how foreign women’s bodies are sexualized and racialized. In addition to the meaning of “out-of-date fashion” expressed in the same way as *dalumei*, *yuenanmei* is also used in a way to tease about a woman’s darker skin. In current Taiwan, women with darker skin are very often jeered as servants from

Southeast Asia. In early days when Filipina domestic workers were the major migrant group dominating the public's perception of migrants in Taiwan, *feiyong Maliya* (菲傭瑪麗亞; Filipina maid by the name of Maria) was used most frequently to mock a woman's unfashionable appearance and her humble behavior. Yet after foreign brides massively flowed to Taiwan, *yuenanmei*, as Vietnamese brides became the majority among migrant women, was gradually adopted to share the cultural meaning of *feiyong* (菲傭; *Filipina maid*), that is, women of lower quality than the local. Nevertheless, there are still some differences existing between the two. For example, people's imagination of *feiyong* is more likely constrained to the household for domestic work or hard working occasions. In contrast, *yuenanmei*, actually *dalumei* as well, opens up more possibilities for sexual imagination. *Mei* means young, little sister, connoting innocence to some extent. It has been seen that more and more karaoke bars promote their business by advertising *yuenanmei* as their bar hostesses in the hope of attracting customers who cannot afford luxurious consumption or who are curious about "exotic" services. With the dissemination of negative news about female migrants from Southeast Asia and China engaging in the sex-related industry, *yuenanmei* and *dalumei* are gradually attached with a sex-related discriminatory connotation, implying the "tenderness" of these foreign women's bodies and their easy availability.

I would like to give another example to show how the discriminatory naming is unscrupulously coined to be used in daily life through food consumption. When I went back to Taiwan for a break in 2003, many hotpot restaurants started to serve a new kind of vegetable by the name of *dalumei*. I was astonished the first time when being asked as I never heard about it before. I asked many people what the vegetable's "real name" was, and everyone gave me the same answer: "*Dalumei* is its name! Everyone calls it as such." After some investigation, I found

a piece of online news reporting how the name came up:

“Recently a new kind of vegetable came out with an interesting name, *dalumei*! Just as those *dalumei* who come to Taiwan to “dig money” through smuggling, this “*dalumei*” was also smuggled from mainland China by farmers...It is actually very popular at hotpot restaurants in Beijing..It was imported to Taiwan two years ago at the time when the police made efforts to ferret out illegal *dalumei*. The vegetable was therefore called *dalumei*.... According to some other greengrocers at a traditional market, when the vegetable went on the market, most consumers had no idea what it was. They just heard it was from mainland. Since its leaves look very beautiful, feel very tender and taste very sweet, some consumers started to call the vegetable *dalumei*. Afterward the name was widely spread in a flash.....However, despite the fact that the vegetable has been called as such, the Taipei Agricultural Products Marketing Company still decided to give it a proper name, which was *youmai cai*. (Meng 2001)”

Obviously, the proper name is not commonly recognized by the public. Restaurants still use *dalumei* to refer to that vegetable when taking customers’ orders. I was shocked by the phenomenon because it seems that no one feels uncomfortable to use the name when ordering it at a restaurant or purchasing it at a traditional market. Unfortunately, due to a lack of a “proper name” for the vegetable to be circulated, people, even for those who think it’s problematic to call it this way, need to “learn” and get used to it in order to reach mutual understanding. The mis-representation reflects how a racial ideology penetrates into the social mind and disseminates widely throughout a community via people’s daily communication at minute levels—dining at restaurants, shopping at street vendors, or even just cooking in one’s kitchen.

While the foreignness of “foreign brides” is negatively translated into daily language, it can also be observed to be manipulated in a positive way. Honig has noticed how immigrants’ foreignness is important to a nation’s democracy. According to her, immigrants could reinvigorate ordinary people’s moribund faith in a just economy, sense of community or family, consent-based sense of legitimacy, and voluntarist vigor. However, the dream of a national home, which is helped along by the symbolic foreigner, will in turn animate a suspicion of immigrant

foreignness at the same time. For example, “their” admirable hard work and traditional family values will threaten “our” job opportunities and also the new and fragile gains that have been made in gender equality (Honig 2001: 76).

Honig incisively analyzes the complex about the immigrants’ foreignness, yet she does not seem to look into how the foreignness can be manipulated by the regime and other social organizations in some way to achieve their political agenda. This foreignness, contrary to its abovementioned discriminatory usage, has to be kept and made visible to the public, if not always, at least in certain occasions. It can be seen as a demonstration of the regime’s respect of differences in society, the achievement of its multicultural governance. In Taiwan, as I mentioned earlier, the discourse of multiculturalism was formed under the political pressure of civil society to request the Kuomintang’s (KMT) equal respect for four main ethnic groups<sup>24</sup>, which was actually a product of Taiwanese nationalism. It was not until the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power and proclaimed their “Resolution on Ethnic Diversity and National Unity” in 2004 that foreign spouses residing in Taiwan for the past decades were embraced in the formulation of “diverse ethnic groups.” The resolution serves as a guideline for the DPP to govern the country. It emphasizes that policies based on cultural assimilation should be abandoned, ethnic discrimination should be denounced, all ethnic groups are masters of Taiwan, cross-ethnic communication should be facilitated for ethnic harmony, and Taiwan should be built up as an exemplar of the multicultural state on the globe. In contrast to the initial multiculturalism, the new version seeks to go beyond the national boundary to build a xenophilic atmosphere and to break the myth that Taiwan should be a homogeneous nation.

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<sup>24</sup> In order of proportion in the total population, they are Hoklo, Hakka, mainlanders, and the aborigines.

Since the resolution has come out, multiculturalism has become the highest guidance of one's political language expression and social actions in the public sphere. Politicians realize that they have to infuse their utterances with multicultural rhetoric so as to secure their disposition to be politically correct. Similarly, a lot of non-profit organizations targeting foreign spouses as their service objective mushroomed in the past decade. With financial and ideological support from local and central governments, "foreign brides" became the most noteworthy social weakness all of a sudden. To make their social participation and the government's full support of multiculturalism visible to the public, local governments have been cooperating with or sponsoring civil organizations to organize various community activities, such as singing and composition contests, workshops, and festivals that feature foreign spouses as major participants or performers. They are always arranged to dress up in traditional costumes as multicultural exhibits on the stage.

These foreign spouses participate in these events, however, very often through mobilization. In many occasions it is easy to see participants from the same group. During my fieldwork period, I heard a lot of complaints from foreign wives who were requested to perform dancing or singing on the stage at certain occasions or the achievement show of their language learning or life adjustment class.<sup>25</sup> The most common reason I heard was that they have to stay at home to take care of young children. To encourage their participation, the organizers have to provide some "benefits" to "induce" hesitators, such as free lunch boxes, home pickup and drop-off services. It can of course be explained as a way in which the government encourages new migrants to integrate themselves into society as smoothly as possible through taking part in

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<sup>25</sup> Attending these classes for 72 hours in total is a requirement for new immigrants to apply for their citizenship. These classes are sponsored by the government.

community activities. Nevertheless, for these migrant women, performing dancing or singing on the stage or “selling their culture” is of no benefit to their real life. On the contrary, it takes their private time of getting along with their families and would cause trouble if their husbands do not support such kind of activities. In fact, what these women are concerned about is how to overcome cultural differences in their familial life rather than how to perform dancing and singing on the stage and promoting their original cultures to attract attention at special events and festivals.

By showing how the cultural differences between “others” and “us” are kept for “performance” by these “authentic” owners of cultures, I argue that the foreignness of immigrants is positively manipulated and displayed by the state power in order for the public to imagine a harmonious society of multiculturalism. I do not therefore disapprove of the government’s and many social groups’ efforts to promote multiculturalism in Taiwan. However, I believe the key to create a multicultural society, in which migrants from different origins of culture can be respected, lies more in forming a powerful counter-discourse of “foreign brides” in society than in arranging those immediately-visible-but-fleeting activities. From my observation, in fact, it is local people, especially the husbands of transnational marriages, who need more education so as to learn how to respect other cultures and appreciate immigrants’ contribution to the host society, a contribution that is not only through cultural sharing but also through economic engagement in the labor market. Without a strongly reflexive discourse formed to counter the given social construction of new immigrants, the multiculturalism will just be a “performative” multiculturalism, that is, multiculturalism on the stage.

In fact, in the positive manipulation of immigrants’ foreignness, we can also find another stereotype of “foreign brides”: the supercitizen immigrant (Honing 2001:77). Unlike the weak

who call for our social charity or the powerful who provoke our hostility, these supercitizens are fine examples for the native born to follow. They are stereotyped with our projection of what the ideal self ought to be. For example, they endure hardship of life without complaints, work harder but require less, respect traditional values and are willing to commit themselves to family. In short, they hold the virtue of fortitude that is thought to be lost in the native born, especially women who are highly educated and career-oriented. Although the state advocates gender equality in society, without related supporting measures provided, for example, public baby-sitting services, professional women are still expected to perform the role of the traditional housewife in the family. Under such social circumstances, it becomes significant to have exemplary women as mothers or wives who sacrifice themselves for their family's, or even the community's, good without hesitation. It is even more meaningful and touching if the self-sacrificing women are originally from foreign countries. There have been many news reports of miserable stories describing how the foreign wife takes care of her husband's parents and children for her irresponsible or deceased husband. Many local governments also reserve a quota of the exemplary mother award for foreign spouses in honor of their fortitude. The commendation in effect encourages the native born to reflect on the fact that "if they foreigners can, why we the native born cannot." On the one hand, it serves to counter the given negative stereotypes of "foreign brides." On the other hand, however, it also plays a part in constructing another stereotype, the immigrant of super virtue, positively.

In brief, I contend that the foreignness of "foreign brides" can be manipulated not only negatively but also positively according to different political agendas. It is noteworthy that in addition to the commonly recognized stereotypes of "foreign brides" as the social weak who are induced to migrate and the social dangerous who migrate for money, there is another one, the

supercitizen. In the manipulation of the migrant women's images, the complex of xenophobia and xenophilia is in effect generated hand in hand. Hongmei's story of passing the public servant exam yet being rejected for work I mentioned earlier exemplifies the phenomenon. She was regarded as an exemplary immigrant for striving hard to improve herself on her own initiative. As the same time she embraced the national value by showing her resolution to serve as a public servant. Her endeavors earned her respect as she passed the competitive national examination, when many native born Taiwanese are not able to. Nevertheless, she was still faced with the unfair legal treatment due to a perceived reasonable doubt of her loyalty to the new country. This case paradoxically manifests how "foreign brides" are perceived to "threaten" our society for being supercitizens. To make it clearer, in addition to the immigrants' loyalty, their "super virtue" of overtly and actively embracing the regime, which would reinvigorate certain ideologies or effect a transformation of existing institutions, also draws the native born's attention to their existence.

Nevertheless, to govern a country in an efficient way, each regime needs certain kinds of supercitizens in society as "showpieces" for ordinary citizens to follow. Of the exemplary citizens singled out from different levels of the social stratification, those from marginalized groups are among the most significant ones. They represent the possibility that insofar as enough efforts are made, the differences of class, gender and race/ethnicity among people can thereby be overcome. In this view, the subaltern can still reach as great achievements as others of higher class as long as they actively engage in self-improvement and self-governance. These kinds of successful stories are particularly welcome in neoliberal society where individuals are informed

of taking responsibility for themselves in the competitive market-like society.<sup>26</sup> In the past, that indigenous people were selected to be exemplary citizens was of historical significance. It not only illustrated their accomplishments of stepping up in the class ladder through self-improvement, but also symbolized the state's success in multicultural governmentality. According to the multicultural politics, people of different ethnicities share equal opportunities and are equally respected in society. Nowadays, with an increase in marriage immigrants residing in Taiwan, "foreign brides" from developing countries in Asia gradually take indigenous people's place in the state's deployment of multiculturalism politics and become the new target of the "exemplary citizen" image-building project.

The multiculturalism calls for the politics of difference and the politics of emotion. It requires differences to remain among ethnic groups as evidence of the regime's respect for original cultures of the immigrants, while at the same it requests a form of solidarity under the leadership of the state. In a similar approach to Furedi's politics of fear, Sara Ahmed analyzes how the feeling of love is also manipulated for solidarity in multicultural society. As she puts it, "the others can be different (indeed, the nation is invested in their difference as a sign of its love for difference), as long as they refuse to keep their difference to themselves, but instead give it back to the nation" (Ahmed 2004: 134). The difference that can be taken on by society becomes an ideal for multiculturalism. What makes the differences harmoniously cohere is the manipulation of the feeling of love— individuals' love for the shared community, the nation, and the state. As society, the nation and state are over valued as the object of love for its people, immigrants are demanded to take on the characters of what is thought to be ideal for the entire

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<sup>26</sup> Despite special governmental funding available for foreign spouses, whether or not immigrants should get so much benefit from the welfare resources is frequently questioned.

nation. By making themselves become desirable, the immigrants will be rewarded with a promise of being loved in return. Becoming an exemplary citizen, in Ahmed's words, is a "labor of love" for the immigrants (2004: 134). As Bhikhu Parekh notes, a multicultural society cannot be stable and last long without developing a common sense of belonging among its citizens. The sense of belonging cannot be ethnic and based on shared cultural characteristics, but must be political and based on a shared commitment to the political community, which could take such forms as a quiet concern for its well-being, deep attachment, affection, and intense love (Ahmed 2004: 134-5).

No matter what forms the expression of "love" would take, it is important to make the expression of love visible and audible. In Taiwan, the oral expression of "loving Taiwan" has become something more than a slogan used for election. As the campaign for promoting Taiwanese native culture to dilute the ongoing influence of Chinese culture, "loving Taiwan" gradually becomes a moral imperative that everyone should follow by speaking it out loudly without hesitation. The watchword "愛，就要大聲說出來" (if you love it, you should speak it out loudly) is applied to the national campaign of "loving Taiwan." The campaign of "love" is expected to go beyond the differences of gender, class and ethnicity to stick the nation together. However, once it is adopted as a criterion to examine a person's political morality, it becomes symbolic violence of identity that deprives the person's right of reserving opinions or expressing dissent, and turns him into a suspect citizen. Therefore, to avoid being suspected or accused, one must learn to express love for the nation in public. Of various approaches of expressing the love, the most basic for immigrants is to speak the national language or local dialect fluently. It is regarded as the first step to turn the "other" into one of "us," and serves as an alibi for their suspect identity. Therefore, as we see different social groups manipulating the narrative of love

to legitimate their social action, I am in particular interested in how immigrants position themselves in this kind of political climate and respond to the widely held Taiwanese complex about the “foreign bride” trend. How do they learn to be, or are made to be, desirable citizens?

### **Cultural Citizenship as Subject-ification and beyond**

While the study of citizenship focuses on the individual’s autonomy and rights acquisition in legal-political terms, cultural citizenship sheds more light on the cultural dynamics between the state and individuals in the process of citizen-making. It attends more to how the criteria of citizenship are variously applied to different categories of social groups, and how these social groups react to the inequality in seeking the feeling of “belonging.” Renato Rosaldo (1994) defines cultural citizenship as “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (1994: 402). He views the acquisition of cultural citizenship as the process of the disadvantaged subjects struggling for full citizenship despite their cultural difference from mainstream society. However, Aihwa Ong (1996) criticizes this view for attending to only one side of unequal relationships. According to her, “it gives the erroneous impression that cultural citizenship can be unilaterally constructed and that immigrant or minority groups can escape the cultural inscription of state power and other forms of regulation that define the different modalities of belonging” (1996:747). In contrast to Rosaldo, Ong considers citizenship “a cultural process of ‘subject-ification,’ in the Foucauldian sense of self-making and being-made by power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration” (1996: 747). The relations that regulate the conduct of subjects through rituals and rules to produce consent in modern democracies are the very center of the idea of

governmentality.

Drawing on Ong's idea, I'd like to discuss the effect of governmentality on "foreign brides" in Taiwan. Indeed, citizen-making can be regarded as a process of subjectification where "consent" is required for the power to formulate individual immigrant subjectivity. However, it is by no means a wholehearted "collaborative relationship" between the dominator and the dominated. Rather, the "consent" of the dominated could be given based on the expectation of an exchange of benefits with the dominator. Therefore it could be seen as a cynical bodily performance, through which subjectification is seemingly achieved. Next, I will give an example to demonstrate how the marriage immigrants learn the narrative of "good citizens" and manipulate it in return in the struggle for their citizenship.

Between 2002 and 2003, an amendment to the *Cross-Strait Relations Act* at the Legislative Yuan gave rise to a social movement against the policy that would prolong the waiting time of citizenship acquisition for mainland immigrants. According to the amendment, mainland spouses have to wait for 11 years in total, which is three years longer than the original regulation, to gain citizenship.<sup>27</sup> So the main appeal of the movement was to urge the Legislative Yuan not to pass the "eleven-year evil law." This was the first social movement that featured marriage immigrants as major participants. However, since the interested party, the mainland spouses, were not yet Taiwan citizens with the right to engage in political and social movements, according to the *Cross-Strait Relations Act*, the protests were registered under the name of a non-profit organization for cross-strait marriages, which consists of cross-strait married couples, and their Taiwanese husbands became the major spokesmen (Chao 2006: 89-90, 101).

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<sup>27</sup> The objective of the protests was to oppose the new-added certificate requirement of three more years of long-term residence before the immigrant is eligible for the identification ID application.

The social movement evoked polarized reactions in society. Some people argued they were not Taiwanese but Chinese citizens and felt a strong antipathy towards their protests. One political party even made a statement that asked the mainland spouses to go back to their own country to protest. It urged that the government of China dismantle missiles that aimed at Taiwan, otherwise the police should arrest and repatriate the “Chinese” protestors. Much hostility toward China was aroused and imposed on all mainland spouses due to the protests. Nevertheless, on the same day, some other legislators together with about ten female mainland spouses held a press conference to sign the *Loving Taiwan Declaration*. According to the press release, the purpose of the declaration was “sharing their love stories so that the public could know that they also have a courtship before getting married through....They want Taiwan society to know they have fallen in love with this land. They also want to contribute to Taiwan and make Taiwan better!” The narrative implies that “true love” should be taken as the final criterion to judge the legitimacy of mainland spouses’ struggle for citizenship. Indeed, claiming one’s love for society and the state is already very important for native born Taiwanese, not to mention immigrants, especially those from China, the country that has been simplified as Taiwan’s “enemy” (Chao 2006: 121-122).

The third protest took place at the plaza in front of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. Lots of mass media surrounded the protesters and next to them was a battery of policemen. I stood in the middle of the crowd watching a guerrilla theatre using a big foam board-made identification card and shackles as stage props to symbolize the unjust treatments mainland spouses receive. After the play, several mainland spouses brought their kids sitting on the ground and started to tell their sob stories caused by the unjust policy. All of them wore a yellow bandana with the slogan of “anti-discrimination” on their heads and some held a sign in their hands. These mothers looked very depressed and tightly held their kids while sobbing out their

suffering in front of the mass media. The stories basically reflected their concerns and complaints in two aspects. One was about the expenses they had to spend for cross-strait travels periodically due to the given policy stipulating that before advancing to naturalization candidacy, they had to exit Taiwan every half to one year. For poor families with small children, it was indeed a financial burden. The other was about the unequal policy that made their status lower than other foreign immigrants. Due to the different sources of law applied to immigrants from China and other foreign countries, they had to wait for eight years, and now probably three more years, to obtain citizenship, while other foreign immigrants only needed to wait for four years. Some mainland spouses therefore complained about their status as second-class immigrants to Taiwan. As one put it with a racially discriminatory connotation, “we are better than Vietnamese brides. We can speak and read Chinese. We can teach our kids to read and write. Can they? Then why do we need to wait for 11 years, while they only need to wait for four?” (Chao 2006: 120).

The strategy of distinguishing selves as desirable citizens through degrading others was applied not only without, but also within, the racial boundary. It is believed to be even more effective to convince people of the group’s morality if the group can carry out a purge of its unqualified members on its own initiative. At the plaza, while the mass media were busy interviewing those mainland spouse protesters, the protest organizers and some mainland spouse representatives started to deliver short speeches one after another on their loudspeaker van. A mainland spouse’s speech impressed me most for its urging the government to clamp down on cross-strait fraudulent marriages. She argued that

“we are legal marriage immigrants. We came here to pursue our love. Unlike those illegal immigrants who take marriage as an instrument to fulfill their plot of “fake marriage, real prostitution,” our marriages are real and sincere. We do not come for money but they do. We love our family. We love Taiwan. We are Taiwanese daughters-in-law. We also want to contribute ourselves to Taiwan society. We urge that the government strictly enforce the law to prevent smuggling and fake marriages. Only

by doing so can our innocence be proved. (My fieldnote 2003)”

Whether or not the appeal to the capability of mothering and the sacredness of love-based marriage could legitimize their claim for citizenship is arguable.<sup>28</sup> Besides, the question how to define a marriage as “fake” or “not love-based” is *per se* problematic.<sup>29</sup> When “love” is adopted as a normative criterion to judge legitimacy of the marriage, it is in fact no longer a legal but a moral issue. As a universally perceived appropriate principle today, “love” becomes something that different social forces struggle for a right of its interpretation. It just serves as an amulet for its claimers to fight off all moral attacks from the shadow. However, the narrative strategy these mainland spouse protesters adopted just resonates with the given “foreign bride” discourse, according to which foreign mothers should take responsibility for the population quality of “new Taiwanese children.” The way they distinguished themselves as good citizen candidates just serves to reinforce the patriarchal logic of traditional families and the image of what “good” women ought to be. Other mainland spouses who get involved in the sex-related industry due to an unhappy marriage end up becoming invisible scapegoats here.

Antonia Chao’s study on life experiences of the mainland spouses who took part in the social movement reveals why their bodily performance of “loving Taiwan” was so important.<sup>30</sup> She also notices that these migrant women did sense that they were “performing” for the mass media. They did it cynically. As one involved in the protest said to her in private,

“Love should not just been performed on the stage. It should be fulfilled through practice rather than speaking loudly...We feel hypocritical. But we were forced to do so

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<sup>28</sup> For more discussion on the discourse of motherhood and citizenship acquisition please see Antonia Chao (2004).

<sup>29</sup> More details about real/fake marriages will be discussed in chapter five.

<sup>30</sup> Emphasizing how the politics of sentiments plays out in the daily life and migration experiences, Chao analyzes how the identification card is perceived and turns out to be an object of fetishism for these mainland spouses.

by the situation, and we of course could do it. But we felt unhappy and uncomfortable. We even wonder if Taiwanese people's affect is that cheap. (Chao 2006: 127)"

The purpose of analyzing their involvement and "performance" in the social movement is of course not to accuse them of hypocrisy or disloyalty to Taiwan. Rather, it aims to challenge the assumption that immigrants' performance of the desirable citizen is tantamount to the success of governmentality in the citizen-making. In fact, implantation of the ideology of the dominant culture in foreign spouses in everyday life never stops. It is undertaken through language and life adjustment classes, community activities, singing and composition contests co-organized by the local government and non-profit organizations, as well as their husbands' families. However, sometimes contradictory power relations create "hidden spaces" for them to escape domination. For example, many husbands' families do not allow their foreign wives to go out alone. Yet the compulsory language class and life adjustment class provide them with a good reason to negotiate with their husbands. Going to class becomes their refuge from constraints at home, where they can meet friends and share bitterness. Learning itself becomes the secondary objective or even just an excuse instead (Wang 2007). Just as the social movement for mainland spouses' citizenship has demonstrated, through their learning of Taiwanese protest culture, manipulation of "love for Taiwan," and self-analysis and self-reflection on the motivation of struggling for citizenship, we can assert that cultural citizenship as a process of subject-ification is in effect full of contradictions, contests and negotiations. I will discuss more of the blurring of women's agency and subjugation and the politics of representation in later chapters.

### **Chapter Three: Women's Representation and the Geopolitics of Desire**

Having waited for a long time, I finally gained agreement from both the marriage broker, Hui Ge, and his two clients, Guochang and Yunpu, to join their marriage group to the north of Vietnam for a matchmaking trip. Guochang was 38 years old and worked as an administrator of the warehouse of a publishing house. Yunpu was 29 years old. He was an engineer working for a computer company. Both of them came to Hui Ge via his fancy website,<sup>31</sup> the same way in which I found Hui Ge. Hui Ge has run the transnational marriage brokering company for more than ten years. He started the business in the mid-1990s when he was doing business in importing wood from Vietnam. At that time he found many Taiwanese businessmen married to Vietnamese women and who then started transnational matchmaking as a sideline, which even brought them more profit than their main business did. The successful stories triggered Hui Ge to seriously consider engaging in matchmaking as well. One day he met Tung, a Vietnamese man who served as his trucker on a business trip. Having found Tung could speak some Mandarin, Hui Ge asked whether he was willing to do business in matchmaking together. Tung gladly accepted the invitation and diligently improved his Mandarin afterwards. He then became Hui Ge's "big matchmaker"<sup>32</sup> in the north of Vietnam. A couple of years later, Hui Ge married Tung's younger sister. When I visited Hui Ge for the first time in 2004, they had already had a girl of three. Hui Ge told me he wanted to extend his matchmaking business to China, where his

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<sup>31</sup> Unlike other websites, Hui Ge's website has lots of his journals of marriage trips with vivid photos. His writing makes readers feel the trips are full of fun, and his clients appreciate very much the result he brought to them. In addition, his instruction on how to prevent being cheated by bad marriage agencies is analytic and convincing, which makes his service more trustworthy than other agencies.

<sup>32</sup> The big matchmaker functions as the Taiwanese broker's local manager to coordinate matchmaking related affairs, such as accommodation, meals, meeting schedule, paperwork preparation, and so on. Under the big matchmaker are "small matchmakers" who are in charge of local women recruitment.

father had some networks that he could rely on, and to Ukraine as well.

Although Hui Ge organized this marriage trip, it was his father, Hsiao Ba, who accompanied us to Vietnam. After arriving at the airport in Hanoi, Tung came to pick us up. It was about 10 in the morning, and then we spent another three hours or so in a car driving to Ha Long Bay, where we spent the rest of the day and prepared for another four-hour car trip to a remote village in Ha Coi, the venue for the matchmaking meeting. According to Hui Ge, this place is a “virgin land for bride hunting”. “Unlike other brokers who prefer popular cities, such as Hai Phong,<sup>33</sup> where young and beautiful women would have already gone either for marriage or for prostitution, I bring my clients to this new place where there is a great pool of young women of good quality for selection,” he said.

We arrived at the village around ten in the morning the next day. When our car slowly approached the destination, numerous villagers were standing by the sides of the muddy and bumpy road watching us. Children were running around the car and caused obstruction from time to time. When we got to the house where the matchmaking meeting was going to be held, there were more than fifty young women waiting outside to be “interviewed.” According to my notes taken at the meeting, the oldest women coming for matchmaking were 23 years old.

The house was surrounded by curious villagers and young women, and outside the fence of the house stood two *cong an* (policemen). Despite the fact that transnational matchmaking activities were banned by the government of Vietnam, the meeting was still held openly and went smoothly throughout without any disturbance from the police. According to Tung, it was because he had already “informed” the police with money before we arrived. In addition to his

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<sup>33</sup> Hai Phong is a port city and well known for its sex industry among Taiwanese men who are fond of soliciting prostitutes.

explanation, I also believe it was because the local government did not seriously enforce the law at that time. I did not sense any atmosphere of tension around the “illegal activity” during our stay in the village.<sup>34</sup> Rather, it seemed that the entire village was rather busy and excited on that day due to our visit.

We were arranged to sit in the living room of a house owned by a local matchmaker. The living room was very small, and could only fit one ancestral altar and the table where we were sitting. Tung and the two clients, Guochang and Yunpu, sat together on one side of the table, and left the other side for “interviewees.” Two women were arranged to come in at a time. Tung served as an interpreter and also raised questions for both sides. Questions revolved mainly around three points: first, their personal information, such as age, height, weight, educational level, occupation and sibling ranking; secondly, the backgrounds of their families, such as the number of siblings and the occupation of their parents; and last, their capabilities and willingness for housework and family care performance. It was male clients who asked questions throughout the meeting, although women could raise questions as well. Once a woman was selected to be a candidate, she was sent to another room to wait for the second round.

After “interviewing” about forty women, Guochang and Yunpu finished the first round of candidate selection. In the second round, they asked more detailed questions and compared height, weight, face, body shape and so on to make sure the appearance of the couple matches as

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<sup>34</sup> The experience was very different from the one I had with another marriage group in the south of Vietnam three years later after the Vietnam government actively responded to the vehement condemnation from the international society regarding its loose regulation on the crime of human trafficking. All matchmaking meetings were held in secret and we had to move rapidly from one place to another to meet different groups of women so as to avoid the police’s attention.

well.<sup>35</sup> In the end, Guochang chose Hong from three finalists and Yunpu chose Van from two.<sup>36</sup> The meeting ended in the early afternoon, which meant they “efficiently” decided their marriage within three hours. In this kind of matchmaking practice, neither correspondence in advance nor online catalog preview is necessary. The client just needs to find a trustworthy broker, pay a service fee, go to the bride-sending country to pick up a woman, and then everything will be arranged well afterwards until his bride comes to Taiwan.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, each client is guaranteed a marriage in the end. If he is not satisfied with the current group of women arranged by the local matchmakers, he can request to meet more until being satisfied with one. In that case, the meeting would take more days and the cost for the local matchmaker would increase due to extra fees reimbursed for more women’s travel expenses. As a result, many matchmakers would persuade their clients to choose one from the first group of local women. According to Tung, when the business was just formed and had not yet encountered serious market competition, the matchmaking fee the Taiwanese broker charged was almost twice as much as it is today. With more money he got from his Taiwanese boss, he could provide clients with “better service,” for instance, more women to select from<sup>38</sup> and more comfortable places to stay. Since the market became very competitive, there has been a price war among Taiwanese brokers. To survive the

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<sup>35</sup> For example, the woman cannot be taller than the man. In addition, it is not necessary that all men like to choose the most beautiful ones. Another client I met later told me he deliberately chose an ugly woman so that he didn’t need to worry about his wife being “seduced” by other men in the future.

<sup>36</sup> I asked Tung what if two clients selected the same woman. Tung replied that it never happened and shall not happen because everyone has a different taste. Yet if it does happen, he will find a way to settle the problem, for example, providing more women for selection.

<sup>37</sup> However, in reality, due to the uneven quality of marriage brokers, disputes between the broker and clients occur very often.

<sup>38</sup> I believe it was also because the government didn’t impose a stricter regulation on the business at that time. I have heard a lot that a matchmaker could even provide a client with about two hundred women for selection in the south of Vietnam, where the transnational marriage market is much more active than it is in the north of Vietnam. Therefore, we should also take into consideration the difference of the business operation between the north and south of Vietnam and the change of the government’s attitude toward the business when interpreting what Tung said.

competition, most brokers chose to reduce their service charge in order to attract clients.

However, to reduce the cost and maintain certain profit, they not only cut off some services that were contained in the service package before but also largely reduced the bride price<sup>39</sup> given to the bride's family.<sup>40</sup> The money issue turned out to be one of the core issues in the policy debate on the prohibition of profit-oriented marriage brokerage not long after.

Tung was happy with the result and told me Guochang and Yunpu were nice and "easy" clients, not as fastidious as other clients he met before. After lunch, Tung drove us to visit Hong's and Van's parents to ask for agreement to their daughters' marriage. We went to Hong's house first and then Van's. When we arrived, there had already been a group of people assembling in front of their houses. They were either the bride-to-be's friends and relatives or curious spectators who were waiting for a celebration. Contrary to my expectation, it did not take long to gain agreement from the brides' parents.<sup>41</sup> After meeting all of the family members, a simple engagement ceremony was held on the spot. Then they went out of the house to meet people, take pictures, and receive congratulations.

In the evening, Hong and Van each packed a small suitcase and then came with us back to the hotel in Ha Long Bay. With all necessary documents for filing a marriage in hand, Tung scheduled the next day to go to Hanoi to have Hong and Van take a physical examination and

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<sup>39</sup> Usually the bride price is included in the total matchmaking charge. In other words, it is the broker who decides the amount of money that is given to the bride's family in the form of bride price. If the groom wants to give more, he can do so, but would be discouraged by the broker. The reason is simply, as one broker said to his clients, "you should avoid evoking competition among the brides!"

<sup>40</sup> According to my interviews, the bride price could be given up to \$2,000 (US dollars) in the early time when the matchmaking fee was set at around \$12,000. After the matchmaking fee was reduced to around \$7,000, the bride price was also reduced accordingly. Now no more than \$500 is given on average.

<sup>41</sup> Most parents know well that their daughter goes to the marriage broker. Sometimes the idea even initially comes from the parents. Therefore, in most cases, the parents would have mentally prepared well for finding out that their daughter gets selected.

make an appointment for the visa interview. After confirming their interview dates, Guochang and Yunpu came back to Taiwan to wait. A couple of weeks later they came back to Hanoi for the interview.<sup>42</sup> In the interim of waiting, Hong and Van moved to Tung's place, staying together with other brides of Tung's clients. Tung was in charge of these brides' life before they move to Taiwan. He arranged classes for them to study Chinese, served as an interpreter when their grooms called them from Taiwan, and from time to time taught them how to be a "good wife" in their daily conversation.<sup>43</sup> By arranging them to live together with his family at his own house, Tung was also able to closely watch their daily life and prevent them from runaway.

Guochang and Yunpu returned for the visa interview a couple of weeks later. Before we went to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (hereafter referred to as the TECO) in Hanoi, where visa interviews take place, I had contacted a visa official and requested him to arrange an opportunity for me to sit in on an interview as an observer. Coincidentally, the date he scheduled for me was exactly the same day as Guochang and Yunpu would be interviewed with their respective brides. Without disclosing my relationship with the two interviewees, I was invited to sit next to the visa official and observe the entire process of interviews held on that day. The visa official and a Vietnamese official translator asked both members of each couple the same question in their mother tongues at the same time to check if the answers they gave were corresponding. Both interviews went smoothly despite the fact that their stories of romantic encounters with their mates, which were made up and taught by Tung's business partner who

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<sup>42</sup> Tung disclosed to me that he "used money to exchange time" for his clients; otherwise they would have to wait longer. It is hard to tell if a bribe really matters in his case. But it is for sure that bribing has commonly been practiced by local matchmakers who want to facilitate their applications. That is to say, a certain amount of the service fee Taiwanese clients pay actually goes to different levels of authorities.

<sup>43</sup> I stayed at Tung's place to participate in their everyday life while waiting for Guochang's and Yunpu's return from the visa interview. I also tutored them in Chinese as an exchange for free accommodation.

was in charge of document applications, were highly suspect. The visa official did not heckle them with trivial questions and quickly ended his interviews with the two couples. However, owing to Yunpu's "unusual" background—young and holding a bachelor degree in engineering from a national university, the visa official ceaselessly asked Yunpu with misgiving why he wanted to marry a foreign wife. "You should be able to find a wife of good quality in Taiwan according to your good conditions," the visa official commented in Mandarin during the interview. Without any hesitation, Yunpu firmly responded to his curiosity with an answer for official-use-only, "I feel I have reached the age of *chengjia liye* (成家立業; getting married and making achievements in one's career). I do not want to delay my marriage. So soon after meeting Van through my friend's introduction, I fell in love with her and just wanted to marry her as soon as possible."

After Yunpu and Van left the interview room, the official could not help voicing to me his deep concerns about the increasing rate of transnational marriages:

"Why are there so many Taiwanese men coming to Vietnam to look for wives? We have so many good women in Taiwan. Do Taiwanese people not understand the meaning of the Chinese old saying, *feishui buluo wairentian* (肥水不落外人田; One should prevent nourishing water in his farmland from flowing into others'. It suggests that good things be kept for one's own community, not be shared with outsiders). How come Taiwanese men like to marry foreign brides, and Taiwanese women just let go of these men? You know, I'm surprised by the increasing number of cases in which the Taiwanese husband has a good educational background and good job, like the guy you just saw, in the recent years!"

Indeed, I have encountered other men like Yunpu, university graduates, holding a job with a good salary, also looking for foreign wives through marriage agencies. Another example is another client of Hui Ge's, Chingda, whom I met on his trip to Vietnam for the visa interview. At that time he just got his Master's degree in computer science from a national university and was considering continuing his study for a Ph.D. degree. In like manner, in my visit to another

marriage brokering company in Taipei, the broker boasted to me of the quality of his clients by showing one of his clients who was a professor coming to him in his middle age. These examples seem to suggest that, in spite of the fact that lower-class men constitute the majority of consumers in the commodified transnational marriage market, the increase of men with more economic and social capital participating in the market should also be noted. In light of this, we need to reconsider the idea that the economic status of grooms is the major factor influencing men's decision to marry foreign brides. Taiwanese men's increasing interest in foreign brides has triggered the transnational marriage market to be very competitive and active. To create more demand for foreign brides in the market, brokering companies have adopted various marketing strategies. They seek to attract potential clients by reducing the charge and providing more service. Different from the bride-recruiting end, where personal networks are heavily relied upon,<sup>44</sup> Taiwanese marriage brokers have to attend to advertising on the internet in addition to flyers circulated in the neighborhood. Their marketing strategy first of all aims at distinguishing foreign brides from local brides through sexual and racial otherization, and then differentiating among foreign brides according to their countries of origin.

Interestingly, a new trend emerging in the early 2000s challenged the double-discrimination connotative assumption that only "low-class men" look for "foreign brides." Beginning in 2002, a couple of marriage brokering companies launched a new business in introducing women from Eastern Europe, mainly Ukraine, to Taiwanese men. It was seen as a golden business opportunity as the brokers believed white women can be the target of middle to upper class men who had no

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<sup>44</sup> Taking Vietnam for example, the personal network serves as the only access for interested women to get to the market. I thereby argue that it is this character that makes the practice of the commodified transnational marriage very different from it—the "mail-order bride" practice— in the West.

time for courtship, such as engineers working at industrial parks, as distinguished from Asian women for lower class men. As the news of the brokering business in Eastern European brides was exposed on the mass media, it attracted tremendous attention from the public all of a sudden.

The phenomenon was so prominent in that it challenged the stereotypical images of commodified transnational marriages in three dimensions. First of all, these white women, unlike brides from China or Southeast Asia, were never depicted to be poor or as opportunists who use marriage as a strategy for a better life. Instead, they were very often promoted for their sexy appearance, high educational level, and language skill, characteristics that ordinary Taiwanese people think helpful in improving the entire Taiwanese population quality of the next generation. Secondly, they were set for upper-middle class men and therefore had a much higher “market price” than brides from other Asian countries. For instance, the cost of marrying a Ukrainian woman through an agency is about three to four times the cost of marrying a Vietnamese or Chinese woman. Besides, it was widely believed that a huge difference of expenses will come into view after the couple’s marital life is laid out. In other words, men without a considerable economic ability or inheritable property would not be regarded as eligible candidates for marrying Eastern European women. Last, these white women were not expected to play the traditional role of housewives as Asian wives are, although they are when marketed to Western men. The discrepancy seemed to imply that men’s expectation of women’s role in the household and gender relations in the marriage would vary with race and/or nationality.

In contrast to the way in which matchmaking is practiced in Vietnam,<sup>45</sup> the procedure of

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<sup>45</sup> The practice in the north of Vietnam is in some way different from that in the south of Vietnam. For example, in the south of Vietnam, women who look for foreign husbands would come to Ho Chi Minh City and live with their little matchmaker, or *yangma* (foster mother) until being selected. In addition, they do not need to pay their

introducing a Ukrainian woman to a Taiwanese man is much more complex and costly. To get a sense of how the business is operated differently from that in China and Vietnam, I also went on a marriage trip organized by a brokering company to Kiev, Ukraine. The group consisted of only three members, the broker, the client and me. The client, Yongchi, is a son of a landowner family. He was 42 and worked as a foreman at a construction company. He found the broker Su on TV and was attracted to his business. After joining Su's club, he had been put in touch with several women, and finally decided to meet Natasha after corresponding with her for several months. He was told that if he was not satisfied with Natasha, he would be arranged to meet other potential brides. Unfortunately, the client refused Natasha after they met in person. Yongchi gave me a simple reason that shocked me a lot. He told me that Natasha did not meet his imagination of what an Eastern European bride ought to look like.<sup>46</sup> She was not a blond, nor was she sexy as her picture shown in the catalog. As a result, he asked Su to arrange for other women to meet after Natasha left on the second day.

I was very surprised by the way in which Su positioned his client in the relationship with bride candidates in the matchmaking process. The expected gender relation was totally opposed to that between Taiwanese clients and Asian bride candidates. For example, all of the meetings for Yongchi to meet the women were arranged at luxurious restaurants one-on-one for dinner each night. We were given an orientation regarding how to behave in a proper manner at a dining table, how to eat and drink, what to say and not to say, and other Western etiquette that he

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matchmakers for successful matchmaking; whereas in the north of Vietnam, the bride's family usually needs to pay about US\$1,000 as a necessary thank you gift. In China, the bride's family is charged even more. I was told by a bride-to-be that she had to pay her big matchmaker RMB\$40,000 (about US\$5,800). The amount would vary from area to area, but I believe she was extorted too much too.

<sup>46</sup> Taiwanese people liken Eastern European women to "*jinsimao*" (金絲貓; blond hair cats). It implies that Eastern European women should be blond and sexy as cats. I will discuss the culturally imaginary formation later on in this chapter.

thought we should follow. Yongchi was asked to give precedence to women, opening the door for them, helping them to sit, helping them take off and put on their coat whenever needed. We both were asked to behave and speak with caution so as not to lose face in front of them, whom Su thought to be “Western” and more “civilized” than Taiwanese. To prevent unwanted consequences, I carefully avoided breaking his rules. Unfortunately, I still failed to meet his criteria sometimes, which led to his blaming me for looking like a *dalumei*,<sup>47</sup> a vulgar woman from mainland China. Ironically, I never experienced such a severe and intensive “Western life” in the US. Instead, I was brought that experience through people’s anticipation of how “Western etiquette” ought to be carried out in daily life while I was outside the Western world. I argue that Su’s equalizing Ukrainians to “Westerners” and the belief that Ukrainian brides are more civilized than Asian brides is by no means merely his personal perception. It also reflects many Taiwanese people’s construction of a racial hierarchy, in spite of its unapparent disposition, of which the formation can be tracked in Taiwan’s closer relationship with the West, especially the United States, in the past decades.

The Eastern European bride fever did not last long, and successful cases were very few.<sup>48</sup> Despite its transience, it did cause a sensation during those years. For instance, to attract the public’s attention, one proprietor held a public dating event close to an industrial park for interested men to meet several Ukrainian women who were invited to Taiwan. These women were arranged to stand on stage and play some interactive games with a crowd of men standing in front the stage. One newspaper even used half of a page to report this event and the new

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<sup>47</sup> For example, he blamed me for dressing like a *dalumei* because I wore a down coat with a pair of sport shoes rather than a wool coat or leather jacket with high boots.

<sup>48</sup> Since the brokers I contacted always refused to reveal the number of their successful cases to me, I conjectured the number should be very low.

foreign bride trend with a compelling title, *烏克蘭佳人，台灣郎想牽手!* (*Taiwanese Men Want to Hold the Hands of Ukrainian Beauties!*) (Pan 2003). The scenario is reminiscent of another piece of sensational news about Vietnamese women being displayed in front of a Mazu temple “for sale” arranged by a marriage broker in 2004. The marriage broker arranged the trip for several Vietnamese women who were interested in marrying Taiwanese men to come to Taiwan. In contrast to the treatment the other broker offered to those Ukrainian women, unfortunately, these Vietnamese women ended up being peddled in the streets and displayed in public with a price of NT\$320,000 (about US\$10,000) for on-site transaction. According to the news report, interested men could just pay and take a woman away right away (Apple Daily 2004). This incident invoked the opposition of women’s rights advocates for the overt practice of “selling” women.

Two facets of the marketing of foreign brides in the transnational marriage market intrigue me to explore more. One is the commodification of women and marriage, which I will discuss in the next chapter. The other is about the racial hierarchy in the transnational marriage market: why are Eastern European women represented as “modern” subjects in relation to other Asian women represented as backward ones? How is the racial ideology that dominates men’s perception and influences their preference of “foreign brides” formulated? How does the racial ideology work with class to differentiate the value of foreign brides in the marriage market? To explore those Taiwanese men’s desire for foreign wives, I would like to look into how the representation politics is maneuvered in conjunction with the market logic to create a demand for foreign brides in the marriage market, in which different “market value” is assigned to foreign women according to their country of origin. I argue that the analysis of how race, class and gender relations play out in the transnational marriage market is important as it serves as a key to

understand why Taiwanese men look for foreign wives in terms of the cultural logic of desire. I will approach this issue by analyzing the trend of transnational marriages in the past decade in a broader framework including a demographic perspective in the next section.

### **The Trend of Transnational Marriages**

As mentioned earlier, Taiwan's close economic ties with Mainland China and Vietnam in the 1990s gave rise to the trend of transnational marriages. The trend extended from specific groups of people, such as veterans and businessmen, to ordinary people in the late 1990s and rapidly grew in the early 2000s. According to statistics (see Table 1), the rate of transnational marriages peaked at 31.86% in 2003. To restrain the trend, the government adopted a stricter immigration policy, which stipulated that all foreign spouses have to go through a one-on-one interview to obtain a visa to Taiwan. The new policy was applied to Chinese spouses beginning in 2003 and other foreign spouses in 2005. It has been seen that the transnational marriage rate gradually decreased after 2004. Apparently, in addition to other possible influences, such as the sluggish economy of Taiwan and growing economy of the bride-sending countries, the strict immigration policy significantly contributed to the result. In 2008, the rate of transnational marriages reduced to 14.3%.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The increasing rate in 2009 was due to a decrease in the number of total registered marriages. The total number of transnational marriages in fact did not increase.

Table 1: Estimated Number of Transnational Marriages by Nationality of Spouses, 1994-2009

Year	Total no. of foreign	As % of total marriages	Nationality of Foreign Spouses			Sex		Total no. of Marriages
			China	SE Asia	Other areas	Male	Female	
1994	12,784	--	7,885	4,899		--	--	--
1995	16,754	--	9,180	6,574		--	--	--
1996	20,561	--	9,349	11,212		--	--	--
1997	24,960	--	8,951	16,009		--	--	--
1998	22,905	15.70	12,451	10,454		--	--	145,976
1999	32,263	18.60	17,589	14,674		--	--	173,209
2000	44,966	24.80	23,628	21,338		--	--	181,642
2001	46,202	27.10	26,797	17,512	1,893	3,400	42,802	170,515
2002	49,013	28.39	28,906	18,037	2,070	4,366	44,647	172,655
2003	54,634	31.86	35,473	17,351	2,292	6,001	48,633	171,483
2004	31,310	23.82	10,972	18,103	2,235	3,176	28,134	131,453
2005	28,427	20.14	14,258	11,454	2,354	3,139	25,288	141,140
2006	23,930	16.77	14,619	6,950	2,574	3,214	20,716	142,669
2007	24,700	18.29	15,146	6,952	2,602	3,141	21,559	135,041
2008	21,729	14.03	12,772	6,009	2,948	3,516	18,213	154,866
2009	21,914	18.71	13,294	5,696	2,924	3,673	18,241	117,099
	476,386		261,270	215,116				

Note: \*including spouses from China, Hong Kong and Macao.

Sources: various sources compiled by the author.

(1994-2000: Wang and Chang, 2002; Tsay, 2004; Hugo and Nguyen, 2007; 2001-2009: Department of Population, Ministry of the Interior, Taipei, Taiwan)

The statistics roughly show the “success” of the government’s efforts to curb the increase of transnational marriages. I will discuss the state’s regulations on the market in chapter five. In this chapter I will attend to two things that are noteworthy in the transnational marriage trend of the past decade but not reflected in the statistics. One is an increase in young and/or middle-class men interested in marrying foreign women through brokers, just like Yunpu and Chingda, despite their insignificant number contributing to the total statistics. The other was the emergence of Eastern European bride brokerage that was thought to subvert people’s perception of “foreign brides” but faded out from the market soon.

Why did Taiwanese men swarm to marry foreign women in the past decade? I contend that three factors need to be taken into consideration when delving into the phenomenon: the

demographic structure, gender politics and economic conditions. First, in terms of the demographic structure in Taiwan, we can see an unbalanced sex ratio of the unmarried population (see Table 2). It shows that of every 130 men, 30 (23%) would not be able to find a wife. The unbalanced situation at the age between 30 and 44 years old is even serious, in spite of a steady decrease yearly in the past decade, that to every one hundred of women more than 40 men cannot find a mate. From the demographic perspective, there indeed exists a demand for foreign women for Taiwanese men in the marriage market.

Table 2 Numbers of the Unmarried Population and the Fertility Rate, 1999-2009

Year	Total no. of the population	Sex ratio of the unmarried population over 15 yrs old		No. of unmarried male over 15 years old		No. of unmarried female over 15 years old		Fertility rate (‰)
			30-44 yr		30-44 yr		30-44 yr	
1999	22,092,387	130	175	3,364,354	606,860	2,581,305	346,062	1.555
2000	22,276,672	129	169	3,371,213	620,066	2,619,391	367,632	1.680
2001	22,405,568	127	163	3,371,660	635,570	2,652,393	390,665	1.400
2002	22,520,776	126	157	3,379,567	650,001	2,687,613	413,461	1.340
2003	22,604,550	124	153	3,410,118	668,308	2,741,113	437,631	1.235
2004	22,689,122	123	150	3,452,830	698,770	2,796,839	467,129	1.180
2005	22,770,383	123	147	3,499,950	730,054	2,852,497	498,121	1.115
2006	22,876,527	122	144	3,540,848	781,010	2,900,170	543,172	1.115
2007	22,958,360	121	142	3,583,708	821,419	2,952,078	579,659	1.100
2008	23,037,031	121	140	3,612,897	861,271	2,988,331	616,036	1.050
2009	23,119,772	120	140	3,675,047	923,076	3,053,673	663,369	1.020

Source: Department of Household Registration, Ministry of Interior (various data compiled by the author)

Yet things are never as easy as they appear to be. In reality, the situation is even worse as more and more Taiwanese women delay their marriage or choose to remain single. The improvement of women's education over the past decades has led to the change of gender politics in Taiwan. The advocacy of gender equality by early Taiwanese feminists since the 1970s, alongside with the project of Taiwan's democratization, has granted women more access to higher education. Holding a higher educational degree allows women to compete with men in

the job market and accumulate more bargaining power than before in the face of men. However, the gender ideology for a long time implanted in the social body does not keep pace with the quick change of women's status. Women are still widely expected to engage in labor reproduction at home. Their educational achievement and career development are widely perceived to be contradictory to marital life and a threat to the mainstream idea of gender relations in the household, such as *nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* (男主外, 女主内; men are in charge of outside affairs and women of inside affairs; namely men are breadwinners and women are homemakers), or *nanzun nübei* (男尊女卑; men are superior to women). The awakening of gender equality helps educated women find release from the constraints of patriarchal ideology while at the same time makes them less desirable for men who hold the belief that men should be superior to women. In fact, most women also hold this belief, in spite of their feminist consciousness being raised, when looking for mates. In other words, the cultural preference of hypergamy, the situation that women marry up, is not completely mitigated for the improvement of education in the past decades.

The hypergamy practice results in a marriage gradient where two categories of people are squeezed out of the marriage market: women of high status and men of low status. The situation of marriage squeeze is even more serious when women's educational level is on average higher than men's. Table 3 tells the very story of educational attainment between the sexes in 2005, where we can also observe the improvement of women's education over the past decades. Of the population younger than 35 years old, the limit of women's socially accepted marriageable age, the number of women graduating from college and university has surpassed that of men. According to statistics of educational composition of Taiwanese grooms and brides married in 2003, 19.3% of brides are university or college graduates while only 17.8% of grooms are so.

Taiwanese brides clearly have a higher level of educational attainment than grooms (Tsay 2004: 181). Plus, with more human capital and higher social status than before, women's expectation of gender relations in the household is also changed. Nowadays, the man's personality, the way in which he treats his mate, his living style and taste, all of the factors that would influence the gender relations become as paramount as, or even more crucial than, his economic ability, in Taiwanese women's decision on mate selection.

Table 3 Educational Attainment of Population aged 20-54, 2005

Educational Attainment	Years	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54
University & College	Total	258,182	456,678	318,803	239,251	196,950	164,733	140,758
	M	109,161	209,381	152,035	115,156	103,639	93,455	86,189
	F	149,021	247,297	166,768	124,095	93,311	71,278	54,569

\*source: the Department of Statistics, the Ministry of Education, Taiwan

Economic restructuring of Taiwan in the past decades also contributed to the gravity of the marriage gradient. Industrialization and urbanization have led to marginalization of men from the agricultural sector since import substitution and export-oriented industries became dominant in the government's policymaking in the late 1960s. Since then, agriculture has been seen as an appendage to industry. In 1986, the ratio of the average income of agricultural households to non-agricultural households reached 0.72 (Hsia 2002: 171). Better living conditions in cities and better salaries of working at factories attracted rural men to find jobs there. However, the export of Taiwanese domestic capital to China and Southeast Asia in the mid-1980s caused lots of factories in towns to close down. Numerous migrant workers were forced to return home and worked in the informal sector. The unemployment situation got even worse after the government opened up the import of short-term foreign labor and encouraged high technology-oriented industry development in the late-1980s. The policy change aggravated the marginalization of

unskilled labor in agriculture and other traditional industries. Without accumulating enough human capital, rural men are frequently confronted by double discrimination, even in their hometown: they are stigmatized to be economically weak even if their families own lands and culturally poor despite having urban living experiences before. Lacking human capital plus the cultural preference of hypergamy makes rural men commonly have a hard time finding mates even in their hometown. In this sense, they are squeezed from the domestic marriage market.

In short, three dimensions, the demographic structure, gender politics and economic conditions, need to be attended to when we consider the market formation of transnational marriages from a macro-political economic perspective. In addition to the practice of hypergamy, it is the triple pressure—the unbalance between two sexes of marriageable population, discordance between the raising of women’s feminist consciousness and expected gender relations in mainstream society, as well as the economic predicaments in rural areas and in traditional industries due to industrialization—that trigger a considerable number of men of rural origin and of lower social status to look for wives from China and Southeast Asia. However, the macro-perspective would not be able to explain middle class men’s participation and the emergence of Eastern European bride brokerage. Nor would it be able to elucidate how the racial hierarchy of foreign women is formed through Taiwanese imagination of the global cultural order. Therefore, I argue it is important to look into the political economy of the imagination and the cultural logic of desire, seeing how they are interwoven together with the abovementioned macro factors and embodied in the individual’s decision making through a micro-perspective lens.

### **Racialized Bodies: How are Foreign Women Advertised?**

A piece of doggerel widely circulating on the internet since 2004 makes sarcasm at the reason why many Taiwanese men turn their back on local women and look for foreign women (from China and Southeast Asia) instead. It exaggeratedly differentiates Taiwanese brides from foreign brides by delineating the former as arrogant and avaricious in opposition to the latter as docile and easily satisfied, having little consumption desire. Here are some excerpts:

找外籍新娘時：女人一字排開讓你選！  
找台灣新娘時：沒的選，只能被選！  
外籍新娘：老公你好棒喔！一個月可以賺三萬耶！  
台灣新娘：你這無三小路用的傢伙！一個月才賺三萬！  
外籍新娘：老公帶我去超市，夜市逛逛！  
台灣新娘：老公帶我去日本、美國逛逛！  
外籍新娘：老公我生日時，我要蛋糕！  
台灣新娘：老公我生日時，我要鑽戒！  
外籍新娘：有飯有一個青菜就可以吃了！  
台灣新娘：只有飯和一個青菜怎麼吃？  
外籍新娘：我工作一個月有1萬5就可以了！  
台灣新娘：我不想工作，你養我吧！  
外籍新娘：有空時打掃，整理家裡！  
台灣新娘：(什麼都不做)……  
外籍新娘：(作什麼事都先問一下老公)  
台灣新娘：老娘作什麼，還要先跟你報告嗎？

--為什麼台灣有35萬的男人要娶外籍新娘<sup>50</sup>

*When looking for foreign brides:* Women line up for men to choose!  
*When looking for local brides:* Men have no choice but to be chosen!  
*Foreign brides:* Honey, it's great that you can earn NT\$30,000 a month!<sup>51</sup>  
*Local brides:* Only earn NT\$30,000 a month? What a useless person you are!  
*Foreign brides:* Honey, please take me to supermarkets and night markets!  
*Local brides:* Honey, please take me to Japan and USA!

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<sup>50</sup> For the full version please see: <http://eznewlife.com/?p=12854>

<sup>51</sup> It is about US\$930. Take 2004 for example, the average salary was about US\$ 1,103 (NT\$35,292). For university graduates, the average salary of their first job after graduation was about US\$ 825 (NT\$26,400). More detailed statistics please go to the website of the Council of Labor Affairs, Executive Yuan, Taiwan, at <http://163.29.140.81/psdn/query/DownLoad.aspx?session=beuyubzkyjeflk55jvhboi45&sermo=4&type=display&years=1&dataYear=095&no=4&pagetab=2>.

*Foreign brides:* Honey, I want a cake on my birthday!

*Local brides:* Honey, I want a diamond on my birthday!

*Foreign brides:* It is enough to have rice and a vegetable dish for a meal.

*Local brides:* How to swallow a meal with rice and a vegetable dish only?

*Foreign brides:* It is enough if I can get a job with a salary of NT\$15,000 a month

*Local brides:* I don't want to work. Please feed me!

*Foreign brides:* Cleaning the house whenever they have time.

*Local brides:* Doing nothing!

*Foreign brides:* No matter what they want to do, they ask husbands first.

*Local brides:* Why should I report my husband what I want to do in advance?

*--Why are there 350,000 Taiwanese Men Looking for Foreign Brides?*

Using the contrast of diamond/cake, Japan and USA/night markets, laziness/diligence in housework performance and so on to represent the discrepant gender relations, the doggerel has provoked much discussion on individuals' blogs and brokers' websites. Many men expressed their approval of the content by sharing the same feeling of being "tramped" (踩; cai) by Taiwanese women. For many of them, it is men's dignity, the need of masculinity maintenance, that primarily triggers them to consider marrying foreign women from developing countries. Tian and Wang's study (Tian and Wang 2006) also observes the role of masculinity in the transnational marriage. Seen as men's essential characteristic, it is not only required by men, but also manipulated by brokers. Many men looking for Vietnamese brides I met in Vietnam share similar concerns about their marriage. They are not necessary economically weak but more likely to be culturally weak due to lack of socially recognized "masculinity." I will discuss this more when getting to Yunpu's story later. Besides masculinity, a demand for free labor is also an important factor triggering men to look for foreign brides, a demand which crosses through class distinctions. For example, for men who serve as the owner of a small factory or farm, money is not an issue for getting married. What is at stake, rather, especially for those who have parents or children to be cared for at home, is to find a wife who is willing to support them by contributing

both productive labor and reproductive labor at work and at home respectively for free. Before profit-oriented matchmaking was completely banned in 2008, it was easy to find advertisements online or in the streets. Many brokering companies knew well how to manipulate the cultural logic of “love” in packaging their bride candidates. They assumed and homogenized all foreign women from developing countries as docile and domestic so as to make them ideal wives in a traditional sense. One brokering company promoted their bride candidates by calculating for men the benefit of getting married with a foreign bride from China or Vietnam:

“First, she can work and earn NT\$20,000 (about US\$625) a month. The total income of the household increases NT\$240,000 (about US\$7500) per year. Second, she will sleep with you. You do not need to find women outside. It saves you NT\$80,000 (about US\$2,500) per year. Third, she can do housework, cooking and doing laundry for free. It saves you NT\$10,000 per month and NT\$120,000 (about US\$3,750) per year. Fourth, she can give birth to a child. *Chuanzong jiedai* (produce a male heir to continue the family line) is invaluable. In total, you can get a benefit of NT\$300,000-400,000 (about US\$9,375-12,500) per year. Why don’t you get married?”

This bald-faced calculation converting the value of the woman’s body into cash value would irritate readers, especially women’s rights advocates, for its audacious commodification of women and marriage. My main purpose of attending to these advertisements here, however, is not to condemn the business and involved men as complicit chauvinists who exploit and oppress women, which would be an oversimplified narrative. But rather, I would like to complicate the “complicity” by looking into the interplay between the market mechanism and involved men from the structure/agent dynamic perspective: how the former stimulates the latter’s desire for foreign brides and how the latter responds to the market phenomenon.

Although using this kind of degrading language to promote foreign brides in the advertisement has given rise to reproach in society, it did draw the picture of ideal marriage which many Taiwanese men dream of, that is, “buy one (wife) get one free (labor).” The

treatment of a wife as a free worker at home and even at work is taken for granted not only by Taiwanese husbands but, unfortunately, also by many Vietnamese wives. In my observation of matchmaking meetings, almost every woman gave a yes to the question regarding whether or not they are willing to take care of their husband's family and help his business eventually. In Vietnam, most bride candidates agreed without negotiation and considered it the wife's obligation;<sup>52</sup> whereas in China, more women reached the agreement through negotiation. Admittedly, it could be attributed to the language factor that sharing the same language makes it easier for the Chinese women to bargain with the Taiwanese men. I argue that it should not be ignored either that the national economic capability also influences women's bargaining power in the international marriage market. First, after China's economy got prosperous and became attractive to foreign capital, Chinese women, especially those living in the Southeast coast area, started to enjoy better living conditions than before. Besides, a flood of Taiwanese enterprises entering China brought them more opportunities to meet Taiwanese men, which allowed them to be able to compare men of different backgrounds. Therefore, compared to Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian bride candidates, Chinese bride candidates hold relatively more capital to bargain and make their choice accordingly.<sup>53</sup> The difference has led to racialized differentiation between Chinese and Vietnamese brides in the transnational marriage market. According to Hui Ge, Chinese brides are cleverer than Vietnamese brides, while Vietnamese brides are more

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<sup>52</sup> While in reality, I met some "runaway brides" who decided to leave behind the marriage because they could not bear the double burden with little or even no payment, which crashed their "Taiwanese dream." I will discuss their labor in more detail in the next chapter and a couple of runaway stories in chapter five.

<sup>53</sup> The scenario is in fact happening between China and Vietnam too. With the bloom of China's economy, it has seen thousands of illegal Vietnamese workers flooding into China. According to a news report in Asian Times, at the same time, an increasing number of Chinese men are looking to Vietnam in search of the ideal wife through brokers. Many Chinese men complain of Chinese women's soulless avarice on the Internet and employ matchmakers to find them a more "obedient" Vietnamese wife. Testimonies judging that Vietnamese brides are the best abound (Ewing 2010).

obedient and trustful. He taught his clients how to choose the nationality of their future wife, “if you need someone to help manage your business, you can consider Chinese women. However, if you can not handle women well, then probably Vietnamese women are more suitable for you.”

Mr. Lin, a manager of a brokering company, which also does business in both Chinese and Vietnamese brides, expressed the same opinion,

“When a client comes to our office, we will conduct a conversation with him to get to know his personality and other personal information first. If he is clear about which nationality of his wife he wants, then it is great. If not, we will start with his personality analysis. We will tell him the pros and cons of marrying a Chinese bride and Vietnamese bride respectively. If he is more introverted and his personality is less masculine, we will probably suggest him considering Vietnamese rather than Chinese brides. Here is our reason. For example, Chinese brides more likely request more than Vietnamese brides do. It is because their economic condition is better than Vietnamese on the average. Plus, they speak Chinese so they can argue with you. In short, they are more difficult. You will find sharing the same language would be good for some people yet bad for others. If you are not confident of your ability to handle women, you probably like to have a Vietnamese wife. They are simpler and more obedient because of the language barrier. So actually it is good timing for you to train your wife when they just arrive, at the time they can only speak a little bit Chinese and must depend on you for everything.”

Although Taiwanese husbands’ complaints about their foreign wives “turning bad” after a certain period of time abound on the Internet, in the eyes of marriage brokers, the “problem” can never be attributed to the wives. It is so because, according to their logic, these Southeast Asian women are so innocent and simple that they are easily contaminated by our complicated society. Therefore the husband should take the responsibility to prevent his foreign wife from being “contaminated” by “bad friends.” Many brokers provide their clients with some “tips,” such as reducing their wife’s opportunity of contacting the outside world, especially her countrymen who have resided in Taiwan for a long time and know well how to “enjoy life” in Taiwan. Some even suggest their clients not let their wife go to language classes but teach by themselves at home. However, this is of course not the only way to “protect” their wife’s “innocence.” “You have to

earn her love so that she is willing to stay with you all the time.” said Hui Ge. “Making them stick to you is in fact very easy. Just like a poor child who has no chance to taste candy, she will be pleased, appreciate and then listen to you if you can give her some sugar from time to time. Vietnamese brides are easily satisfied,” he concluded. These brokers taught their clients how to maintain a happy foreign marriage using the strategy of *ruanying jianshi* (軟硬兼施; use both hard and soft tactics). Some brokering companies even offer their clients marriage consultation as “after-sales” service.

In addition to romanticization of foreign brides from Southeast Asia as tender, innocent and simple-hearted subjects,<sup>54</sup> these brokers also appeal to cultural affiliation to endorse their statements. For example, they told their clients that the reason why Vietnamese brides are obedient as such is because Vietnam receives great influence from Confucianism. As a result, Vietnamese culture is closer to ours and Vietnamese women also comply with *sancong side* (三從四德; three obediences and four virtues<sup>55</sup>) as their life-long obligation. Some brokers even theorize Vietnamese women’s diligent and family-oriented virtue by attributing it to the nature of Vietnam’s “matrilineal society,” which, unfortunately, has been widely spread in society as common knowledge. In fact, Vietnam is not a matrilineal society, despite the fact that, indeed, very often it is women who bear the responsibility for the financial security of the household. Speaking of women’s labor, it is interesting to observe that contrary to many Taiwanese women

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<sup>54</sup> If we closely observe the image construction of “foreign brides” in society, we would find that not only marriage brokers but also many non-profit organizations for immigrants are involved in romanticizing them. The latter’s representation of “foreign brides” as the innocent victim actually helps essentialize those women’s vulnerability, which is unfortunately what the brokers are happy to see. There has been much research and criticism on the representation of foreign sex workers as victims of trafficking in women, such as Kamala Kempadoo (1999; 2004; 2005a; 2005b) and Laura M. Agustín (2003). I will review more literature in a later chapter.

<sup>55</sup> Three obediences refer to obedience to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to son after husband’s death; four virtues refer to morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work.

who choose to work for the sake of self-realization, Vietnamese women seem to have no choice but to work for the family's sake. My friend Trang Ha, a Vietnamese journalist and writer living in Taipei, wrote on her blog:

“I have been asked if Vietnam is a matrilineal society thousands of times. I don't know where Taiwanese get the idea. In Vietnam, women's status is very low. They do not have power at home although most of them are breadwinners. Of more than hundreds of families I know, I never know any woman who does not need to work but can choose to stay at home as a housekeeper.”

The seriously unequal gender relations do tell a part of the story why Vietnamese women want to marry foreign husbands, which I will elaborate in the next chapter. What I would like to discuss here is the difference in the way in which women's reproductive labor is considered between Asian brides and Eastern European brides in the marriage market,<sup>56</sup> and how the difference is at play in men's comprehension of “romantic love.” I suggest inquiring into the issue through examining the representation of foreign brides of different origins in the online catalog first as visual images play an important role in constituting people's imaginaries. Here I would like to show an example of the differentiated representation. Below shows two web pages I found on two websites of marriage brokering companies. The left one demonstrates Vietnamese bride candidates and the right, the Ukrainian.

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<sup>56</sup> Although both resort to “romantic love” in the hope of triggering Taiwanese men's desire to get married, how “romantic love” is construed by men looking for Asian brides would differ from those looking for Eastern European brides. I will talk about it later.

Figure 2 Example of Pictures of Vietnamese and Ukrainian Brides in Online Catalogs



Resources: Left: <http://www.vnn.com.tw>;  
 Right: <http://www.crosinternational.com.tw/urk2/gallery.php?country=UK>  
 Accessed date: June 15, 2006

These are typical ways in which Vietnamese and Ukrainian brides are displayed in the online catalogs. The Vietnamese women were presented through snapshots taken on the spot one after another, having neither make-up on the face, a designed hairstyle, a pose and facial expression, nor photographic light to make their body sexually attractive. By striking contrast, Ukrainian women were presented in glamour shots with delicate make-up and dress-up, a

designed hairstyle, as well as an enchanting pose and facial expression, which made them look far from ordinary housekeepers but more like celebrities.<sup>57</sup> Women's romantic attraction thus appears as a reference to distinguish Eastern European brides from Vietnamese brides, and a cue for male clients to consider what type of wives they wish for and can afford.

Image is a form of expression, a way of seeing. The meaning of an image depends on the symbolic associations of the individuals perceiving it. How the individual perceives it is linked to knowledge and beliefs in a complex relationship (Berger 1972). In the same formula, photographic portraits of bride candidates in the catalog would make different sense to consumers/suitors according to the cultural framework in which the portraits are positioned and through which the consumers read. The women's smile and gestures become semiotic codes to be interpreted with the cultural reference of what consists of the "ideal" wife. For example, in her study on international matchmaking, Jennifer Patico (2010) discusses the representation of Russian "mail-order brides" in the United States. She observes that in American society, those glamour shots, despite many sexy poses and makeup used, do not thereby reduce American men's "confidence" in those women's "traditional" values. Rather, these images serve to promote Russian women as subjects who carry the virtue of domesticity, passivity, and patience yet are sexy and hyper-feminine.

However, this kind of glamour shot was read differently in Taiwan. In the context of

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, Nadezhda Azhgikhna and Helena Goschilo observe (1996) that in the late Soviet the androgynous images of femininity promoted by the state combining with ongoing consumer shortages made pursuit of an attractive feminine appearance an act of resistance for Soviet women. After the collapse of the Soviet state, sexualized representations of the female body flooded the Russian mass media. With participation in the public labor force no longer obligatory, being a housewife appeared as a liberating choice for some women (Patco 2010: 28). Although most studies on gender politics in the post-Soviet period revolve around Russia, I believe the explanation about Russia's social change is also valid for Ukraine since both of them share the same historical experience of being "invaded" by capitalism.

Chinese society, women gesturing in an alluring way or showing their sexy body parts for photography would seldom be associated with the image of an ideal wife but more with that of licentious woman. Ukrainian women's gaze at the lens/men with sexy and confident poses therefore makes them far from being the model of "traditional" and "passive" women in the Chinese context. By contrast, Vietnamese women's plain dress, stiff standing posture, unnatural facial expression with a shy smile makes them closer to the model. They are perceived to be desirable as traditional housewives who lack modern subjectivity and consumer desire and whose self can only be realized through *xiangfu jiaozi* (相夫教子; help the husband and teach the child/children). The lack is constructed, discursively and visually, as if it can only be fulfilled through a love connection with men who commit to "rescue" the women from the catalog world to the real world.<sup>58</sup>

Many studies have mentioned how nostalgia for "tradition" is at work in creating men's desire for foreign brides (Halualani 1995; Robinson 1996; Tolentino 1999; Simons 2001; Wilson 1988), and how brokering companies manipulate the nostalgic discourses and have foreign women's bodies fit into the discursive framework (Tolentino 1999; Patico 2010). As Rolando Tolentino observes, to maintain the US nuclear family fantasy, "the functional third-world woman's body is made symptomatic of the ideal first-world male nuclear family narrative (Tolentino 1999: 59)." In the same vein, Jennifer Patico criticizes brokering companies for their reductive and objectifying rhetoric that homogenously positions all American male clients as

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<sup>58</sup> Many scholars have studied the images of "mail-order brides" and highlight the victimization and homogenization of the women (Halualani 1995; Robinson 1996; Tolentino 1999; Villapando 1989; Wilson 1988). While Anna Tsing suggests we read them in another way— to see the photographs as a feature of a search for self-actualization of the women who send them in (Constable 2003: 22). Informed by the scholarship, I will look at not only the effect of the photographic representation but also how women voice for themselves beyond the representation.

consumers of Asian or East European “tradition,” docility, or desperation who do not look for “equal relations,” and that ignores other dimensions of the gender crisis that also account for men’s desire of foreign brides, such as excessive individualism and materialism, and the American culture of divorce (Patino 2010: 33).<sup>59</sup> Similar to their observation, I also found that most Asian bride brokering companies know well how to manipulate men’s nostalgia for the traditional gender relations in pre-industrial Taiwan, during which women served as the main care taker and affect provider for the whole family, and link the realization of “brining nostalgia back to reality” to men’s vision of “romantic love.”<sup>60</sup>

The marketing logic and representational strategies that resort to men’s masculinity through “rescuing”/“conquering” women and nostalgia, however, are not applicable for advertising Ukrainian brides. As mentioned above, Ukrainian brides are promoted in Taiwan not for their value of “tradition” as they are in the United States but, on the contrary, the value of “cosmopolitan,” which is perceived to be embodied in their higher educational background compared to Asian brides on the whole and, more compellingly, their stereotyped white appearance, blonde and tall. The contradictory image of Eastern European women is reminiscent of a “cultural shock” I experienced when I mentioned to Professor Bilaniuk, who does research on Ukraine, about Ukrainian bride brokerage in Taiwan for the first time. She was shocked and asked “Why? Is it because Taiwanese men also think Ukrainian women are traditional and

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<sup>59</sup> Patino tries to challenge the stereotype of male clients as power pursuers who always want to dominate exotic women. Yet she does not elaborate on what “equal relations” means for the American men who pursue this kind of relationship with their foreign partners. The occurrence of the “social ills” she mentions that many men would attribute to women’s faults and that many men hope marriage to a Russian or Ukrainian woman will help them overcome can actually be tracked back to the social mentality of masculinity. Informed by Patino, I will attend to male clients’ mentality so as to challenge the social representation of the gender relations between transnational couples simplified as the dominating and the dominated.

<sup>60</sup> I will elaborate the connection later on.

obedient?” Then it was my turn to get shocked and think, “What? Ukrainian women are thought to be traditional and obedient here?” The interesting experience inspired me not only to consider the cultural logic of the “value” and “desire” from a local perspective but also to attend to the culture’s relationship with others in the global hierarchy.

In contrast to a guaranteed happy ending of men’s trip to marry a Vietnamese woman, not every man interested in marrying an Eastern European woman can realize his dream. According to Mr. Su, men who want to become his clients must go through the process: registration online, telephone interview, and face-to-face interview. They have to be single with a stable job whose monthly salary is higher than US\$1,250<sup>61</sup> and own real estate. Besides, they should have received higher education or/and are of high social status and decent personality. In the final stage, he usually visits the client’s home in person to do an “on-the-spot survey.” The client would be granted access to the entire online bride catalog only when he passes through the examination and then pays a membership fee. Mr. Su stated that only by doing so could he screen out ineligible and insincere people and get the qualified clients he wished.

However, this kind of filtering mechanism is never adopted by Asian bride brokering companies. Asian bride brokers usually recruit as many clients as possible without setting up any requirements for their backgrounds, which in fact has become an issue that many women’s advocates urge the government to attend to. Unlike marrying a Ukrainian bride candidate, which requires correspondence between both sides for a period of time before meeting in person,

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<sup>61</sup> The national average salary was about \$1,250-1,300 during 2003-2006 (Council of Labor Affairs, M.O.I). More detailed information can be found at:  
<http://163.29.140.81/psdn/query/Download.aspx?session=0rao0fevw2ta5v45ms3xrf55&serno=2&type=display&years=4&dataYear=092,093,094,095&no=3&pagetab=1&title=總薪資、經常性薪資、非經常性薪資&measure=單位：元>

marrying a Vietnamese or Chinese woman does not need to go through that stage. The client does not even need to know whom he is going to meet prior to his departure. In most cases, the bride catalog exists only for the client's reference and as proof that the broker has the "ability" to provide this number of bride candidates for the client to choose until he is satisfied with his selection.

For Mr. Su, Asian brides, especially those from Southeast Asia, are not comparable with Eastern European brides in terms of "quality." So the price difference between marrying a Ukrainian bride and marrying an Asian bride just reflects the quality difference in proportion. How Ukrainian brides are promoted in a privileged way can be found in an interview report (China times, 9/12/2004). In the interview, Mr. Su claimed that all of the women listed in the catalog hold at least college degrees<sup>62</sup>; some possess a doctoral degree, working as a physician or engineer. He believes that these Ukrainian brides have better genes and cultural taste that can help improve our population quality by passing them down to our next generation. By comparison, the educational background of Asian brides is never recognized as important human capital, even though some do receive higher education, such as many Filipina brides.

Besides, Eastern European brides' language ability was also highlighted to be another selling point. He stressed that obtaining English ability is vital for it can help Taiwan communicate with international society and that most Ukrainian brides in his catalog can speak English. In the same interview report he stated that "marrying Eastern European women allows our next generation to grow up in a bilingual environment, which is important for Taiwan's internationalization." Yet ironically, this bilingual environment was mis-referred to the

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<sup>62</sup> In fact, the educational system of Ukraine is different from that of Taiwan and it is problematic to equalize the degree in one system to the other. Mr. Su did not mention it and most Taiwanese people were not aware of it either.

environment of English and Mandarin rather than Russian or Ukrainian and Mandarin, and nobody seemed to be aware of it.<sup>63</sup> It is noteworthy that even though Filipina brides can speak more fluent English than Ukrainian brides, they are never promoted for this advantage by brokers. This discrepant treatment among foreign brides reflects male clients' different expectations of the role of their future mates and conforms to the social imagination of "racial/ethnic division of labor" in Taiwan. For example, Filipina women are associated with domestic workers while Ukrainian women are models. The gendered racialization and stratification of others has been observed not only in the labor market (Lan 2006; Parreñas 2001; Palmer 1989; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983) but also in the marriage market (Lu 2008: 99-100).<sup>64</sup> The racialized representation among foreign brides that Asian brides are less

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<sup>63</sup> When I went to Ukraine with a correspondence group to see the potential brides, I found most of them could not speak fluent English as the advertisements claim; some of them could not speak any English at all.

<sup>64</sup> Lu Chiawen points out that contrary to the cases of mail-order brides in Japan, North America and Europe, in Taiwan, the marriage market, the domestic labor market, and the prostitution market are differentiated (see the table below). According to her, despite ample opportunities for daily contact, when Taiwanese men and families intend to marry a foreign or mainland Chinese woman, they do not look around among female migrant workers but go to matchmakers and/or marriage brokers (2008: 100). She shows the distribution of foreign spouses and foreign migrant workers to address the differentiation. However, to make sense of the differentiation of markets, we would need more demographic data on these female migrants in Taiwan, such as their marriage status and age. We need to know, for example, if it is possible that those men and families do not seek bride candidates from domestic workers around in their neighborhood because most of them are married before coming to Taiwan. As for the parallel of labor and marriage markets in Japan and North America, it would be attributed to some profound historical influences, such as the colonial relationship that facilitates marriages between the colonial and colonized people in the post-colonial period.

Table 4 Number of Foreign Spouses and Foreign Migrant Workers by Sex and Nationality

Nationality	Foreign Spouses		Foreign Migrant Workers	
	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Vietnam	104 (0.2%)	42,731 (99.8%)	11,079 (17.5%)	52,226 (82.5%)
Indonesia	236 (2.2%)	10,426 (97.8%)	6,542 (13.32%)	42,911 (86.77%)
Thailand	2,024 (33.1%)	4,090 (66.9%)	84,408 (82.49%)	17,919 (17.51%)
The Philippines	307 (8%)	3,523 (92%)	23,806 (28.58%)	59,479 (71.42%)
Total (including other nationals)	6,292 (8.4%)	68,159 (91.6%)	125,855 (42.18%)	172,537 (57.82%)

cultivated and romantic than Eastern European brides conforms to the Eurocentric logic to shape cultural racism in Asian people's minds.<sup>65</sup>

The incompatibility between the Taiwan native born and Vietnamese or Chinese migrants is very often ascribed to the latter's low quality of cultural cultivation, in spite of the common belief that they share a lot of cultural similarities with Taiwanese. To improve their human quality, they are asked to learn and internalize the host culture and life-style. Nevertheless, the cultural difference is still manipulated in some way to keep the social boundaries intact, which I have elaborated in the previous chapter. Contrary to this cultural racism, Taiwanese men seem to have a totally different attitude toward Ukrainian brides. If cultural similarity and the political economic relationships between Taiwan and Vietnam and Taiwan and China are the backdrop of the booming transnational marriage brokerage, what could be the backdrop of the transient yet sensational Eastern European bride craze, considering that neither cultural affiliation nor close political economic cooperation exists between the two countries? What intrigues those Taiwanese men to spend so much time and money looking for Ukrainian brides? What kind of desire is it?

### **The Geopolitics of Desire and other Sentiments**

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Source: For foreign spouses: National Police Agency, Ministry of Interior, ROC, December, 2002. For foreign migrant workers: Bureau of Employment & Vocational Training, Executive Yuan, ROC, March 2004 (Lu 2008: 100).

<sup>65</sup> It is an interesting issue how, historically, Eurocentric thinking was implanted into the Asian mind and became part of Asian people's thinking even in the present day. Europe and North America are the symbol of "modernity". It would be very hard for Asian people to imagine that there are also out-of-date elements or very poor people in those Western countries. In Taiwan, for instance, products from Europe are supposed to be branded and are thus worth more than local ones. The logic is similar when applied to explain the "mail-order bride" market in my analysis of this paper.

“Wow, it is too romantic to be true!” When I chatted with young men about the Ukrainian bride brokerage, I often got a response as such with weird smile on their face. Mr. Su told me that after he advised his brides on TV, he had gotten about 170 people inquiring how to become a member.<sup>66</sup> Most of them were of high social status, aged between 30 and 60, and working as entrepreneurs or engineers. Because there is no guarantee of marriage, clients have to pay for one trip after another if they want to find a bride in the end. During the period of correspondence, they also need to spend money on gifts and flowers and language translation if both sides cannot use English to write smoothly. So it is not affordable for ordinary white-collar men. For Yongchi, in order to make the trip to Kiev, he had spent almost NT\$1,000,000 (about US\$31,000) on relevant expenses before I met him.

In spite of the unreasonably expensive charge, Yongchi still wanted to give it a try. What made me feel weird was that he was going to find a Vietnamese wife to take care of his old mother, but after watching Mr. Su’s interview on TV, he changed his mind and went to Mr. Su. “How come you changed your mind so dramatically? How about your mother? Do you expect your Ukrainian wife to take care of your mom?” I asked, and his answer quite surprised me: “But I think it is also good to have someone practice English with me and lead me to the Western world....In the past I could only imagine white women’s bodies through reading novels, watching TV and movies, but now I can touch them physically. Even if I cannot find one eventually, it will still be an unforgettable memory in my life. It is thus worthy.”

Eastern European women became more and more visible to the public thanks to the mass

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<sup>66</sup> Yet he always eluded my questions about the details of his business whenever I tried to ask information relevant to numbers, such as the exact numbers of members and successful cases. Another Ukrainian bride broker Mr. Tsai expressed the same concern about his “business secrets” leaking out to other brokers through me. Due to their self-protection, I could not get too much detailed information as I could from other foreign bride brokers.

media, and their sexy appearance did draw the public's attention. In recent years Taiwan has seen quite a few foreign women from Eastern Europe working in the entertainment industry. Most of them are from Ukraine and Russia and serve as dancers and models. A couple of them even successfully became well-known TV stars. In addition, there are also some involved in the sex industry, which has been reported by some mass media. These attractive women help the stereotypical construction of *jinsimao* (golden hair cats), the blonde and beautiful white women from Russia and Ukraine, the women who only appeared in the movies and novels in the past but are now available in the real world.<sup>67</sup>

It is clear how differentiation of body values between Eastern European brides and Asian brides is made along the class and race/ethnicity lines. The huge difference in their market prices cannot be accounted for by the visible costs such as paperwork, travel expenses, and the service quality but by something else, I argue, the exchange value of women's bodies created by "white fetishism." Generally speaking, one of the major reasons for Taiwanese men to find a foreign wife from developing Asian countries through brokers is to maintain the mechanism of labor reproduction in the family. Based on the demand, Asian brides are frequently portrayed as subservient, docile and full of motherly love, the same way in which Eastern European brides are portrayed in the United States. As we have seen, these features are absent in the representation of Ukrainian brides in Taiwan. The "selling point" of marrying Ukrainian brides," instead, is their sexiness and their cultural capital, the value of "modernity." The disparity seems to suggest that men who dream of marrying Eastern European women are not concerned about their future wife's domestic quality but their sexuality and whiteness, the homogeneously imagined high

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<sup>67</sup> More discussion on how Western women and Asian women are represented in the East and West respectively please see Lily H.M. Ling (2002).

cultural taste that can bring glory to the match. Marrying Eastern European women signifies marrying their whiteness, the “magic power” that can boost men’s cultural capital and symbolic power. The psychosexual dynamics in the transnational gender politics may be understood in the light of Fanon’s famous analysis of black men’s white complex in the post-colonial context. He said,

“I wish to be acknowledged not as Black but as white . . . who but a white woman could do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her noble love takes me onto the road of self realization—I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands grasp those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.(Fanon 1967[1952]: 63)”

Sexual desires were structured by desires and discourses that were never about sex alone. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, sexual desire has been a crucial transfer point of power, tangled with racial exclusions in complicated ways (Stoler 1997: 43-44). Yet how could Fanon’s analysis of the inferiority-complex make sense in the case of Ukrainian bride brokerage emergence since there was no such historical contact between Taiwan and Eastern European countries? Where do the desire and complex come from and what does whiteness mean to Taiwanese? I suggest that the desire for Eastern European women should be further analyzed in the context of the formation of American-Eurocentric discourses in the contemporary history of Taiwan, the history of how white culture, mainly referring to American culture, was introduced to Taiwan and became a symbol of modernity for people to pursue. I will try to elaborate how the desire for Ukrainian women is created based on the chain of misrecognition, a simplified logic of the myth—all Ukrainians are blond/white, all whites are from the United States of America, the United States is a perfect example of modernity, modernity is desirable, and therefore Ukrainian

women are desirable.<sup>68</sup>

Just like many other Asian countries which have been seeing the West as their model of modernity, Taiwan in the process of modernization has also tried to mimic the development patterns of Western advanced countries in many dimensions in terms of political, economic and educational systems. The political economy, Nicole Constable (2003) contends, is implicated in the production and reproduction of desire. Individuals' affect and love never exist outside the limits of temporality and spatiality, but always invisibly embedded in the structure, in the practice of everyday life at even the minute and intimate level. That is to say, we should inquire further into the interplay between the individual desires and the global political-economic restructuring in the global process.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Neferti Xina M. Tadiar (2004) both have contributed to the understanding of how individual agency and the global capitalist process are bridged through the discussion on imagination. Imagination, according to Appadurai, "has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility (1996: 31)" in the global cultural process. He regards imagination as a new social force of the new global order, in which the United States is "no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes (1996: 31)." While agreeing to see imagination as "culturally organized social practice, Tadiar contends that imagination is not an abrupt historical emergence as a new social force but has its history. It is important to look at the social force of imagination at work in the

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<sup>68</sup> I would like to thank my friend Tzu-I Chung for helping clarify my thinking by editing my words.

structural realities before its expression in recent, more visible “culturalist” forms through electronic media, as Appadurai describes (2004: 4). In her research on Philippine’s fantasy in the new world order, the role of United States in the history of the Philippines is put back under the spotlight. Many scholars have also elaborated how American modernization penetrates into the Asian mind from the political economic level to the individual level (Chen 2001; 2001; Schein 1994; Yoshimi 2007; Yoo 2007).

As Chen Guanghsing (2001) has shown, in Taiwan, and in East Asia at large, modernization is very often interpreted as “Westernization” and interchangeable with “Americanization” after the United States gained its power and influence on the region in the postwar era (2001). The long-term relationship based on America’s military and economic assistance to Taiwan after WWII paved the way for the latter to follow the steps of the former toward modernization. Taiwanese “imagination” of American society and American lifestyle thereby triggered many people’s “American dream,” the dream which does not fade away even though Taiwan has successfully developed into one of the Newly Industrialized countries in Asia. The collective imagination of modernization appearing in daily life becomes the individual’s desire to be westernized and participate in global capitalist consumption through consuming goods from the West, such as European brand products and American pop culture, the practice of “imagined cosmopolitanism” (Schein 1994: 149). In the same formula, English proficiency was perceived as an index of the individual’s degree of modernization and internationalization. One can say that the Taiwanese imaginary of the West is by and large formed through the knowledge of the United States. People imagine Westerners through the stereotype of Americans—Caucasian Americans—obtained from the mass media and then extend the stereotype to all others who look “American.” The conflation of Eastern European women and Caucasian American women as the

same category of “white” women is actually the practice of “Occidentalism,” the cultural practice through which the “West” is homogeneously and exotically represented in the same logic of what Said criticizes as “Orientalism.”

While “Occidentalism” is common practice in Asian societies, the imaginary expressions it takes on vary from country to country as a result of different historical and geopolitical influences. In his research on Chinese identity, Sheldon Lu looks into what Fredric Jameson called the “geopolitical unconscious,” that is, the vision of the social, the public, and the national-within-the global, through the tales and images in media representations (Lu 2000: 29). He analyzes Chinese masculinity in soap operas of China, and found Chinese men are always positioned as the owners of power and capital, and white women are the “subalterns” subject to the men’s gaze and desire, although white women have been a trope of Western lifestyle and the incarnation of modernity throughout the twentieth century (2000: 34).<sup>69</sup> In the contemporary representation, in addition to being sexualized and racialized, these white women are also treated as “punching bags” as well as the object of redemption for Chinese men to vent complicated emotions for their used-to-be-enemies in history. Therefore, it is common to see American women being scapegoated for capitalist America’s hostility to China and Russian women for

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<sup>69</sup> For example, in a sequence of the soap opera titled “A Beijing Man in New York,” China’s most popular television series in 1993, the main actor gets himself a local American prostitute, who is white, blond and buxom after suffering a series of failures. While thrusting himself into her, he showers her with dollar bills and demands her to cry out repeatedly: “I love you, I love you.” This sequence is famous in the discussion of China’s cultural nationalism for its symbolical revenge for all the real and perceived slights of the past century (Barmé 1999). Another example is a Chinese television movie titled “Sunset at Long Chao Li.” According to Erwin (1999), who plays an American wife of a returned Chinese scholar in the movie, the inclusion of foreigners in TV dramas provides a real and symbolic opportunity for Chinese to “connect to the world,” and by arranging a subordinated American wife in the family, Chinese men are inscribed as the central agent both in the domestic and international order.

Soviets' "betrayal."<sup>70</sup> In the representation politics in China, what intrigues me is the way in which Russian women are depicted. These women migrating to China for jobs and wealth are depicted as romantic, innocent, and fragile subjects who rely on Chinese men deeply. The image is very different from its counterpart in Taiwan, which sheds light on how white women are "consumed" by the national imagination in different geopolitical contexts. The comparison of representation politics cross the strait shows the importance of taking into account the history of "imagination" in comprehending the embedding of imaginaries in the geopolitical and economic structures—as we can see from this cross-strait example how the political and cultural logic of the Cold War has been shaping and dominating people's imaginary and sentiments differently in the postwar era even up to today.

### **(Romantic) Love and Its Discontent: Men's Struggle in the Face of Social Stigma**

I have discussed how the racial hierarchy in consonance with class distinction in the marriage market is formed through representation. I have also elaborated how the representation politics on the local scale epitomize the global racial hierarchy in a geopolitical sense. Last, I would like to look at how men who are pulled into the system of fantasy production perceive themselves in the construction. For example, how do they conceive of masculinity, the idea that is widely propagandized, especially by most Asian bride brokers, as the principle for men to act

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<sup>70</sup> Lu takes the soap opera "Russian Girls in Harbin" for instance to demonstrate how China/Chinese men are constructed to be generous and dependable. The story is about Russian women migrating to Harbin to look for jobs at bars, restaurants or hotels for a better life due to the dire economic situation after Soviet Union collapsed. The main actor not only saves the main actress' life from mobsters' attack but helps her find a job and settle down. The scenario sharply contrasts to Soviets' brutal treatment of China and the Soviets demanding China to pay back the debt that caused people's hardship and hunger in the late 1950s and early 1960s. China's generosity is re-confirmed through the Chinese man's heroic behavior for the Russian women (2000: 35).

in gender relations? Moreover, how do they consider love, the concept that is socially perceived as the foundation for a happy marriage, in their marriage?

Tian and Wang's research (2006) on Taiwanese men's incentives to marry Vietnamese women shows that masculinity is key. According to her, those men consider marrying foreign brides as a way of fulfilling their masculinity. Indeed, many men who marry Vietnamese women expressed a similar concern about their dominant power in the gender relations. I heard a lot from the husbands how they compare their wives with each other according to the wife's obedience and care labor performance. For example, one complained about his wife who orders him to run errands all the time, which makes him "not like a husband." Another one praised his wife for preparing clean clothes in the bathroom for his father to take a shower every day. Yet criticizing these men's patriarchal ideology and Chauvinist practices cannot therefore lead to the conclusion that they are not concerned about "love" but "power" and "control" over their wives, the most common critique from the public. I would like to argue against such an assumption by demonstrating the complex the Taiwanese husbands hold about their transnational marriage. I found that, first, men who look for white Eastern European brides are concerned less about their masculine performance in the marriage than men who look for Asian brides do; Secondly, not all men marry Asian brides in order to pursue their masculinity or chauvinism. Third, it is not as simple as what people assume that men who choose this kind of "instant" transnational marriage do not care about "love" and affect in the marital relationship. However, how they conceive of "love," "romantic love," and masculinity would be different according to their class. Many Taiwanese husbands shared with me their struggle before and after making the decision to go on the marriage trip, such as Guochang and Yunpu, Hui Ge's clients.

Guochang and Yunpu went to Vietnam in the same group that I also joined. Guochang is

very knowledgeable on masterpieces of world literature despite his insignificant educational achievement, which impressed me a lot. I always saw him reading a novel quietly when he took a rest. In fact, Guochang never stopped expressing his anxiety about the decision of finding a lifelong mate in such a way. He told me, “nobody likes to marry a foreign bride if they can find one locally. I would say most men who marry foreign women through brokers have some problems, and yes, I have some problems too.” Instead of trying to counter the social stigma attached to the transnational marriage, he confirmed the stereotype with his “problems:” “My conditions are bad. I am too shy to find a girlfriend. Plus, my salary is low and I have an ill mother who needs to be taken care of. Who wants to marry me then?” Yet Guochang expressed doubts of such kind of brokered marriage because “it lacks love as its basis. How can I make the decision to get married with someone whom I do not know well in two days? It is just like gambling. If I am lucky enough, I will find a suitable one. We will love each other and enjoy happy life for the rest of our life. What if I am not? Do I really want to bet?”

Yunpu, the 29 year-old engineer working for a computer company, had a similar concern. I was curious about his motive for marrying a Vietnamese bride because I felt it should not be hard for him to find one in the domestic marriage market according to his conditions such as age, economic ability and appearance, despite his introversion. I did not get the answer until the third day after the bride selection meeting when I had a long chat with him in the afternoon. Yunpu was anxious about his relationship between his wife, Van, because he observed that she looked passionate when interacting with others while turning to be cool when facing him. I explained to him that it would be due to a language barrier. Besides, for a 19 year old girl, it would be hard to interact with a man who is almost 10 years older than her and whom she just knew for a couple of days. Van’s rejection of being touched by Yunpu in private deepened Yunpu’s anxiety. “She is

too vivacious. I am afraid of such kind of women. Van's character is similar to the character of my former girlfriend, who just dumped me for another man. I am fed up with being a loser all the time in the relationship." He told me how his unsuccessful courtships in the past hit him seriously and triggered him to turn to foreign women who would admire and treasure him. "I want to prove to my former girlfriend by getting married with someone else that I am capable of finding my love, and she will have no chance to regret what she did to me." Yunpu then could not help but start to weep in front of me.

Having met many men coming to Vietnam to find wives, I got to know more about the struggle and the dilemma they have to face between the individual choice and the social stigma attached to the commodified marriage, especially for men who have a higher educational background or are of higher social status. They chose not to hold a wedding ceremony back in Taiwan, and keep their marriage low key. Chingda, another computer engineer working for a big electronic company, told me he even hid his marriage from his colleagues because he "did not want to be seen differently."

Apparently, the difficulties caused by uncertainty of future happiness and social discrimination do not dash these men's dream in pursuing "love" in the marriage. Even though Chingda just got divorced from his Vietnamese wife half a year ago, he still believes in "love." "I was just unlucky to meet San. She is so young and pretty that many men run after her. In spite of her betrayal, I still believe in love. I want to get married again, yet I know it is hard to find one with good conditions now as I'm a divorced man with a child," he said. Their narratives informed us, as Constable and Patino have shown, that men who look for foreign wives through brokers can not be simplified as "buyers" in the marriage transaction or patriarchal perpetrators of "foreign bride" exploitation, the common representation of them by mass media, NGOs and

many feminist scholars. Looking into how men's, as well as women's, affect and emotion is intertwined with other social factors in the decision making will help us understand the development of the transnational marriage market— how it is formed in the dynamics between the individual's desires, the market and social forces.

Guochang and Yunpu exemplify one kind of Taiwanese men who would look for foreign wives, that is, men of “over-soft” character who are thought to lack masculinity. Lacking in masculinity, just as abounding in chauvinism, makes men less desirable in the marriage market nowadays. In addition, unattractive appearance, lack of social skills, and working in a boring environment will also contribute to the decrease of their desirability. Hence it is clear that the economical disadvantage in society cannot stand alone to account for cases like Yunpu and Chingda, and actually many others. Their middle-class identity shows that the single-dimensional construction of Taiwanese husbands as the economically weak is problematic.<sup>71</sup> In the same manner, Simplifying these men as buyers of the bride and the marriage and/or the “root” of social problems without attending to the dimension of affect, individually and collectively, is of no use to understand the social phenomenon.

In fact, many men who chose transnational brokered marriage told me that they did believe love, as the foundation for a happy marriage, could be pursued even in such a way. However, we have to be aware what “love” or “romantic love” means to them and how it is practiced differently. I observed that it would be related to class, and probably race as well, in the case. For example, men of lower class I met by and large tend to conceive of “love” more in the

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<sup>71</sup> In fact, I met many men who are shy of women and/or still dependent on their mother a lot. Some were even brought to Vietnam by their parents. Besides, many of them were working in a sex-unbalanced and isolated environment.

framework of daily interaction than in that of romantic events. Moreover, their expectation of love is grounded firmly on the traditional gender relations, in which a woman is expected to act as if she needs the man's protection and is easily satisfied with what she gets from the man. "I am really fed up with women who think they are autonomous and can do everything by themselves without men. I am willing to give a woman my entire world if she can make me feel my existence for her is invaluable," said my informant who was considering marrying a foreign bride through a broker. "I love my wife very much because she helps me organize my daily life very well. Plus, she is very considerate. I take her out to night markets every weekend and she appreciates a lot. This is our romantic time. I feel I am very lucky to have her as my lifelong mate," said a Taiwanese husband marrying a Vietnamese wife.

In contrast to this kind of story I heard a lot from Taiwanese husbands who marry Vietnamese wives, men who look for or are married with Ukrainian wives gave me a very different impression of what they conceive as "romantic." For example, one husband who just got married shared with me how hard it was to earn his wife's heart. "I spent lots of time and money writing love letters, sending gifts, chocolate and flowers cross half of the earth to her. I had to show her my gentle manner so as to convince her that I am an eligible husband. Now she is here with me and I hope I can give her the feeling of romance and security all the time." His words reminded me of the scene on the day I visited their place: he was busy coming in and out of the kitchen preparing snacks and fruit while his wife Louisa sat in the living room complaining to me about her life in Taiwan: "Yes, he is romantic and treats me very well. He took me out to have dinner and go shopping and sightseeing very often. But I just cannot adjust myself to the life here. For example, I really do not know how to appreciate delicious food here,

especially those sold by street vendors....”<sup>72</sup>

The two different ways of expressing “love” and experiencing “romance” suggest how class difference influences people’s conception of love in their gender relations. By juxtaposing those men’s different experiences in courtship, I aim to demonstrate the complexity of the dynamics between market forces and the individual’s choice. These men’s choice of marrying a foreign wife cannot be simply interpreted as a response to the market forces, especially when social stigma is still tightly attached to such marriages. In my fieldwork observation, Guochang’s and Yunpu’s cases are not unique at all. They represent many men’s struggle with decision making when facing the dilemma of social discrimination and their own choice, the choice that is structured by social and familial expectations on them as well as their life history in the past. Their stories also challenge the social stereotype which homogenizes men who marry foreign wives as chauvinists who treat their wife as a thing bought from the market and/or even wife abusers. Far from fitting the image, Guochang’s and Yunpu’s inner conflict shows their emotional entanglement in the marriage transaction and what “love” means to their life, albeit the way to perceive it would be vary due to the differences of their class and life experiences.

Perhaps Guochang’s email sent to his friends to announce his marriage can speak for many men’s intricate sentiment. He wrote the email after passing the interview by a local court and getting the marriage certificate successfully. In the email he wrote,

“I rode my motorbike around the town, where I grew up, yesterday. I went up to a hill taking a road which I never used before. I stopped at the roadside and gazed distant mountains in an elegant posture. After a fantastic journey, the thing that has been suspended for a long time got fixed eventually. Now I am not alone. My wife is at a

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<sup>72</sup> We should be careful not to read Louisa’s reaction as if she is a material-oriented person who cannot “eat bitterness.” Instead, we should consider cultural differences and cultural shock she would encounter during the initial period of time of her arrival. I will talk more about Louisa’s story in the next chapter.

distant place now but is coming to reunite with me next month. I went on my third trip to Vietnam to sign the marriage certificate last month. We held our wedding in my wife's hometown, a remote village in the north of Vietnam. It is hard to believe that I, a nobody in my own society, was treated as an honored guest at that foreign place. My wife's family and relatives are simple-minded and honest. In spite of poverty, their love to each other is so rich. My wife cried hard and the scene touched me deeply. You must not believe I can gain my love in this way. But yes, I do gain it in the very way. I am relied and respected, and my life in the world finally finds its own value."

By now, Guochang and Yunpu each has already had a two year old child. They are quite satisfied with their marital life after the marriage adjustment period. Chingda, unfortunately, got divorced several months ago because his wife Xan left him for another man. Chingda attributed his failed marriage to his "bad luck," and is going to engage in a lawsuit with Xan for the custody of their one year old child. In spite of the drama, he does not feel frustrated about love and marriage. Rather, "I still believe in love. I was just unlucky to meet Xan, who was too young to get ready for marriage. But I did learn a lot from getting together with her. I did not really know how to get along with females before. Now I know better and I believe I can cultivate a happier marriage in the future," he said so as we chatted about courtship and marriage in our correspondence.

Talking to male clients from different familial backgrounds, occupations, economic classes and of different ages and personalities allows me to criticize the stereotype of Taiwanese husbands, who are categorized and labeled as social losers in relation to those who marry native-born Taiwanese. In fact, before the government illegalized marriage brokerage, the number of men who are not the economically weak in society yet also seek marriage brokers for help was on the rise, albeit an insignificant portion out of the total. Despite no official statistics on that, many people I encountered in the field had, or at least had heard about, friends or relatives considering marrying a foreign wife not out of economic concerns. Apparently,

economic factors are no longer sufficient to explain Taiwanese men's motivation for transnational brokered marriage. What also needs to be taken into consideration is the cultural logic of their desire and choice that can not be spelt out in the framework of economic relations or demographic composition but has to be put into the dynamics of social ideologies and individual sentiments to be understood. Just as Yunpu, most of the men I met, in opposition to the image demonized by mass media as violence abusers, cherished the hope of finding their "true love" through matchmaking albeit knowing its nature of commodification. The mushrooming of the marriage brokerage business reflects certain Taiwanese men's very demand for (romantic) love and reproductive labor that are not available for them in the domestic marriage market. I will explore how the development of the transnational marriage market has been influenced by the amended immigration law passed in 2007 in a later chapter.

Figure 3 advertisement of Vietnamese Brides

Right: Introduction to Vietnamese Brides

(line two: getting married in three month warranty; line three: six days only to complete the procedure; line four: \$200,000 NTD only; in the column: four warranties: 1. virgin warranty; 2. marry a bride in three months; 3. no hidden fee; 4. free to get another if the selected bride runs away in one year)



Figure 4 Matchmaking Venue in a Village of Hai Coi, Quang Ninh Province, north Vietnam



Figure 5 Matchmaking Meeting



Figure 6 After the matchmaking meeting, the male client was brought to the selected woman's home to propose and hold a simple engagement



## **Chapter Four:**

### **Women's Agency and Gender Dynamics in the Commodified Marriage**

Three days after Guochang and Yunpu had selected their wives, Hong and Van, Tung brought them to the TECO in Hanoi for visa interview appointments. Hong, Van, and another young bride were in an elated mood, romping about on the street as we traveled. Hong held my hand, leaned against my shoulder and laughed loudly to jokes told by the others in the group; it was a beautiful day for these girls for sure.

However, after returning to our hotel that evening, Guochang came to me expressing his concern about Hong according to his observations of her behavior that day. He felt that the way Hong interacted with me did not show respect to me as an elder sister, and her ways of walking and talking to people were not decent at all. His fear was that Hong was not as cultivated, tender, and feminine as what he thought an ideal wife ought to be, and that she would not be respectful and considerate to his parents. Because of these concerns, he considered changing for a different wife. Despite my disapproval of his complaint, I suggested that he bring the issue to Tung and Hong directly before they had their marriage registered.

That night, Tung held a meeting for Guochang. In the meeting, Hong was told about Guochang's complaint. Having not finished listening to the whole story, Hong burst into tears and ran out of the room. I ran after her, trying to comfort her while she was crying severely. As a researcher, I should have avoided intervening in their marital business. Yet as a woman, I could not help but hint to her to carefully reconsider the marriage. She was still very young and had a lot of opportunities to meet a suitable man in her life after all. After spending a couple of hours calming down, surprisingly, she came back to Guochang and expressed her strong desire to

marry him and her willingness to adjust her behavior so as to meet his expectations. From the next day on, I found Hong intentionally changed her behavioral patterns in Guochang's presence, and tenderly served him when we had meals. Guochang accepted Hong again. Three months later, Guochang came back to Vietnam to hold a wedding ceremony at Hong's village. One month after the wedding, Hong got a visa and migrated to Taiwan, where she currently resides.

Hong's active submission shocked me a lot as it was my first time going to Vietnam with a marriage group. Yet having encountered many women looking for foreign husbands in rural Vietnam, I figured out that Hong was not unique at all. Before the trip, I went through the literature on "mail-order brides" to prepare myself for the fieldwork and found that most of the works focused on a woman's being compelled into the global bride trade by marriage brokers, who were viewed as human traffickers. In such narratives, the marriage brokerage system is simplified as a "vending machine" that sells women on display to whoever has the money in hand to purchase. Women are uniformly viewed as innocent victims, either forced or deceived into entering the system, marriage brokers are shown as evil traffickers, and customers as potential violent abusers.

Not until recent years did scholars pay more attention to transnational marriages and reconsider the marriage introduction system. For example, Nicole Constable (2003) argues that women using the online introduction system are by no means "victims." They are neither victims of the unequal global political economy nor victims of human trafficking, but single women using the Internet to seek potential lifelong mates. Rejecting the terms of "buying" and "selling," she conceptualizes these women's experience using the online introduction service as "looking for pen pals." However, even though her research tries to deconstruct the social perception of "mail-order brides" as the vulnerable weak versus men who use the service as perpetrators, to

what extent can these stories speak for the experience of most Third World women who look for foreign husbands through marriage brokers? The answer is debatable if we take class difference into careful consideration. A distinct difference between the “mail-order brides” in Constable’s study and most of the women looking for foreign husbands whom I met in Vietnam, for instance, is their independent ability to use the online introduction service. Using the service requires the ability to use English to correspond with their male “pals” directly and an easy access to the Internet in the daily life. Women who fulfill these two conditions usually have some education, and do not live in a very harsh environment. Therefore, most of the women whom Constable met online were not the stereotypical poor and rural women who use marriage as a strategy for a financially better life, but were in fact divorced career and/or educated women who were capable of living independently and sought foreign husbands for non-economic reasons, such as pursuing a more modern life or self-realization in the host country.

It is therefore not surprising to see how these capable women exercise their agency to make the decision to marry a foreign husband and even negotiate with their husbands where to reside after getting married as examples in Constable’s study has showed. Yet most women from rural areas in Third World countries, due to their relative economic weakness, do not have such bargaining power to negotiate constraints and are frequently regarded as tender and docile individuals lacking in agency. In contrast to these women, male clients, due to their economic advantage, are also assumed to be the type of men who can control the marriage transaction and who choose this type of marriage in order to maintain their masculinity, which they have not been able to do in their own society.

Hong’s reaction, however, shocked me a lot. Despite her economically and culturally disadvantageous position, her will to marry Guochang was so firm and strong that she could by

no means be viewed as an innocent victim being deceived by the broker to enter the marriage. Likewise, Guochang's anxiety about Hong's eligibility of being an ideal wife can not simply be interpreted as a fear of being unable to exercise his masculine power over his wife either. The longer I stayed in Vietnam participating in matchmaking meetings and follow-ups, the more I encountered stories like Hong's. Many young women in her village registered themselves with more than one local matchmaker to maximize their chances of being selected. Some even came to the matchmakers without informing their parents in advance and thus provoked serious familial tension after they were selected and agreed to marry the men. Nor were the bride-seeking men necessarily able to exercise their agency and perform masculinity in the manner imagined in the commodified marriage. I came across several cases in which men were asked and accompanied by their mothers or other familial elders to Vietnam to select their brides. Moreover, the final decision on which woman to select is frequently made not by the man independently but through a collective discussion, which involves voices not only from his family members, friends traveling with him, local major matchmaker or the Taiwanese broker, but also from other members of the marriage group. I was even asked often for my opinions despite my serious refusal to get involved in their business from the beginning.

There is no doubt that Constable's study brilliantly reverses widely perceived images of "mail-order brides" by granting these women agency. Yet since the women in her study are those who at least have some economic and/or cultural capital to get access to the online introduction service, I wonder to what extent her observation on "mail-order brides" can shed light on the Third World rural women who have little human capital so have to rely on local connections in order to bridge their world with the outside world. This curiosity triggered me to look into poor woman's migration experiences; as with Hong, Van and many others from rural Vietnam, the

comparison made with that of other women looking for foreign husbands in China and Ukraine center around a better economical condition. What can Hong's story tell about women's agency? In what way can women living in a poor condition exercise agency to negotiate social and economic constraints they are faced with?

Starting with Hong's story, in this chapter, I aim to analyze women's agency in the commodified transnational marriage. I seek to examine the concept in both of the macro context of political economy and the micro context of everyday life in order to better understand what shapes these women's understanding of "chances" and "risks," according to which their decisions are made. In addition, based on the discussion of male clients' various gestures in response to the social stigma of men looking for foreign brides as "chauvinists" in the previous chapter, I will demonstrate the complicated gender dynamics in the transnational commodified marriage. I will go further to discuss what is commodified in the marriage transaction, and how women's agency would play out in the commodification so as to understand the bigger picture of women's mobility in the global economy.

### **The Feminization of "Survival"**

Saskia Sassen (2002) points out the phenomenon that developing countries increase pressure on women to pursue survival strategies for household well-being as well as to relieve the government's burdens by encouraging women to emigrate. She terms the gendered strategy "the feminization of survival." The "survival" is preliminarily conceived of in an economic framework. Yet for many migrant women I met in the field, the sense of "survival" has gone beyond its original significance and mixed with an intention to search for a modern subjectivity through transnational marriage. In this section, I will provide several scenarios of women's

taking part in the matchmaking meetings in the three bride-sending countries. These stories will help our understanding of these women's incentives to marry foreign husbands and of what "survival" would mean differently to them.

### A Scene in Vietnam

Neng, Hong and Van good are friends from the same village in the north of Vietnam. They are around the same age and grew up together. Neng has three sisters and two young brothers. One of her sisters is married to a Taiwanese man and resides with him in Taiwan. Her sister's happy life triggered Neng to go to a broker after she turned 18. Her idea was supported by her parents not only for her successful marriage but also out of economic need. After her sister got married, they were able to let the youngest brother to go to school, install a landline phone, and pay utilities every month without borrowing money from other relatives. Even though Neng was very young, she had made a wish to remodel the house for her parents as many other neighbors' daughters marrying foreign husbands do in the village. Neng had taken part in a matchmaking meeting many times but always failed to be selected. She attributed the result to her ugly face and often mocked herself "I'm so ugly that no man wants me." One day, she heard that there was another matchmaking meeting to be held and excitedly invited Van to come with her while they were working together on the beach picking clams for sale. Van told me:

"When Neng asked me to accompany her to the meeting, I was not sure if I really wanted to marry a foreign husband. I heard a lot of stories about Taiwanese husbands but I never talked them face-to-face. So I was curious and willing to go just take a look. Many of our friends went to the meeting out of curiosity just like me in the first place. I feel it was like trying our luck, you know. There are more than fifty girls on site, how lucky you would be to be selected from so many competitors. Plus, I can always say no if I don't want to marry that guy anyway. So I just went with Neng. That was my first try. Neng was selected at that meeting, which inspired me a lot to give myself a second chance. Neng's husband said it was Neng's "safe look" that gave him a sense of

“security.” I am glad that I was selected and able to come to Taiwan with Neng.”

Of course it was not pure curiosity that drove Van to look for a Taiwanese husband. In her neighborhood seven out of twelve households had at least one daughter marry a Taiwanese man, when I went with Hui Ge to Ha Coi for the first time in 2004. Walking in the neighborhood, the remodeled houses had big colorful televisions in the living rooms that could easily be seen through the front doorway, fathers were using fancy cell phones, and new motorbikes were parked in the front yards, all visually suggestive of the benefit these households got from marrying a daughter to a foreign husband. Interestingly I found that many people in the village perceive Taiwan not through a geographic concept but a modern materialist imagination. One woman in the village said “I do not exactly know where Taiwan is. I think it is located in the west of Vietnam. But I know there are many high buildings and shopping malls in Taipei. Life there is very convenient. You do not need to farm like we do here. That is gorgeous!”

Material competition among households in the neighborhood pushes many parents to consider letting their daughters to go to a marriage broker, and many young women decide to go by themselves after observing the matchmaking meeting several times. They attend the meeting as if going to a “job interview”: they wear makeup, high heels, and pretty clothes, despite being out-of-fashion from an urban perspective.

During the bride selection, women are not granted much time to express themselves or ask questions back. Men’s decision on whom to keep for the second round to a high extent relies on first impressions of the women. The atmosphere is akin to that of the Chinese emperor’s concubine selection process. The male side dominates the process and women quietly sit cross the table to be judged as objects. Here is a example of a typical “Q and A” that I frequently heard after women’s brief introduction to the men at the matchmaking meetings:

Tung: Do you cook?

Woman: Yes (or quietly nod the head)

Tung: Are you willing to learn Taiwanese cuisine?

Woman: Yes (or quietly nod the head)

Tung: Are you good at doing housework?

Woman: Yes (or quietly nod the head)

Tung: Are you ok to live with your parents-in-law?

Woman: Yes (or quietly nod the head)

Tung: Are you willing to take care of the elders in your husband's family?

Woman: Yes (or quietly nod the head)

In opposition to the majority of criticism of the women's objectification in which these women are considered to be lacking in agency, I read these women's silence and docility in these interviews as a way to actively promote themselves— through performing “submission” to strive for men's appreciation. Their performance at the matchmaking meeting, just like our performance at a job interview, does not necessarily reflect their personality. It is not surprising then that having spent some time together, Yunpu started to worry that Van would in fact be an extrovert, the type of personality that he does not appreciate at all, and Guochang began to worry that Hong was not cultivated and obedient enough to take care of his family.

It is noteworthy that not all Vietnamese women agree to marry the men who choose them in the end, and their decision to get married is not always supported by their parents. Hongminh is one example. I met her in Ho Chi Minh City when I accompanied another marriage group to a matchmaking meeting. She was 22 years old, very young, smart and pretty. She received a senior high school education, which is relatively high compared to the average educational achievement of Southeast Asian brides who marry Taiwanese men.<sup>73</sup> She stopped her pursuit of higher education due to her family's economic predicament. Her parents worked at a local suburban

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<sup>73</sup> Taking the statistics of 2003 for example, 45% of Southeast female spouses are junior high school graduates and 28.9% are elementary graduates. Only 20.9% received senior high school education (Tsay 2004: 180) .

factory and had left other family members in their hometown, a rural village in the Mekong Delta. There was no tap water available in the village, and the so-called toilet was just a small platform built on the pond. To help her parents, she registered herself with a local matchmaker. Her attractive appearance had gotten her selected by a Korean man once, but that was before she met her current husband. She decided to give up at that time as she did not feel enough “love for that guy”. Later, Hongminh was selected by Shuntai. Shuntai was 28 years old, a truck driver working for a fruit farm in a rural village in Central Taiwan. His teeth were as red as blood due to chewing too many betel nuts, which helped keep up his energy to drive, however this habit disclosed his low social status. He only received a junior high school education, less than Hongminh’s. As a result, his proposal was rejected by Hongminh’s parents, who believed that Hongminh would be able to find a better mate in terms of economical and cultural conditions. Yet surprisingly, Hongminh insisted on marrying Shuntai. She said this time she felt “love for the man”, despite the language barrier. Hongminh’s parents regarded her insistence as a way to fulfill her filial piety, and tried to convince her not to “sacrifice” herself as such. Failing to stop her in the end, they agreed to the marriage with tears.

I met quite a few anxious parents who opposed their daughters’ marriages with foreign husbands. Yen was 33 years old when I met her in Vietnam through a marriage broker’s introduction. She was also from a rural village in Can Tho in the south of Vietnam. She was selected by a 60 year old Taiwanese man, a plumber who had been married twice before. She told me that her mom cried a lot and pleaded with her not to marry this “old guy”, as he was the same age as her father. Her parents seriously thought the huge age difference would be a big issue between the couple in the future, in addition to other cultural differences. Yet Yen seemed to love this man deeply and was eager to live with him. One day a widowed Vietnamese friend,

who also married a Taiwanese man, accompanied me to visit Yen's family at the village. That night before we went to sleep, Yens mother pleaded again for her daughter to change her decision. She stated,

“Yen is a filial daughter, who spent most of her young days at home making clothes as a small business to improve our family's economic condition. I introduced several local men to Yen before she turned 30, but she rejected all of them. She is picky from my point of view. Now our economic situation turns better, but she has been regarded as being too old to find a good match in Vietnam. I thus agreed her to go to a marriage broker to see if she can find any chance to meet a good foreign man. But I do not expect a result like this. I just cannot accept a son-in-law as old as my husband.”

During my stay at Yen's house, I met her husband, Chen, who came to Vietnam for the fifth visa interview. One day after dinner, Yen chatted with me while Chen went to take a shower,

“Do not look at his physical age. His mental age is very young! You can tell that he is very simple, honest, and straight. I really appreciate this kind of personality and feel he really deserves my care. Everyone around me thinks I am out of my mind, but I am not! He has come to Vietnam to see me every half an year in the past two years, which touches me so much. Although we have failed the visa interview for four times, we will never give up.”

Because of the age difference, their marriage had been seen as dubiously false by Taiwanese consular officials.<sup>74</sup> Even though they had been married for two years in Vietnam, they could not live together unless Chen moved to Vietnam. Fortunately, after five attempts they passed the interview and Yen was finally able to unite with Chen in Taiwan several months later.

### A Scene in China

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<sup>74</sup> In 2007, the procedure of the visa application was changed. The new policy requires the couple's marriage certificate as one of the documents to make a visa interview appointment. That is to say, the couples have to take a risk of not being able to reside in Taiwan if the wife cannot get a visa. In the past, the couples got married after confirming that the wife got a visa. An official commented on the new policy that “getting married is everyone's right. The government cannot limit individual freedom of getting married but can control where you live.” I will discuss the policy issue more in the next chapter.

I went to Fuzhou in Fujian with the Taiwanese broker, Yang Dong, and his client, Chinghui. Chinghui was 45 years old, working as a template-making technician at a factory. In addition to this, he also ran a family business growing and selling sod grass. He had been married twice before, and both of his former wives were foreign nationals; the first one was from Indonesia, and the second one was from Vietnam- and both of them ran away. His first wife left him a 12 year old child and never returned. He was positive that he was used as a “fake husband” by these two foreign women in order to enter Taiwan. Yet these two failed marriages did not defeat him. Incited by his colleagues, he decided to give marriage another try regardless of his family’s opposition. However this time, he wanted a Chinese bride.

We were arranged to stay at a hotel near Fuzhou rail station. The next morning, around 10 or 15 women were brought over by their matchmakers and waited downstairs in the lobby. One woman after another was invited to Chinghui’s room, where the matchmaking meetings took place. The conversation started with self-introduction, and Chinghui showed them some pictures of his house and living environment. These women ranged in age from their early twenties to their early thirties. Many of them migrated from the inland provinces to the coastal areas in order to seek employment as factory workers or shop clerks. Chinghui’s house was a two-floor house located in suburban Taoyuan, about twenty minutes’ drive from downtown. Most households in his village owned land and were involved in agriculture. Since Chinghui also took part in his family business, one of his conditions for the bride candidates was to help during the farming seasons.

About one-third of the women expressed loss of interest and left after learning of Chinghui’s background. With Yong Dong’s “help,” he finally decided to select Xiaoke. Xiaoke was 30 years old. She had been divorced one year ago and worked as a salesperson in a clothing

store. The next day, Chinghui and Xiaoke were brought to take wedding photos. Yong Dong asked Chinghui to buy some new clothes for Xiaoke too. They had a great time getting to know each other through sightseeing, shopping and dining together while waiting for Xiaoke's document preparation. However on the third day, they were informed that Xiaoke had difficulty in getting her single-status certificate as her divorce procedure was not yet completed. She needed to get her former husband's signature for one single document, but he was in Japan and out of reach.

Figure 7 Chinghui's wedding photos  
(Photos were taken with two different women in two days)  
Left: Chingchui and Xiaoke; Right: Chinghui and Hongmei



At this moment, another candidate, Hongmei, was recommended to Chinghui by a local matchmaker. In fact, Hongmei expressed a strong desire to marry Chinghui during the first round of bride selection. She was firm in her belief that she had felt a strong *yuanfen* (緣分; fate, destiny) with Chinghui at first glance. Having found out that something was wrong with Xiaoke's document, Hongmei appeared at the hotel again, actively promoting herself and convincing Chinghui to marry her. Hongmei was 37 year old single mother with a nine year old

son. According to her, her husband died of cancer two years ago. She came here just to find herself another chance to find someone with whom she could share her life. She came from rural Sichuan and had been residing in Fuzhou with her husband's family until he passed away. She worked as a product quality checker on the assembly line at a local factory. Yang Dong told Chinghui if he wanted to get married soon, he would need to consider replacing Xiaoke with Hongmei as no one knew when Xiaoke's former husband would be reached.

The next morning, I was awakened by Chinghui's call. He told me he decided to give up Xiaoke and marry Hongmei instead. He asked me to prepare quickly as Hongmei would be there soon. "We are going to take wedding photos," he said. "What? Just one day after you took wedding photos with Xiaoke? Those photos even have not yet been developed and you are going to take another set with another woman? The owner of the photo shop must be very confused!" I could not help but disclose to him my feeling that this swap was ridiculous. "That is the most convenient way I can take now. I cannot wait here forever for Xiaoke to get her husband's signature. I have to go back to work. I cannot take more days off!" Chinghui replied in a "helpless" tone.

After taking the wedding photos, we set off to the marriage registration office, which was about two-hour drive from the hotel, to submit documents in the afternoon. The next morning, we again went to get the marriage certificate. On the way back to the hotel, Yang Dong told us all of a sudden that he was going to arrange a wedding ceremony for them in the evening, and asked Hongmei to inform her family. After returning to the hotel, I accompanied Hongmei to a salon to do her bridal hair and make-up. She incessantly preached to me how important a marriage is for a woman and how much she looked forward to starting her new life in Taiwan. She used the Chinese word, *yuanfen*, to explain her dramatic yet successful encounter with

Chinghui, who, in her eyes, was a trustworthy man to rely on.

Up to that moment everything had gone so efficiently that it felt surreal. It was not until the last day that something happened and brought the situation back to reality. The night before Chinghui left for Taiwan, he handed Hongmei a prepared “premarital contract” and asked Hongmei to read and sign. Most of the contents revolved around financial arrangements, including income and labor distribution, as well as remittance frequency. In short, Chinghui requested Hongmei to prioritize their conjugal family over her families in mainland China, and consult with him when there was a need to send money back home. According to Chinghui, he had to make things clear before Hongmei moved to Taiwan, as he had some bad experiences with being “cheated” by his ex-wives. Hongmei was shocked to begin with, and then refused it in a roundabout way with honey-mouthed language. She stressed that she would take care of Chinghui and his family for sure, but also alluded to the fact that she needed to fulfill her obligation as the mother of her son as well.

“A-hui, we are married couple now. You know how hard it is for two people to meet each other and then get married? There is an old Chinese saying, *shinian xiude tongchuandu, bainian xiude gongzhenmian* (it takes a decade’s efforts for two people to ride on the same boat, and a century’s efforts to sleep on the same pillow; It implies the difficulty in meeting someone in the universe so we should cherish the relationship). It is the very *yuanfen* that bring us together, so we should trust and treasure, rather than hurt, each other. We do not need a contract but love! Believe me, A-hui, I will love your family as I love you. Yet please understand that in addition to your wife, I am also a mother, just as you are a father. We all need to take care of our children in some way...”

They kept negotiating this issue yet did not come to any conclusion. Yang Dong and his local business partner, the big matchmaker, A-Long, became flustered and joined in to dissuade Chinghui from pressuring Hongmei in a way that may jeopardize the deal. “That is ridiculous! You should get to know each other and communicate with love, not a contract. No wife will

accept a husband who uses this method to communicate!” said A-Long. Despite these true and encouraging words, I sensed what hid behind A-Long’s words was his anxiety about an open break between the couple, which would bring him trouble if any party regretted the marriage. In the end, Chinghui gave up his insistence under Yang Dong and A-Long’s active persuasion, and went back to Taiwan as scheduled.

Hongmei moved to Taiwan a couple of months later. As she gradually became close to me, she revealed that actually she was heavily indebted due to her former husband’s medical treatment and a housing loan, plus red-envelope money requested by A-Long for the successful matchmaking. To raise money for her husband’s medical expenses, seven years ago she plotted a “fake divorce” with her husband so as to find a foreign husband to help them get out of the financial predicament. She went to a marriage broker and very soon she was selected by a Hong Kong man. Yet her husband regretted right before they went to register their marriage. Hongmei then did not go to any matchmaker until after her husband had passed away.<sup>75</sup>

Hongmei’s case exemplifies how an economic reason plus mother’s love triggered a woman to migrate for more financial resources. Yet not all divorced mothers seeking their second marriage with foreign men meet the social expectations of motherhood. Libin’s case challenges the social assumption that these single mothers choose to marry abroad primarily for their children (Chao 2010). I met Libin through Yang Dong’s introduction. She was a divorced mother with a nine year old child. She went to a matchmaking meeting but ended up being selected by Yang Dong, who organized that marriage trip. Libin was 36 years old. She came from Fuzhou

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<sup>75</sup> Hongmei’s marriage with Chinghui turned out to be a sad story as she ran away, got caught and was sent back to China after residing in Taiwan for six months. I will continue her story in the next chapter as an example to discuss the real/fake marriage issue.

and was married to a local man, who lived next door to her when they were both children. She worked as a ticket checker at a shuttle company before marrying to Yang Dong.

Libin's home is located in a small and quiet neighborhood close to the Fuzhou rail station, a busy area full of small shops and restaurants. She has a younger sister and a younger brother. Her sister married an older Australian gentleman through a marriage broker and migrated to Australia eight years ago. They own a big house there and send money and pictures back home regularly. With her brother-in-law's help, Libin does not need to worry about her parents' financial situation. Her brother works as a bouncer at a local bar and is actively looking for a girlfriend to marry. According to Libin, she divorced her husband due to their unmatched personalities. Not long after their divorce, her ex-husband remarried to another woman. Since they still live next to each other, arrangements have been made for her son to sleep at his father's home yet stay at his mother's home during the day.

Compared to other women coming to the matchmaking meetings, Libin looks fashionable and passionate. She brought me to foot massage salons that she patronizes several days a week. She likes window shopping and hanging out with friends. She told me she went to a marriage broker because she does not want to live alone for the rest of her life.

“As a woman, I feel I need a man to share life. A woman's life will not be completed without a man's participation. After I got divorced, I gave myself lots of opportunities to meet men. I think Yang Dong is trustworthy. He treats me very well....It is good for me to go to Taiwan because of the same language and culture we share and its short distance to Fuzhou. It is much closer than Shanghai! In addition, its modern life attracts me too. I heard Taiwan is very developed and people are nice. I know there are many women from Fujian marrying Taiwanese men.”

“But what about your son? Are you not worried about him?” I could not help but ask the question as I rarely heard her express worries or concerns about her son. “Oh, despite his young age, my son is very mature. I tell him what I think and he totally understands. My ex-husband

and his wife will take care of him so I do not worry about him at all....” Libin answered without hesitation. With no need to send money back home or take care of her only son, Libin looks for a Taiwanese husband just to “complete” her life. Ironically, shortly after moving to Taiwan, she began to complain about her boring life and how it was constrained in Yang Dong’s big house, surrounded by trees and fields in suburban Taoyuan. “How come the place I live in Taiwan is more backward than my home in China? There is only one 7-11 store within my walking distance. I cannot go anywhere without a motorbike. I thought life in Taiwan would be more modern, at least not less convenient, than it is in my hometown.” Many migrant women from China have similar experience like Libin who, as it turns out migrated from a city to a rural area, and now suffers from a material shortage and spiritual isolation in her new life (Chao 2004). Libin did not get used to her “boring life” in Taiwan until she had a baby.

### A Scene in Ukraine

Mr. Su, the marriage broker, Yongchi, his client, and I spent more than 20 hours on the plane flying from Taipei to Kiev, Ukraine. Su’s local secretary, Maiya, a local Ukrainian woman who speaks fluent Chinese, arranged for us to stay at a rental apartment. I learned about this kind of apartments initially from Russian and Ukrainian “mail-order bride” websites in the United States. According to the websites, clients will be offered a seven to ten day trip to meet their “pen pals,” with whom they have corresponded for a period of time, and/or other interested women in person. They are usually arranged to stay at a luxuriously furnished apartment, where it is thought to be more convenient for a group of people to hold a social than in a hotel room. The idea of holding a social for women and men to meet each other seems to imply a different logic of thinking of women in the transnational matchmaking practice. In the Asian practice, women’s

individual characteristics are not appreciated and their labor capabilities are more valued by and large. Moreover, brokers' guarantee that their clients seeking Asian brides will be able to get married on one trip intensifies the unfair treatment of women and makes "pen pal" relationships between the two parties almost impossible. This kind of practice is very different from how the matchmaking meeting is held for white women. Mr. Su's arrangement of Yongchi's matchmaking shows the difference clearly.

I met Natasha on the day after our arrival. She came to our apartment in fashionable dress: makeup, high heel boots and a warm-looking knit hat, under which lay her auburn curly long hair. Natasha came from a small town in the south of Kiev, about five to six hours' drive away. She was about 30 years old and worked as a secretary at a small local company. She had registered herself with a couple of marriage brokerage companies and had entered into correspondence with several men. She corresponded with Yongchi in simple English and resorted to a translator when more complicated communication was needed. Despite the language problem, she gradually took to Yongchi for his sense of humor in the email and gladly agreed to meet him in order to learn more about him in person. Having spent time with each other for two days, Natasha expressed her interest in marrying Yongchi, even if she did not know exactly where Taiwan was.

Compared to Natasha's increased passion, Yongchi's attitude towards Natasha appeared more and more indifferent. Two days later, he announced his decision of not marrying Natasha for her unattractive appearance to him, which I have addressed in the previous chapter. Natasha left that evening, and Mr. Su was requested to arrange more candidates for Yongchi in spite of his anger about Yongchi's "childish decision" in his eyes. From that next day on, Mr. Su arranged a one-on-one matchmaking meeting over dinner at a luxurious restaurant for Yongchi

every night.<sup>76</sup> We met five women in total. All of them were single and at the age from 25 to 35. I was surprised to see how fashionably they were dressed. Tanya, for instance, a 32 year old young woman, wore a long sleeve T-shirt with a big, shiny Channel mark on the cuff, a short pencil skirt, a pair of high heel boots, a long black coat with a fur collar, and heavy make-up with long and curly artificial eyelashes. Another woman, Olga, was 25 years old and participated in a Ukrainian beauty pageant when she was 18 years old. She looked charming and also dressed exquisitely. Stylish hairdo, fashionable clothes, high heels and elaborate makeup seem to be standard dress for these women to attend the matchmaking meeting. The way they dressed accentuates their individual characteristics and material taste, yet at the same time this also confuses the men about their economic condition. Mr. Su more than once stressed how important it is to be generous in front of the women so as not to be looked down as ordinary “Asian men.” “Our clients’ competitors are not other Asian men but white men who come from the United States and Western Europe. If you do not have a good economic capability, how can you afford these women’s living expenses?” Mr. Su stated his theory sternly.

In fact, what is unseen under these women’s astonishing appearance is their anxiety about their futures, both financially and not. None of these women had a stable and decent job at that moment. Maiya laughed embarrassingly to clarify our confusion about the contradiction on these women we saw.

“We Ukrainian women care more about our appearance than about our stomach. We may have difficulty in having three meals a day, but we never give up material consumption. That is our ‘face.’ Many of my friends have the experience having plain bread with water for a week or two in order to save money for a coat. You can never

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<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, I was not allowed to chat with those women but could only sit aside to do my observation at their meetings. It was because I had a chat with Maiya about the average salary of college graduates in Taiwan, which infuriated Mr. Su as he thought the low salary would give a bad impression of Taiwan economy on these women.

judge a woman's financial situation from her appearance. In addition, probably their fancy dressing is for tonight only, and those branded items on their bodies are counterfeits."

According to Sarah Phillips (2008), Ukrainian economic and social welfare reforms after independence in 1991 have resulted in great impact on women's lives and their participation in the labor market. In the new market economy, women are no longer able to get various types of social assistance, such as paid child care leave and subsidies, as they were entitled to during the Soviet period (44-45). The withdrawal of these benefits makes women vulnerable in the transformed political economy despite the fact that rhetoric on gender equality extended from the Soviet era to the post-socialist Ukrainian era is still popular. According to Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2001), in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s, women constituted 51 percent of the workforce, and after independence, they constituted 80 percent of people who lost jobs due to the reorganization of enterprises. In 2002, women still made up two-thirds of Ukraine's unemployed. Women are granted limited access to the new world of private business as women's entrepreneurship is interpreted with traditional values and historical myths for the "revival of Ukrainian statehood," which, Zhurzhenko argues, "in fact thrust women into marginal, low-income niches" (Phillips 2008: 47).

Faced with instability of the transitional politics and economy, an increasing number of Ukrainian women seek out "nontraditional" jobs or look for opportunities overseas. More women than men leave Ukraine to engage in low-paying menial or entertainment jobs in foreign countries. Migration through "mail-order" marriage also becomes a hot option and has gained international attention for its suspicious involvement in prostitution and trafficking. Most women choose the United States and Western Europe as top priority destinations, due to the high incomes of these countries and the geographic convenience of Western Europe. Yet without the

two advantages, what makes Taiwan attractive to them, and how Taiwanese men are perceived by Ukrainian women, at least for those who corresponded with Taiwanese men and came to the matchmaking meetings?

Maiya responded to my inquiry about Taiwanese men's impression on Ukrainian women who registered with her for matchmaking with an odd smile. It seems to be an embarrassing question for her to answer. According to her, most Ukrainian women are unfamiliar with Taiwan. They simply view Taiwanese men as "richer Chinese." In the recent years, more and more people became interested in China as China's economy boomed. Chinese men become attractive not only because of the economic factor but also because of their domestic abilities and other characteristics that are perceived as better than those of local men. In fact, a similar description of Chinese men has been seen in a special feature s on the transnational marriage between Chinese men and Russian women in Vladivostok According to the report, many Russian women think that Chinese men are better than Russian men because they are more diligent and harder workers and do not drink as much as Russian men. More importantly, they are more reliable and willing to do housework because of the influence of the Chinese traditional family values (Xinhua News 10/3/2010).

It is hard to estimate to what extent a Ukrainian would buy into such an idea from a Russian. Yet it seems to be true that China's rise has drawn attention of its neighbor countries and made Chinese men "visible," even though this "visibility" is still far from "desirability" by and large. Not all Chinese men, but wealthy ones, become an option, alongside men from Western Europe and the United States, for Eastern European women to consider marrying. Maiya states that many of her friends get interested in Chinese culture now and feel "cool" to be able to do business in China in the future. Most of the women who came to the matchmaking meetings

indeed expressed their interest in Chinese culture. They simply regarded Taiwan as part of China for their shared language and culture regardless of the political reality. Yet for its geographic inconvenience, they do not really consider moving to Taiwan as “it is just too far away from my hometown,” said Lubov.

Despite the fact that most Eastern European women prefer western men to Asian men, there are still some choosing Taiwanese men.<sup>77</sup> In addition to Natasha, Tanya is another example. Tanya was a 28 year old Ukrainian woman, who married Xizhi through Mr. Su’s brokerage. She was an English teacher and got laid off due to her school’s budget-cuts. Considering her age, she registered herself with several matchmaking agencies and finally met Xizhi. She described her first glance at him, “He looked very shy. He did not speak much but I could feel his sincerity. He is very cute, and I like his personality, straight and simple. I felt I would fall in love with him very soon, and it just happened as predicted. That’s it! It’s very unbelievable even to me!” Tanya resided in Taiwan just for two months when I visited their home in Taipei County. Her husband Xizhi was a computer engineer, 29 years old, and owned a beautiful condo. The condo was on the fourteenth floor with a beautiful view from their French window. The living environment and house decoration reveal Xizhi’s life taste and economic status.

When I talked to Tanya in the living room, Xizhi was busy preparing drink and food for us in the kitchen. Without Xizhi beside her, Tanya straightforwardly expressed her thoughts about living in Taiwan. She complained that Xizhi brought her to eat at roadside food stands and night markets several times, where food is dirty and the dining environment is bad. The cultural

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<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, I could not get the exact number of successful cases from the brokers as they view the number as a “business secret.” It is believed to be very few. In my estimation, it would be less than ten in total up to the time of my visits.

difference in dining habits is one thing that bothers her, and the complicated familial relationship of Xizhi's parents is the other, not to mention other barriers in everyday life that she needs time to overcome, such as language. "I do not know when I will overcome all of the difficulties and get used to life here. I think I will give myself two years first to see whether or not I can survive. Even though I love Xizhi very much, I do not want to force myself to live an unhappy life. I believe we should be able to find a compromised way to solve the problem. I am still optimistic about our future, at least for now," said Tanya. Unfortunately, one year later when I tried to contact her again, her cell phone was out of service and her email address was no longer valid. How her life is going remains unknown.

Having followed marriage groups to Vietnam, China and Ukraine, I sense that talking about a women's agency would become meaningless if we do not take into account to what extent these women are allowed to exercise their bargaining power to negotiate with structural constraints they have faced. In my initial analysis, the way the women adopt to negotiate the constraints is not always confrontational. Instead, active submission to the power mechanism, if little bargaining power was available, would be another way to exercise their agency. Here, I would like to complicate the concept of agency by highlighting not only the dynamics between individuals and the structure, but also examining the bargaining power, the human capital that could be accumulated from the woman's financial capability, educational achievement, appearance, and other political economic conditions. In the context of the transnational marriage market, it has been seen in the process of matchmaking that it is a woman's skin color that symbolized a sort of "eugenics", whereby also granting them a source of bargaining power. This phenomenon brings up several other issues that I would like to discuss in this chapter: what is commodified in the marriage transaction, how can we conceptualize the relationship between

women's agency and women's commodification, and how should we grant women agency while at the same time not exaggerating or romanticizing it?

### **Women's Agency in Decision Making**

The concept of agency has been discussed a lot in previous scholarship. Laura Ahearn (2001) cautions us to define carefully when using it and Margaret Archer (2000) urges a middle ground between over-privileging and under-privileging human agency in our analytical approach. Agency is widely perceived as a force of potential movement and change to oppose structure. Yet to what extent an individual can be recognized as a subject having agency to define themselves rather than a socially or discursively constructed subject is arguable. Sherry Ortner (1996) questions the way early structural-functionalism, certain kinds of deterministic/mechanical Marxism and French structuralism all ignored an intentional subject in their theoretical elaboration. She also questions the position of post-structuralisms for excluding the intentional subject or "agent" from their theoretical model (1996: 7). For the latter position, she argues, Foucault's theory of power is an example that evokes controversies. Despite his productive understanding of the nature of power, his viewing the subject as discursive construction can be seen to hide one's multiple and various constructedness of the 'self' through lived gender-specific experiences.

Indeed, we need to go beyond the binary concept of the dominant and the subordinate so as to see people's heterogeneous responses to the power, as Lyn Parker (2005) points out, "subjects who resist or who exercise some capacity for "deviance" are doing more than just reacting to one dominant discourse...In short, the subaltern subject is not monolithic (74)." Foucault's discourse that dichotomizes power and resistance has been found contradictory to a great deal of

ethnographic studies (Sangren 1995) that explore individuals' struggle with constraints or negotiation with identity with motives and intentions that appear psychologically, emotionally and politically ambivalent, contradictory and complex in the specific social context (Abu-Lughod 1986, 1990; Scott 1985, 1990). Therefore, instead of urging us to "write culture" to look at how people make meanings of their culture (Clifford, Marcus, and School of American 1986; Geertz 1973; Rosaldo 1980), more recent scholars caution us to "write against culture" in attendance on individuals' emotions and intentions, upon which individuals experience the daily life in their social worlds (Abu-Lughod 1991).

Another scholarship resource that helps to reflect on the binary power/resistance, agency/structure would be Ortner's idea of "serious game" (1996). Ortner seeks to recover the subject and agency through practice theory that puts human intention and desire back into the picture. She praises Anthony Giddens in particular for his viewing agency as both a product and a producer of society and history. He recognizes the agent's knowledge ability and intentionality to see into the workings of the larger forces impinging them, yet also recognizes the complex dynamics between subjects' intentions and the structure that the shape of the latter is never a direct outcome of the former (1996: 11). She proposes a model of practice, "serious games," to embody agency but not freeze it as a category in contrast to "structure." According to her,

"The idea of the 'serious game' is meant to capture simultaneously the following dimensions: that social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous "agents"; and yet at the same time there is "agency," that is, actors play with skills, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is 'serious' is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high. It follows in turn that the games of life must be played with intensity and sometimes deadly earnestness" (12).

The reflection on the dynamics between agency and structure helps us better understand migrant women's decision making of marrying foreign husbands in different social contexts. First, I argue that women's agency does not necessarily take on a form of resistance to structural constraints. Instead, sometimes it may appear to conform to them.<sup>78</sup> For example, Hong's and Hongmei's stories suggest that in embracing the patriarchal ideology and market mechanisms it helped them to get out of financial predicaments; women would actively bow themselves to the institutions and reframe what people in the First World perceive as oppression and exploitation of women with positive connotations. For example, for Hong and Hongmei, finding a mate through professional brokers was the most efficient way to carry out their dreams, and bearing in mind unequal gender treatments and potential risks in the process of matchmaking, it was regarded as a necessary cost in exchange for a better future. In Vietnam, it was common to see bride candidates staging themselves to conform to the gender roles that men expect at the matchmaking meetings and selected brides at the dining table where they served their husbands as obedient wives. The performance of obedience molds them to the stereotypical image of Vietnamese women in Taiwan's mass media and makes Taiwanese clients believe in their "Vietnameseness," which refers to the virtue of bearing hardship and hard work, at the first glance. Yet I am not saying that these women deliberately "cheat" men by performing obedience. On the contrary, I want to point out that on the dating occasion, all women, regardless class or racial differences, seek to make a good impression on men through manipulating their images, and these potential brides are no exceptions.

Secondly, the structural limitations are never perceived as singly but multi-dimensional,

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<sup>78</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) and Saba Mahmoud's works on Islamic women's piety (2005) that twists the perceived binary of women's piety and resistance are very informative here.

just as barriers designed in a game in which players need to figure out how to get through to reach the destination. Women seek to find a way out of their current predicaments just as playing in a game. They need to calculate pros and cons of their choices to negotiate limitations on different dimensions in the game of their life and prioritize preferences for action they would like to take with limited resources and information available to them. For example, Ngan grew up under the shadow of her father's domestic violence in a poor family. She prioritized escaping her father's patriarchal control and reducing her mother's financial burden to other living difficulties and considered matchmaking the best way for her to get out of predicaments she was faced. Despite hearing about many negative stories of marrying foreigners through brokers, she was still willing to give it a try. Many young Vietnamese women in the village I visited pursue transnational marriage at the expense of their own courtship. Van's brother's girlfriend is an example. She sadly left him for a foreign husband as she thought there would be no future for either of their families if she chose to stay with him in the village. These women's decision to give up what they currently have in order to pursue the wealthy yet uncertain future might sound irrational or too materialistic, yet in fact, their decision making in such circumstances reflects their agency and what Catriona MacKenzie and Natalie Stoljar (2000) term "relational autonomy," which I will address next.

Lastly, since individuals can not be distinguished from the social, we could claim that there is no "autonomous agent" in the sense that no one can make a decision without any social references. Therefore, it would make little sense if we base our understanding of women's agency on the belief that women must make their decisions alone without being influenced by her surroundings. MacKenzie and Stoljar's concept of "relational autonomy" would be helpful to reflect on the suspect ideals of radical independence and self-reliance. According to them,

relational autonomy “does not mean a single view, but designates a loosely related collection of views that emphasize the social embedding of the self” (Westlund 2009: 26). Yet one would question to what extent a choice or decision could be considered an agent’s own according to this point of view. Andrea Westlund (2009) maintains that an agent should be able to hold herself answerable to external critiques and challenges to her commitments (34-35). The decision-making of women I met in Van’s village reflects this point of view by and large. They have legitimate reasons for going to brokers despite knowing they may risk marrying the wrong person. It is clearly seen in the cases such as Hong, who struggled for marrying a foreigner in order to share the financial burden of her family at the expense of degrading herself in front of her future husband, and Yen, who fought for her believed love at the expense of endangering her relationship with parents. I see their determination to marry foreign husbands as an expression not only of their agency but also of a collective view that has been shared among their friends and families.

As good friends and neighbors growing up together in the same village, Hong, Van, and Neng always hung out together, sharing information and values with each other. Before they reached the eligible age to attend matchmaking meetings, they often called each other out to the meetings to peek at the grooms for fun. As time went by, their collective views on marrying foreign husbands were formed and their interest in giving it a try themselves one day developed. Their collective views, doubtlessly, were shaped within a larger social context, where rumors, gossip and stories about transnational marriages of some neighbors’ daughters circulate widely in the village and serve as people’s references when they consider marrying foreigners, for better or for worse, at some point.

News about Vietnamese women being mistreated in foreign countries is frequently seen in

mainstream newspapers and heard from people's talking in urban areas, yet it seems that due to limited access of mass media to remote villages, those sensational stories do not produce a great negative effect on young women such as Van, Hong, Neng and Hongminh, who are interested in marrying foreign husbands. Those pieces of news have gradually lost their roots of authenticity and are perceived as rumors and gossip as they travel through different story hearers and tellers in the village. The power of these narratives comes from their floating meanings that can be appropriated and made to be "true" or "fake" in one's mind at some point through hooking them up with certain events that happen around and/or are visible to people as proof. Without certain events happening in people's surroundings to prove the truth of the circulated narratives, for the villagers, stories are just stories and will not affect their thinking. Women's reactions to stories that Vietnamese wives are murdered or abused in foreign countries is commonly something like "Oh, I heard about that. It would really be horrible if those stories were real.... Yet I don't think anything bad will happen to me if I find a good matchmaker." Instead of thinking of various possible risks that might be beyond the control of the matchmaker, they place their hopes in matchmakers to find them good mates. "As a result, we need to carefully choose a reliable matchmaker to arrange our marriage.... Look at my neighbor's daughter's marriage. She lives a happy life now, which means her matchmaker is trustworthy," Ngan said.

Happy and sad stories circulate in daily life in the village. People rephrase and interpret the stories so that they make sense to them in their own ways. Happy stories reinforce women's determination to marry a foreign husband. Yet sad stories do not necessarily halt women from doing so. Instead, sometimes they produce unpredictably disciplinary power over young women in shaping their ideas of how to act as a good wife. For example, Van told me about Long's runaway story that she heard from other people in the village. Long was about 23 years old and

was selected by a Taiwanese man one year earlier. Recently they heard from Long's matchmaker who got a complaint from Long's husband that Long had run away without leaving any message. There is no clue why Long left her husband in this circulated story. Gossip about her life before getting married had spread and provided an answer to the people's conjecture. According to Van,

“Long is very mysterious. She left the village to find employment in Hanoi very early. She seldom came back to visit us and nobody here stayed in good contact with her. Even her parents had no clear idea what Long did in Hanoi. I think she must have done something bad like serving as an escort or prostitute, so she dared not tell people about herself openly. We believe she must have used marriage as a guise to continue this job in Taiwan.... It is really bad to treat your husband like this. We should appreciate our husbands for marrying us and behave properly in the first place...”

Because of Long's mysterious past, few people questioned her husband or other possibilities that might have caused her run away, but assumed it was Long's misbehavior that led to the unhappy ending of the marriage. Obviously Long's story has lost its authenticity in the course of its travel, which allows hearers to assign legitimate causes to the result and makes their standpoint in favor of foreign marriage unchanged. In any case, the government's and the mainstream mass media's warnings of the danger of marrying foreign husbands through brokers does not create too much influence on women's decision-making. People still act according to what they see, in this case, the change of material life of their neighbors who marry off their daughters to foreigners and returning migrants who come back to the village with a new outlook.

It goes without saying that not all transnational marriages are as successful as expected. Yet in the village, people rarely see the unfortunate divorced women returning home, but rather see happy couples visiting the wife's natal family with gifts and money for relatives and help with house remodeling. Van's and Neng's contact with their natal families and their first visit back to the village after getting married vividly exemplify how visual materials play a role in triggering women's desire or reinforcing their determination to marry a foreign husband. Van gained eight

kilograms in one year after she moved to Taiwan. One day when I visited her, she laughed at her own balloon-like body shape and said she enjoys life in Taiwan a lot because she does not need to wake up at dawn to earn hard money any more. She then showed me some photos of her with Neng and Hong that she had sent back to her family. The photos were taken in a park on a beautiful day. In the photos they hold each other's hands and smile broadly. They look fashionable, with knee-high boots, stylish hairdos and hats, short skirts and knee-length coats, making them like Japanese girls in the fashion magazines. It was obviously not their usual way of dressing but a way in which Van suggests her good life in Taiwan so as to set her parents' mind at ease.

The illusion that marrying a foreign husband brings a brilliant future is not only reinforced by the images of migrants' photos but also by their physical visits. Van mentioned about her first visit paid to her natal family after getting married.

“I wore a short skirt, which I rarely wore before because it is not convenient to work in the farm or at the beach. I liked to wear black stretch pants. When I arrived home, many relatives and friends were waiting in front of my parents' house to greet me. I felt a little bit embarrassed as people were staring at me. I think people would be shocked at how much I changed in such a short time. I gained a lot of weight and my skin became whiter. I was very skinny and dark before getting married.... Yet I dressed beautifully only for the first three days after I got back home, because my mom asked me to help her with corn farming. Unfortunately on the fourth day my shin got hurt and my skin got burned. I then realized that I was no longer able to work as efficiently as I had before. At that moment, I felt I just wanted to come back to Taiwan. Life in my hometown is just too harsh.”

When I accompanied Neng with Kunsheng and their one year old baby to go back to the village, I witnessed how her marriage contributes to her natal family economically. Her parents' house looked different from a year and a half before when I had attended Neng's wedding. A big television has been put on a table in the living room, despite the fact that the electricity supply was unstable and the signal was weak in the village. During our stay for example, power outages

occurred almost every three to four days. The unreliability of the electricity made the television more like a decoration than an appliance. To comfort our visit, Neng's father built a brick restroom with white tiles lining the inside in their front yard for us. The second day after arriving, Kunsheng actively busied himself with various shopping plans for getting modern equipment for Neng's natal family, such as a gas stove for Neng's mom and a motorbike for her brother. He also brought money to Neng's relatives as a gift.

Married daughters visiting natal families dressed in fashionably and bringing money and gifts for relatives reinforce people's stereotypical imaginary of their material lives in Taiwan. Stories of unfortunate marriages always travel back to the village in the form of gossip that can hardly be testified to by the women involved. Married daughters tend to hide their misfortune from their parents, and divorced women choose to stay away from their old acquaintances in the village in order to save the family's face. Take Hong for example. I was not able to get in touch with her after she moved to Taiwan. According to Van, she was confined to the house and not allowed to contact friends freely. She lost Guochang's trust because she told him that she found his father peeping at her in the shower and Guochang did not believe her. This scandal caused conflicts in the family and put her in an isolated situation at home. Yet even though she suffered so much, she never disclosed the pain to her family. She still sent photos of her with happy smile back home as if she enjoyed her marital life very much in Taiwan.

According to Tung, divorced women are not accepted in rural Vietnam, so many of them have difficulty living in their hometowns on their return and decide to leave again to seek their new life somewhere else. The difficulties come not only from people's discrimination and gossip about their failed marriages, but also from the limited economic opportunities available to them. I met several divorced women returning to Vietnam with such vexation, such as Cam Tu from

Vinh Long in the south of Vietnam. Cam Tu was 25 years old when she got married to her Taiwanese husband. Having a bachelor's degree in accounting and several certificates in language and computing, she worked at a bank before getting married. Unlike most local women seeking foreign husbands for economic reasons, she was encouraged by her mom to marry a Taiwanese man so as to accompany her younger sister, who married a Taiwanese man through a broker when their family had economic difficulties, and who lives in Taiwan now. She considered it a good chance for her new life too, as she actually had a hard time finding a suitable boyfriend in the circle of her friends and colleagues at that time. With the strong feeling that she should compensate her younger sister's "sacrifice" to help their family and her accomplishment of finishing the higher education, she accepted her mom's suggestion to marry a man through a broker's introduction.

Unfortunately, Cam Tu's marital life was totally different from her expectations. Her husband was in charge of his family's business of selling motorbikes in suburban Taipei. She was asked to help with the business in the daytime and the housework in the evening. She had never engaged in so much physical labor before and very soon her womb developed problems from so much heavy lifting. Yet she did not receive good care at home and was still granted little time for a rest after a long day. Just nine months after getting married, Cam Tu decided to run back to Vietnam to have a "break." Three weeks later after coming back to her hometown, she called her husband to express her consideration of getting a divorce. She told me that although she still had passion for her husband, she could not endure such a life any longer. Since Cam Tu made the decision to stay in Vietnam, her mother had been keeping her marital status secret from their neighbors and pushing her to leave the village because she considered divorce to be a dishonorable thing for a woman. According to her mom, if a married daughter stays at her natal

home too long, people would suspect her marital situation. She requested that Cam Tu leave their hometown after two months. Luckily, I happened to have a chance to introduce her to a Taiwanese restaurant to work as a waitress in Ho Chi Minh City. She said to me in a firm tone that no matter what happens, she will no longer consider going back to Taiwan. Yet without officially getting divorced, Cam Tu became a so-called “runaway bride” and blocked herself from possibilities to meet other men in the near future.

It is understandable that to save face, women in the village intend to hide the dark side of their marriages and flaunt the bright side. Photos of married women’s happy life in Taiwan sent back to their families and scenes of returning migrants carrying lots of goods to visit natal families inform their hometown fellows that they become not only wives of foreigners but also consumer subjects in a modern world. The remarkable improvement of material living conditions of families who have daughters marrying foreign husbands in the neighborhood work as catalyst to trigger more women to consider foreign marriage.

These village women make their decisions based on limited knowledge and information, of which much circulates as rumors and gossip, and their imaginaries of modern worlds through (mis)-reading returning migrants. These migrants are seen as modern subjects for their consumption power showed to their village fellows. Marrying a foreign husband is a rite of passage that announces a woman’s identity has transformed not only from a single woman to a wife, but also from a vulgar village woman to a fashionable modern lady. Transnational marriage provides a faster way to improve women’s quality of life and accumulate their human capital, such as cultural taste cultivation and educational achievements, which they would not be able to accomplish otherwise if choosing to stay in the village. The accumulated human capital not only presents the increasing value and quality of the migrant woman but can also be transferred from

her conjugal family to natal family. Just as Yen's observation in her neighborhood, "I feel many families who have daughter(s) marrying foreigners have been treated differently by their neighbors. Probably they are rich now, having remodeled houses and luxurious things, which make them more respectable. It is also possible that since they know more foreigners, people come to them more frequently in the hope of finding foreign husbands through their daughters' networks."

Yen's story about families that have daughters marrying foreign husbands suggests how important a daughter's transnational marriage is for its contribution to the household economically and non-economically. As a daughter of the family, many Vietnamese brides I met expressed as much concern about their natal families as about themselves when considering getting married. Many of them consider marrying foreign husbands and reducing their parents' financial burden as a way to perform filial piety, a virtue that is deeply rooted in Vietnamese traditional culture<sup>79</sup>. To carry out filial piety, some follow their parents' marriage arrangements and others might opt for foreign husbands without consulting their parents in advance.

The complex relationships between parents and daughters shed doubt on the common analyses of women's motivations for marrying foreign husbands that oppose women's choice for their own good from that for their parents' sake (Hugo and Nguyen 2007). The complexity of these relationships also makes it impossible to reduce women's agency to their ability to make decisions for themselves. . I argue that we should not simply deny women's agency just because

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<sup>79</sup> How a daughter could perform filial piety in the Vietnamese family has been exemplified in an epic poem, *the Tale of Kiều*, the most significant work in traditional literature written by Nguyễn Du (1766–1820). The poem depicts the tribulations of Thúy Kiều, a beautiful young woman who sacrificed her life to save her family. She sold herself into marriage with a middle-aged man, not knowing that he is a pimp, and was forced into prostitution (Nguyen 1983). This story is widely circulated and Kiều has been considered as a model of a filial daughter.

of their subjugation to market and patriarchal mechanisms that seek to maintain existing order through sacrificing women's interests. Rather, we should carefully look into what "free choice" and "desire" mean for these women as humans are social beings whose understanding of the world is always shaped in certain social and historical contexts and by particular communities. Desire does not root in the individual mind of these women, I argue, but it speaks itself through these women. Just as stories of women looking for foreign husbands have shown, these women's visions of the future are shaped by the visibility of what other migrants have gained through marriage in economic and cultural terms. In this case, they would not perceive "exploitation" the same way as women in the First World do, and may not expect to be "enlightened" from "false consciousness" as First World feminists might try to do for them. Instead of arguing for what "real" consciousness would be for these village women, I maintain that more attention should be paid to how these women negotiate constraints and compromise themselves in order to achieve the objectives, which, I consider, is where their agency emerges.

Participating in the matchmaking process also allowed me to observe the difference of bargaining abilities among Vietnamese, Chinese and Ukrainian women in the transnational marriage market. In front of Taiwanese clients, Vietnamese women showed the least bargaining power. They easily accept requests from Taiwanese clients and are thus regarded as the "easiest-to-handle" bride candidates. Ukrainian women directly expressed to Taiwanese clients their hesitation to migrate to Taiwan because of uncertain living conditions and cultural differences. At the dining table where matchmaking took place, they actively engaged in negotiation for their rights in the marital life and hinted that they prefer white men from Germany and the United States for their believed abilities to provide more secure financial support. The contrast of women's gestures in bargaining shows how women's value is

determined by their human capital, the capital which can be accumulated not only through individual beauty, educational achievement, financial ability, but also through their nationality and race. The political economic conditions of these women's countries and the symbolic power of race they hold work together to construct their image of superiority or inferiority in the global stratification and enhance or weaken their bargaining power accordingly. For example, white privilege entitles Ukrainian women to exercise more of their bargaining power in front of Taiwanese clients while rural Vietnamese women have less power to do so due to their lack of the "eugenic" privilege.

Third World women have been characterized for a long time in terms of pre-technological "backwardness," inferiority, dependency and ignorance, forced by overwhelming external powers completely beyond their control into submission and slavery (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998: 13), whether in the form of prostitutes or mail-order brides. In the transnational marriage market of Taiwan, Vietnamese women's humble gestures are very often interpreted as lacking agency. However, through looking into Vietnamese women's decision-making, I argue that women's lack of bargaining power cannot be seen equally as lacking agency. Women having little human capital are still able to exercise agency despite their unremarkable ways that would easily cause an outsiders' misreading. To explore women's agency in different social contexts, we should pay more attention to how the power of geo-political economy is translated into women's human capital that grants them bargaining power to negotiate limitations. Exploring the relationship between women's agency and the political economy allows us to avoid either simply attributing women's different degrees of agency to their racial difference or romanticizing Asian women as more obedient and innocent.

## **Commodification of Women in the Brokered Marriage**

Transnational marriage brokerage is widely blamed for its exploitation of women. In the West, the prevalent discourses criticize the “mail-order bride” trade as a new form of sexual exploitation (Barry 1979; Barry, Bunch, and Castley 1983; Glodava and Onizuka 1994) and link brides and/or bridal brokers to prostitution and trafficking in women (Cao 1987; Demleitner 1994). For example, Mila Glodava and Richard Onizuka (1994) regard mail-order brides as victims of “unequal political and economic relationships between developing and industrialized nations and between the sexes on a worldwide scale” (4). They sell themselves as commodities into Western advanced countries for a better life and are thus trapped in a new form of sexual exploitation. Yet Nicole Constable (2003) argues that Glodava and Onizuka's analysis ignores the fact that many women act in awareness of potential risks, and are not duped or seduced into the relationships. Women imagine various options and react in different ways in the face of global inequalities. For them, looking for a mate through agencies does not mean that love and emotional ties are absent or unimportant. Therefore, refusing to use the word, “selling”, she interprets the process of matchmaking as “looking for pen pals” instead.

Despite Constable’s informative critique, the “pen pal relationship” formed through online dating services could not be able to account for the relationship between the sexes in the brokered marriage practice in the Taiwanese-Vietnamese context where there is no need of correspondence prior to getting married. Men’s selecting a wife from a crowd of women on site makes the scenario more like men “buying” a bride and women “selling” themselves to strangers. In a later article, Constable (2009) reviews scholarly works on sex work, domestic work and cross-border marriage involving sex, love and reproductive labor and conceptualizes the phenomena in global capitalism as “commodification of intimacy.” Based on Karl Marx’s idea of

commodification that transforms goods or services previously outside of the market to commodities that are tradable in the market by assigning them economic values (Marx and Engels 1978), she develops her concept of commodification of intimacy as “the ways in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flow of goods” (Constable 2009:50).

Constable considers “intimate relationships” rather than “women” commodities in conceptualizing the global phenomenon; yet I argue that when looking at the brokered marriage practice in the Asian context, we cannot ignore the aspect where women are objectified and packaged as commodities in the gendered unequal marriage market. Commodification of women is commonly regarded as objectification of women alienates women from their own nature and subjects them to exploitation of the market mechanism, to which women have no agency to react. Many studies of transnational marriages through agencies overestimate either a woman’s agency or her victimhood, and consider the two notions incompatible. This binary thinking either ignores the ability of this kind of marriage to entrap women into vulnerability or simply conflates this kind of marriage with women trafficking. My observations of Vietnamese women looking for foreign husbands through brokers provide an insight into a third way to look at the commodified marriage. These rural women are commodified for the transnational marriage market and financially exploited by the brokers, even when they cannot be seen as victims of global sex industries at all. I regard a women’s actively conforming to the market mechanism as self-commodification, in which they engage in self-packaging and self-promotion, as conspirators of marriage brokers, in order to make themselves more attractive and competitive in

the transnational marriage market. Therefore, instead of avoiding using the concept of commodification of women, I seek to re-conceptualize it with feminist reflection.

Commodification of women in transnational marriage is never a simple monetary exchange for women's bodies. It requires women's lifelong commitment of reproductive labor contribution to the household and requires her active commitment to this new mode of life. In fact, it is not a new phenomenon that women are regarded as commodities in history. In Chinese society, a "price-market society" for example, "from the Song dynasty (960-1279) forward, households increasingly treated women like commodities not only in the suddenly expanded impersonal labor market but within the sphere of kinship as well. Men could, and frequently did, exchange their kin, male or female depending on the condition, for money, whether in marriage, adoption, or sale into slavery or prostitution. As objects for exchange, women could not be actors in exchanges (Gates 1989: 799). Gates found the degree of commodification of women is proportional to the development of the petty capitalist mode of production emerging in late imperial and early modern China. In the areas where petty capitalism highly developed, women were more likely subject to be commodified in the marital transaction. Women's value largely relied on their labor contribution and was embodied in the form of brideprice because both of their productive and reproductive labor was in great demand by husbands' families.<sup>80</sup>

In the current era, the expansion of global capitalism has also generated great impact on

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<sup>80</sup> In the study of Chinese marriage, Gates classifies three forms of marriage by the way in which brideprice and dowry are exchanged. They are "major marriage with dowry (MMD)", "major marriage with brideprice (MMB)," and simple sale (Gates 1996). In the MMD, the bride's family expends its own resources on the dowry, while in the MMB, dowry is all or largely paid for by the groom's family. Gates points out that in the areas where the petty-capitalist mode of production is highly developed, women and their work encounter more possibilities of being commodified. For the demand of household labor of the family economy, the groom's family is usually willing to pay more brideprice than what they would receive back in the form of dowry as compensation for the bride's natal family. As a result, people would regard MMB as selling a daughter or buying a daughter-in-law (1996: 126).

women's labor employment in the transnational context. Unlike being exchanged as objects or property as in the old days, today's women seek marriage abroad as a form of "migrant reproductive workers" (Thanh-Dan 1996). Migrant reproductive workers provide labor to supply the shortage of social reproductive labor in developed countries. Those countries are faced with a shortage of reproductive labor because women, with increasing economic opportunities, become more engaged in professional careers than housework, the reproductive labor which women have been expected to contribute despite the growing gender equality in education and employment. Women's decreasing commitment to engage in reproductive labor in the household and men's inability or unwillingness to share the burden leads to a social demand for replaceable labor from overseas. The flows of domestic workers and caregivers from Southeast Asia to East Asia are obvious examples to illustrate the commodification of women's reproductive labor in global capitalism, and the demand of foreign brides should also be considered in such a context (Kojima 2001).

Migrant reproductive workers, domestic workers, caregivers and foreign brides all similarly provide material and immaterial labor services. Immaterial labor (Hardt and Negri 2004) is a new labor form in the final decades of the twentieth century.<sup>81</sup> It creates immaterial products such as a relationship, an emotional response or communication and almost always mixes with material forms of labor, which can be better understood as "bio-political labor." For example, caregivers perform affective, cognitive and linguistic tasks together with bedpan cleaning

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<sup>81</sup> There are some critiques on Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labor. For example, David Camfield (2007) questions their generalization of immaterial labor. He argues that it is essential to distinguish the production of ourselves as human subjects in determinate socio-material conditions and particular historical moments from the production by humans of microprocessors. Labor is involved in the process at different levels of abstraction and in different social forms. Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labor does not allow making such distinctions (2007: 31).

(2004:109). Affective labor is one principal form of immaterial labor. The value of affective commodities cannot be simply counted by the socially-necessary labor time necessary to produce them, but by the quality of labor that satisfies clients' emotional and affective needs.

What makes foreign brides different from domestic workers, caregivers or sex workers in terms of their labor commodification is their affective involvement and commitment. In the transnational marriage brokering business, marriage is regarded as a lifelong contract between men as clients and women as labor providers. The validity of the contract relies on the willingness of continual affective investment by the two parties. In other words, the commodification of women in this context has gone beyond a simple purchase of women's labor and sexuality with money. It also involves men's careful estimation of potential affective exchange with women in the future. What catalyzes men's feeling of love is their estimation of women's value based not only on her past domestic labor performance but also on their outlook and characters, which are very often associated with stereotypical images of her culture of origin.

Tadiar analyzes the commodification of the domestic worker's labor and regards the domestic worker as "a compound of thing and service, product and producer, a commodity which works to produce itself as a use-value as well as to produce other use-values" (Tadiar 2004:120-121). This analytic logic is also applicable to the commodification of the foreign bride's labor inasmuch that she is considered more of an "unpaid reproductive laborer" for the household than a "lover" to be doted on by the man. A foreign woman's surplus value of labor can be appropriated to a maximum degree when she is a wife rather than a caregiver or a domestic worker. As a wife, she is expected not only to produce and reproduce her own labor to create the value of things but also to contribute her labor to other members in the family for free, which makes her cost much less and her surplus value expropriated much more, than a caregiver

or domestic worker.

I came across many Taiwanese men who looked for Vietnamese wives to take care of the elders in their families. This is of course not the only reason but doubtlessly a vital reason in their consideration of marrying a foreign wife. Guochang's case exemplifies this logic of thinking. He prioritized his mother's health issue to his own happiness and made all efforts to confirm that Hong would be able to take care of his mother in a proper manner. When I observed the visa interviews in Ho Chi Minh City, I also came across many men who, under the visa consular official's interrogation, admitted that they needed a caregiver for the elders in the family and to bear the burden of housework. For example, Mr. Chang was a factory owner, divorced and living with his mother and two children. He had hired Xuan, a Vietnamese woman to work at his factory two years earlier. Xuan had been working more than ten hours almost every day without overtime pay, yet she never complained. Mr. Chang praised Xuan's hard work in front of us without anyone noticing that his behavior had violated the labor law until the consular official pointed it out. By the time Xuan's working visa expired, Mr. Chang decided to marry her. He replied to the official's question regarding his motivation to marry Xuan as follows and was harshly responded to with "you should find a caregiver then!"

"Xuan is a nice person. She is a very good employee, working efficiently and never complaining.... From her working attitude I can tell she will be a good wife....I trust her ability to manage a household.... My mom needs someone to take care of her daily life because she is unable to move freely. My two young kids need a babysitter too. I used to rely on my married sisters. Yet having met Xuan, I think I found a right person to share my burden."

Transforming Xuan's identity from worker to wife, that is, from a paid worker to an unpaid worker, Mr. Chang not only saved his financial expenses in hiring labor but also received affective satisfaction. Many Taiwanese men marrying Asian women from poor areas that I had

interviewed, like Guochang and Chinghui, who expected Hongmei to help with his family business, shared in the opinion that marrying a foreign bride is a financially smart decision. Indeed, from the male client's perspective, marrying a foreign bride is very "economical." Their surplus labor, which can be increased through reducing their labor costs, that is, living and other consumption expenses, can be appropriated infinitely and directly in the name of "love" and "obligation" for the family. For example, Hui Ge's wife complains that she is only allowed to shop at night markets for her personal consumption, such as clothes and shoes. One day when I visited Hui Ge, he was blaming his wife for purchasing a handbag despite its cheap price when compared to those sold at stores. According to Hui Ge, those women's goods are unnecessary and redundant. Hongmei also complained about her husband, Chinghui, for giving her an allowance of only US\$100 a month, which makes it almost impossible for her to go out and buy the clothes she needs. Yet Chinghui justified his allowance policy by arguing that Hongmei has been provided food and other necessities for daily use at home, so she does not need extra money.

This commodity logic, however, would be very different for white women from Eastern Europe. In the transnational marriage market, white brides' exchange value, which is represented by the price of marrying them, is much higher than Asian brides. What differentiates them from Asian brides is highly related to their mis-represented western characteristics and white privilege that is commonly held by Asian people, which I have analyzed in the previous chapter. Given that women's domestic labor is never a priority in Taiwanese men's consideration of marrying Eastern European women, how they are commodified is less about caring labor than sexuality and race.

Foreign brides' value is determined not just by their labor but also by their race and

sexuality. They are surplus in the sense of surplus value to the extent that they cost very little since their labor provides for their own labor reproduction. In addition, the difference of economic status between the foreign wife and the husband is racially translated into the value that accrues to the latter. For instance, Asian brides' economic disadvantage is construed as their racial inferiority and cultural backwardness and enhances their husbands' sense of superiority in all dimensions. Last, what counts as a necessary purchase versus luxury consumption for women's labor reproduction is also differently considered between Asian and Eastern European brides. From this perspective, foreign brides' surplus value is also racially estimated. Natasha's complaint about her husband for taking her to eat at dirty street vendors in contrast to Hongmei's meager monthly allowance which keeps her from enjoying life reflects what Maria Mies asserts, "the definition of what is 'necessary' and what is 'surplus' is not a purely an economic question, but a political and/or cultural one (Tadiar 2004:120, 303).

The value of commodities is also not purely an economic calculation but a political and cultural one. What kind of goods can become commodities involves political consideration, and the price competition of commodities is also a competition of the value of social meanings that are attached to the commodities. The commodity, as Marx said, is a "social hieroglyphic":

"[v]alue, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic" (Marx and Engels 1978: 73).

Commodification involves not only price assignment but also a process of social meaning giving and sharing. As Appadurai suggests, "demand is the economic expression of the political logic of consumption" (Appadurai 1986: 31). From this perspective, consumption is not just an economic activity but also a political expression of one's identity, desire and cultural tastes. I have discussed the market mechanisms of foreign bride brokerage in the previous chapter and would

like to point it out here again that, compared to Asian brides, what elevates the exchange value of Eastern European brides, which is represented by the price of marrying them, is the very misperception of the fantasy of whiteness, a ghostlike thing that has been fetishized in the course of post-colonial history.

### **Commodification and Affect**

Although I emphasize the dimension of women's commodification in the transnational marriage market, I do not claim that no affect is involved in this kind of marriage practice. All of the women who agreed to marry the men I met in Vietnam told me that they had the feeling of "loving" their husbands at the matchmaking meeting. I am not going to argue how "authentic" their love is because it is immeasurable. It could be a mixed feeling of love at first sight and gratitude for men's selecting them. It could also simply be the women's performance to respond to my inquiry and/or to the men's proposal. It is widely recognized that real marriage must be based on "love," and "loving the person" is a never wrong answer for questions like "why do you marry this man" posed by immigration officials. Yet in most cases, we cannot deny the fact that as time goes by, an affective relationship is gradually formed between the couple. Some cases have shown how women fought with their parents for their firm decision to marry the man, as Yen's story showed. It would be hard for ordinary people to imagine how Yen could fall in love with an old man in such a short time, which was why the consular official suspected that the marriage was fraudulent. . Yet we should avoid judging the authenticity of their affect from a middle-class viewpoint that "true love" should be something pure and free from monetary and material contamination.

Money and intimacy should not be seen as two mutually exclusive concepts. Some scholars

condemn the widespread conflation of intimacy and economic transactions as the markets expand across the globe, yet Viviana Zelizer (2005) reminds us that this “hostile-worlds view” fails to recognize how regularly intimate social transactions coexist with monetary transactions in our daily life. For example, friends and relatives send gifts of money as wedding presents, and friends loan each other money (2005:27). It is also often seen in the sex industry in how “performative” affect mingles with “authentic” affect between sex workers and their clients (Brennan 2004; Constable 2009; Takeyama 2010). In short, commodification could be disguised as gift relations, and gift relations are often “infiltrated” by commodity relations. People’s affect involved in the relationship cannot be considered real or fake but only felicitous or infelicitous.

Scholars have criticized the radical opposition between gifts and commodities (Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995; Parry and Bloch 1989; Yan 1996). Yan Yunxiang (1996) argues that the opposition is actually “a result of the ideological construction of the pure gift in the West and the romanticization of gift relations in non-Western societies” (13). Take money for example. A lot of ethnographic examples have showed that money indicates not a purely economic relation but a social relation that serves to solidify the relationship between transactors. According to Stefan Dietrich’s research on money and marriage exchange in East Indonesia, money transactions in the context of marriage are considered “investments” not for further market transactions but for creation of long-term exchange relations, that is, a stable social relationship between the two families.

In the same vein, taking transnational brokered marriages between Taiwanese men and Vietnamese women for example, despite the fact that only a small portion of the money the groom pays to the broker goes to the bride’s family in the name of brideprice and that traditionally reciprocal gift exchanges between the two families rarely take place before the

marriage (Wang and Chang 2002), it is still hard to say that the brideprice is merely a monetary expression for purchasing a commodity and no intention of building up a long-term gift relationship is involved. In addition to the brideprice, the amount of which is usually determined by the broker, Taiwanese men need to purchase a combination of jewelry as a betrothal gift to the brides by themselves. The quality and price of the jewelry is seen as something to represent the man's economic ability and the "quality of love," which are compared not only among men in the same marriage group but also among those brides-to-be. As a participant observer in the marriage groups to Vietnam, I always heard the broker urging his clients not to buy too many valuables for their wives before the wedding because "gifts could lead to a 'competition war' among the wives." "It would be easy for you to express love and concern through gifts. However, these women would compare with each other whose husband is more capable through the gifts they receive behind your backs. If you give them too much right now, they would think you are very rich and they can demand whatever they want in the future," says Tung.

Tung's words would make these women sound like extortionists who use marriage as a tool to enjoy material comforts. We would easily blame these women if we do not reflect on how our advantage of economic and human capital keeps us from the need of adopting foreign marriage as a "survival strategy" for the family and if we do not recognize how middle-class women would also compete with each other on the size of diamond on their wedding rings as an index of the quality of their husbands' love. Materialistic love and romance have been seen to take place everywhere and to everyone regardless gender, class and race. Far from being afraid that "true love" was disguised by economic relations, people frequently expect an intimate relationship to be formed on a stable economic basis. Gift relations are expected in the commodified marriage too, despite the fact that women have no financial ability to give back gifts of the same value as

they receive from the men and that they would delay the return or in a less material form. It is very common that the bride's family entertains the groom with gorgeous home-made dishes, which they do not eat on usual days, during his stay, and gives him cured meat or dried fruit as gifts in return when he leaves.

Admittedly, some husbands grumbled to me during their wedding preparation that they spent much more than expected on red envelope money and gifts to their Vietnamese wives' natal families and relatives requested by the wives. Yet I do not simply translate their complaints as anger about the expense, but more as a complex that makes them worried about their financial situation in Taiwan on the one hand, while feeling smug about the economic power they have over the wife's family on the other. The economic power not only earns them respect, which they are barely able to gain in Taiwan from their wives' families, but it also helps in cementing the wife's status in her natal family. Kunsheng regards the spending as an "affective investment." He told me how he planned to "cultivate" Neng to be his ideal wife, who must know well how to take care of the family and educate kids, and has good language and computing skills to help him with daily affairs and work-related tasks. To reach the goal, he planned to send Neng to a language school to study English and Chinese and then a computer class afterwards. His plan was laughed by Tung and Hui Ge as conducting a 10 year project of "dream wife upbringing." During our stay at Neng's home for the wedding preparation, Kunsheng generously took Neng and her siblings to local markets to buy lots of shoes and clothes, and bought her father a cell phone as a gift. He expressed his concern about Neng's family by discussing with her father about remodeling the house and setting up a landline phone, which were not common in the village. According to Kunsheng, it is a rewarding and necessary investment for the "dream wife" project because the husband's financial support to the wife's family will help the construction of

his image as a capable husband. The image construction is important because it serves to increase the wife's trust in and reliance on the husband, which in return leads to her firm willingness to commit herself to the husband and the family.

Kunsheng's idea of "affective investment" is by no means his own unique and creative thinking. In fact, it was widely shared among the Taiwanese husbands I met on the marriage trips to Vietnam. I frequently heard them discussing with each other and the broker tipping them how to "handle" their future wives. Hui Ge, for example, advocates both soft and tough tactics in managing the relationship. He restrains his wife's social life by keeping her busy with housework and studying languages including Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Japanese<sup>82</sup> at home, and brings her out to enjoy food and shopping at night markets from time to time. He interprets his wife as a traditional Vietnamese woman who will accept all crumbs you give gratefully as long as you can treat them well occasionally.

The ethnographic observations on the interaction between Taiwanese grooms and Vietnamese brides challenge the widely held social assumption that given that the transnational brokered marriage is formed based on the commodity relations, no affect but only economic interests exist between the couple, and that women are sold as objects without agency and men are agents of domestic violence. The dynamics between the couples in considering their marriage demonstrates how economic interests and affect intertwine in the establishment of the commodified intimacy. The argument about whether the affect between women and men is performative or authentic is *per se* questionable because it is made on the binary premise that performative affect is the nature of commodified marriage that is morally condemnable and only

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<sup>82</sup> Learning Japanese is for his future business in serving Japanese clients.

marriages based on “true love” are sacred and respectable. In reality, however, “love” is never pure and free from “contamination” of economic interests. It is rather highly related to society, culture and class. The idea of what kind of people one should love and marry is very often shaped by an individual’s educational and familial backgrounds. Many Taiwanese middle-class women set up their criteria for lifelong mate selection based on men’s economic conditions, social status and family backgrounds. They expect to marry men who have cars, houses and decent jobs so as to secure their economic lives. This kind of mentality shaped by the social ideology of hypergamy is logically no different from that of rural Vietnamese women looking for foreign husbands. However, Taiwanese women receive little moral condemnation as those foreign brides do in society. The discrepant treatment of women, I argue, reveals a potential class and racial discrimination lurking under the surface of the entire society’s advocacy for “true love” based marriages, as free marriage is thought to be a symbol of civilization and democracy in modern Taiwanese society.

Because of the democratic idea of free marriage, traditional arranged marriage via matchmakers has been regarded as a backward process that only exists in underdeveloped societies. It is seen to be anti-feminist because the women involved in the arrangement have little say about their marriage. Free love is believed to be the only premise that guarantees a “real” marriage in the public’s perception nowadays. Yet in fact, it has been seen that this new trend of “arranged marriage” is emerging to take over the old one. Modern matchmaking takes on the form of online dating services, local marriage agencies and dating clubs, that aims to attract women and men with higher levels of education and stable incomes. This is different from the old form in that modern women go to the matchmaking service on their own initiative and determine their fate on their own. In the cultural logic of adopting the service, the domestic

matchmaking service is little different from the transnational one. However, the local services do not provoke social disputes regarding whether or not women and men participating in the arrangement will form their marriages on the basis of “true love.” Nor do they give rise to public discussions about how the authority should regulate the domestic matchmaking business despite the fact that they also prioritize profit pursuing in their service and involve “commodification of marriage” as transnational matchmaking does.

What makes the public’s perception between the domestic and transnational matchmaking so different, I argue, is the social production of knowledge about women in the matchmaking business. Local Taiwanese women are constructed to be agents who look for romantic love and enjoy gender equality in the matchmaking service, whereas foreign women from developing countries are either victims of the global sex industries or opportunists who take marriage as a tool to pursue a better material life. Indeed, it is true that compared to foreign women looking for Taiwanese husbands, local women have more bargaining power to perform their subjectivity in the face of male clients due to a stronger economic ability. Yet the fact cannot be ignored that those foreign brides also exercise agency in their own decision-making and self-commodification as I have demonstrated above, and that their dream for a better material and affective life is all together of no difference from that of local Taiwanese middle-class women. Therefore, I maintain that if we recognize modern Taiwanese men’s and women’s need of seeking lifelong mates through matchmaking, we should also respect those who choose a foreign marriage through brokers’ arrangements in the transnational context. What is at stake should be a call for the state’s regulation on the business to prevent women, and men in some circumstances, from being exploited or cheated by unscrupulous proprietors rather than simply labeling the commodification of marriage as immoral and enforcing a ban on the business accordingly.

Without looking into rural women's motivation, needs and expectations for foreign husbands from a local perspective, we would easily stereotype them and misappropriate assistance to them despite a good feminist intention.

## Chapter Five: The State, Market, and Anti-Trafficking Campaign

The growing number of foreign brides in Taiwan in the past decade has drawn the public's attention to the increasing social problems that were perceived to be the consequence of the migrant inflow. The most frequently referred problem is foreign women engaging in the sex industry through marriage. There are many sensational stories about *jia jiehun*, *zhen maiyin* (假結婚, 真賣淫; fake marriage, real prostitution) reported in the mass media. In ordinary people's daily conversation, *jia jiehun* (fake marriage) is often referred to *zhen maiyin* (real prostitution). This assumed association aids and reinforces the ongoing knowledge construction of marriage immigrants and real/fake marriages. The news I showed in chapter two titled "*Foreign Bride Bargirls Playing Crazy*" exemplifies the very socially conceived link between fake marriage and prostitution. Without carefully looking into various causes and effects of foreign brides engaging in the sex industry, people often conflate trafficking in women with brokered marriage and regard foreign wives ending up in the sex industry either agents of fraudulent marriage or victims of trafficking. Many domestic and international non-profit organizations have strongly condemned the new form of trafficking in the guise of marriage. They attributed the phenomenon to Taiwan's loose regulation on transnational marriage brokerage and urged the government to take action seriously.

To curb the influx of the marriage migrants, the Taiwanese government brought into effect again a one-on-one visa interview that became required of Chinese spouses in 2003 and other foreign spouses in 2005.<sup>83</sup> It led to a sharp drop of the total number of transnational marriages in

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<sup>83</sup> The interview system is applied to foreign spouses specifically from 21 developing countries, from which migrants are considered more likely to engage in illegal residence. The oversea interview system has provoked

the following year respectively. In 2004, the government subsumed the marriage brokerage into its business registration management. Yet the policy direction that aimed to regulate, rather than ban, the business, provoked protests from some women's groups who accused marriage brokers as being the "traffickers" of the "bride trade." In 2006, the *American Trafficking in Persons Report* (hereafter referred to as "*the American TIP report*") placed Taiwan on the Tier 2 Watch List for its perceived lack of effort to combat human trafficking. It blames the Taiwanese government for its poor control of foreign bride recruitment that makes marriage a major conduit for the trafficking of women, primarily from Vietnam, into the Taiwan sex trade<sup>84</sup> (U.S. Department of State 2006).

The *American TIP Report* was thought to seriously impact Taiwan's reputation in the international society. To show its active efforts to combat trafficking and fraudulent marriages, the Taiwanese government promulgated the *Anti-Trafficking Act* in 2006 and passed the *Anti-Trafficking Law* in 2009. In addition, in a speech in 2006, Premier Su Tseng-Chang criticized the commodification of marriage and contended that "matchmaking is originally a beautiful thing and should not become a business." This statement set the tone for the policy amendment from the given version of regulating the business to the future version of banning

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critiques from women's groups. They argue that the different treatment between migrants from Third World countries and First World countries is an expression of racial discrimination. Made at the moment when the transnational marriage brokerage was booming, the policy connotes that only brokered marriages between Taiwanese men and foreign women from poor Third World countries are suspicious and need to be carefully scrutinized.

<sup>84</sup>According to the report, "Taiwan is primarily a destination for men, women, and children trafficked for forced labor and sexual exploitation. Women from the P.R.C. and Southeast Asian countries are trafficked to Taiwan for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Women and children, primarily from Vietnam, are trafficked to Taiwan through the use of fraudulent marriages, deceptive employment offers, and illegal smuggling for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor....The recruitment of foreign brides primarily from Vietnam, but also from other Southeast Asian nations, is poorly controlled and, as a consequence, has become a major conduit for the trafficking of girls and women into the Taiwan sex trade, as well as for forced labor....Taiwan should develop a clear policy and action plan that adequately covers sex trafficking and involuntary servitude among foreign workers and brides" (U.S. Department of State 2006).

it.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, the business registration of marriage brokerage was annulled in the same year, and the immigration law amendment, the legal resource for carrying out the ban on the business, was passed in 2007. The new policy stipulates that only non-profit organizations and individuals can provide matchmaking service, and no commercial advertising for foreign brides is allowed. It was confirmed that all of the existing proprietors had to end their brokerage business or to transform them into non-profits within the one-year buffering period according to the sunset clause. The legitimacy of putting an end to commercial marriage brokerage also appeals to Article 573 of the Civil Code, which clearly stipulates that in “an agreement promising remuneration for matrimonial brokerage, the claim of remuneration is not enforceable.” That is to say, the broker has no right to ask for a service fee from their clients; they are only allowed to take money as a gift given on the client’s own initiative.<sup>86</sup> In the end of 2008 when the sunset clause ended, the profit-oriented marriage brokerage officially became an illicit business in Taiwan.

However, the wave of urging for a stricter policy of regulating transnational marriages in the hope of preventing women from being trafficked into the sex trade of Taiwan provoked some controversies. A debate on whether or not the profit-oriented brokerage needs to be completely banned while non-profit oriented matchmaking is encouraged occurred between some scholars

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<sup>85</sup> Before Premier Su’s speech, the Ministry of Interior had already drafted a special regulation on marriage brokerage. According to my interview with the official in charge of the regulation drafting, it allowed profit-oriented matchmaking practices but required proprietors to register their business with the government and to subject to the latter’s regulations. For example, proprietors had to provide with their clients a contract, the contents of which should be drafted based on the standard contract provided by the government. In addition, all of the commercial advertisements had to go through censorships before coming out to the public.

<sup>86</sup> Yet ironically, in fact, there was no item called “matchmaking service” listed in the brokerage contract between the proprietors and their clients to be charged. The proprietors usually made their profit by giving an inflated quote of other necessary expenses, such as airfare, accommodations, meals and document applications. Therefore, it is hard to tell if the money paid by the client is really used for his own expenses or not.

opposing the policy and NGOs in favor of it. The pro-policy camp condemned brokering companies for packaging women as objects, which deteriorates existing gender inequality in society. They maintained that matchmaking should be a non-profit service and only money given as a thank you gift after successful matchmaking should be allowed. Responding to the problem of objectifying foreign brides in proprietors' advertising, the anti-policy camp argued that it should be attributed to the state's inefficient governance rather than the nature of the business *per se*. They claimed that people's choice of the type of marriage should be respected. The society should not judge people's marriage from a monolithic and privileged middle-class moral perspective. Both of the two parties sought what they think justice ought to be for subaltern women, and their oppositional approaches inform a need to reconsider the conceived binary roles of the market and the state in the neo-liberal economy.

What is noteworthy following the controversy is foreign brides' victimhood in the marriage and their involvement in the sex industry, which has been widely perceived as trafficking in women in the guise of marriage, as stated in the American TIP report. It can be easily found that two binary assumptions are interwoven with each other in producing knowledge about "foreign brides engaging in the sex work." One involves the binary conception of women as either victims of trafficking or perpetrators of fraudulent marriage, and the other involves the binary judgment of their marriages as real or fake. With the widely circulated stereotypical image of foreign women coming to Taiwan for prostitution through marriage in the mass media, such as the abovementioned news report, it is almost taken for granted that if a foreign bride is found in the sex trade, her marriage must be fraudulent. Furthermore, if she is violently forced, then she is a victim of trafficking who is worthy of sympathy; otherwise she should be punished for engaging in fraudulent marriage and disobeying social morality.

Closely observing the processes of policymaking and matchmaking in the fieldwork allows me to reflect on the following issues: does the policy of banning the business really benefit those foreign women who look for getting married with Taiwanese men? According to what criteria and in whose judgment could a marriage be defined as “real” or “fake”? Moreover, how could we understand foreign brides’ engagement in sex work beyond the binary conception of “victims” of trafficking and “perpetrators” of fraudulent marriage? In this chapter, I will review the policymaking of the marriage brokerage ban and the debate it aroused, and seek to reconceptualize the relationships among intimacy, the market, and the state’s regulation that were not well articulated in the controversy. I will juxtapose perspectives of the different parties involved in the business, including the socially perceived perpetrators, marriage brokers, and victims, foreign brides/brides-to-be, in relation to those of women’s advocates and of government officials. Through presenting the inconsistent concerns between the third world women who want to marry Taiwanese husbands and the Taiwanese women’s rights advocates who oppose commodification of “foreign brides,” I will discuss the issue of subaltern women’s representation informed by Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). Last, I seek to deconstruct the real/fake marriage discourse that is embedded in the anti-trafficking framework. I challenge the assumed distinction of real/fake marriage and the widely held belief that fake marriages can be efficiently screened by certain mechanisms, such as one-on-one visa interviews. Instead of re-defining their boundary, I try to complicate the binary conception by taking into consideration not only its legal but also its socio-cultural logic of meaning. To argue against the essentialized real/fake marriage distinction by a middle-class ideology, I will demonstrate stories of how a legally “real” marriage is eventually found to be fraudulent and how an initially “fake” marriage turns out to be “real.”

My preliminary intention of bringing up these issues is not simply to judge whether the policymaking is good or bad, blame the marriage brokers as perpetrators and sympathize with “foreign brides” as victims in the first place. Instead, I hope to demonstrate a multi-faceted reality through juxtaposing the debate of the policymaking and my observation of proprietors and women looking for foreign husbands in the field. I contend that as long as the problem of global economic inequality exists, Third World women’s migration through whatever channel is easily available for them will never stop as a strategy of what Saskia Sassen (2002) called “feminization of survival.” Banning the profit-oriented marriage brokerage to protect these women from not being “commodified” would just be a romanticized policy imagined by the middle-class of developed societies. Taiwan’s stricter immigration policy can only reduce the number of foreign women coming to Taiwan but cannot curb them from going to other countries.<sup>87</sup> In any case, these women are, and will still be, commodified. Viewed in this light, the policy of banning marriage brokerage would protect not these women but rather the moral order that Taiwan society calls for. In fact, for these women, how to get out of poverty or pursue a better life is much worthier of meticulous consideration than whether or not they will be treated as an object in the marriage transaction. The latter is just too far away from their daily concerns. Apparently, we need a transnational feminist perspective to help us think beyond the state-centric approach of women’s rights protection in the global economic inequality. Again, no matter in what context the issue is put to be considered, we, as women’s advocates, intellectuals, policymakers or those who are able to speak in the public sphere on behalf of these foreign women, should be aware of our own position in the discursive formation that we are not

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<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, Korea has gradually replaced Taiwan to become Vietnamese women’s “dreamland” for marriage due to a simpler procedure for foreign spouse to get a visa.

transparent in the power to represent the foreign brides or brides-to-be.

### **Discussions of the Policy Debate**

During the policymaking period, several articles written by scholars and NGO representatives in the newspaper China Times brought about a debate over whether or not profit-oriented marriage brokerage needs to be completely banned. People who opposed the policy decision doubted the legitimacy of the state's intervention in individuals' intimate life, which limits the individual's choice of different types of marriage. Despite approving the idea of having non-profit organizations provide the service, they did not think that profit-oriented ones should be completely put down. They argued that, first of all, the saying that "matchmaking is originally a beautiful thing and should not become a business" just reflects the intention of the middle-class to regulate marriages of the lower-class with what they image marriage ought to be (Wang 2007). The transnational brokered marriage should not be simply equalized to "human trafficking." Instead, it can be read as "the weak supporting the weak"<sup>88</sup> transnationally (Chang 2006). Secondly, the problem of commodification of women in the advertisements that provoked serious criticism by women's groups lies in the loose regulation on the representation of foreign brides rather than the brokering practice per se. Only when the marriage brokerage is recognized as a legal business is the government able to supervise and administer it. Thirdly, very often the relationship between the broker and brides is not as simple as the perceived exploiter and victims. Instead, in many cases the broker even serves as a consultant to the newlywed couple and provides the foreign spouse with needed assistance especially in life adjustment upon her arrival.

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<sup>88</sup> It could be referred to "poor women from the Third World marrying poor men from the First World."

Lastly, it is in doubt whether or not the non-profit organizations are able to take over the enormous volume of demand for the matchmaking service left behind by the previous brokerage proprietors in the market as these transactions require certain “professional skills,” such as being able to easily get access to local resources and establish far-flung interpersonal networks in both societies.

Activists and women’s groups in favor of banning the business responded to these points of view with the following reasons: first, marriage is not a “money game.” They argued what they opposed was not the matchmaking service per se but its commercialized aspects, in which women are exploited by the broker. For example, the broker charges a considerable amount of money from the male client, but only a very small amount of this goes to the bride’s family in the name of brideprice at the end. In addition, in order to pursue as much profit as possible, many brokers do not provide both sides with accurate information about each other so as to make the matchmaking successful. Secondly, Taiwan’s loose administration of the foreign labor brokerage, which has caused many problems of labor exploitation, is a vivid example to disprove the government’s capability of regulating the marriage brokerage as efficiently as is claimed. Thirdly, although some marriage brokers did build a good relationship with the foreign wives and provide assistance, this function can be, and should be, replaced by non-profit organizations for transnational marriage consultation (My interviews 2008).

For people opposing the policy of banning the business, one of the main concerns was that banning the business is of no use to resolve the problem of women’s exploitation when the business is forced to turn invisible with the formation of a black market. Yet for people supporting the policy, it is the very responsibility of the government to ferret out illicit activities and protect the legal ones. The debate could preliminarily be analyzed as confrontation between

the pro-state and the pro-market perspectives as well as negotiation between the public and the private spheres. How the state should exercise its power in individual private life in the market economy is at issue here. A contradictory viewpoint of the state could be seen in the argument of the state's efficiency held by people who advocated banning the business. On the one hand, they questioned the government's capability of regulating the existing proprietors, while on the other hand they pinned their hope of "rescuing women" on the state's efficiency to enforce the law of banning the business.

This standpoint that invites state power to the domestic sphere to protect women's rights is understandable, especially if we look back at the feminist struggle for gender equality in the domestic space. For example, some feminists have criticized Habermas' idea of the public sphere for not taking women's status in the household into consideration. They call for more reflection on the distinction of the public and private and advocate for the state's intervention in individual families in order to protect women from domestic abuses. Yet we may want to ask, to what extent can we rely on state power to secure women's rights in this case? How can the government protect foreign women involved in the commercialized transnational matchmaking when the activity is criminalized and all of the contracts between proprietors and clients become invalid by law? Apparently, all of the parties, regardless of their position in the debate, have to face the state's inconsistency between its policymaking and its efficiency of law enforcement. That is, if the government is believed to have the capability to regulate the business efficiently, why is it not believed to have the capability to clamp down on illegal brokerage practices? In fact, no matter which of these approaches is adopted, both have to resort to the validity and efficiency of state power, if the market mechanism is thought to be something unreliable.

The debate revealed people's complex feelings about the state and the market. Those

supporting the policy expressed their anti-market position by emphasizing the connection between the market and exploitation of women. They argued that marriage brokers by all means pursue profit at the expense of women's interests. They argued that women are treated as objects and this subjects them to dangerous situations. As a result, the business should be banned in the hope of redressing the distorted gender morality. Despite agreeing with their position, I do not join their conclusion easily. Instead, I feel it is necessary to complicate our understanding of women's situations in the dynamic between the market and the state where market competition does not necessarily worsen women's status in the transaction and the state's regulation does not always guarantee that their needs will be met. This contradiction will lead us to reflect on the issue of how these foreign women are represented, which I address later in this chapter.

### **Market Competition, Women's Exploitation and State Regulation Reconsidered**

Does the market mechanism always help brokers' profit-making and damage women's interests while the state always functions well to remedy the injustice? The transnational marriage business would provide another perspective for us to re-evaluate the dynamics of the state regulation and the market competition if we can leave aside for the moment moral judgments such as whether or not "marriage is so sacred that matchmaking should not be commercialized" and "women cannot be objectified."

To make the statements against the profit-oriented business valid, people who oppose the business may need to carefully consider, first, to what extent the profit the broker makes from matchmaking can be regarded as "reasonable," and secondly, what the women's interests are and whether the "protection" government is able to provide truly meets their needs.

Let us take a look at the effect of the market mechanism from the late 1990s to the mid

2000s, a period when the transnational marriage was at a surge.<sup>89</sup> The demand for foreign wives stimulated a mushroom of transnational brokerage companies, which further resulted in a slash in brokerage prices in the competitive market. Taking one Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriage brokerage for example, the average price of marrying a Vietnamese woman dropped from US\$12,000 in the late 1990s to less than US\$7,000 in the mid 2000s (Chang 2004: 71-73). Calculating the costs of brokering a marriage at about US\$6,000 (Chang 2002), the broker's profit thereby dropped sharply from US\$5,000-6,000 to US\$900-1,200.

It needs to be taken into consideration that the profit has to be further distributed to local matchmakers to cover their "cost." The cost refers not only their labor contribution, but also accommodations and meals they provide for all potential brides. If a bride candidate has not been selected for months, the matchmaker who fosters her would lose money.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, we would find it is hard to judge whether the profit brokers make is extravagant or not, and if yes, how much would be a reasonable compensation for the service they offer.<sup>91</sup>

One of the important reasons that NGOs opposed the business was that women are exploited in the matchmaking process, as a NGO representative who urged to ban the business at a conference saying that "you don't know how much we foreign spouses hate marriage brokers.

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<sup>89</sup> From 1998 to 2004 before the government took measures to curb the marriage flow, the number of transnational marriages increased from 22,905 to 54,634, which accounted for 15.7% and 31.86% of the total registered marriages in 1998 and 2004 respectively (Ministry of Interior, Taiwan).

<sup>90</sup> So usually local matchmakers choose women who, they evaluate, have more "potential" to be married off. It is also seen that big matchmakers ask the women who have been failing to be selected to leave as a way to stop their "money-losing."

<sup>91</sup> In fact, a similar issue has been discussed at an official meeting at the Immigration Agency regarding the regulation making for non-profit matchmaking in the future. Some representatives of women's groups proposed that the government should set up a charging standard and request matchmaking service providers to follow. However, the idea was thought to be infeasible at law. For example, the service provider would cooperate with a travel agency to arrange the trip for clients. The travel agency should be allowed to provide different level of services at different prices. In addition, it would violate the fair trade law to limit a travel agency's profit-making.

They deceive us into the marriage and take most of the money that should go to us.” It is true in that women are excluded from all kinds of negotiations and their interests are frequently determined by the matchmaker and market. For example, brideprice, which is supposed to be given to the bride’s family by the groom, becomes something to be determined by brokers. The brokers squeeze the amount in order to lower their matchmaking cost and maximize profits. From the late 1990s to the mid 2000s, due to market competition, the average brideprice shrank from US\$1,000-2,000 to less than US\$300 in tandem with the drop of the average market price of matchmaking. Yet looking at the market development, we would find the argument that attributes women’s exploitation to marriage brokers’ price competition fails to present women’s various situations in the matchmaking. The number simply tells that women received more benefit before the market boom, the period of time when the market was monopolized by several brokering companies and a higher matchmaking service charge was acceptable. Reading the number literally risks leading to the conclusion that it should be market competition, rather than the business *per se*, that needs to be restricted. Obviously, this is not what the NGOs meant to advocate for. The market, according to them, is something that needs to be replaced with state regulation, and the business needs to be banned for its nature of treating women as “objects” for sale.

Kung Yi-chun (2005) articulates that women’s exploitation lies in body discipline. She criticizes Wang and Chang’s study (2002) for seeing matchmaking as one kind of market activity in globalization, where all personal relationships can be objectified as market relations for the sake of profit-making. They maintain that as market activity participants, marriage brokers should not be blamed more for pursuing profit because marriage brokerage is a commercial activity, just like many other businesses that rely on relationships. Yet Kung argues that this kind

of perspective, which assumes that every party involved in the activity makes the decision based on their rational choice, ignores unequal relations at play. What makes women's exploitation unseen is the mechanism of disciplining women's bodies, the bride-making mechanism that is operated by local matchmakers to train rural women to be "eligible wives." Unlike forced labor, these women follow the broker's instruction to make themselves as an object for sale and become alienated from the self, in Marx's term. Kung claims that the self-alienation and self-discipline in the process of bride-making is where the very "exploitation" is located.

Yet as what I have elaborated about women's self-commodification in Chapter Four, I do not see their objectification simply as the consequence of exploitation by the broker. Instead, I conceptualize their subjugation to the brokers and market rules as a process of self-exploitation, through which they expect to make themselves more valuable and competitive in the market. Therefore, in opposition to Kung's conclusion, I regard these women's "conspiracy" with local matchmakers as a way of exercising agency. Once again, I do not deny the fact that indeed there are women deceived into marriage and/or sold into prostitution. Although I do not agree the common social perception that labels "foreign brides" as victims, I do not intend to romanticize and generalize their agency. What I would like to urge, rather, is to look into women's various dynamics of agency and structural limitation as well as to complicate our conception of women's exploitation in the transnational matchmaking practice. We need not only a transnational but also a trans-class perspective to examine the policymaking, which, in my opinion, embraces certain middle-class feminist idea of value that needs to be reflected.

The policy of banning the business is made based on the assumptions that marriage is sacred and women cannot be objectified and that commodification of women and marriage is the cause of women's suffering. It is so because brokers pursue profit at the expense of women's

rights and interests. Therefore, freeing women from marital market transaction is to save them from exploitation. An NGO representative clarified to me on this issue: “We do not oppose transnational marriage through matchmaking. What we oppose is women being exploited by the third party. Marriage brokers suck money from clients and sell women as an object. Our standpoint to fight against marriage brokers is just like our standpoint to oppose pimps, who exploit sex workers to make money” (my interview, 2007).

Her comment that parallels sex workers with foreign brides reflects the very stereotype that constructs women as victims versus brokers/matchmakers as perpetrators. The dichotomy is in fact problematic. According to my interviews with runaway brides engaging in sex work, many migrant sex workers prefer relying on pimps for their local networks to develop customers, despite knowing that a certain amount of their earnings will go into the pimp’s pocket. Chen Mei-Hua’s research on Chinese migrants and sex workers also points out the dynamics between the pimp and sex workers. She criticizes the stereotype that constructs pimps as organized and powerful gangsters who exploit sex workers for their own good. She finds that many pimps are people who used to work for hotels and guest houses or taxi drivers who became unemployed after the companies they worked for were closed down due to Taiwan’s economic decline in the 1990s (Chen 2008:13). Likewise, the relationship between the marriage broker and foreign brides is various and dynamic. To maximize their chances to marry a foreign man, women in the rural areas resort to “professional” matchmakers who are able to locate groom candidates for them efficiently. For example, the middlemen are so important for Vietnamese women in rural areas because those women commonly lack abilities to reach the outside world by themselves. Unlike young women in urban cities, they have no resource to study foreign languages and meet foreign people in their daily life nor do they have convenient access to the Internet in their

hometown. These limitations keep them away from online dating services that are widely used in the urban areas and tighten their reliance on middlemen in their villages.<sup>92</sup> As a result, even though these women would be vulnerable to the broker's exploitation, compared to the "profit" they would get from marrying a foreign husband through matchmaking, the risk becomes worthy to take.<sup>93</sup> In this light, all of the local matchmaker's discipline and training on these women to become ideal wives becomes something that does not "harm" but "benefit" these women's future.

When I lived at Tung's place, I closely observed and participated in five to seven brides' daily life. They moved to Tung's place from their rural homes in Quang Ninh, the north of Vietnam, after being selected. While living there to wait for visa issuing, they helped Tung's family with some housework and went to language school to study Chinese. They were very young, at the age of 18 to 22. They started a day with floor cleaning, and then helped Tung's wife prepare for breakfast. Afterwards they went to school and came back for lunch. After school they were asked to stay at home to study, prepare for dinner or do laundry. Sometimes some went to the market doing grocery shopping with Tung's wife. Tung did not allow them to go out after it gets dark for safety consideration, so whenever they wanted to enjoy "fresh air" at night, they dragged me out with them. We spent lots of time having fun and eating late-night snacks at street vendors. When Tung was home, he practiced Chinese with them and answered their questions about marital life in Taiwan based on what he heard from return migrants and his Taiwanese

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<sup>92</sup> I believe that many women also use their relatives' and friends' networks to find foreign husbands. But in the villages I visited in the north of Vietnam, most families still rely on local matchmakers. One possibility would be that they do not know how to go through the process but the brokers do and can assist them from the beginning to the end.

<sup>93</sup> I consider most risk lurking not in the broker's side but the client's. There is no requirement that men have to present criminal records at the meeting, for instance.

business partner Hui Ge. He hung a big blackboard on the wall in the living room, and gave them a review lesson from time to time. Sentences that I heard most frequent from their practice include “*yilushang xinkule*” (一路上辛苦了; you must feel tired after the trip), “*laogong, ni leibulei?*” (老公，你累不累?; my dear, are you tired?). Everyday when I got back home, I was greeted with these. In addition, he also helped them call, or answer calls from, their husbands in Taiwan with Vietnamese-Chinese translation. Calling frequently is crucial, despite the language barrier, because all call detail records will be provided for the visa interview as the evidence of their “real marriage.”

According to Tung, strict discipline collectively is necessary for several reasons:

“First, these women are at the age of being curious about the world. You never know if they will be attracted to something interesting or young men during this period of time. I have heard many runaway cases that the woman falls in love with another man before moving to Taiwan, and runs back to Vietnam to unite with her boyfriend. I have to make sure this will not happen with my brides. Second, it’s my task to take care of them and secure their safety. I have to know where they are once their husbands call me. Here is Vietnam, not Taiwan. I have the responsibility to make sure they are good when their husbands come to pick them up. Third, they need to study Chinese. Their husbands pay for their tuition already. But you know they are very young and think of going out to have fun all the time. I have to watch their schedule to make sure they do study for some time everyday. I do it all for their own good! If they do not study language and learn some Taiwanese living habits, they will suffer and I will not be able to save them at that time! They will regret a lot!” (My interview, 2007)

Tung often shared his observations on those young brides with me and boldly conjectured that someone’s marriage would encounter problems because the wife he found liked to play around and was lazy studying and doing housework. He then mocked those men for just wanting to marry pretty women without considering if they have the ability to “handle” them. One day, I saw Tung giving a lecture to Chingda’s wife, A-san, for her “laziness.” Tung told me afterwards that “she gets up later than others, always comes up with reasons not to go to school or do housework. Moreover, whenever there is a chance to go to the market, she is the first one to rush

out! She must think she is pretty and her husband will do everything for her!”

Yet compared to my schedule, A-san is not “lazy” at all. She got up by 7:30 am and then swept the house stairs after breakfast every day. Tung’s comments on those brides always made me feel embarrassed as it seems to be me who should receive his lecture. Obviously, Tung judged these young women with his patriarchal understanding of what a good wife ought to be, a gender ideology that was widely held by local people. He acted as an agent of the market mechanism that forges women into cheap reproductive labor and made his fortune out of it accordingly.

Despite Tung and other matchmakers’ exploiting surplus value of women and helping maintenance of the patriarchal oppressive system transnationally, I do not consider banning marriage brokerage a good way to save women. I argue that the dynamics between the matchmaker and women cannot be simply understood as exploitation, the binary of the exploiter and the exploited that implies women could be saved once marriage brokers disappear. Rather, the relationship is diverse and has to be understood in the context of the inequality of global political economy, in which what is considered exploitation from the First World perspective would ironically be considered “benevolence” from the Third World perspective. Taking Tung for example, in spite of his stern discipline on those young women for a business purpose, he still gained trust and respect from them. In the eyes of these women, he was the person who owned professional skills that they could rely on. He helped them with preparation for the trip to Taiwan and formed networks for new comers. Many women kept in touch with him after residing in Taiwan because he functioned just like an “information center”—offers assistance in stuff shipping and message delivery for those whose natal families lack modern communication equipments, as well as circulates gossips and updates about their fellow villagers and other

oversea migrants.

The relationship between Tung and the brides was also observed at other local matchmakers' places as foster families, which serves to complicate our understanding of the boundary between women's exploitation and salvation in the unequal market economy. In some extreme cases, women would even be invited to engage in "conspiracy" with matchmakers to meet the male dominated market demand, such as playing "fake virgin." Mr. Wang, who became a broker after his bad experience of being a client, suggests how easy it is to make a "virgin":

"My neighbor Xiao Lee runs a transnational marriage brokerage company. He knew I was looking for a foreign bride so he invited me to join his marriage group to the south of Vietnam. In Ho Chi Minh City, I was arranged to stay at his house. One night, I accidentally found numerous jars of small cotton balls and bottles of mercurochrome in a room which he forgot to lock. I finally figured out why Xiao Lee can always provide his clients with a "virgin guarantee." I had a serious quarrel with him about this. Having got married to a Vietnamese woman, I opened a Vietnamese snack shop and started my own business in brokering Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriage with my wife's help. I believe I can provide a better and more virtuous service. The virgin guarantee is ridiculous and of nonsense. Those men obsessed with virgins are just dummies. Now people in this business know that in Vietnam, it is very easy to make a fake virgin and get a certificate from the hospital— as long as you have money to bribe!"

Interestingly, the virgin bride-making project, which represents patriarchal repression on women, becomes something that women can "take advantage" to better their chance in the marriage market. In these fraudulent cases, men become "victims" to be sympathized (or mocked) in relation to women and the broker as perpetrators. Mr. Wang's words reveal how men's virgin complex ironically helps many brokers to forge "ideal wives" in the market. In the sex performance, red ink becomes the alibi of the woman's "fakeness," and the woman's status of "idea wife" gets approved accordingly. It is this "realness"-fetishism and "fakeness"-phobic that entails the knowledge production about the distinction between the real and fake marriage and state's efforts on normalization of the distinction.

## State's Regulation and Market Responses

After the Taiwanese government carried out the one-on-one visa interview institution, the heat of marrying foreign women in Taiwan started to cool down. Many proprietors have encountered difficulty in maintaining the business and intended to end their business or switch to do domestic matchmaking.<sup>94</sup> However, several disclosed to me that on the surface, they would follow the policy to register their existing companies as non-profit organizations but continue the business under the table by moving their bases out of Taiwan. Of the 16 proprietors I interviewed, more than half, especially small-scale brokerage companies and individual brokers, stated that the policy would not stop them from going on. They believed that they will not get into trouble because they engage in “real” matchmaking. For example, one told me,

“It is impossible that I will be arrested by the police for running the business because I do not do ‘fake marriage’ but real matchmaking! There are so many crimes of human trafficking in society, why does the police not go to arrest them but me? Besides, I have already accumulated good reputation over the past years so am not worried about the future—as long as there is still a demand in the market.”<sup>95</sup> (My interview 2007)”

These registered brokerage proprietors argued that the government should put its energy and time to ferret out illicit brokerage rather than “paint everyone with the same color” and ban the entire business accordingly. They not only urged the government to put down “black-hearted” proprietors but also urged others to be meticulous when choosing their business partners in the bride-sending country lest getting involved in the complicity of human trafficking without awareness. In an open letter to other proprietors in the same business of brokering mainland

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<sup>94</sup> One proprietor said, “do not think that domestic marriage agencies are doing better. They cheat clients too! For example, they will not introduce suitable candidates to you in the beginning so as to keep you with them longer. If they successfully make a match for you just one time, how can they rob you?” (My interview, 2007)

<sup>95</sup> Is there still a demand for foreign brides in the market? According to the statistics, about 40% of men at the age between 30 and 44 were single in the past years. They are regarded as potential customers (see the chart of the number of the unmarried population in chapter two).

Chinese brides, one proprietor sharply pointed out a malady that commonly exists in the business circle, which gave us an important hint to know how the business is operated in the transnational setting.

“...those illegal brokerage companies and individual brokers make the transnational marriage brokerage market chaotic. Some brokers even brag about their cheap service package as low as NT\$120,000,<sup>96</sup> which leads to cut-throat competition in the market and low quality of marriage brokerage....Many new migrants run away soon after arriving in Taiwan because they are heavily indebted to the matchmaker in their hometown. To pay off the “red envelope money” asked by their matchmaker, many of them are forced to borrow money at usury. If their husbands cannot help, unfortunately, they have to find a job upon arrival by all means, despite knowing it is illegal.<sup>97</sup> Then the real marriage turns out to be “fake.” Our company has engaged in marriage brokerage for more than a decade and has seen numerous fraudulent cases. Fake marriage cannot become real, but real marriage sometimes becomes fake. So please choose your local business partner with caution... (excerpted from the website [www.twlily.net](http://www.twlily.net), accessed 2007)”

Indeed, according to my observation in China and the north of Vietnam, it was very common that the local matchmaker charge the bride’s families in the form of “red envelope,” a money gift in appreciation of successful matchmaking. For example, in China, Hongmei was asked by the big matchmaker<sup>98</sup> for a red envelope of US\$3,000 and was threatened that she would not be able to get her visa if she did not pay off the money. Having little knowledge about paperwork, Hongmei had no other choice but to borrow money everywhere and got into more debt. Likewise, in the north of Vietnam, brides were commonly requested for red envelope

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<sup>96</sup> It is about US\$3,760, lower than the estimated average cost.

<sup>97</sup> The policy that Chinese spouses cannot work before obtaining their long-term residence status was changed in 2009. According to the new amendment to Regulations on the Relation of People between Taiwan and Mainland China, Chinese spouses are granted the right to work right after residing in Taiwan.

<sup>98</sup> Like the matchmaking system in Vietnam, in China, there is also a distinction between the “big matchmaker” in charge of the details of marriage transaction and the “small matchmaker” in charge of bride recruitment in the village.

money at the amount of US\$500-1000.<sup>99</sup> In most cases, local matchmakers took the money under the table, and eventually it was their husbands who paid the bill. Even if Taiwanese brokers knew about their business partners' "extortion," they usually did not thrust a hand in it. A Taiwanese broker said,

"I know some local matchmakers are very bad. They stretch out right hands to ask money from us and left hands to ask money from the brides. However, I do not want, and am actually unable, to intervene in the business. That is their business. As long as the matchmaker follows my rules to do business, I will not let this kind of thing influence our business partnership."

Admittedly, Taiwan cannot avoid the shared responsibility of all unfair treatments of the women in their home countries. However, banning the business would be of little use to help women because it would cause the facts that fewer choices are available in the market and that going to matchmakers becomes an illegal activity so no legal resource they can rely on any more. The banning policy in Taiwan ended more than 400 registered brokerage companies after it went to effect in 2008. Up to today, only a couple of non-profit organizations for transnational matchmaking are allowed, which is far insufficient to supply the market demand. Previous brokerage proprietors and individual brokers are still heavily relied on. In fact, because the business requires rich human and administrative resources in the bride-sending areas, the non-profit organizations inevitably have to count on existing local matchmakers for their networks and experiences. It is predictable that unless the governments of the bride-sending countries can take over the role of existing local matchmakers by providing free service and

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<sup>99</sup> But this business convention was not commonly practiced in the south of Vietnam. So far there has been no clear explanation regarding what causes the difference of business operation between the North and the South. It is wondered if it has to do with the historical division of labor between the two, that is, the north of Vietnam in charge of labor exportation and the south of Vietnam, bride exportation.

make it easily accessible to interested women in rural areas, the tight connection between women looking for foreign husbands and local matchmakers will not be broken.

In this regard, the Vietnamese government did attempt to make the goal.<sup>100</sup> For example, in 2003, it passed decree No. 68, which stipulates that all marriages between foreign men and Vietnamese women have to be arranged under supervision of the National Women's Association. The government issued licenses only to certain marriage agencies with whom the National Women's Association sought to cooperate to provide matchmaking service, and at the same time it enforced the law to clamp down on other unlicensed/illegal brokers (Lee 2006). Yet according to Kung I-Chun's observation in the south of Vietnam, only one marriage agency was granted to engage in the business, which was the government organized marriage consultation center in Ho Chi Minh City. However, the office was almost out of work due to its poor management and lack of networks to connect interested women and men. There were only three staff members working there: the director, vice-director and an operator. In addition, the location made it hardly accessible to women in rural areas (Kung 2005: 7). Eventually, existing local matchmakers still served as major service providers and women had to go to them surreptitiously. The banning policy does not help women as it is assumed but hinders them from getting to know more foreign men as they wish and deprives them of legal protection in the marriage transaction.

My purpose of attending to the “benefit” women gain from market competition and “loss” from the state's enforcement of the policy is by no means to celebrate the neoliberal capitalism

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<sup>100</sup> According to my interviews with officials at the TECO, the Vietnamese government's attitude toward the transnational marriages is complicated. On the one hand, it has to take action to respond to the public criticism of an increasing number of Vietnamese women marrying foreign men. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the transnational marriage helps mitigate an economic burden not only of individual households but also of the nation through, for instance, remittance.

and debase the function of the state. Neither do I seek to legitimize the broker's profit-making and depreciate the effort many women's groups have made for the migrant women. Instead, I want to point out that hinging the legitimacy of banning transnational marriage brokerage on the perception of women being exploited by the brokers would be insufficient because it overlooks the power of neoliberal capitalism that shapes women's desire to marry foreign men for a better life. We have seen how women tried hard to widen their chance of being selected and how they envisioned their future to be carried out through marriage. We need to admit to the double characteristics of the market mechanism that makes women vulnerable to exploitation on the one hand while providing them with more chances on the other. With a hope in mind, women care less about whether or not the matchmaking is legal and what "exploitation" and "objectification" means to them than how to facilitate their migration so as to live a better life like those successful marriage migrants.

### **Can the "Foreign Brides" Speak?**

I was doing fieldwork on transnational matchmaking in Taiwan and Vietnam during the period of time when the policy of banning the business was drafted and the debate was hectically going on. The experience of closely observing and interacting with marriage brokers, local matchmakers, male clients, and young women from rural villages informed my consideration of the policymaking and its related discursive campaign in wider transnational and trans-class contexts. Listening to different voices enable me to get to the controversy with a more considerate mindset. I reflect on much rhetoric of women's salvation based on the middle-class liberal feminism that urges rural women to resist the exploitation by the transnational marriage brokering system and punish the latter by cooperating with the state to terminate their legal status.

However, I argue that this feminist view fails to attend to how the neoliberal capitalism shapes the needs and desire of women in poor countries by incorporating them into the global circuit of capital and value, where needs and desire become inter-referential in the perception of these women as potential modern consumers. The system gives women the hope that, being a modern consumer through marriage, they can fulfill the dream of getting out of poverty and enjoying a modern life, and this psychological hint in turn excuses the exploitation of women in the course of forging them into the modern subject.

In this sense, what should be blamed for contributing to women's exploitation, in my opinion, should be the neoliberal economy which creates inequality among regions and causes women to take mobility as a survival strategy. We can say that without the inequality, marriage brokerage would not be able to get bloomed and without professional marriage brokers, rural women would not be able to move upward in their social strata so efficiently. Therefore, marriage brokerage that is considered malevolent for women's human rights in the eyes of the middle-class liberal feminism would be considered benevolent in the eyes of the rural women who wish to marry foreign husbands. The middle-class liberal feminists romantically assume women's international solidarity in fighting against patriarchal exploitation failing to take class difference into consideration. They represent the interests of the rural women in the Third World," urging that "women cannot be objectified" with their good intention. However, this statement resonant with the state's position that "marriage should not be commodified," in my opinion, would eventually only serve to the dominant power to reconfirm the moral order of gender and sexuality in society.

In the discussion on the controversial policymaking in the public sphere of Taiwan, what was left out was the very voice of the women in question, the women who were looking for

foreign husbands in their rural hometowns. They have been invisible and silent, unable to speak but can only be represented. They are invisible because of their non-citizen subject position. In the bride-sending countries, they are just “potential foreign brides” waiting to be selected by Taiwanese men. They are silent because of a language and a class barrier. They cannot speak political language due to their limited knowledge and humble status in society. Also, their non-Taiwanese-citizen subject position keeps them from being heard in the discursive campaign about “foreign brides” in Taiwan. Knowledge about them can only be constructed by people around them: mass media, scholars, governmental officials, and representatives of NGOs.

After “foreign brides” became a hot issue in Taiwan, NGOs concerned about foreign spouses mushroomed. At a conference on migration in Taiwan, a foreign spouse representative of a NGO advocating banning marriage brokerage, reiterated in an agitated tone how poor those foreign spouses introduced by matchmakers are due to deception and exploitation by them. “You don’t know how much we foreign spouses hate the brokers. They tell us how much money we can get from the male side, but in the end we just get a little. Where does the rest money go? Matchmakers!” Interestingly, I happened to talk to the representative the other day and got to know that she came from Thailand and got a bachelor’s degree there. She met her husband on his business trip to Thailand when she served as his translator. She can speak and write Chinese fluently, and has published a lot of articles on behalf of foreign spouses in newspapers and on websites. In an article urging the government to ban marriage brokerage on the newspaper, she wrote, “Marriage brokers only protect the rights of their male clients, not caring about the rights of the female side at all. Today the brokers deceive us into giving money to them in the name of holding the wedding and boast how good the men’s families are....We think we are coming for marriage, while the males think we are coming for sale...(Chiu 2007).”

A danger of representing foreign brides as innocent victims of the bride trade lurks in this kind of narratives. On the one hand, it would arouse public indignation over the unjust treatment foreign spouses have received; on the other hand, it would lead to reinforcement of the stereotype that foreign brides are innocent and helpless subjects who need to be particularly protected and enlightened. Yet who can “protect” and speak on behalf of “foreign brides” as a whole is a question here. It is taken for granted that the representatives of “foreign spouses” in Taiwan can represent their fellow villagers in their hometown as they share the same experience looking for foreign husbands through matchmaking. However, this assumption fails to consider how transnational migration causes a class difference between women who successfully migrate to Taiwan through marriage and women who still wait for the chance of being selected in their hometowns. In the eyes of the latter, those who get married to Taiwanese men are like Cinderella becoming a princess. They enter a new world to enjoy a better life and gain more respect in their hometown via an expression of their consumption power. With the difference of economic power, these marriage migrants no longer belong to the subaltern group they belonged to before migration. Instead, they become successful examples that other women in the rural hometown want to follow. The difference makes the representation of those rural women by the NGOs, even though they may have foreign spouses serving as their staff members, becomes questionable as they share different interests. NGOs are concerned about women’s rights whereas the women only care about how to facilitate their moving upward in the social strata through marriage migration. The interest conflict was disclosed when I discussed with a Taiwanese NGO representative about the policymaking at their office. I argued that banning marriage brokerage would harm the women’s rights as they will lose a legal ground to fight against illicit matchmaking. To my surprise, however, she replied to me that “well, at least the abuse of women

will not happen in Taiwan if we ban it.” I consider her words a nationalist logic of thinking, that is, the reputation of Taiwan as a nation in the international community is more important than the interests of women who are not citizens of Taiwan.

Despite the difficulty of representation, I do not mean that NGOs and other social groups should therefore stop voicing for the women. Instead, I argue that they should carefully reflect on their power position because they are inevitably involved in the knowledge production about the subaltern women they speak for. Some scholars criticize the western intellectual for silencing the subaltern through claiming to represent and speak for their experiences (Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982; Mohanty 1991; Spivak 1988) Spivak draws on Marx’s writing of *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* to discuss the concept of representation. She notices a significant difference between two senses of representation in German: *Darstellung*, re-presentation as image or signifier and *Vertretung*, representation as political proxy, the two which are related but irreducibly discontinuous. Marx uses the word *Darstellung* in his description of the class of the French peasants before their “class consciousness” was formed, and *Vertretung* in his discussion of their representation by the representative, Louis Napoleon. According to him, the peasants’ belief that Louis Napoleon, bearing the name of Napoleon, will bring back all of the historical glories transformed their class interest into action and legitimized his representation of them. The belief in the miracle demolishes all questions of the agent’s connection with his interest and makes *Vertretung* behaves like a *Darstellung*,” where the latter simply dissimulates the former as no gap between the representative and the represented.

In the representational politics of foreign women as brides-to-be, we could also see the conflation of the two senses of representation that made the interest of the representatives and power relations in the representation unseen. For example, the kind of narratives that portray

foreign women eager to marry foreign husbands as innocent and helpless who need to be saved from the brokers by women's groups does not really reflect the interest of the represented but the representatives. For the government, its interest could be maintenance of its international reputation for protecting women from being trafficked and its moral order in society, which also serves to curbing the inflow of marriage migration that has been considered the source of social problems; for NGOs for women's rights, it could be an expression of what I term "politics of charity"—through telling miserable stories of marriage migrants to attract more public attention and donors; and for intellectuals and experts, it could be a reinforcement of their power position in the social hierarchy by displaying their saving power and neoliberal humanity for the weak.

Then we may want to continue to ask, can the subaltern speak? Could subaltern women form their own consciousness and recognize their interest without being "educated"? Spivak answers the questions by demonstrating how women's voices were appropriated by different social forces in understanding *sati*, the practice of Hindu widow sacrifice, in nineteenth century India. She points out women were silenced in the discursive campaign between the statement of "white men saving brown women from brown men" by British colonialism to "rescue" native women and the statement of "the women wanted to die" by the local elite to yearn for the national past. Women become a signifier that can be manipulated to link to various signified in order to achieve different political agenda in the course of societal development. Women were constructed as either victims or heroes who commit suicide in the names of nation, God, other species of self-"sacrifice," and also, husband. She argues further that the significance of "husband" becoming an appropriate name for radical alterity relies in the fact that, in the current world, the gender issue is centered in the development, the imperialist project in the guise of pursuing gender equality in the international division of labor. In short, staging women as victim

is important in the New World order because “imperialism's (or globalization's) image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind (1988: 52).”

Spivak’s comment helps address why “foreign bride,” or “mail-order bride” in the western context, and “trafficking in women” become a heated global issue in the present. However, I do not consider this counter-hegemonic thought connoting that the discourse of women’s exploitation in the bride trade is a historical plot at all. Instead, I argue it informs that the power relationships between different representatives and the represented women should carefully be scrutinized in our reading of the discursive formation, “foreign brides need to be saved.” As my case shows, the feminist project of banning marriage brokerage does not necessarily benefit rural women looking for foreign husbands but would benefit middle-class liberal feminists for fulfilling their envision of global justice as they “save brown women from brown men,” in Spivak’s words.

When I claim “foreign brides” cannot speak earlier, I refer to their inability to speak in the public sphere. They do speak as social individuals in private. Yet their individuality makes women’s advocates face the difficulty of forming their subaltern consciousness and having their voices be heard—as a subaltern group. An article written by Chen Huangfeng<sup>101</sup> (2006), a Vietnamese spouse contributing to the newspaper *Daily Apple* exemplifies the representational contradiction. She wrote it after a TV news reported that Vietnamese brides planned to go onto the street to protest in a more radical way about the discriminatory comment by the legislator,

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<sup>101</sup> This is her Chinese name known in Taiwan. She studied Law in Vietnam and graduated from Ho Chi Ming City University. She taught Vietnamese at National Chengchi University and was elected as “Ten Distinctive Figures in Healthy Taipei” in 2005.

Liao Penyan, who suggested that Vietnamese brides receive examination to check if their bodies carry residual Agent Orange from the Vietnam War.<sup>102</sup>

Title: Vietnamese Sisters also Want to Go Shopping

“Today I cannot help but write to the newspaper again... This was a makeup report that falsely incriminated Vietnamese sisters. According to my years-long experience serving as a mentor of foreign spouses, I sensed that most of my fellow sisters come from poor families and get married to old, sick, ugly or poor men from weak families in Taiwan. For a woman, this is her pain that she does not want to mention. How is it possible that these sisters want to go on the street to expose this embarrassment to the public? I really do not want to see more people use the mass media in the name of our fellow sisters. Their makeup statements will only harm our efforts to build up our quiet image to be accepted by Taiwan society. In addition, there has not been any real women’s group consisting of foreign spouses in Taiwan. Who can represent us to say we want to protest? I think even Taiwanese husbands have no right to act on behalf of us. ...I can tell everyone what the collective act that our Vietnamese sisters want to do most is: go shopping!....” (Chen, 2006)

Chen’s narrative implies her opposing women’s groups that involve foreign spouses in collective political action for her fear that it would provoke entire society’s hatred toward foreign spouses and reinforce the given racial stereotype that “foreign brides are social troublemakers.” To water down the existing bad impression of “foreign brides” in society, she hints that what foreign spouses want, in fact, is to keep quiet and stay away from social spotlights, making themselves invisible to the public so as to live an ordinary life. How should intellectuals who endeavor to empower the subaltern women respond to such narrative? Instead of labeling these “quiet women” as passive, submissive or even backward subjects who need to be empowered by feminism, I argue that feminist intellectuals should try to understand why these women choose to swallow their bitterness rather than “make noise” to have their voice heard by society first, that is, to understand their efforts to erase their “foreignness,” the difference that racial and class

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<sup>102</sup> This is the political event that I addressed in Chapter Two.

discrimination derive from. Disregarding Chen's voice and the like for its being outside the historical feminist agenda would result in silencing women's various expressions of their agency.

Yet I contend that it is the scattered voices that make reflexively anthropological work meaningful. For example, I do not want to represent all "foreign brides" and "women looking for foreign husbands" as a homogenous group of women but intend to juxtapose their heterogeneity in reality. They could be the subjects (of self-objectification) and the objects (of market commodification), victims (of the exploitative brokerage system) and agents (of fraudulent marriage) at the same time. We do not need to romanticize these women's innocence as children or demonize their desire for wealth as wrongdoing of opportunists or perpetrators. Like ordinary human beings, marriage migrant women carry various characteristics that cannot simply be represented as a group in which all women share the same class consciousness and interest.

Therefore, during the period of time when the policy was drafted and the debate was going on, I tried to understand the self-perception of the "foreign brides" in the marriage transaction and their understanding of what the marriage brokerage ban meant to them. I was curious if the way they considered themselves would be different from the way the NGO represented them, the "victim" exploited by the broker. I collected women's voices through various channels except women's groups.<sup>103</sup> I sat in language and life adjustment classes offered by a local community college as a teaching assistant, and asked my existing informants to introduce their friends.

When I brought my curiosity to them, I always got similar answers like these: "oh, I heard about some stories of bad matchmakers. They just want to make money. Yes, they are very bad. But it is definitely not my case. I am not a victim for sure." "Of course not everyone's marriage

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<sup>103</sup> My concern was that women's groups would only introduce to me the migrant women who they know well and share similar points of view.

can work out. Some just had a bad luck to marry bad guys.” Interestingly, most women contributed part of their successful marriage to the matchmaker’s help, and ascribed unfortunate ones to their own bad luck. The image of “victim” was simply out of their mind. In fact, it is their very lack of the sense of exploitation that gives the NGO legitimacy to educate them in the name of “empowerment.” For those middle-class feminists, it is their responsibility to educate the subaltern women “who they are” and “what they should do” so as to form their collective consciousness of victim to resist the patriarchal repression.

This good intention, unfortunately, is not always welcome among these women, especially those who just want to live a quiet individual life. They do not respond to the call because what they want to do to decrease their perceived difference from ordinary local women is to keep silence and invisibility, behaving like good citizens who always follow the social norm. Public politics is out of their concern when they have to struggle with their hectic family life. It was not surprise that when I further asked my informants about their opinion about the marriage brokerage ban, none understood what I was talking about. All of them replied, “I do not understand politics. I do not know what it is. But if I have a friend or relative wanting to get married to Taiwanese men, I know where to get the right person.” It is understandable that they do not care about this policymaking because they have become the residents and will not be affected by the policy anyway and that one would not complain the brokerage system if she is satisfied with her marriage. Yet for those whose marriage unfortunately did not work out, taking Hongmei for example, it would be a little bit surprise to know that, in spite of her complaint about the bloodsucking big matchmaker, she still placed her hope of marrying another man in the future in matchmaking through the given social network she was familiar with. Before leaving Taiwan, she told me “I will try my luck again to find another foreign husband in the future.

Having a husband and a family is important for a woman. But it is for sure that I will not consider a Taiwanese man any more.”

We have seen how the heterogeneity of foreign spouses’ voices makes it difficult to have a representative to represent a collective consciousness of “foreign brides.” Even though some NGOs successfully recruited a certain number of foreign spouses as their members and sought to empower them through community education, most foreign spouses still choose, or are forced, to stay home. The feminist project of empowering foreign spouses by women’s groups is appreciated. However, it cannot be denied that the empowerment inevitably involves certain kind of ideology cultivation that may result in exclusion of some women whose points of view cannot fit the feminist agenda. Therefore, it is important to listen to different kinds of voices, albeit their lightness, and seek the significance of silence. We can never ensure if the feminist justice in the First World will benefit women in the Third World if the knowledge production about what justice means for women of different class in the transnational context is not carefully examined. We would risk using our moral value created in the developed country to judge women’s need in the developing country, which is of little use to help those women in poor conditions, but only serve to satisfy our moral imaginary of “humanity.”

### **Knowledge Production of Real/Fake Marriage and Trafficking in Women**

The last issue related to the policymaking that I would like to discuss is the connection between the discourses of real/fake marriage and trafficking in women in the framework of transnational brokered marriage. News reports about foreign brides engaging in the sex industry, as the one I show in the beginning of the chapter, have been producing and reproducing the stereotype of the association between brokered marriage and prostitution, and the official

discourses, like the TIP report, reconfirm the image: “The recruitment of foreign brides primarily from Vietnam, but also from other Southeast Asian nations, is poorly controlled and, as a consequence, has become a major conduit for the trafficking of girls and women into the Taiwan sex trade” (U.S. Department of State 2006).

This report is believed to significantly influence Taiwan’s international reputation. To respond to this critique of trafficking in women in the guise of marriage from domestic and international communities, the Taiwanese government was actively involved in the global anti-trafficking campaign. It promulgated “Anti-Trafficking Act” in 2006 and passed the “Anti-Trafficking Law” in 2009. During this period of time, the number of conferences, workshops and training classes on how to locate and identify victims of human trafficking held by central and local governments and civil groups mushroomed. With the one-on-one visa interview policy and the marriage brokerage ban carried out together, the government claimed its success in combating fraudulent marriages as the number of fraudulent cases was seen sharply dropping.<sup>104</sup>

While criticizing the mass media for associating “foreign brides” with either “victims of human trafficking” or “perpetrators of fraudulent marriage” to construct the social stereotype of foreign spouses in Taiwan (Hsia 2002,122-133), I argue that we do not need deny the fact that there is indeed a certain number of Southeast Asian and mainland Chinese migrant women

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<sup>104</sup> Since the interview institution was carried out, the number of visas issued to Mainland Chinese spouses has dropped from 34,685 in 2003 to less than 14,000 and to other Southeast Asian spouses from 11,454 in 2005 to less than 7,000, after 2004. However, whether the decrease can be attributed to the screening mechanism is questionable, because a higher visa rejection rate and a decrease in the total number of Taiwanese men looking for foreign brides could also contribute to the result. In fact, due to the difficulty of visa obtainment and the ongoing recessionary economy in Taiwan, many women in Southeast Asia have turned to other East Asian countries to find husbands. For example, Vietnam has seen a dramatic increase in the transnational marriage between Vietnamese women and Korean men. These factors contribute to a decrease in the total number of transnational marriages in Taiwan, which further led to a decrease in the total number of marriage fraud cases.

engaging in sex entertainment businesses serving as hostesses in the karaoke bars and *binlang xishi* (檳榔西施; betel nut beauty)<sup>105</sup> at betel nut stands. In some counties of Middle-South Taiwan, some proprietors even blatantly name their stores using such phrases as *yuenan tianxin* (越南甜心; Vietnamese sweet heart) or *dalu tianjieer* (大陸甜姐兒; sweet mainland Chinese sister) to publicly imply their cheap prices and exotic services. According to my male informants who used to patronize these stores and female informants who worked at these places, many employees of these places are “runaway brides” and housewives who go to work without disclosing what they actually do to their husbands.

Some scholars working on gendered migration have noticed the interconnection between sex work and marriage, such as entertainers or sex workers turning out to be lovers or wives of clients (Faier 2009; Brennan 2004; Mix and Piper 2003). While most studies focus on women’s migrant experience from serving as sex workers to serving as wives or lovers of their clients, few scholars have paid attention to foreign wives who become sex workers. In order to address this gap in our understanding, I have focused on how runaway wives as sex workers and their marriages were perceived and represented at the moment in time when the anti-trafficking law was passed and the knowledge about trafficking was constructed. Through telling runaway stories, we can see how women’s victimhood in the marriage would result in their engagement in

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<sup>105</sup> The term Betel Nut Beauty refers to a common sight along roadsides in Taiwan: a young woman selling betel nuts and cigarettes from a brightly light glass enclosure while wearing revealing clothing. Though betel nuts are chewed in many regions of the Asia-Pacific, the betel nut beauty phenomenon is distinctly Taiwanese. By the end of the century betel nut kiosks had become a trademark feature of Taiwan's cities and countryside. They are most characteristically encountered along major highways where truck drivers--famously enthusiastic consumers of betel nuts--can easily find them. For more details please see <http://www.taiwanderful.net/guides/betel-nut-beauty>. Even though betel nut beauties do not necessarily provide sex-related service, they are widely perceived as potential sex workers. Some betel nut shops offer different levels of sex service at different prices: from touching the breasts of betel nut beauties to having sex with them. Sometimes they cooperate with hotel proprietors to provide “door-to-door” service so as to avoid the police’s attention.

the sex industry. However, my attempt is not to resonate to the social stereotype of “foreign brides” as victims of domestic violence in relation to Taiwanese husbands as abusers. Rather, I aim to challenge the social perception of these women’s unfortunate marriages as an engagement in *jia jiehun*, *zhen maiying* and of the distinction between real and fake marriage. I argue that it is wrong to judge an existing marriage as real or fake based on its success or failure. It is also problematic to celebrate the success of the visa interview practice for its efficiency in filtering out “fake marriages” because the binary conception that the “real marriage” is formed on the basis of “romantic love” while “fake marriage,” “material needs,” is questionable. We cannot define what a “real” marriage ought to be as we cannot restrict people how to love. This idea of love-based marriage that apparently expresses the modern thought of individual freedom shows a narrow-minded middle-class liberalism that requires obedient minds of lower-class people to follow its moral ideology. Therefore, as we will see in the end, justice would only exist in the middle-class utopia to satisfy their imaginary of the moral world.

#### The Identification System: Victims or Perpetrators?

After the Anti-Trafficking Law was passed, the government undertook the most important task to follow: identifying trafficking cases. How to establish a system of knowledge that helps identify, rescue and then rehabilitate victims became an urgent matter for the government. One immigration official expressed his excitement to me about the creation of the law, “now whenever I find foreign wives in the sex industry, I ask myself if it is a trafficking case. I try to apply the trafficking law to all cases I encounter first.” Since the law was passed, foreign women involved in “fake marriage, real prostitution” are no longer simply recognized as “perpetrators.” Rather, it is increasingly more likely that they will be identified as “victims.” In the immigration

official's words, it is because "we need more victims to prove our efforts to combat trafficking in women." However, how to identify a victim in practice remains unclear. Misrecognizing trafficking crimes always frustrates the police and immigration officials who enforce the law in the frontline. Another immigration official said,

"It is very frustrating that we work very hard to find out victims, save them and prosecute the suspected traffickers, but the judge does not take our testimonies and evidence to determine the case as a TIP crime. I believe the discrepancy between our perception and the judge's exists due to our different interpretation of victimhood. We came across many cases in which Vietnamese spouses engaged in the sex industry and were exploited by their employers. Yet given that these Vietnamese women come from a world of poor living conditions, they could endure poor working conditions and bad treatments they were given in Taiwan without fully sensing that they were being exploited as forced laborers! We have to educate and remind them of their human rights! I urge others to pay more attention to this type of "potential victims," but most judges do not buy in to this idea. I have emphasized many times that although these foreign women are unaware of their victimhood, they are indeed "victims" in our standard of human rights! The judge's denial of the case we prosecute as a trafficking crime frustrates us and causes a loss of morale of our colleagues.

His statement suggests that constructing a "victim" identity requires teaching by the police, learning by the "potential victim," and lastly confirmation by the judge's verdict. Sometimes the subject of "real victims" has to be interpellated or hailed, in Althusser's words (2008[1970]), because "in many cases, the victims of trafficking may not readily identify themselves as such. For example, individuals tricked into forced labor through the imposition of extortive fees may require education, or those who are psychologically attached to a sex trafficker as a 'boyfriend' may require counseling before they understand that they are being exploited and their human rights violated (UNODC 2009: 41). According to the guidelines of how to identify victims developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), women's initial consent to be transported is irrelevant and meaningless for conviction of trafficking cases because women's position of vulnerability makes them easily subject to the trafficker's exploitation through force, coercion, or deception. The assumption of victimization, however, risks ignoring

migrant women's ability of decision making and oversimplifying the complex dynamic between the women and the trafficker. Several women at the detention center shared with me how they were taught by their brokers to insist they were tricked into prostitution and just did it for the first time in order to get better treatment. As we can see, the identity of "victims" is formed and sometimes manipulated not only by law enforcing agencies but by "victims" themselves. The police and the victims ironically become complicit in the knowledge production of "victimhood" of human trafficking. In fact, as Natasha Ahmad's study on undocumented Bangladeshi sex workers in India has showed, no matter how the women engage in prostitution, voluntarily or by deception, all of them go with a dream of bettering their life. They all resort to fraudulent means aided by professional middlemen whom they usually know and trust, and face the same risks of exploitation, harassment and abuse (Ahmad 2005: 224-5). Ahmed's observation suggests that simple categorizing some women as perpetrators of smuggling and the others as victims of trafficking make not only the diversity of migrant women's life stories but also the complexity of human relationships unseen.

#### The Identification System: Real or Fake Marriages?

In the UN Combating Trafficking in Persons handbook, certain kinds of marriage that are subsumed as suspicious trafficking activities include early marriage, forced or servile marriage, arranged marriage, compensation marriage, transactional marriage, temporary marriage or marriage for childbearing (UNODC 2009: 15). The guideline indirectly influences many studies in the past to conflate trafficking with transnational brokered marriages and assumed women, especially those from developing countries, as vulnerable subjects who are always subject to coercion or deception by middlemen. When the stereotype is applied to foreign spouses involved

in the sex business, they are often thought to either be the victim of trafficking if they suffer abuse or the perpetrator of marriage fraud. In both cases, their marriages are fraudulent.

The immigration officials whom I interviewed strongly believed that trafficking in women and other fraudulent cases in the guise of marriage can efficiently be prevented through the interview mechanism. However, according to my experience encountering “fake husbands” and fraudulent marriage brokers in Vietnam, this claim is doubtful. It is doubtful in two senses: first, the assumption that the couples who fail to answer interview questions are fraudulent and those who pass it are authentic is arguable. Second, the assumption that real and fake marriages are two clear-cut categories is questionable. Next, I will provide some ethnographic observation to address how fake couples get through the visa interview and how a “real” marriage turns out to be “fake.”

One day when I went to a hotel to visit a Taiwanese broker in Ho Chi Minh City, I came across another marriage group at the hotel lobby. We then sat together to drink and chat, and gradually two young men disclosed to me their “secrets”—they came to “marry” two young women for their landlord, another guy in the group who had already got drunk and sent back to his room with the support of his young Vietnamese wife. The two fake husbands were in their early 30s and had a low paid job. They were given NT\$100,000 (about US\$3,000) as compensation for keeping the marriage until four years later when their fake wives are eligible for applying for Taiwanese citizenship.

They carried with them all authentic documents and successfully got their marriage certificates from a local court. They also visited the houses of the paper wives to get necessary information for the visa interview. The key to pass the interview, according to them, is to follow their landlord’s instruction that was obtained from other professional brokers. Indeed, to help the

couples to pass the interview, marriage brokers usually prepare a script for them. All of the possible interview questions and answers are listed, for example, how they met each other, what their spouse's family backgrounds are, how the bride's house looks like, and other personal questions. There are some blanks left for the couples to fill out, but how their romantic love stories taking place are set. It is ironic that the real couples are taught to tell a lie based on the version the broker provides in order to pass the interview.<sup>106</sup> For example, Yunpu got the version that he met Van at the airport and they fell in love at the first glance. While waiting for the interview, Tung arranged a dry run for them and helped them review again and again. It was very common to see brokers helping their clients memorizing the answers in the waiting area of the TECO. It was a spectacle for me as there was only a window between the counter and the waiting area, so basically what happened in the waiting area could be heard and seen from the counter.

I was told later by a Taiwanese immigration official that in fact they knew what was going on outside the interview room. They did not care because marriage brokerage was not yet illegal in Taiwan at that time. When I sat with the visa consular officer in the interview room observing the interviews, I almost burst into laugh when I witnessed how Yunpu seriously insisted that Van and he met at the airport even though the officer told him, "I know everything. I know you were introduced to each other by a matchmaker. I just want to know why you, a person with a high education and a good job, also want to marry a foreign woman." After Yunpu and Van left, the officer turned to me: "I have heard about this version of love story many times. Why do these

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<sup>106</sup> Because those Vietnamese matchmakers illegally engage in transnational matchmaking, they make up romantic stories of their clients' encounter with their wives so as to avoid legal liability. But in fact the common practice has been known by Taiwan consular officers for the similarities of the plots in the stories.

couples fear to tell me the truth?” “Probably they are just afraid of being thought to be fraudulent, so they tell a lie in order to make them sound ‘more real than the real.’” I replied with a laugh.

The couples’ performance makes the interview a satire on the state’s administration of real/fake marriage. Real and fake couples prepare for the interview in the same way and make up similar love stories for the interview. The sincerity of the real couple to get married cannot guarantee their success in passing the interview. The key lies in how to make their marriage “sound real” for the immigration officials. These makeup love stories that are made to serve as alibis for the “crime” of fraudulent marriage thus ironically become something that real couples reply on to prove the “realness” of their marriage. However, because of the “fakeness” of these stories shared widely, the distinction between real and fake marriages becomes blurred and therefore “love,” which is thought to be the basis for “real marriage” in the immigration officers’ mind, has to be measured with other more “objective” indicators, such as age difference between the couple no more than 20 years, the husband’s stable financial condition, the record of the communication frequency between the couple, et cetera.

In fact, many visa consular officers also admitted to the difficulty of determining which marriages are fraudulent.<sup>107</sup> I met many “real couples” failed the interview because they were unable to answer questions correctly in such a tense atmosphere, like Yen and Chen, whose story I described in the previous chapter, and some “fake couples” passed the interview because they prepared well for it. However, by pointing out the dysfunction of the interview system, I do not mean the filtering mechanism does not work at all to prevent marriage frauds and needs

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<sup>107</sup> In fact, ferreting out suspicious marriages relies more on monitoring marital life afterwards. The consular officers usually issue suspected spouses a shorter-term residency permit, which requires the couple to renew with a local immigration office in person after the spouse resides in Taiwan for a certain period of time.

improvement. Rather, I want to point out the problematic of the binary concept of real/fake marriage and its paradox manifesting in the practice of visa interview. To me, the question what kind of marriages can be counted as real or fake is problematic in itself. To show how the distinction could be blurred in reality, I would like to use Lihua's story as one example of how a perceived "real" marriage" would turn out to be "fake" in the end.

### Lihua's Story

I met Lihua at an immigration detention center in Taiwan. She was introduced to me by a captain of the Command and Control Division of the National Immigration Agency in Changhua County for her becoming involved in "fake marriage, real prostitution." She was caught by the police at the betel nut stand where she worked as a *binlang xishi* (betel nut beauty) offering sex service. The police charged her with coming to Taiwan to engage in prostitution in the name of marriage. When I talked to her, she was sitting on the chair, her hands in handcuffs. The handcuffs implied that she was a "danger" to me. The captain warned me to keep some distance from her in case she attacked me and escaped. She looked confused and depressed, and during our conversation, she incessantly asked me to help her get out. "I just want to go home now. I had a bad luck to meet my husband. I did come to Taiwan to get married. They can check my documents. They are real!"

Lihua was a 21 year old Chinese Indonesian from Kalimantan. She has four siblings and worked at a restaurant before marrying to Taiwan. She got married to a Taiwanese man through a matchmaker. She wanted to marry a Taiwanese husband because she hoped to share her parents' financial burden and she thought she could have a happy marital life as many of her friends do. At the matchmaking meeting, she was told that the man she was going to marry was 40 years old,

never married, and that once she came to Taiwan, she did not need to go out to work. However, the reality was totally opposite. Her husband was married once and had fathered two children aged 9 and 11. He owns a farm planting black fungus as a family business, and asked her to help as a free worker. She was promised to get paid as other employees for a salary of US\$600 per month, but only got US\$90 in the end after many unknown expenses were deducted. She was asked to work as a full-time employee in the daytime and a housewife at night. She was not allowed to take a rest before going to bed, and had no private or leisure time to enjoy on weekends.

The overwhelming work made Lihua feel like to escape. Yet her final decision of runaway was made based not just on her physical suffering but also on her spiritual torment:

“I felt I was not respected and was treated more like a maid than a wife or a daughter-in-law at home. I remember one time I got blamed by my parents-in-law for asking their grandchildren to wash dishes. They thought it was my duty. I was requested to take care of the children but could not rebuke them. What made me feel more painful to stay with my husband was that I had to meet his sexual need whenever he wanted. He never considered my exhausting body after so many hours of work every night. He insulted me with abusive language if I rejected.... Moreover, I was granted no time to go to school, and therefore got few chances to reach outside. I felt isolated staying at home. I wanted to go out. I missed my family and I wanted to go home!”

A strong desire for freedom eventually triggered her runaway plan. One day when she worked at the farm, she saw the front gate was open and decided to leave that instant. She went to a friend and inquired about job opportunities everywhere. One of her friends grudgingly introduced her to a job at the betel nut kiosk. The friend told her frankly that she had to provide sex service and asked her to consider it carefully. She struggled a lot but eventually decided to take the job. “It was really a painful decision. I dared not to tell anyone even my close friends. I did not want to do the job but I knew if I wanted to save enough money to go home in a very

short period of time, I'd better take it," she started to tear down when she talked about her family. Not long after she was caught, her marriage broker also got caught for involving in smuggling people with fake documents, which made her case more suspicious. Although she believed her authentic documents could prove her innocence, in the eyes of immigration officials in the office, she was still labeled as a perpetrator of "fake marriage, real prostitution" because of her voluntary engagement in the sex business. Before our conversation ended, she sighed out her grief with sobs and asked me to do her a favor.

"I never expected to be treated as a criminal living in the prison-like place with handcuff on my hands. I am not a criminal! I just wanted to be an ordinary wife and enjoy my familial life. Now I dared not to tell my mom what happened to me. She must be worried about me as I have not called her for two weeks! I used to call her every day before coming here. Could you help me give her a call?"

I was touched by her filial piety and her close relationship with her mom. I called for her and left a message to tell her family that Lihua was safe and would go home soon. Her story, and others of the women I interviewed at the detention center, shocked me a lot when I learned how much they had suffered at such a young age. In order to survive, they needed to learn how to serve men, deal with difficult clients, and hide themselves from policemen and the truth of what they were doing from friends and families in order to maintain their images. Lihua's story helps us deconstruct the stereotype that foreign spouses engaging in the sex industry are either perpetrators of fraudulent marriage or victims of women trafficking. The dualistic thinking will only lead us to continually misrecognize them as innocent, vulnerable dupes who lack the ability to make a decision. Other than labeling them as such, we should get to know their multiple identities as mothers, daughters and wives who struggle for a better life as we do through listening to their life stories. Next, I would like continue Hongmei's story from the previous chapter as another example to challenge the binary conception of real marriage based on "true

love” and fake marriage, based on “material needs” held by authorities.

### Hongmei’s Story

Hongmei’s story exemplifies how an initially real marriage turns out to be perceived as “fake” by the local authority. In the previous chapter, I have mentioned how Hongmei married Chinghui and moved to Taiwan. Due to a heavy debt occurring when her former husband was hospitalized, after settling down in Taiwan, she started to request Chinghui to find her a job in spite of knowing it was illegal for Chinese spouses to work during that residential stage.

Hongmei kept her secret of indebtedness from Chinghui without knowing that he also kept the same secret from her. Chinghui had a lot of debts from a failed investment in the past. His debts made him unable to financially meet Hongmei’s need. Yet he still needed her for her free labor to help with his family business and take care of his family. Due to the miscalculation of economic benefits from each other, conflicts between Hongmei and Chinghui gradually emerged and extended from the financial to other issues in their marital life. Hongmei felt frustrated and depressed and finally decided to run away. Through a friend’s introduction, she got connected to a job broker who promised to arrange her a care taking job in a hospital. Hongmei took her wedding bracelet and some cash, and rode a bicycle away. Unfortunately, she was soon found by Chinghui’s friend Officer Wu, a district policeman. With mingling anger and frustration in mind, Chinghui not only refused to take Hongmei home but sued her for stealing the property of his family. Without a place to go, Hongmei was sent to an immigration detention center to wait for the court to deal with her case. During those months when she stayed at the detention center, I visited her several times. She looked drawn and haggard, but still held the dream of staying in Taiwan through begging Chinghui’s forgiveness. Four months later, she gave me a call to notify

that the court decided not to prosecute her, which meant she was set free. However, since Chinghui refused to renew her residential permit for her, unfortunately, she had to be repatriated back to China after her residential permit expired.

I visited Official Wu to talk about Hongmei's case in the hope that he could do something for her. To my surprise, he endlessly emphasized that Hongmei was a typical perpetrator of marriage fraud. He insisted that Hongmei's incentive to marry Chinghui was not for "love" but for "money," and her runaway was evidence. He and Chinghui deeply believed she went for prostitution during the period of time of her absence. "I have seen too many fraudulent cases like Hongmei's. Taiwanese husbands are used as figureheads by their foreign wives who engaged in the sex industry behind their husbands' back," he said. Chinghui also felt he was used as a figurehead. Yet for Hongmei, marriage is a life gamble and she just had a bad luck again. She always told me that "marriage makes a woman's life complete." It is no doubt that having a man to satisfy her affective needs is as important as having a man to support her financial needs in her decision of getting married again.

Hongmei's dream of marrying a financially capable man and being taken good care of is actually also other women's dream, regardless of class and racial differences. Yet when the idea is carried out by poor migrant women, it frequently provokes a moral judgment from middle-class people in host society, that is, "we" are morally superior to "them" and we have obligation to maintain our moral boundary by excluding cankers in our midst. The predicaments of the migrant women are unseen. Official Wu's words exemplified how this moral judgment shapes the social response to the runaway phenomenon: "we must ferret out marriage fraud perpetrators to ensure our national security and social order!"

The moral judgment covered with the rhetoric of patriotism is actually highly gender and

class biased. Foreign brides become social scapegoats, which, according to Bonnie Honig, is “the cultural symbolic organization of a social crisis into a resolution-producing confrontation between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’” (2001: 34). Official Wu’s reproach on runaway brides like Hongmei shows how this political logic is manipulated, where foreign spouses become the visible target to be blamed for moral bankruptcy in society because of their “materialistic thoughts.”

This judgment of fake marriage, however, in fact reflects the middle-class centralism of the idea of marriage. It is the very belief that real marriage should be formed on love other than anything else that makes transnational brokered marriages so suspicious in the public eyes. Hongmei’s story unraveled the myth that there is no affection involved in this type of marriage. The point is how we interpret it. The affect between the couple should not be read in the middle-class sense of romantic love that we are familiar with in the Western culture. Rather, it should be understood in their local contexts. For many low-class men and women in the transnational marriage, like Hongmei and Chinghui, love refers to their mutual agreement of obligation and responsibility, in their commitment to the marriage, which does not necessarily involve the romantic feeling. For people who choose the “instant marriage,” affection between the couple can be cultivated after getting married, just as how their parents’ arranged marriages in the old days worked.

Commitment or promise, as J. Austin, suggests, is a performative utterance by means of which a marriage is performed. According to him, there is no logically true or false about this linguistic act, but only successful or unsuccessful, felicitous or infelicitous (Felman 2003). Hongmei’s runaway should not be simply interpreted as her premeditation, but her unsuccessful vow. She broke her vow because in her mind, Chinghui could not meet her expectation of what a

husband should be to take care of his wife but hindered her to fulfill the obligation of being a mother to her young kid. After failing negotiating with him, she ran away for her son's and her own future. Yet for Chinghui, it is a matter of course that a wife offers free labor for her husband as an expression of her love to their family. Hongmei's refusal to stay at home and constantly request to go out to work violated Chinghui's expectation and fell under the stereotype of "bad foreign brides," which resulted in Chinghui's suspect of her as a marriage fraud perpetrator. It was this perception gap that led to their failed marriage. My intention of telling the story is not to judge who was right or wrong. Instead, through demonstrating the dynamic relationship between Hongmei and Chinghui, I hope to complicate the stereotypical understanding of "runaway brides" and perceived fake marriages.

Sometimes fake marriage can turn out to be real. An example can be seen in the news report about how a fake husband fell in love with his fake wife after their first night sleeping together. The news title is "fake husband wanted to marry fake wife after real consummation." According to Central News Agency's report (Central News Agency 2011), the police ferreted out a snakehead gang engaged in brokering mainland Chinese women to Taiwan to find employment via fake marriage. Mr. Chu was recruited to serve as a paper husband with a payment about 1,700 USD. However, Mr. Chu confessed to the police that after he had sex with his paper wife, who was 15 years younger than him, he fell in love with her. As a result, he tried to negotiate with the snakehead gang in the hope that they could let them become "real" married couple. To his surprise, no sooner had he contacted the leader of the gang, all of them were arrested by the police. What makes the story compelling is that, ironically, the couple found their romantic love after having sex for the first time. The point of the story lies not in how important sex would be to trigger the feeling of love between the couple, but how important the feeling of love would be

to shape the base of “real marriage” perceived by the authority and the couple. Mr. Chu did not realize that he actually did not need to resort to the snakehead gang for permission to get married with his paper wife, because his marriage was already legally recognized, thanks to the mistake of the state. It is unknown how the police dealt with his case in the end as no further information provided in the report. However, from this case we saw how the paper couple ridiculed the state’s conceited mechanism of marriage fraud prevention and how the boundary between real and fake marriage can easily be blurred in the affective transformation of the paper couple.

Stories of “fake marriage, real prostitution” are reported sensationally by the mass media without being carefully investigated. People readily judge a marriage based on the foreign wife’s marital situation and her occupation. Lihua’s and Hongmei’s runaway stories tell us how the binary concept of “real” and “fake” blinds us to see the real lives of transnational married couples. This simplistic distinction that defines a marriage as real based on “true love” and as fake based on “material needs” ignores the fact that even though women choose to migrate through marriage primarily for an economic reason, they do also desire a fulfilling marital relationship with their husbands. When they suffer from the marriage but do not want to get divorced due to a lack of citizenship, which will cause them to be sent back to their home, they would choose to run away. In this case, they need to make money to live an independent life. Yet having little cultural and social capital plus the uncertain legal status always limits their choice in finding a desirable job. Under this circumstance, getting a job in the sex industry becomes an option for them. Yet we need to know that sex work is by no means an easy job for these runaway brides. They have to face the risk of being repatriated if caught and will be separated

from their children if not having the custody of them.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, their situations are much more complicated than local spouses involved in the sex industry and worthy of more attention. Without looking into how they are brought to the sex-related industry, these ceaseless reports of “fake marriages” will only homogenize these women’s migrant experiences and in return reinforce the stereotype of “foreign brides” as potential trouble makers.

I would like to emphasize that revealing the dark side of the transnational marriage should not hinder us from celebrating those with a happy ending. My effort through telling these miserable stories is to reveal how the stereotype of fake marriage was formed in order to deconstruct it. Misreading these stories will result in reinforcing the existing stereotype of miserable foreign wives versus cruel husbands, which is what I fear to see. Moreover, I urge that we should be sensitive to the fact that who considers whose marriage being “fake” or “real” is itself a political act. Affection is never neutral; instead, it is always gender- and class-shaped. The state’s sanction on the marriage brokerage in the name of scared marriage would in effect serve to negate low-class people’s conception of marriage, disregarding their “freedom” in choosing their own marriage type through advocating a middle-class liberal version, the freedom that requires individual self-discipline and internalized social mind, so as to maintain the middle-class moral order in society.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> According to the law, if the foreign spouse has the custody of the children, they are allowed to stay. But it seems that most of the time the custody is assigned to the father for it is believed that the father has a better economic ability to take care of the children than the foreign mother does.

<sup>109</sup> This class distinctive idea of freedom is similar to what Timothy Mitchell describes about Egyptian liberalism in its colonial context. According to him, “Egyptian liberalism spoke about justice and legal rights; but these concerns were contained within a wider problematic....Liberalism was the language of a new social class, threatened by the absence of the mental habits of industry and obedience which would make possible a social order” (Mitchell 1988: 116).

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

Since I began this research in 2002, I have witnessed the ups and downs of the transnational marriage market with the Taiwanese government's regulation on marriage brokerage. The ban of the industry in Taiwan has contributed to the prosperity of the industry in Korea. For example, Korea has gradually surpassed Taiwan in attracting Vietnamese brides due to its easier procedure to get a visa. In recent years, southeast Coast China has also seen an increasing number of Vietnamese brides flowing in through marriage brokers<sup>110</sup> (Ewing 2010; Southern Metropolis Weekly 2011).

When I revisited Ho Chi Minh City with a marriage group in 2008, things had changed a lot. The district with numerous hotels and cafés for matchmaking to take place was not busy any more. After the Vietnamese government stringently enforced the ban on illegal marriage brokerage, as in Taiwan many local matchmakers were forced to close their businesses or take them underground. Those who still wanted to run businesses became very careful in arranging matchmaking meetings. I vividly remember how difficult it was for our group to meet potential brides after the ban enforcement. Unlike my previous visits, when our group always received local matchmakers' warm welcome in the hotel lobby, we had to act like thieves to avoid the police's attention. The meeting venue was changed to a rented private house in a suburban neighborhood. We had to ride in a car and then on a motorcycle to the house located at the dead end of a dirt road. No sooner had we entered the house than the house owner rapidly pulled down

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<sup>110</sup> Even though the transnational marriage between Chinese and Vietnamese has been taking place for thousands of years, this latest trends marks the first time Chinese suitors have made their way to Vietnam to woo their brides (Ewing 2010).

all of the curtains. Only then did I learn that more than 20 bride candidates were already there inside the house. They crowded the kitchen and were waiting to be called out to meet us in the living room. The matchmaker urged us to act fast, and managed to get us out of the house in ten minutes, once he realized that the clients considered the women too young for them. Although no match was successfully made this time, I was very much impressed by their efficiency and the way they managed their business in such a precarious situation.

Due to the double barrier from the Vietnamese and Taiwanese governments, many Vietnamese local matchmakers turned to work with brokers from Korea. To respond to this market transformation, they had to create a discourse to package Korean men. From some of the matchmakers I met, I learned that Korean men's financial advantage over Taiwanese men is one thing that was used often to convince women why Korean men are better than Taiwanese men. In fact, a woman's decision of which nationals to marry is very likely made by the matchmaker she registers with and trusts. If this time the matchmaker works with a broker coming from Taiwan, then she gets more chance to marry a Taiwanese man; if next time comes a Korean marriage group, she would marry a Korean man. However, it is not saying that women are simply manipulated by matchmakers. Instead, it resembles playing a gambling game. They widen their choice through opening to more options while inviting more uncertain risk in their future life in the destination, especially if they do not have any existing support network there.

Things also changed a lot after I finished my fieldwork in 2008 in Taiwan. Since it is now illegal to run marriage brokerages, most websites of brokering companies are removed. It is no longer easy to find advertisements and price competition on the Internet or flyers in the street. Mr. Su's business in brokering Ukrainian brides was quietly closed down. Hui Ge took his business underground and planned to extend it to Russia and Ukraine. Tung, Hui Ge's business partner in

Vietnam, switched his business focus to contracting jobs with a construction company. He still worked with Hui Ge from time to time, but spent more time working as a truck driver for the company. He was happy that he had more time to enjoy family life.

Most of the couples I met in the beginning of fieldwork in 2004 are still married and have children now. I was frequently asked to comment on their marriages when people learned I worked on this topic. “Are their marriages happy?” was the inquiry that I received most. When hearing such questions, I always threw another back and said: “could you provide a definition of what you mean by ‘happiness’? Everyone has a different sense of satisfaction. They might feel satisfied with their lives even though you may think they are very poor.” People seemed to anticipate hearing miserable or eccentric stories from me, and to be prepared to respond with sympathy or hatred. I always had to challenge their reaction and further complicated my position, which confused people all the time and made my words sound contradictory. Yet what I wanted to convey was the very difficulty of consistently describing “foreign brides” and their marriages as a whole. In many cases of failed marriages, I had a hard time judging whether it was the husband or the wife who should held responsible for the failure. I tried not to put all blame on the husband for being chauvinistic or on the wife for valuing material goods more than affect. In addition to arguing over individual responsibility, I think it is even more crucial to critique unequal structures that directly or indirectly shape individual habitus, thoughts and behavior. We need a broader lens to look into the dynamics between the structure and agents, considering individual agency as a response to the gendered ideology in society and to cultural, economic and political hierarchies on the globe.

I contend that we need a trans-national and trans-class perspective to understand the market formation of transnational marriages and why men and women need or desire foreign spouses

despite the social stigmas tightly attached. Neoliberal governmentality would be a useful concept to analyze how women have been triggered to pursue a modern life in a developed country through marriage migration. Yet as Tsing suggests (2005), neoliberalism does not influence the local directly and unidirectionally, but always creates friction. We have seen how neoliberal power negotiates with local (traditional) forces differently in the market. For example, compared to Chinese and Ukrainian women, Vietnamese women bear more economic burden from their natal families and their country by and large. Following the traditional virtue that prioritizes filial piety over individual needs, these young women compromise their personal interests and make their families' burdens part of their own. Their economic disadvantage relatively reduces their bargaining power in the market. They gamble on a better life with marriage, and hope their migration will bring benefits to both individual and natal family. The benefits refer not only to better material conditions, but also to a chance to cultivate higher cultural tastes. Migration through marriage, as migration through work (Pun 2005; Yan 2008), has become another shortcut for women to accumulate human capital and help themselves and their families move upward rapidly in their natal society.

Therefore, we have seen that in this neoliberal capitalist world, the meanings of "survival" and "desire" become negotiable depending on the women's sense of life satisfaction and their vision of future life. "Survival" can no longer be measured exclusively by economic conditions, as needs and desires cannot be differentiated with the stimulation of modern consumerism. Van's story exemplifies this, blurring: she was happy with her life in Taiwan because she could help her parents back in remote Vietnam while enjoying urban modern life in Taipei.

In re-visiting Spivak's work *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Pheng Cheah (2010) poses a critique of Spivak's reading of Foucault's and Deleuze's analyses of power. Spivak criticizes their

accounts for being ideologically blind to the international division of labor. In her view, because of the ignorance of the function of ideology, Foucauldian analysis of power forecloses the need for counter-hegemonic ideological production that would contest the proxies, and facilitates the muting of the subaltern. However, Cheah contends that Foucault is right in sensing that a new form of power has emerged that makes the rise of global capitalism possible. It is neither ideological nor repressive, but positively shapes and produces its objects through discourses of truth (2010: 184). He argues that the power in contemporary globalization no longer operates according to the same regulative logic established under colonialism, and that Spivak did not engage deeply with Foucault's concept of biopower in her critiques, which, he believes, would be very useful in analyzing the new international division of reproductive labor. For example, he observes that the establishment of an international division of reproductive labor is largely done by recruiting foreign women from impoverished areas to engage in domestic work in advanced countries. The power integrates women into global capitalism through biopolitically crafting their interests into needs rather than through obscuring their voices through ideological subject formation.

Indeed, I agree with Cheah that global capitalism has gone beyond the power operation of rigid center-periphery opposition. Not only foreign domestic workers, but also foreign brides are now the objects of neoliberal power. Although migrating through different approaches and bearing different kinds of risks, these two groups of women share a common belief that migration could bring them tremendous benefits, and to exchange for the benefits, they just need to provide their material and immaterial reproductive labor, which they would have to provide in their life as a wife and mother anyway, if not in their own country, then somewhere else overseas.

I argue that only within this neoliberal context can we negotiate a way to understand the blurring of the binaries of freedom/coercion, agency/subjugation, and realness/fakeness in the configuration of migrant women's subjectivity. I have shown how these foreign women are put into a specific social context to make their own decisions about marrying foreign husbands. I also showed how they subjugate to power that shapes them into desirable citizens, yet at the same seek a way out if their subjugation fails to benefit them in any sense. Running away from marriage would account for their resistance to patriarchal exploitation of their labor, which, nevertheless, does not lead them to doubt the function of the brokering system that made their migration come true. Last, we cannot easily distinguish these women's "real consciousness" from a supposed "fake consciousness" and thus judge whether their marriage is real or fake, because the distinction is problematic in itself. Love has been capitalized in the global market economy, and the foreign spouse's labor exploitation by the husband's family been translated into her obligation as a wife. Failing to follow gender norms in the marriage causes these foreign spouses to be suspected of engaging in marriage fraud.

We have seen how these foreign women are absorbed into the global capitalist system and subscribe to the neoliberal logic, which further forces us to re-consider these migrant women's "exploitation" in the newly international division of labor. Unlike domestic workers who sell labor to others only for temporary use, many "foreign brides" are subject to labor abuse for their entire lives. However, unless they complain or "make noise," it is hard for outsiders to put a hand on their "family affairs." In fact, whether their hard work for their families is labor "abuse" or "obligation fulfillment" to a large extent depends on individual perception. Many Taiwanese wives share the same feeling of "labor abuse" at home, yet it is not widely perceived as "abuse" by society because the discourse of motherhood has naturalized women's reproductive labor as a

necessary burden for women to be a wife or mother. The more labor and sacrifice a woman can offer for the family, the more respect she will gain from society. What makes foreign wives suffer from labor abuse is partly due to a lack of their husbands' affective investment and support. For transnational brokered marriage, it is very common that the husband thinks he is helping his wife get out of poverty, so he deserves her free labor as payment of her debt of gratitude. Men who hold this idea frequently mistreat their wives as free domestic workers and birth-giving machines. Therefore, ironically, the labor abuse would not be recognized if the wife feels she gets enough compensation from her husband with his affective appreciation.

We also have to be aware that “exploitation” in the global marriage brokerage does not simply refer to “men exploit women,” that is, “husbands exploit wives” or “brokers exploit brides.” Gender inequality doubtlessly is a core issue in the global bride trade. Yet in my opinion, what causes the rise of transnational marriage markets is more about global economic inequality than about gender inequality, which has existed for ages in patriarchal societies. We have seen several cases in which it was the husband's mother who pushed the brokered marriage through and was involved in abusing the foreign daughter-in-law. Likewise, as I have discussed, not all marriage brokers are male, and their interaction with women is not always perceived as being exploitative. If we raise our perspective to a higher level, we may view men and women looking for foreign spouses, along with marriage brokers, as “conspirators” in promoting the transnational marriage market. This is their way of seeking “survival” in the unequal global economy and fulfilling their roles in the family and society. Therefore, I consider these women agents as well as victims, men being powerful as well as marginalized, and marriage brokers helpers as well as perpetrators, depending on the scale and context in which they operate. It is noteworthy that in addition to certain market rules as structure that each party has to follow,

sometimes there is space for agreed-upon negotiation among the broker and his or her male and female clients. This space shows that the business could be operated ethically in some way and is not always as exploitative as it is thought to be.

Despite contending that these migrant women are integrated into the global market economy and forged into neoliberal subjects, I do not conclude that they do not have any sense and space for resistance, albeit the resistance would be very fragile. However, their resistance is made more against their inferior status in the husband's family than against their marginalized position in the global economy as the patriarchal exploitation is real and sensible whereas the global political economy is so far from their conception and daily activities. It is often seen that they negotiate a space in their marital life or a position in the husband's family through manipulating their triangle relationships with the husband and the parents-in-law, as Wang's research (2007) has showed. Sometimes threatening to run away is another tactic. Yet taking runaway into action often causes unpredictable consequences that trap these foreign women into a worse predicament. For example, they will lose their legal status and become undocumented residents if they have not gained citizenship at the moment they run away. Due to a lack of legal protection, they become even more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, especially when trapped in the underground economy as sex workers. In the end, their runaway as a form of resistance would only worsen their existing marginalized status and enhances inequality in society.

The phenomenon of "runaway brides" is worthy of further study in the future. As I stated in chapter five, despite seeking to deconstruct the image of "runaway brides" as perpetrators who migrate for prostitution through "fake marriage," we should not deny the fact that there are a certain number of marriage migrant women who run away from home to avoid their unhappy

marital life and ending up in the sex industry or other undesirable businesses. Instead of judging their morality, what we should be concerned about is why they run away, where they go, how they make a living, and how they negotiate their identities. Looking into these issues will help widen people's understanding of various consequences of Asian women's marriage migration.

In sum, this study contributes to existing marriage migration studies in the following dimensions: First, it provides a close observation of the business operation of marriage brokerages and how race, class and gender play out in the formation of the market. It explains how the price disparity of marrying a foreign bride reflects a class hierarchy among men in Taiwan and a racial hierarchy among women around the globe. Secondly, it challenges the widely held assumptions that only low-class men look for foreign brides, and that women seeking foreign husbands are victims of the global bride trade. Instead, it gives insight into how cultural factors, such as a traditional familial ideology, also play an important role in influencing men's decision-making. Likewise, economic predicament cannot be seen as the sole factor that triggers women to migrate. We must consider how the global circulation of capital and value and goods has influenced migrants and their natal families through consumption, and how modern consumption has aroused local women's desire to pursue a better life and modern subjectivity. Last, this study adds to the understanding of migrant women's agency in the global bride trade. Echoing current studies that focus on women's ability to make decisions, this study further provides analyses of their dynamic relationships with their natal families, brokers and male clients, through which I hope to break the stereotypical binaries that regard women as victims and brokers and men as perpetrators.

This dissertation is just a start toward a comprehensive study on transnational brokered marriages in East Asia. There are still a lot of issues in this field that scholars need to explore

further, such as children's education, identities, and citizenship. I hope that this research will inspire more scholars to engage in related studies and that this dissertation can provide a base for further comparative studies of marriage brokerage in Asia and elsewhere.

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