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### Beyond victimization: the empowerment of 'foreign brides' in resisting capitalist globalization

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## Beyond victimization: the empowerment of 'foreign brides' in resisting capitalist globalization

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Drawing on the author's direct participation in the empowerment of 'foreign brides,' this paper charts the gradual transformation of these highly stigmatized marriage immigrants from isolated and suppressed individuals to active participants in a growing immigrant movement in Taiwan. The 'double-bind structure' prevalent in mainstream media narratives has constructed 'foreign brides' as either 'passive victims' or 'materialist blood suckers,' two logically contrasted stereotypes that jointly construct 'foreign brides' as an inferior other. While sympathetic with 'foreign brides,' most feminist discourse also portrays them as passive victims. This paper highlights the agency of 'foreign brides,' who strive for better lives via transnational marriages and, more importantly, have transformed themselves first from personal subject to communal subject and then to historical subject. This process of subjectivation is the result of active grassroots empowerment, which has provided the impetus for the building of a social movement.

摘要：从作者多年涉入培力「外籍新娘」的经验出发，本文分析在台湾被高度污名化的婚姻移民逐步突破孤立处境，进而积极投入新移民运动的过程。普遍存在于主流媒体叙事的「进退维谷结构」将外籍新娘建构为「无可奈何的受害者」和「唯利是图的吸血鬼」——两者看似矛盾，实为统一地，将外籍新娘建构为「低劣他者」。许多女性主义者虽然同情外籍新娘，但仍视其为无助的受害者。本文强调外籍新娘的能动性，指出她们不仅透过跨国婚姻追寻更好的未来，更重要的是，已从个人主体转化为社群主体，甚至成为历史主体；而这主体化的过程是多年草根培力，从而打造社会运动的结果。

**Keywords:** empowerment; foreign brides; immigrant movement; globalization

### The phenomenon

Since the late 1980s, when Taiwan's agricultural economy was increasingly threatened by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization and the country experienced an exodus of labour-intensive industry, hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese men from the peasant and working classes have left the countryside in search of brides. Led by marriage brokers, they are transported to modern international airports, where their humble glances are immediately exposed to the alien prospects of luxurious lounges, complex and wordy immigration forms, and expressionless customs bureaucrats. Such experiences are rare in their solemn lives.

Meanwhile, across the South China Sea, marriage brokers and matchmakers weave in and out of communities in rural areas and on the margins of cities in Indonesia, Vietnam and other southeast Asian countries, encouraging young women to meet these men. During the meetings, the men cast anxious, searching glances, the women are shy and

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reticent, and the matchmakers enthusiastically urge them into pairs. Days later, the engagement ceremony is held. The men return to Taiwan to wait for a period that can range from several months to a year for their 'foreign bride'<sup>1</sup> to arrive. Transnational marriages of this type require large sums of money, often half of the savings of a farming or working-class family in Taiwan. If the match results in marriage, the groom must pay the broker a sum between US\$10,000 and 15,000,<sup>2</sup> only 10% of which goes to the bride's family as a dowry. Still, a dowry of this size represents a significant amount to families in southeast Asian nations where wages remain low.

This trend had been anticipated in the early 1980s, when men from rural areas in Taiwan began marrying brides from Thailand and the Philippines. At the end of the 1980s, the Taiwanese government stopped issuing visas to single women from southeast Asia since several women were arrested for engaging in prostitution after coming to Taiwan on tourist visas. Since then, Taiwanese men searching for foreign brides have had to go to southeast Asia. In the early 1990s, Indonesia became the primary source of brides. In recent years, more than 2,000 Indonesian women leave their home annually, heading to an imagined 'prosperous paradise' in Taiwan. In order to reduce the number of Indonesian brides, the Taipei Economic and Trade Office (TETO) in Indonesia slowed down the process of obtaining visas for these women, and required them to submit to an interview before they would be granted a visa to Taiwan adding anxiety for the women who must submit to an interview for a visa to Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Many Indonesian brokers, impatient with the lengthy process imposed by the Taiwanese government, have turned their attention to Hong Kong suitors, and Taiwanese brokers are now searching for women in Vietnam, Cambodia and other countries.

According to a study by the Ministry of Interior, 240,837 foreign spouses entered Taiwan between 1987 and late 2003 (42.2% were from southeast Asia and 57.8% from Mainland China). Ninety-three per cent of these foreign spouses were women. Among the women from southeast Asia, 57.5% were from Vietnam, 23.2% from Indonesia, 5.3% from Thailand and another 5.3% from the Philippines.

### **Critical review of the mainstream construction of 'foreign brides'**

In Taiwan, the term 'foreign brides' refers to southeast Asian women married to Taiwanese men. In the mainstream media, these transnational marriages are viewed reductively as 'trade marriages' and are cited as a cause of social problems. 'Foreign brides' are of particular interest to the media, which often directly or indirectly accuse these women of engaging in prostitution. An analysis of the depiction of foreign brides in the media shows that they are portrayed either as passive victims who are so uneducated and poor that they do not have any control over their lives or as materialistic bloodsuckers who connive to entrap Taiwanese men in order to steal their money and run away.

Although 'passive victims' and 'materialist blood suckers' are two logically contrasted images, their co-existence in the media has powerfully defined the realities of the 'foreign brides.' Similarly, in certain white-dominant discourse, non-white women have been constructed as an exotic species with two opposing natures: naïve, submissive and loving, on the one hand, and crafty, mysterious and sexually seductive, on the other. African American women have been portrayed as both innocent 'mammies' caring for white masters or immoral Jezebels overcome by lust. Asian women are stereotyped in a similar fashion: pure, submissive 'China Dolls' or mysterious, crafty 'Dragon Ladies' (Feagin and Feagin 1996).

By analysing the narrative structure of these claims, we can identify the cultural resources and ideologies on which they are based (Riessman 1993). The contradictory images of foreign brides form what I call a 'double-bind structure.' Double-bind structure is different from 'contrast structures' (Smith 1978) or 'complementary oppositions' (Douglas 1986, Miller 1991), which is based on the opposition of good and bad or normal and unusual. Double-bind structure is an interpretive technique that leaves little room for their subjects to resist negative stereotyping; they are often employed by a socially and politically dominant group to assert the inferiority of marginalized groups. They rely on two negative images that contradict each other. Subjects thus portrayed cannot escape being stereotyped – if they contradict one image, they are immediately captured by the opposing image. If the portrayed subjects do not resist their characterization, this is cited as evidence of their naïve, child-like and easily controlled nature. If, however, they do resist, this is taken as evidence of their immoral, violent and savage nature (Hsia 1997, 2007a).

Although the two opposing natures appear mutually exclusive, together they serve to maintain the image of an 'inferior other.' Inferior others are portrayed as either so naïve and ignorant that they act against their own best interests or as crafty savages who not only do not appreciate their masters but also plot to attack them behind their backs. United in portraying an inferior other, the opposing stereotypes reinforce each other rather than cancel each other out. These controlling images (Collins 1991) are prevalent in the Taiwanese media portrayals of foreign brides from southeast Asia. They are either passive victim bought by men as sexual commodities or materialist blood-suckers disguised by their beauty. The rhetorical double-bind structure serves to maintain the construction of foreign brides as the inferior other.

Since the foreign brides phenomenon has clear gender implications, it has been the focus of attention for many feminists and gender-sensitive scholars and experts. Ironically, their portrayals of foreign brides are often not much different from the media's. The following comments from a well-known Taiwanese female family counsellor are typical:

...These 'foreign brides' tell us a clear reality: That is, we think our society has progressed, but the progress is indeed limited, because marriage is still built on the system of moneyed trade.... Taiwanese men marry foreign brides not because they have much money. The reason why they are willing to marry foreign brides is that they do not even know what modern marriage means. Similarly, the brides who acquire money via marriage simply solve material problems by the fate of their bodies. They do not know what marriage means either.... The practice of buying foreign brides makes us feel sad, because women are still treated as commodities even in the twentieth century. What is the era of free marriage? Give up 'free love' for 'trade marriage'? It is all because they do not know what marriage is (*Chinese Daily*, 11 February 1996).

This perception of the foreign brides often leads scholars sympathetic with women's issues to view them as victims of domestic violence. To raise public awareness of the problems, these scholars often highlight the helplessness of foreign brides while demonizing their husbands (e.g., Shieh *et al.* 2003). Most women's groups share this view, especially when they first became aware of the existence of transnational marriages. I had a personal experience of this disapproving view when I initiated a Chinese literacy programme in 1995 as a first step in the empowerment of foreign brides. The programme, which will be discussed in greater detail later, taught the brides Chinese and encouraged them to share their experiences. A few months after the programme began, one of the leading feminist activists in Taiwan wrote an article criticizing it. The article censured the patriarchal

essence of Hakka<sup>4</sup> culture and argued that the literacy programme served to perpetuate Hakka patriarchy, because it encouraged more Hakka men to buy 'foreign brides' by providing programmes to create better living conditions. In 1995 and 1996, I contacted two major women's organizations in Taiwan and asked if they could hold public hearings on the issue of 'foreign brides.' One of their leaders told me that their organization's goal was to send 'foreign brides' back to their home countries, because it maintained that their marriages were merely a form of trade, encouraged by a patriarchal system. Although it is true that transnational marriages are commodified (there is a growing industry involved), it is not at all clear that returning these brides to their homelands is in their best interest. Foreign brides and their families have striven to free themselves from poverty. Without thoroughly analysing the politico-economic structures of transnational marriages (see Hsia 2004), one can easily oversimplify them and dismiss them as reflection of patriarchy and perceive the husbands of the foreign brides as the sole evil-doers.

The idea that transnational marriages are a form of trade only strengthens the stereotyping of foreign brides in Taiwan. Transnational marriages between natives of Taiwan and southeast Asian countries must be understood in the context of a larger process, not as an isolated phenomenon. In the US, pictures of mail-order brides from Asia, Eastern Europe and Russia are printed in catalogues and the Internet (Lai 1992, Glodava and Onizuka 1994, Constable 2003). There is controversy surrounding the importation of prospective brides from the Philippines to Japan, Australia and former West Germany (Aguilar 1987, Cooke 1986, del Rosario 1994, Sato 1989).

Most research on mail-order brides assumes that this phenomenon is a social problem and adopts a sympathetic attitude towards the women and their unfortunate fate. However, this research often makes the common mistake of constructing these women as 'exotic others.' For instance, in *Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale*, Glodava and Onizuka (1994) strongly criticize common Western stereotypes of Asian women as 'subservient, exotic man-pleasing creatures' (p. 38), although they, too, practise unconscious stereotyping.

When analysing the abusive process of selection as a mail-order bride, the authors maintain that the women are 'traditional,' and therefore unwilling to abandon their marriage or question whether their husbands deserve their respect and love. As therapists, Glodava and Onizuka are especially concerned that mail-order brides are not willing to seek professional help, because Asian values encourage them to be deferential to authority and to maintain harmonious relationships (p. 109). This discourse implies that Asian women are the victims of Asian culture; in order to become liberated, they must forsake their traditional culture and accept Western individualism.

Glodava and Onizuka's table of 'Asian Cross-Cultural Values and Assumptions Regarding Philosophy of Life and Implications for Therapy' (p. 111) provides an illuminating summation of their position on cultural differences. This table is divided according to Asian/Pacific values and Western values. In the Asian/Pacific column, the values include suppression of individuality, fatalism, rigidity of role and status, and deference to authority, whereas in the Western column, we find independence, mastery of one's own fate, flexibility of role and status, and challenging authority. By contrasting Asian and Western values and focusing on the 'problems' endured by Asian women, the authors blame Asian women's suffering on their cultural heritage: Asian cultures are thus constructed as 'inferior others' that will only be saved if they adopt Western individualism.

Gender is the primary concern of most studies of foreign brides, but scholars often maintain that both the men and women involved in these transnational marriages should

be distinguished from the rest of the population: they are products of 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' sexist values, which most people have discarded due to the success of 'modernization' (Sato 1989, Glodava and Onizuka 1994). Men who marry mail-order brides are constructed as sexist exploiters (e.g., del Rosario 1994). Sexism definitely plays a role in transnational marriages; however, scholars often view the men who pursue these marriages as representatives of the patriarchy and do not take into account their marginalized status in society. Thus scholars, often unwittingly, perpetuate a classist prejudice: only less-educated peasants and blue-collar workers are sexist (e.g., Cooke 1986) and incapable of understanding the meaning of modern marriage.

Studies that view transnational marriages as social problems or even individual problems do not have a macro analytical framework. Other studies take a much wider perspective and view the phenomenon as a 'structural trend' arising from the unequal relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries. Aguilar (1987) maintains that there is a parallel between prostitutes and mail-order brides: both are the product of US colonialism. The Philippines' economic dependence on the US leads to unemployment, inflation and widespread hunger, forcing many Filipinas to become prostitutes or mail-order brides out of financial need. To facilitate this process, US cultural colonialism has created romantic fantasies of betrothal to tall, light-skinned American men.

Aguilar shows how women from the Philippines are seen through the prism of US colonialism, and analyses how colonialism distorts and remakes gender relations. This draws attention to the fact that an essentialist feminist theory of gender is not sufficient to account for the complexity of the foreign bride phenomenon. However, we should also bear in mind that commodified transnational marriages do not only occur between the Philippines and the US. The push (e.g., unemployment) and pull (e.g., job opportunities) factors of countries that export brides (such as the Philippines) and import brides (such as the US) do not fully explain this global phenomenon. We need a more comprehensive theoretical overview.

While structural analysis provides us with a broader view of the issues, it neglects the particular experience of the men and women involved. In structuralist accounts, the subjects are portrayed as the puppets of social forces. Their actions are assumed to be determined exclusively by the structures. The ways in which structural forces are processed by the agents and integrated into their everyday lives have not been thoroughly examined.

Recently, feminist writings have begun to challenge the prevailing assumption that foreign brides are simply victims or trafficked women (e.g., Constable 2003, 2005). The focus has shifted to the agency of the women involved in these cross-border marriages: the marriages are seen as escapes from political, economic and cultural constraints and courageous attempts to achieve a better future. By providing personal accounts of these women in *Cross-Border Marriages*, Constable (2005) and other contributors illustrate the agency of women who have escaped their fate through marriage. While it is important to recognize these women's agency, we should not narrowly perceive agency as merely individual escape from structural constraints. More importantly, these individuals can go further to form a 'collective agency' that will transform, not simply escape, these constraints. By doing so, they become 'historical subjects' who make their mark on history by remaking the social relations and the cultural model that determine our identity (Touraine 1988).

Elsewhere I have analysed the dynamic relationship between commodified transnational marriages and capitalist development (Hsia 2004). Commodified transnational

marriages are understood as a by-product of capitalist development; they represent one way that men and women find a way out of societies that have been distorted and marginalized by global capitalism. These marriages, however, often reinforce the international division of labour and consequently bolster capitalism's strength. For the core and semi-periphery (receiving countries), foreign brides provide unpaid household labour, childbearing and childrearing, thereby stabilizing the reproduction of a pool of cheap labour. Foreign brides themselves serve as a new source of cheaper labourers in these countries. For peripheral countries (sending countries), fees collected from document and travel fees, and remittances from women from peripheral countries benefits primitive accumulation. Furthermore, commodified transnational marriages manifest the international division of labour within interpersonal relationships, localizing the international division of labour as an unequal relation between people. Unequal relationships between societies are thus realized in everyday life, and the minute details and conflicts that arise in marriages are often interpreted by members of core/semi-peripheral societies as problems endemic to people from peripheral societies, and then used to explain the underdevelopment of those countries. In other words, the historical and dynamic dimensions of capitalist development are alienated to become an irreversible process, and thereby strengthen the very process of capitalist development (Hsia 2004).

These transnational marriages however do plant seeds for bottom-up globalization, which will only come about as a result of purposeful grassroots empowerment performed by a social movement. The following section examines how foreign brides under structural constraints have gradually broken their silence, organized themselves and become active in immigrant activist movements in Taiwan.

### **The root causes: globalization and unequal development**

Many southeast Asian women decide to marry Taiwanese men because they hope to escape their native country's poverty, which has been intensified by globalization. Globalization entails privatization, deregulation and liberalization, which means unemployment, hunger, and disease, and a threat to survival for the vast majority of labourers. The World Bank and the IMF have driven hundreds of millions of people into poverty in the guise of offering loans to developing countries and promising a boost to development by carrying out SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programmes) (for further analysis, see Hsia (2004)). Under the sway of distorted development, farmers and labourers in the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and other southeast Asian countries have been placed under increasing economic pressure and forced to find work abroad. Women in southeast Asia can find work outside of their native countries or escape their economic plight through transnational marriages.

Their Taiwanese grooms are mostly farmers or blue-collar workers. Taiwan gradually began to take on the characteristics of a semi-peripheral country in the 1980s as it became increasingly incorporated into the world capitalist system. During this period, Taiwan began to exploit southeast Asian and other peripheral countries. At the same time, globalization began to push liberalization, privatization and deregulation, resulting in distorted development in southeast Asian countries and a great number of agricultural and industrial labourers in distress. The poverty created by globalization was not as serious in Taiwan as it was in southeast Asian countries, but agriculture in Taiwan was no longer viable; it had been destroyed by the combined effects of urbanization, industrialization

and international pressure on agriculture. Low-skilled workers were also affected by the increasing threats of liberalization. These low-skilled agricultural and industrial labourers found survival increasingly difficult and, as a result, they were in an extremely disadvantaged position in Taiwan's domestic marriage market.

### **The constraints faced by 'foreign brides'**

As a result of these developments, the economic situation for foreign brides is also dire. According to a recent survey of foreign brides in Taiwan, 31.3% said their family expenses are higher than their family income, 48.9% can barely make ends meet and only 2.7% have more income than expenses. Almost 80% (78.5%) rely on their husband's income, and 7% are the primary earners in their families. Forty per cent said their Taiwanese husbands were working-class, and 65% of the interviewed foreign brides make less than 20,000 NT (about US\$588) (Hsu 2004).

Since their Taiwanese husbands are mostly working-class, most foreign brides need jobs to supplement the family income. To find employment, they must overcome many obstacles. Since they are usually isolated and unable to speak Mandarin, they do not have access to necessary information and resources. Some employers discriminate against foreign brides, and the women often have no recourse, since they are unaware of their legal rights and lack social support.

Furthermore, foreign brides face constraints imposed by laws and regulations, which reflect Taiwan's exclusionary immigration policy. For instance, Taiwan's policy of incorporation is based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, which includes those who can claim a common ancestry (no matter how tenuous) and excludes those who cannot. Despite recent changes in the Nationality Law, it remains extremely difficult for those excluded from nationality to become citizens of Taiwan, unless they are spouses or children of Taiwanese citizens. Prior to the reform of the Nationality Law in the late 1990s, foreigners could not become naturalized Taiwanese citizens, except in the case of women married to Taiwanese men. Foreign women are seen as 'naturalizable' only because of their ability to continue Taiwanese bloodlines. This attitude is a reflection of the patriarchal perception of women as breeding objects, rather than independent subjects. Adopting a patriarchal exclusionary policy of incorporation, the Taiwanese government does not grant citizenship to foreign women as an inalienable right; instead, citizenship is dependent on their status as wife of a Taiwanese man. For instance, foreign brides who have not obtained Taiwanese citizenship are often ineligible for social services and welfare benefits. Abused foreign brides without Taiwanese citizenship are deported if they divorce. Since custody is often granted to Taiwanese fathers, deportation would entail permanent separation from children. Consequently, victims of abuse often decide to endure further domestic violence for the sake of their children. The husband's power over a foreign wife is thus sanctioned by the state (Hsia 2007c).

These laws and regulations not only expose but also reinforce the prejudice and discrimination against foreign brides. Indeed, the very term, 'foreign brides,' reflects the discrimination against third-world women. It is used only to refer to foreign spouses from southeast Asia, not to those from 'developed' countries, such as Japan, the US and western European countries. Furthermore, 'foreign brides' retain this title, no matter how long they have been married to their Taiwanese husbands.



Despite various constraints, foreign brides are never passive victims. Indeed, they have formally established an organization, TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT), which promotes the development of an immigrant rights movement in Taiwan. However, the formation of TASAT did not happen by chance: it is the result of a long process of empowerment, beginning in a southern rural community named Meinung (Hsia 2006b).

### **From a literacy programme to the theatre of the oppressed**

In the course of spending time with 'foreign brides,' I realized that their inability to write Chinese or speak Mandarin is the greatest barrier they face in their everyday lives. I, therefore, offered free Chinese classes for some Indonesian brides I knew well. After a few classes, I talked to my friends about the viability of offering Chinese classes as part of a larger community project, and we decided to expand the classes to include all the 'foreign brides' in Meinung. On 30 July 1995, the opening class of the Chinese literacy programme for 'foreign brides' was held. This Chinese literacy programme was the first in Taiwan designed exclusively for foreign brides.

Inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the Chinese literacy programme aims at empowering 'foreign brides' to speak for themselves and further organize themselves to promote their rights and welfare. By providing a venue for immigrant women to learn Chinese collectively, the Chinese literacy programme helps foreign brides to break away from isolation and gradually build up their subjectivity and collectivity. The literacy programme was not intended to enhance these women's accommodation of, and eventual assimilation to, mainstream Taiwanese society. The programme, in Freire's words, refuses to employ literacy as a tool of the 'ideology of accommodation' or as a reinforcement of a 'culture of silence' (Freire 1985).

The course materials were designed to reflect the environment in the local community and to cover the types of conversations that foreign brides would encounter most frequently (e.g., at markets, banks and airports). I asked two local volunteers to continue teaching the courses when I had to return to the US for my studies. Since learning 'standard' Chinese was not the ultimate goal of this programme, I deliberately did not ask professional teachers to take over the courses. Instead, I asked a homemaker, Ms. Kwei-Yin, who had suffered from domestic abuse and sought help from Meinung community organizations. My hope was that her role as course leader would help her develop self-confidence, and I also believed that the foreign brides would be less intimidated by a familiar motherly teacher than a professional schoolteacher.

However, since I was not present to put into effect my original plan, Ms. Kwei-Yin and the other volunteers used the textbooks written by the Taipei Municipal Education Bureau for the adult literacy programme. They did not know how to empower foreign brides, in addition to Chinese reading and writing. In order to pursue my original aim, I consulted Freire's theories and methods, as well as various forms of liberation education developed in the third-world countries, such as Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed.'

The theatre of the oppressed is 'about acting rather than talking, questioning rather than giving answers, analysing rather than accepting' (Boal 1992, p. xxiv). Boal is a Brazilian activist/artist who was strongly influenced by Freire. It is Boal's fundamental belief that anyone can act and that the theatre should not be restricted to professionals. He claims, 'This is theatre – the art of looking at ourselves.... [A]ll human beings are Actors

(they act!) and Spectators (they observe!). They are Spect-Actors' (Boal 1992, p. xxx). For Boal, the word 'act' has dual meaning: to perform and to take action. Theatre, in Boal's mind, is a force for change, 'a rehearsal for revolution,' rather than mere bourgeois entertainment.

Ms. Kwei-Yin frequently told me that she felt frustrated and guilty for not being able to develop a sense of belonging and community in the class. When I returned to Taiwan in September 1996, I suggested that we collaborate with an activist friend, Mr. Chao Chung, who had been working to bring the theatre of the oppressed to Taiwan. Our hope was that the creative methods of the theatre would encourage the active participation of the foreign brides. A new literacy programme, employing the methods of the theatre of the oppressed, was launched in November 1996. During its ten-week course, we experienced many trials and errors in our efforts to apply Boal's methods.

Mr. Chung was first informed of the theatre of the oppressed by a group of third-world activists of the People's Theatre, especially those from the Philippines. As he was familiar with working with college students and labourers, Mr. Chung found adapting the People's Theatre to a literacy programme for foreign brides very challenging.

As mentioned above, teaching foreign brides to read and write Chinese was intended to promote their self-expression. In order to conduct the People's Theatre workshops, we needed a spacious empty room, so that the participants could freely extend their bodies. We therefore moved the venue of the literacy programme from an ordinary classroom to an empty room with a wooden floor. At the first class, Mr. Chung showed the foreign brides how to develop the ability to express themselves and to build trust among the group members through theatre and games.

While these games had been used successfully with college students, the foreign brides were resistant (though they admitted the games were fun). They told me that only children play games. They said that they had asked their families to take care of their babies so that they could study Chinese, not play. I asked them if they were happier in the workshops than in the regular classes. They said yes, but they still believed that their goal should be learning Chinese characters. Some even suggested that we should have tests to push them to study harder.

We sadly realized that learning was perceived as a cruel regimen, especially for marginalized people. The foreign brides felt that the programme should not focus on self-expression and creativity; instead, it should be about acquiring knowledge to develop a competitive edge. This supports Freire's (1970) theory of the 'duality' of the oppressed: the oppressed simultaneously have the characteristics of the oppressed and the oppressor. The foreign brides internalize the 'oppressor consciousness' and see themselves from that perspective. However, though we realized that this phenomenon had occurred with the foreign brides, we did not want to alienate them by insisting on our agenda and ignoring their practical concerns. After a discussion, we decided to adopt the path of least resistance, hoping that the foreign brides would gradually be encouraged to look at themselves differently.

I called each of the foreign brides the evening before the next class. I explained that, in the following classes, we would focus on conversation in Mandarin. Until that point, they had primarily studied writing and rarely had a chance to practise speaking Mandarin. So we moved back to the regular classroom, with desks and chairs, where they felt more comfortable, because, in their minds, it was what a classroom should be like.

Mr. Chung designed several lesson plans so that the foreign brides would feel that they were learning something practical (i.e., written and spoken Chinese) while, at the same time, giving them an opportunity to express themselves. At the beginning, he used more

abstract methods. For example, once he prepared three pictures – of butterflies, masks and planets – and then asked the women what they thought about the pictures and how they would describe them. His hope was that these images would encourage the women to express their feelings more freely, because there was no ‘right’ answer. However, the experiment was not successful: the images were too distant from their everyday experience, and they were not sure what the teacher expected from them. They did not respond enthusiastically and tended to copy the answers of other students.

### Breaking the culture of silence

Gradually, Mr. Chung introduced methods that the foreign brides could relate directly to their living experiences. For instance, one exercise was called ‘My Typical Day.’ The women were asked what they hear, see, smell and do at 7am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm and 8pm. Before we did the exercise, Chung asked everyone to close their eyes and recall what they do every day. They responded excitedly, and everyone had different answers. Shi-Hua’s response to this exercise is as follows:<sup>5</sup>

At 7am, I get up. I hear *someone else’s baby crying*.

At 10am, from the windows I see *the neighbour doing ironwork*.

At noon, I am at the *kitchen* and smell *cooking*.

At 2pm, I hear *dogs barking* and see *many dogs*.

At 4pm, I am *doing the cementing work*.

At 8pm, I am *teaching my son mental arithmetic*.

Mei-Chu gave the following description of her day:

At 7am, I get up. I hear *my baby crying*.

At 10am, from *my bedroom* I see *my father come back from the field*.

At noon, I am at the *kitchen* and smell *cooking*.

At 2pm, I hear *father getting up* and see *him go to work*.

At 4pm, I am *taking a shower*.

At 8pm, I am *watching TV*.

During such workshops, the women laughed more and were more willing to talk, ask questions and help each other out. Before the workshops, they only repeated what their teachers said. When the teachers asked them to read from the text, they were too intimidated to speak, let alone ask questions. Even after a year of classes, they did not know all their classmates’ names, where they lived or what they did. Needless to say, they had not developed a sense of solidarity. However, through these exercises, which encouraged them to talk about their own experiences, they came to know each other and themselves better. They reached the stage where they broke the ‘culture of silence’ common among the oppressed (Freire 1970).

Freire’s theory of liberation education links literacy, critical awareness and social transformation. While emphasizing the importance of social and historical analyses for the development of conscientization, Freire maintains that discussion should be closely linked to local and personal problems. Freire believes that people are prepared to act only on issues about which they feel strongly: literacy must be linked to their own lives in order to develop conscientization and spur collective action.

When Mr. Chung and I first employed the methods of the theatre of the oppressed, we used abstract pictures to initiate discussion and the result was, as Freire would have predicted, a total failure. As we began to link literacy and communication to their

everyday lives, the women broke their silence and actively participated in discussion. After the ten-week programme was completed and we had a chance to reflect on its successes and failures, we developed Chinese literacy materials based on the lives and needs of the foreign brides: our subjects were chosen to create a sense of familiarity and enthusiasm. One foreign bride asked Ms. Kwei-Yin why she found the stories in the materials so familiar. After hearing how we developed the materials, she commented, 'No wonder I felt the text was about myself or my friends. I thought to myself, "What a coincidence!" You guys are amazing. You know what we are thinking!'

### Tension and transformation

Sometimes, breaking the 'culture of silence' creates tension. At one class we discussed their experiences of coming to Taiwan. Mr. Chung asked everyone to close their eyes. Then he played a gentle music called 'Silk Road' and asked them to reflect on what they felt when they left home and during their trip, on their expectations and first impressions of Taiwan. After the music finished, Mr. Chung asked everyone to share their experiences. Chun-Mei wrote the following report:

When I left *Singkawang*, I heard *sea gulls crying and the steamship whistling*.  
 Then, I went to *Pontianak's airport to take airplane*. I saw *sad travellers*.  
 On the airplane I thought Taiwan would be a *progressive place with many buildings*.  
 When I got to Taiwan, I thought *Meinung is similar to my hometown*.

This particular exercise gave the foreign brides an opportunity to express their complicated feelings when they left their homes for Taiwan. From this exercise, they had the chance to learn about the experiences of others as well. They all talked openly about their sadness. Chun-Mei used to be quiet in the class: she had missed several classes, and her ability to write and read Chinese was not as advanced as the others. Interestingly, she was among the most expressive and outspoken participants in the workshops. She confided how threatened she felt before she left home. She overheard a woman who was about to leave home for work in Taiwan telling her parents that she did not want to go. The woman's parents told her not to worry and behave herself. Chun-Mei was afraid of her future in Taiwan. She said, 'My heart was so confused. I don't speak the language. I didn't know how my husband and his family will treat me.... When I heard the sea gulls crying and the steam whistling, my heart was broken. I wanted to cry.' Mr. Chung said to Chun-Mei and the rest of the class, 'Your experience is very similar to a poem of the greatest Chinese poet, Li Po.... Everyone can be a great poet.' He then wrote down the poem on the board and taught them to read it.

Several husbands of the foreign brides sat in the back of the classroom as observers. They were upset when they heard their wives talk about how sad they were when they came to Taiwan. Two asked us, 'Are you trying to make them homesick?' We were confronted with a dilemma. We understood and sympathized with the insecurity of the Taiwanese husbands, as they are also victims of a society that stigmatizes them due to their occupation and thus contributes to their difficulty in marrying women locally (Hsia 1997, 2004). We also worried that they would stop their wives from coming to class: family support was the most crucial factor in determining participation in the literacy programme. However, we did not want to perpetuate patriarchal attitudes. Our goal was to encourage the foreign brides to reflect on their experiences. Mr. Chung and I discussed this dilemma with other community activists in Meinung and decided that we

would continue with our approach. Even if conflicts arose between the foreign brides and their husbands because of the workshops, we felt we could not suppress their feelings and self-expression.

At the same time, however, we did not want to create tension, which would then jeopardize our progress with the foreign brides. We decided to focus on less threatening scenarios, such as how to go to hospitals. We also made an effort to talk to the husbands, so that they could understand the importance of allowing their wives to express their feelings of homesickness. Fortunately, no foreign brides dropped out of the workshops. Gradually, the husbands expressed their satisfaction with the programme because they found that their wives had gained a great deal of practical knowledge. Chun-Mei's husband said, 'Since she has attended the Chinese classes, she is less afraid of going out alone and has become happier because now she has friends to talk to.'

After ten sessions, we observed some changes between the couples. To ease the burden of childcare, we had provided childcare services during classes. But many husbands volunteered to take care of the babies at home or at the back of the classroom while their wives were in class. Some husbands would take their babies out for a walk or to the playground and then come back to pick up their wives after classes. One participant, A-shuei, excitedly told me, 'Whenever I have classes, my husband takes care of the baby so that I can attend the classes. He never took care of the kid before, as if the baby was only mine!'

We also saw some changes in the women themselves. Compared to other foreign brides who had not participated in the workshop, these participants became more outspoken and self-assertive, and developed a stronger sense of solidarity. Once we had to reschedule the Sunday morning class on Monday evening. Several 'foreign brides' who had not been able to participate in the workshop previously attended this session. Their attitude was similar to that of the other participants at the beginning of the process: they did not ask questions and were very shy when called upon.

The following incident reveals the women's growth in assertiveness due to the workshops. A session was devoted to environmental pollution. The women were presented with three pictures: first, a house near a clean and beautiful river; second, a house near a dirty and polluted river surrounded by factories, and third, a big question mark. Chao Chung explained, 'Suppose you live in the house of the first picture – near the clean and beautiful river. Then the factories moved in and polluted the river, like the second picture. You want the clean and beautiful river back. What would you do?' Two women said that they would ask the neighbours to go to with them to the police and ask the government for help. A third, Shuei-Fen, said she would go to the police by herself. Mr. Chung asked her why she chose a different course. She replied confidently, 'Everyone thinks differently.' This is in clear contrast to the earlier classroom dynamic, when almost all students copied the answer of the original speaker. Even more exciting is that Shuei-Fen was confident enough to confront authority (her teacher). In more traditional educational settings, students' questions are perceived as threat to authority, requiring correction. Shuei-Fen's comment symbolizes the breaking of the 'culture of silence' and the effectiveness of our methods of empowerment. Therefore, Mr. Chung reinforced Shuei-Fen's response by saying to the whole class, 'Yes, everyone has her own opinions.'

At the last session, everyone brought desserts to share with their classmates. Mr. Chung asked them what they had learned in the past ten sessions. They all said they were able to speak more Chinese. None of them mentioned what they had learned about themselves. Still, it was clear that they had become more confident and assertive. A

volunteer taught us a Hakka folk song but changed the words so it told the story of the literacy programme. After the song, the foreign brides began to talk enthusiastically. We were bewildered because they were speaking Indonesian. Then, Hung-Chu announced to us, 'We want to sing an Indonesian song.' They sang a song and clapped their hands. Hung-Chu later explained to us, 'This song is about how happy they are with friends, and they want to know when we can get together again. We will be very sad if we do not see our dear friends.' We asked them to teach us to sing the Indonesian song. Hung-Chu volunteered to be the teacher. Another foreign bride suggested that they sing another Indonesian song, so they followed with a children's folk song. It was a vivid contrast to the first class: when volunteers provided a birthday cake to celebrate the first birthday of the literacy programme, I asked if they could sing an Indonesian song of celebration, but they just shyly smiled.

As Freire (1985) observes, traditional literacy education views illiteracy as a manifestation of people's incapacity and the educators as messiahs. This concept of literacy only transmits an ideology of accommodation, reinforces the 'culture of silence' that dominates most people and can never be an instrument for transforming the real world (Freire 1985, p. 9). The view of literacy we adopted emphasizes the development of the learners' consciousness of their rights, along with their analysis of their position in the real world. The critical issues are how to transform the learners from passive receivers to active participants, and even contributors. In our ten-week literacy programme, we continuously encouraged the women to express themselves and take more initiative. The act of teaching the Taiwanese teachers and volunteers an Indonesian folk song symbolized the beginning of this transformation.

Now that the literacy programme has been in effect for a number of years, the attitudes towards the foreign brides in the Meinung community have changed. They are no longer regarded as foreigners and 'other': the Meinung residents have begun to consider them part of 'us.' A member of the Meinung community organization volunteered to ask the local Rotary Club, where he is a member, to hold a Chinese New Year party for the foreign brides and their families. Since many founding members of the Rotary Club in Meinung were also activists in the community, they immediately approved this proposal. I provided a list of foreign brides in the community, and they sent out the invitations. In the invitations, they spoke as members of the community who were welcoming new members. In subsequent years, the Rotary Club in Meinung district has routinely invited the foreign brides to a Chinese New Year party. In 1998, the Rotary Club held a speech contest on Mothers' Day, and they organized an event specifically for the foreign brides so they could express their longing for their mothers back home.

Several local organizations became interested in foreign brides. In 2001, Labour Exchange Band, a famous progressive folk band in Meinung, released an album of songs dealing with farmers' lives. Two songs were dedicated to the foreign brides. One of the songs, entitled 'After a long period, a strange place becomes home,' was sung by the women from our Chinese literacy programme. Since Labour Exchange Band was an active participant of the anti-dam movement in Meinung, the literacy programme often invited them to attend our activities and the participants in the programme were invited to attend the band's activities. As a result of this close interaction, the band included the experience of foreign brides in their album on farmers' lives. At the Yellow Butterfly Festival, an annual event sponsored by the anti-dam movement in Meinung, the foreign brides performed their first song on stage to overwhelming applause. A labour movement leader,

who had come a long way to attend the concert, commented, 'After watching the foreign brides' performance, I was deeply touched and reflected that our unions have long been unfriendly to migrant workers. We should learn from the Meinung experience and befriend the migrant workers.'

We made efforts to organize community volunteers and train them as facilitators of the literacy programmes. Most of the volunteers in Meinung were middle-aged mothers who were active in other community organizations. By participating in the literacy programmes, these volunteers have developed a deeper understanding of immigrant women and have gradually overcome their prejudices against foreign brides. As a result of their greater empathy, these community volunteers have taken the initiative to seek support for the literacy programmes and help the immigrant women in their neighbourhood.

The network of the immigrant women has grown. Members of the literacy programmes befriended new foreign brides in their neighbourhood and encouraged them to join the literacy programmes and other activities. When they saw other immigrant women experiencing problems with their families, they began to offer help themselves, rather than depending on the intervention of the literacy programme volunteers. For example, the husband of one of Mei-hua's friends was often angry with her. Mei-hua not only comforted her friend but also confronted the husband and demanded that he improve his behaviour.

With our experience of the ten-week literacy programme and our research in the methods of the theatre of the oppressed, we gradually developed more sophisticated teaching materials and facilitator's guides. In the initial stages, my role was to organize and train the volunteers as literacy facilitators, discuss and develop programmes with volunteers, and facilitate some parts of the programmes. After the framework of the programme was established in 1997, I no longer acted as programme facilitator but continued to organize training workshops for volunteers. A study conducted by Wu (2001) has shown that the foreign brides in our literacy programmes have changed in three respects: technically, by increasing their language skills in Chinese and thus reducing their dependence on others; psychologically, by developing self-confidence and self-esteem; and socially, by expanding their circle of friends and improving their communication with their families. The volunteers in the literacy programmes were also changed by their experience. They renounced their prejudices against foreign brides, and they developed greater self-confidence and empathy, which gradually raised their consciousness of women's issues and led to further activism.

The methods of the theatre of the oppressed are not only crucial in the literacy programmes but also integral to later stages in the empowerment process. After the Chinese literacy programmes had been in effect for a number of years, the foreign brides developed a strong sense of community (transnational sisterhood), but they were still incapable of organizing themselves to fight for their rights. Many lost interest in the programmes once they felt their Chinese had been improved. After much discussion, the programme volunteers decided to organize a series of workshops to discuss these issues. Using a 'forum theatre,' a scenario was played out (regarding the obstacles facing the Chinese literacy programme). As problems or crises arose, the play was stopped by the 'joker,' who asked the audience to discuss how they would solve the problem and then implemented their plan of action. As a result of this experience, the foreign brides and the volunteers collectively decided to move forward: they found a house where they could feel at home and get together for reasons other than classes. This new venue represented a crucial breakthrough for the programme and prepared a solid foundation for the establishment of a formal organization later (Hsia 2006a).

We extended our network outside of Meinung by collaborating with other community organizations. In 2002, working with community colleges, we established two community bases in Taipei. After eight years of grassroots promotion of empowerment for foreign brides, we collectively established a national organization, TASAT, in December 2003. TASAT's bylaw stipulates that the president and at least two-thirds of the board members be immigrant women to ensure their input in the organization. Beginning in 2004, TASAT has trained these women to become teachers of multiculturalism and of the language and culture of their home countries. In their journey from 'learners' to teachers, the immigrant women of TASAT not only transform the stereotype of passive victims, but also earn money to meet their economic needs. TASAT has joined other NGOs to establish the Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHRLIM), which spearheads the immigrant movement in Taiwan. AHRLIM has pushed through important amendments to the Immigration Act and has, generally, raised public awareness of discrimination against immigrants (e.g., by condemning an official of the Ministry of Education who publicly said that immigrant women should not have too many children because of their 'ill quality') (Hsia 2007b).

### **The subjectivation of immigrant women and the formation of a movement in Taiwan**

Figure 1 illustrates the process of empowering 'foreign brides' (for details, see Hsia (2006a)). As the figure indicates, the process of empowering immigrant women begins with fulfilling their practical needs (e.g., learning Chinese) and gradually moves towards meeting their strategic gender needs. As Caroline Moser (1989) argues, the goal of gender-sensitive projects should be to address 'strategic gender needs,' which involve transforming oppressive structures, such as patriarchy. However, women in disadvantaged situations are often preoccupied by practical gender needs, such as childcare and making ends meet, which is why most women's projects focus on these issues. To address only practical needs, however, is to reinforce oppressive structures (e.g., by perpetuating the ideology of 'women's domain'). Moser maintains that effective projects meet both practical and strategic gender needs.

By addressing immigrant women's practical need to learn Chinese, the literacy programme aims to create an opportunity for group dialogue by encouraging immigrant women to share their experiences. As a result of group dialogue, foreign brides are gradually transformed – from personal subject to communal subject and, finally, to historical subject, actively participating in public issues and involved in immigrant activist movements. This participation and involvement fulfills their strategic needs. Alain Touraine (1988) introduced the concept of 'societal movement,' where 'historicity' and 'subject' are two key elements. I would argue that, in addition to Touraine's 'personal subject' and 'historical subject,' there is a 'communal subject' (developed through a sense of collectivity) who must be created in the subjectivation process (Hsia 2006b).

This subjectivation process is dialectical, rather than linear. When obstacles arise, various methods, such as forum theatres, are used to create 'mirroring' effects, which allow participants to look at the situation from a distance and reflect, which then leads to discussion and collective resolutions and plans for further action.

Strategic gender needs are not predetermined. They develop as a result of the empowerment process and the need to overcome obstacles. For example, since TASAT was formally established, there was a critical need to transform the public image of foreign brides, so action was taken to train these women as teachers of multiculturalism and



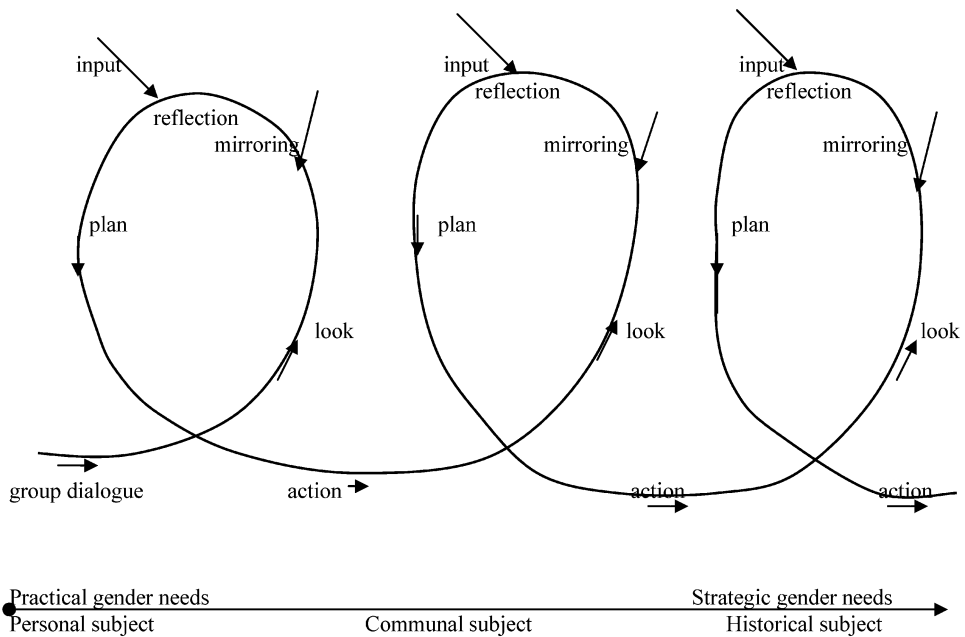


Figure 1. Subjectivation process of immigrant women

southeast Asian culture. As the women became more aware of the impact of immigration policies and laws on their welfare, TASAT began to work with other organizations to establish AHRLIM to transform these policies and laws.

While continuing its empowerment work with immigrant women, TASAT has become an active member organization in AHRLIM. At the first protest initiated by AHRLIM, immigrant women organized by TASAT were on the front lines, expressing their dissent by performing a short play in front of the Legislative Yuan. Since their first protest, the women of TASAT have become significantly more active, often participating in AHRLIM activities, speaking at protests or press conferences, and sharing their experiences and opinions at various activities. On 9 September 2007, a protest was held against the unjust financial requirements for citizenship applications. TASAT, which is a member of the Coalition Against Financial Requirement for Immigrants (CAFRI), took to the street demanding the abolition of the 'proof of financial security.' This rally marked a turning point: it captured the attention of the media because, for the first time in Taiwanese history, hundreds of foreign brides from all parts of Taiwan were part of a rally.

TASAT is also determined to change the public perception of immigrant women. Through such means as seminars, writings, paintings and films, TASAT constantly strives to create a sense of 'betweenness' (Hsia 1997) among Taiwanese and the immigrants. This is done, in part, by pointing out the similarities that exist between the biographies of both. Background stories create empathy: most Taiwanese citizens are descendents of immigrants, and many have experienced prejudice and discrimination in first-world countries. The stories of immigrant women often help subvert their public image as submissive, problematic and incompetent. Through theatre, paintings, writings, and other means at various forums and activities, immigrant women have shared their stories and

challenged many stereotypes (Hsia 2006a). In September 2005, the first collection of writings, paintings, and pictures by immigrant women was published (Hsia 2005). Entitled *Don't Call Me a Foreign Bride*, the book caught the public attention (the first printing was sold out in less than a month). As editor of this book, I noticed that the most common responses from readers were amazement (at the talent on display), appreciation of the benefits of multiculturalism and determination to discard their own prejudices. Through actively participating in the alliance and transforming both their public image and state policies, immigrant women have received positive reinforcement and their sense of their place as historical subjects is strengthened. The formation of the immigrant movement in Taiwan is illustrated in Figure 2 (Hsia 2006a).

TASAT has created a venue for immigrant women to join forces with other disadvantaged groups. By serving as interpreters for organizations investigating human rights violations against migrant workers and human trafficking, the women of TASAT developed empathy for those affected and a greater understanding of related issues. TASAT participated in the Anti-Slave Labour March on 11 December 2005, in response to the Thai migrant workers' uprising against their inhumane treatment. The women of TASAT understood that immigrants and migrants should have equal rights, whether they come to Taiwan as migrant workers or marriage migrants.

TASAT serves as an example for many organizations in Taiwan. The media and activist organizations from other countries, including Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines, the UK and the US, are also interested in learning from TASAT. By sharing its experiences with groups from Taiwan and other countries, TASAT has broadened perspectives and expanded international networking. In September 2007, TASAT co-organized the International Conference on Border Control and Empowerment of Immigrant Brides. As a result of this conference, an international network advocating the rights of immigrant brides was established. Through increasing networking with organizations from their home countries, immigrant women of TASAT have begun to realize capitalist globalization as one of the root causes of their escape from their home countries and the importance of transnational collaboration. To sum up, despite harsh structural constraints intensifying by capitalist globalization, the immigrant women of TASAT have been greatly empowered. In recent years, they have significantly increased their participation

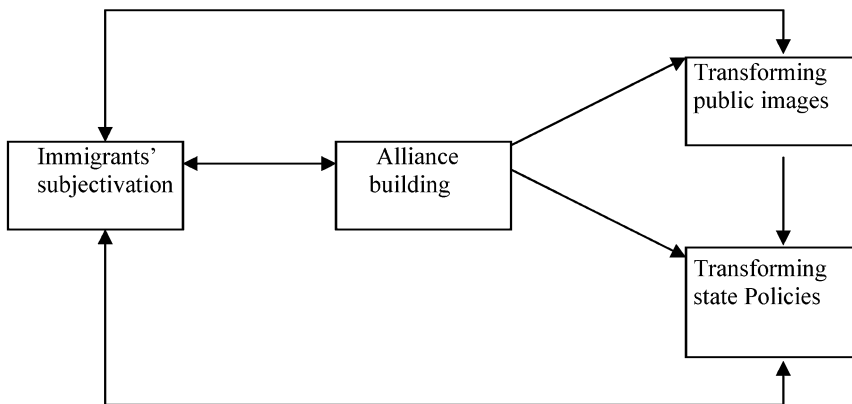


Figure 2. The formation of immigrant movement in Taiwan

in public issues by sharing their immigration experiences; giving lectures on multiculturalism and on southeast Asian histories, languages, cultures; advocating policy and legal reforms to immigration laws; reaching out to other disadvantaged groups such as migrant workers; and forming an international network for immigrant brides. In this process, their initial sense of community, developed in the Chinese literacy programme and TASAT, has been transformed into a comprehensive commitment to the protection of human rights for immigrants and migrants. Thus they have become historical subjects, who have changed history not only for themselves but also for others.

### Notes

1. The word 'foreign bride' is common parlance in Taiwan and reflects the discrimination against third world women. The quotation marks are used here to remind readers that the term is ideologically charged and to draw attention to the symbolic distance that these southeast Asian women have had to transverse in order to fight discrimination and become the historical subjects of social transformation.
2. The costs vary. The marriage brokers interviewed estimate that the range is from NT 320,000 to NT 400,000.
3. To discourage Taiwanese men from marrying Indonesian women, TETO stipulated that only ten couples would be interviewed daily, which resulted in many complaints. As a result, in 1995, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded that the offices in southeast Asian countries complete interview procedures within three months, and later, in 2000, it demanded immediate interviews upon a couple's application for marriage visas.
4. Hakka is an ethnic minority in Taiwan. Many farming men from Hakka communities married foreign brides. The community where I initiated the Chinese literacy programme was a Hakka rural community.
5. The italics are the sentences filled out by the foreign brides.

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