

## **Imaged and imagined threat to the nation: the media construction of the 'foreign brides' phenomenon' as social problems in Taiwan**

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**ABSTRACT** *By analyzing the media construction of the 'foreign brides phenomenon,' this paper examines 'what' is described in the media, 'how' it is constructed, and 'why' this construction seems believable in Taiwan. Based on the narrative analysis of the media reports of the 'foreign brides' phenomenon, this paper argues that 'social problems' are products of 'interpretative work' accomplished by various effective narrative strategies, including overlapping media coverage, authorizing description, fabricated statistics and equivocal wording, and collaboration with governmental agencies. The Taiwanese media construct the 'foreign brides phenomenon' as a social problem. The brides are portrayed either as passive victims or materialist gold-diggers, and prone to committing crimes, while the bridegrooms are portrayed as the 'socially undesirable,' including physically or mentally disabled, and morally inferior. Personal interaction with media workers helps deepen the analysis into the dynamic process of media construction, revealing the power struggles over reality construction. It further analyzes the national anxiety behind these media constructions, explaining why the media constantly construct the 'foreign brides' as social problems and threats to Taiwanese society.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Foreign brides, social problems, media construction, national anxiety

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### **The problematic**

Beginning in the late 1980s, hundred of thousands of Taiwanese peasants and working-class men left the countryside in search of brides. According to the Ministry of Interior, there are 240,837 foreign spouses who entered Taiwan between 1987 and 2003, including those from Southeast Asia (42.2%) and Mainland China (57.8%). Ninety-three percent of these foreign spouses are women. Among those from Southeast Asia, 57.5% are from Vietnam, 23.2% from Indonesia, 5.3% from Thailand and another 5.3% from the Philippines. I have analyzed the structural causes of the 'foreign brides phenomenon' (Hsia 2000 and 2004a).<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will focus on how media work has helped constructed this phenomenon as a 'social problem.'

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This phenomenon of Taiwanese men going to Southeast Asia for wives began to catch the media's attention in late 1980s. In addition to reports of 'tracing' the most recent trends, i.e. the newest favorite target country for 'foreign brides,' several common themes emerge. In most of these, 'foreign brides' and their husbands are portrayed as the causes of social problems. The media have been overwhelmed by stories of the prevalence of run-away 'foreign brides,' divorce, domestic violence, and recently, the 'poor quality of the children of foreign brides.' The primary concern has been how serious the problems actually are. As the first scholar studying this issue in Taiwan, the reporters have targeted me as their key informant. In the first few years of my research, without any exception, every reporter anxiously asked, 'How serious are the problems of runaways, divorce and domestic violence? What are the percentages?' In addition to the media, governmental officials have also shown their

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concern, and even outrage, about these 'problems.' To take some recent incidents as examples, in July 2004, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education publicly denounced these transnational marriages as problems urging the 'foreign brides' to control their fertility, because their children's poor quality would deteriorate the quality of the Taiwanese population! In April 2006, a legislator publicly argued that many Vietnamese suffered birth defects and poor health conditions as a result of poisoning by Agent Orange, a defoliant sprayed all over the Vietnamese countryside by the US army during the Vietnam War, and therefore warning the government not to waste taxpayers' money by supporting 'foreign brides' who may have serious health problems.

From the situations described above, one can argue that the 'foreign brides phenomenon' as a 'social problem' has been accepted as a given 'fact' in mainstream Taiwan society. The issues now have become how the problems can be corrected. Indeed, governmental funds have been poured into projects on 'solving' the problems, epitomized in 2003 by former Premier Yu Shyi-kun's initiation of establishing the 'Three Billion Fund for Foreign Brides'.<sup>2</sup>

The main concern in this article, however, is not to treat social problems as objective conditions that need to be efficiently corrected. Rather, social problems are understood as 'interpretive processes that constitute what come to be seen as oppressive, intolerable, or unjust conditions' (Holstein and Miller 1993: 6). Contrary to a dominant positivistic approach treating reality as an objective fact, this paper takes the alternative approach that perceives social reality as an 'ongoing accomplishment' of social actors who continually construct a social world via 'the organized artful practices of everyday life' (Garfinkel 1967). From this social constructionist perspective, social problems are perceived as the *definitional* activities of people around conditions and conduct they find troublesome, including others' definitional activities. In short, social problems are socially constructed, both in terms of the particular acts and interactions problems participants pursue, and in terms of the process of such activities through time. The attempts are to 'account for the emergence and maintenance of claim-making and responding activities' (Kitsuse and Spector 1973: 415). The constructionist sociology of 'social problem work' addresses how social problems categories, once publicly established, are attached to experience in order to enact identifiable objects of social problems discourse. The issue for the study of social problems work is thus the local articulation of the collective representation with a concrete aspect of experience. The analytical focus is on how the claimants use the culturally available labeling resources to interpret the experience that come to be portrayed as problems (Holstein and Miller 1993).

My previous research shows that governmental agents and the general public, as well as those involved in the transnational marriages, all largely depend on the media coverage as the primary resources for their understanding of the 'foreign brides phenomenon,' which clearly indicates the influence of the media (Hsia 1997).<sup>3</sup> To take governmental agents as an example, they often referred to the media to support their opinions when interviewed. Indeed, three of the media reports analyzed in the following were provided by officials during the interviews regarding how they perceived the phenomenon. The men involved in the transnational marriages ironically also internalize the negative media images of 'foreign brides,' and hence constantly worry that their wives might run away (Hsia 2000). From a constructive perspective, the media do not function simply as mirrors that claimants can use to reflect 'what is really going.' Rather, they decidedly shape the images they convey. News workers, are, in short, the true 'news makers'.

By 'bracketing' the 'facts' of the 'foreign brides phenomenon,' this paper analyzes how the media portray 'social problems' and construct the 'validity' of their arguments. It further examines the 'political' aspects of social construction of reality by looking into my experiences of participating in the process of 'manufacturing' the reports and analyzing why media workers constantly construct the 'foreign brides' phenomenon as problematic.

Thirty-three Taiwanese reports related to 'foreign brides' issues from newspapers, TV reports, and magazines in the period from 1988 to 1996 are analyzed. These reports are all written in Chinese, with an exception of one bilingual magazine article (Chinese and English). Paragraphs abridged from the media reports are the author's translations written as closely as possible to the Chinese originals. The period from 1988 to 1996 is selected because it reflects the time after the phenomenon caught the media's attention and before NGO and social movement organizations began to intervene. Since 1997, NGOs and governmental agencies began to pay more attention to the issues, which have gradually shifted the narratives prevalent in the media coverage. Especially, since the im/migrant movement emerged, efforts have been made to transform public perceptions of the 'foreign brides phenomenon' and one can notice significant change in the media narratives thereof (Hsia 2006a). The primary focus of this paper is on the media's process of constructing the social atmosphere hence the analysis is focused on reports appearing before 1997.

Moreover, I initiated the 'Literacy Program for the Foreign Brides' with the collaboration of the Meinung Peoples Association (MPA)<sup>4</sup> in 1995. It was the first and only program up until 2000 that was developed for 'foreign brides' specifically, and consequently has caught enormous media attention ever since its first class (Hsia 2006b). I have been the primary contact for the media, and hence observed their process of producing reports, which becomes another set of data for this analysis.

#### Media construction: causes of social problems

The most common narrative found in the mass media regarding 'foreign brides' issues is that of social problems:

...The Taiwanese men still continue to 'Go South,' bringing back those poorly-educated, dull, and sometimes even ugly Southeast Asian women to marry. What problems of Taiwan's social structure, marriage, sex ratio, etc. does this phenomenon reveal? (*China Times* 1995a: 17)

... They [foreign brides] will have negative impacts on our population quality, demographic pressure, social and cultural structures...(*United Daily* 1992)

#### *Foreign brides' tendency to prostitution*

One of the common links to 'foreign brides' is the claimed propensity of the 'foreign brides' to harlotry. For example:

The police said the 'Cutie,' 'Chia-Hsiang' and 'Happy' Whorehouse contain the three largest groups of Southeast Asian prostitutes in the North [of Taiwan]. The criminal pattern is that they look for prostitutes abroad and then the human traffickers bring them to Taiwan under the guises of traveling or 'fake marriages, real prostitution' ... (*United Evening News* 1995a)

In a most detailed analytical report, written by a journalist with a PhD in Political Sciences, entitled 'Southeast Asian Brides, Thousands Miles Marriage' the focus is on different social problems that transnational marriages between Taiwanese men and Southeast Asian women have caused. The readers' attention is quickly captured by a huge picture of a young woman with her face covered by her left hand and long hair covering almost one quarter of the whole page. This dramatic picture is captioned: 'Fake Marriage, Real Prostitution—Thai Bride Caught in Taiwan' (*China Times* 1995a: 17). A smaller picture located at the bottom of the page is captioned: 'Filipina Prostitutes Being Deported from Taipei to Manila'. However, in the analyses following these pictures, not much is said about the claimed facts

of prostitution, except for a very brief phrase 'Many problems such as the women coming to Taiwan for prostitution, running away, and having fake household registration.' The 'social problem work' done by this journalist is to use the picture to catch attention by the taken-for-granted association between foreign (mainly from Third World countries) women and prostitution to construct an 'imagined and imaged' 'other' of Taiwan being increasingly troubled by waves of Southeast Asian brides (Naficy and Gabriel 1993).

#### *High risks of broken family*

It was the Taiwanese Holiday for Respecting the Elderly. Most newspapers devoted at least one page to activities celebrating the contribution of the elderly. Taiwan Daily was no exception. Several articles and pictures were complimenting couples who have been married for over 50 years. Interestingly, among those articles and pictures in the center of the page were two articles regarding 'foreign brides.' One entitled, 'Trade Marriage like Gambling, Broker as Dealer, All Depends on Luck,' states,

...Lee She-Tung says, when the members of 'matchmaking tours' go abroad for match-making, they all have a swift campaign and bring it to a rapid conclusion so they (the businessmen) can reduce costs. Of course, the wives may have the mercenary motivations for marrying in the first place, plus the differences in languages and ways of life, and lack of time for adjustment, which all wreck marriages or drive the women to run away. Lee She-Tung said, 'Marriage is for the whole life, a long way to go.' He hopes local residents will not choose 'fast food' marriages, thus avoiding regrets in the future. (*Taiwan Daily* 1996b)

It continues,

In recent years foreign brides have become popular. The male uses his economic clout to obtain a spouse, while marriage gives the female a means to ensure her economic well-being, both sides hope to better their prospects through marriage, like something of a gamble. Winning or losing all depend one's fate. This type of union doesn't always resemble the beautiful fantasy, however, being built on weak emotional foundations and joining people with such disparate backgrounds. It's better to think three times than regret in the future (*Taiwan Daily* 1996b).

These two related articles serve as a contrast to the surrounding pictures and articles of old couples. It implies that the transnational marriages will not survive and one should 'think three times' rather than 'regret in the future.' It further implies that the 'normal,' 'good' traditional marriages (i.e. heterosexual couples of the same nationality) that those old married couples represent are being threatened by the 'abnormal,' 'bad,' transnational marriages.

Media reports often cite official narratives, which almost always emphasize the problems the 'foreign brides' have caused, or will cause.

The Foreign Affairs Department of the Police Administration Bureau has done a study on the 'foreign brides' from Southeast Asia areas who have married and obtained Taiwan's nationality in the past ten years. The results are that more than 60% have reported marital problems, which have generated very serious social and family problems... The police often find that the immigration of these women to Taiwan through 'fake marriage' is only to obtain Taiwanese nationality. (*United Daily* 1992)

Another newspaper article refers to an official report by the Police Administration Bureau. In this official report, seven negative impacts of the marriages between Taiwanese folks and foreigners are alleged. Two of these impacts regard broken families, which supposedly lead to social problems.

Retired old soldiers marrying foreign women consist of 205 of those marriages. And the age difference between spouses is over 5 years. Once the husband dies, it will have negative impacts on children's education [because the foreign women have education much lower than the average Taiwanese], which leads to juvenile delinquency and endangers society.

Remarriages are inevitable, because the marital statuses of the foreigners in their home countries are hard to verify accurately. Thus many of our people will be deceived and have misfortunes. (*China Times*, 11 December 1991)

'Runaway' is the most popular narrative link the media use to illustrate why they think the 'foreign brides' have caused and will cause broken families, a threat to the assumed 'traditional' family structures and values, and hence critical social problem.

Earlier, there were some Thai, Filipina or Vietnamese women who were deceived and brought to Meinung to marry local young men. Due to differences in habits and language, many ran away shortly after their marriage. The Indonesian and Malaysian women of Chinese descent were found. At least they can communicate [with the Taiwanese]. So recently, the foreign brides are mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia. (*Overseas Chinese Scholars* 1996: 31-32)

This 'runaway' narrative is male-centered, because it is constructed from the perspective of how the 'foreign brides' have used and hurt their husbands, rather than exploring why these women would run away by at least including voices of the 'foreign brides' themselves. Moreover, it is imaged as the opposition of 'those heartless foreign women' to 'our defenseless brothers and compatriots'.

Indonesian brides have become 'hot commodities' in Pei-Pu... Reportedly, the marriages of those who married Thai women cannot last more than two years. The divorce rate is as high as 90 percent. Some left after the men's money was used up; some ran away after they got Taiwanese nationality. These Thai brides' performances have been very poor, and the Pei-Pu folks are very hurt... They hope that the Indonesian brides will not follow the steps of Thai brides in hurting the men of Pei-Pu. (*Taiwan Lih-Pao*, 30 May 1994)

The number of foreign brides in Meinung is number one in Kaohsiung county. 'Run-away' cases are numerous. Meinung people often ask the Service Center for the People for help, which causes the officers many headaches. The Director of the Service Center for the People, Lee She-Tung said he feels sympathetic with those lost men looking for their wives, but he cannot help but advise Meinung residents to think thoroughly before they marry foreign brides. (*Taiwan Daily* 1996a)

One should note that the journalists often use statistics to illustrate the imagined seriousness of divorces and runaways. However, no official statistics specifically regarding the divorce rate or the 'runaway rate' of the transnational marriages were available. The only access to obtaining the exact number of these transnational marriages at that time was to look into the Household Registration files piled in every township. Every Taiwanese resident couple is required to send their marriage certificate to the local Household Administration Office. However, there were no separate files for couples in transnational marriages. To calculate the divorce rate of a certain township, one had to go through possibly tens of thousands of files to get the total number of transnational marriages first and then figure out the divorce rate among these marriages. This process required an enormous amount of work and had not been done by anyone. Without this tedious process, one cannot obtain accurate statistics about transnational marriages. In regard to 'runaway rate,' the statistics were almost non-existent, because the claimed 'runaway' wife was not officially divorced and thus was not recorded in any official files. However, the point being made is not about the accuracy of statistics. Rather, statistics are viewed as one of the many narrative strategies used to make the account believable. Thus, statistics represent, rather than prove, what is imagined.

*Deteriorating population quality*

The marriages between the Taiwanese men and Southeast Asian women are stereotyped as a union of two persons with little education, which is constructed as a serious problem to the 'quality' of future generations.

...The very poorly educated, many illiterate or with less than elementary education, Taiwanese bridegrooms marry Southeast Asian brides, which deteriorate the quality of Taiwan's population. The negative impact on society is incredible (*China Times* 1995a: 17).

Another newspaper article cites an official report by the Police Administration Bureau to show the same concern:

...They will have negative impacts on our population quality... In those bi-national marriages, both parties have education much lower than the average Taiwanese education. These marriages in the long run will influence our population quality... (*China Times*, 11 December 1991)

In addition to the imagined deteriorating quality of future generations 'contaminated' by the transnational marriages, the media is also concerned about the imagined influx of immigration of the relatives of the 'foreign brides,' who are constructed as a significant threat to Taiwan's social structures.

...The number of relatives of foreign spouses who come to Taiwan has increased, which will increase pressure on our domestic demography and increase social burdens (*China Times*, 11 December 1991).

...The number of Taiwan's fast-food bridegrooms, who want to 'go South' searching for brides is increasing. Our Taipei Economic and Trade Office in Indonesia only allows ten couples daily for interview... There are an estimated 2400 brides yearly. Within ten years, there will be 24,000 brides. If every couple has two children, these will account for 96,000 of our population. If we add their relatives, the impact will be very broad and bring about serious social problems (*China Times* 1995a: 17).

**Portrayals of women***Passive victims*

A picture of five women sitting on a bed opposite to a man and another woman sitting on another bed, is captioned:

Waiting to be Sold – Every five Vietnamese women go as a group into the room for match-making; the Taiwanese man 'chooses [his wife] according to the look [of the women]'.

This picture is followed by a travelogue-like description of a so-called 'matchmaking tour:'

On the twelfth of August, at noon, the temperature at the International Airport of Ho Chi Ming City, Vietnam, is over 30°. The members of a 'Vietnamese brides matchmaking tour' from Taoyuan, Taiwan, are extremely excited, in spite of the enormous heat and sweat, because soon they will meet with the 'Vietnamese girls' they have been longing for...

...Once they have stepped out of the airport, the local tour guide takes the matchmaking tour to the hotel, where twenty some Vietnamese women from the suburbs of Ho Chi Ming City have been waiting in the hotel lobby. The Taiwanese men enter the matchmaking room and sit down, and the Vietnamese women are grouped by five, going into the room like schools of fish, sitting on the bed in a row, and start the 'matching' face-to-face. ... Via translation, the age, education, height, weight and occupation of the Vietnamese girls are reported one after another, and the Taiwanese men are seriously considering each one after another. If selected, a woman stays and is immediately taken by the man to the hotel coffee shop on the first floor

for a 'one-to-one' detailed conversation. If no women are selected, the next group of women will come in for the men's selection. Soon,... [the men] choose their brides 'according to their looks,' and pretty Vietnamese girls with good arms and legs cannot choose but nod their heads and agree. (*World Daily* 1996)

In this narrative, as in most media reports, women's voices are not heard. They are portrayed as passive victims who have no control over their lives. Men, on the other hand, are constructed as the active selector and controller of women's fate. It is again an obvious male-centered perspective: 5

...[T]he 'cheap and plenty' Vietnamese brides have become the favorite of Taiwanese bachelors (*World Daily* 1996). 10

*Materialist gold-diggers*

In contrast to their image as helpless victims, the 'foreign brides' are also constructed as active evil-doers, who are money-driven and marry Taiwanese men just to suck away their money. 15

Our people have prosperous lives, high living standards, and easy access to money making. Therefore, Taiwan has become a paradise for foreign workers, and many foreign women marry our men as means to obtain legal status to be able to work in Taiwan. (*China Times*, 11 December 1991) 20

...[T]here are very few women over 17 years old in Simbawa (Indonesia). Almost all, except the married ones, have married Taiwanese men. The main reason is that the poverty rate in West Kalimantan is very high. Among the three million and three hundred thousand people, more than 55% live under the poverty line. The monthly family income is even lower than 30 U.S. Dollars... Thus, the women of Chinese descent mostly long for the image that 'Taiwan's money is piled high enough to cover the knees'.... (*China Times* 1995a: 17) 25

The money-crazed image is corroborated by the frequent reports of the police looking for foreign women who claimed to come to Taiwan as brides but indeed came intending to make money:

Filipina women come to Taiwan for 'fake marriage, real working.' The Police Administration Bureau recently has told police departments everywhere to look for seven Filipina women who used this method to enter Taiwan. Yet they have not located these women. The police suspect that they are under the control of illegal groups or hiding in factories to work. (*United Daily* 1992) 30

The images of 'foreign brides' as nothing but parasites longing for money are related to those of their running away, which has been discussed previously and can again be summarized by the following comment: 35

Some left after the man's money was used up; some ran away after they got Taiwanese nationality... They [the local folks] hope the Indonesian brides will not... hurt the men... (*Taiwan Lih-Pao*, 30 March 1994) 40

In her studies on 'mail-order brides' in the US, Nicole Constable also points out the mainstream media reports mainly present 'negative' examples of correspondence marriages using sensationalist stories (Constable 2003). When women are less educated than men, the automatic assumption is that the men are taking advantage of them; whereas when women are more educated than the men, it is assumed that the woman is either taking advantage of him or that the man wants a woman to support him. Either way, Constable argues that this falls into what Espiritu describes as the 'dichotomous stereotypes of the Asian woman,' either 'the cunning Dragon Lady or the servile Lotus Blossom Baby' (Constable 2003; Espiritu 1997: 93). The images of 'Passive victims' and 'Materialist Gold-Diggers' are logically contrasted, yet their coexistence in the media formulates the definitional descriptions of the 'foreign brides.' 50

These logically contrasted but coexistent images are not only prevalent in Asian women and foreign/mail-order brides. Constable points out that American men seeking marriage partners abroad portray western women in diametrically opposed images, either as 'overly liberated placing their careers ahead of marriage and family,' or 'materialistic, spoiled, lazy and unwilling to work in or outside the home' (Constable 2003: 68). Similarly, in the White dominant discourse, many non-white women have been constructed as an exotic species with two opposing natures: naive, submissive and loving, on the one hand; crafty, mysterious and sexually seductive, on the other. African American women have been portrayed as either innocent 'mammies' caring for white masters, or immoral 'Jezebels' who lust sex. Asian women are stereotyped in a similar fashion: a pure, submissive 'China Doll' or mysterious, crafty 'Dragon Lady.'

This narrative structure of contradicting images forms what I called the '*double-bind structure*' (Hsia 1997). The double-bind structure is different from 'contrast structures' (Smith 1978) or 'complementary opposition' (Douglas 1986). The latter two involves the opposition of 'good' and 'bad,' 'normal' and 'unusual,' whereas the former is an interpretive technique of 'double bind' that leaves little room for the subjects to resist the negative images. Double-bind is a technique often employed to construct the 'inferiority' of the marginalized groups. It involves two negative images that contradict each other. The portrayed subjects can hardly get away with being stereotyped, because if they contradict with one image, they are immediately caught into the opposing image. Almost all minority groups in the US have been portrayed by double-bind structures. The Native Americans are constructed as 'children of nature' and 'blood-thirsty savages;' African American men as 'child-like sambos' and 'ape-like rapists;' Asian American as 'docile, submissive' and 'inscrutable and crafty' (Feagin and Feagin 1996). If the portrayed subjects do not resist, this is seen as evidence of their naïve, child-like, and easily-controlled 'nature.' On the other hand, if they resist, this is evidence of their immoral, violent and savage 'nature.'

The two opposing 'natures' may appear contradictory but together they serve to maintain the image of an 'inferior other.' The 'inferior other' is constructed as either so naïve and moronic that they do not even know what is in their best interests, or they are crafty savages who not only do not appreciate their masters, but also always find ways to attack them behind their backs. Consequently, the opposing stereotypes reinforce each other rather than cancel each other out.

In short, 'foreign brides' have been constructed either as passive victims bought by men as sexual commodities or materialist gold-diggers disguised by their beauty. The rhetorical 'double-bind structure' serves to maintain the construction of 'foreign brides' as the 'inferior other.' The convenience and powerfulness of the ironic 'double-bind structures' can be illustrated by a Taiwanese official, who describes the Taiwanese men marrying 'foreign brides' as either 'low-class' or being involved in human trafficking. When complaining about the 'low quality' of the Taiwanese men, I pointed out that I observed a man with a college education was just interviewed by this official. Instead of reflecting on the validity of her assumptions, she immediately employed the opposing image to validate her argument,

But I think he is strange. Why would man like him come here to get married? I am very suspicious. He might very well be paid by the human traffickers to pretend to marry the woman. Once he gets her the visa, she will be sold as a prostitute.

#### *Prone to committing crimes*

Several articles juxtapose 'foreign brides' and other foreign residents, such as migrant workers, in the discussion of crime. They are constructed as a group of foreigners who are either committed or potential criminals.



As the number of foreign workers increases, the problems of foreign workers have become more complicated... There have been almost 300 cases of crimes committed by foreign residents as of August this year. Almost 700 foreign residents were found to be involved in prostitution. Recently, the number of Chinese of foreign domicile who break immigration restrictions via marriage has been increasing. It indicates that social problems of foreign laborers, such as adjustment, staying over their allotted time, crime, problems of management etc., have had serious impacts on society. (*Taiwan Lih Pao*, 18 December 1993) 5

In an article entitled 'Many Foreign Brides, Mostly not Registered on Household Records: serious population drain indirectly causes young men to have problems finding wives,' the main issue is really how the government is trying to improve public security. This article consists of two parts. At the beginning paragraph of part one, it reads, 10

The population drain in Pon-Hu is serious, which indirectly causes young men difficulty in finding wives. Consequently, they have to look for foreign brides. According to the statistics reported by the police yesterday, there are 282 foreign brides in the whole county and the majority consist of Indonesian – 121. (*Taiwan Times Daily*, 13 December 1996) 15

The second paragraph says that the police have checked on all household registration records to accord with the central government's policy on improving public security. The third paragraph claims that out of the 282 foreign brides, only 21 of them have completed household registration. The next, and also the last, paragraph of part one concludes that, due to the recent occurrences of serious murder cases, including that of the Governor of Taoyuan County and seven other officials and workers shot to death at the Governor's Residence, the police urge residents to report any suspect and announce that great awards are available for any such suspects who are convicted of murder. Part two of this article is comprised of three paragraphs, all of which are about the government's policy on preventing crimes, improving social order and encouraging criminals to give themselves in so they can receive less punishment. 20

Judging from the content, one would logically argue that this article should have been entitled something related to crime prevention policy rather than the 'foreign brides.' This obviously distorted title serves to make a link between 'foreign brides' and crimes, which represents and also perpetuates the xenophobic stock of knowledge of the Taiwanese. 25

**Portrayals of men**

The media portrayals of Taiwanese men who marry 'foreign brides' can be summed up as 'the socially undesirable.' 30

Many are disabled, such as deaf, mute, with broken arms or legs ..., some widowed, and others divorced. (*China Times* 1995a: 17)

As Constable argues, men seeking mail-order brides are also stigmatized, subject to dichotomous stereotypes as either 'the omnipotent, controlling, white/western oppressor, or the reject and loser who becomes an unwitting victim of the 'dragon lady' (Constable 2003: 78). 35

*Physically disabled and mentally ill*

- Case one: Mr. Chen, 35 years old, clerk of a local government, junior college graduate, two legs disabled. 40
- Case two: Mr. Lin, 30 years old, industrial college graduate, butcher, 200 thousand monthly, 159 cm. tall. 45
- Case three: Mr. Chao, 35 years old, Taipei Industrial College graduate, supervisor
- Case four: Mr. Chieng, 38 years old, retired soldier, communication disorder, 40 thousand monthly. 50

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These disabled Taiwanese men are the main components of the Vietnam matchmaking tour. In Taiwan, they have been searching for many years for paths to marriage, but have constantly been frustrated. However, each of them found satisfactory wife within two or three days of this tour to Vietnam. (*World Daily* 1996)

5 The 'typification' applied in the above article include age, education, occupation, income and kinds of handicaps, of which age and handicaps are the most common themes applied in all cases. The general picture of these men looking for 'foreign brides' is older and disabled. The disability includes handicapped legs and arms, being too short, and communication disorders. This picture is reinforced by the following statement: 'These disabled  
10 Taiwanese men are the main components of the Vietnam matchmaking tour'. Furthermore, these men are constructed as desperate losers in their home country, and yet easy champions in other Southeast Asian countries, 'In Taiwan, they have been searching for many years for paths to marriages, but have constantly been frustrated. However, each of them  
15 found a satisfactory wife within two or three days of this tour to Vietnam.' The two opposing images of Taiwanese men as desperate losers and easy champions interestingly serve to construct both the Taiwanese men and the 'foreign brides' as socially undesirable.

The image of 'the handicapped' is constructed not only as an attribute that is not socially favorable, but also as a cause of social problems. In the discussion of the social problem narrative, I have pointed out that the foreign brides' supposedly high 'runaway rate' is  
20 one of the media's major focuses. Some articles further attribute the high 'runaway rate' to those Taiwanese men's disabilities.

The officials at the Service Center for the People revealed privately that those who marry foreign brides are mostly mentally ill or, physically disabled, which are the real reasons for a  
25 high 'running-away rate'. (*Taiwan Daily* 1996a)

Note that the journalist mentioned the information was reported 'privately,' which provides an image that it is such an undesirable and shameful phenomena that one should  
30 keep it secret rather than make it public.

30 *Morally inferior: deceiver and sexist*

Taiwanese men are constructed not only as physically and mentally handicapped, but also as morally inferior. They are portrayed as deceivers tactfully covering their shortcomings  
35 and thus manipulating the women and their families.

The men tend to avoid important questions in their answers in their haste to find a wife. Some men get married with cash from private loan associations, and it is only on arrival in  
40 Taiwan that the bride finds her husband can barely even support himself. In some cases, the man disingenuously tells his future wife that he just takes 'a little drink now and then,' but she will later learn for herself that he gets plastered every day. (*Taiwan Daily* 1996b)

Moreover, many articles vividly portray a picture of 'macho' Taiwanese men making frivolous  
45 remarks about women.

They [Taiwanese men] think the brides from Vietnamese rural areas are naive and conservative, very suitable to take home as wives... One of the men who married a Vietnamese  
50 bride took a bunch of pictures of Vietnamese girls and showed them to other men. The main characteristic of the Vietnamese girls is that they are darker-skinned and thinner, and that they are wearing very colorful clothes. The reactions differ: some are motivated [marry a Vietnamese], some are worried about the potential problems, some are commenting on which girl is the prettiest. (*Central Daily International edition*, 8 December 1993)

These 'macho' images are often juxtaposed by the images of passive foreign women. For example, to cite the article used in a previous section,

... The Taiwanese men get in the room and sit down, and the Vietnamese women are grouped by five going in the room like schools of fish...Soon, the men chose their brides 'according to their looks,' and the pretty Vietnamese girls with good arms and legs cannot chose but nod their heads to agree. (*World Daily* 1996)

Thus, a typical sexist interaction is imaged: a man chooses his wife merely according to her appearance, while the woman never resists but passively concedes. 5

**The mechanism of media construction**

As illustrated, the media portrayed the transnational marriages as a serious social problem, endangering the quality of life of the Taiwanese. However, the sense of seriousness is constructed by certain narrative strategies, which will be analyzed in the following. 10

*Overlapping coverage* 15

Many studies show that the media decidedly shape the images they convey, rather than mirroring 'what is really going on.' For example, Fishman shows that a crime wave against the elderly reported by three New York City media organizations was, in fact, a growing, overlapping media coverage (Fishman 1978). The theme became a media wave when it was reiterated in other news reports. Similarly, the two articles by *Taiwan Daily* (1996a, 1996b) cited above are indeed reiterations of a single report with rearrangement of paragraphs and minor changes in wording issued in the previous year by *Sinorama Magazine* (1995).<sup>5</sup> 20

The fifth paragraph of the first article of *Taiwan Daily* cited above states, 25

...Lee She-Tung says, when the members of 'matchmaking tours' go abroad for matchmaking, they all have the swift campaign and bring it to a rapid conclusion so they [the businessmen] can reduce the costs. Of course, the wife may have the mercenary motivation for marrying in the first place, plus the differences in languages and ways of life, and lack of time for adjustment, which all wreck the marriage or drive the woman to run away. (*Taiwan Daily* 1996b) 30

Compare it to the *Sinorama Magazine* article: the paragraph in the *Taiwan Daily* article is a summary of the two long paragraphs of *Sinorama Magazine* with some even identical phrases. 35

'These days young people in Taiwan want love before they think of marriage,' remarks Chung, 'but it isn't possible in this situation. The matchmakers saw we were attracted to each other and decided to bring it to a rapid conclusion – there was no time for the luxury of romance, getting to know each other and falling in love.' The matchmakers prefer a swift campaign too, he explains, since their costs go up with every added day. From meeting to marriage, the whole process usually takes around twenty days. As for love, that can be worked on later. 40

This type of union doesn't always deliver love, however, being built on weak emotional foundations and joining people with such disparate backgrounds. There are often stories in the news telling how the 'good man' the bride thought she was marrying turned out to be an alcoholic, a gambler or a wife-beater, or even unable to support his family. Equally, the wife's mercenary motivation for marrying in the first place, along with differences in language and way of life, often wreck the marriage or drive the woman to run away. (*Sinorama Magazine* 1995: 51) 45

The second article of *Taiwan Daily* has eight paragraphs, the first six of which are a reiteration of the *Sinorama Magazine* article. The first paragraph states, 50

66 *Hsiao-Chuan Hsia*

In recent years foreign brides have become popular. The male uses his economic clout to obtain a spouse, while marriage gives the female a means to ensure her economic well-being, both sides hope to better their prospects through marriage, like something of a gamble. Winning or losing all depends one's fate. This type of union doesn't always resemble the beautiful fantasy, however, being built on weak emotional foundations and joining people with such disparate backgrounds. It's better to think three times than regret in the future. (*Taiwan Daily* 1996b)

The sentence that begins with 'this type of union' is a paraphrase of the *Sinorama Magazine* cited previously. The rest of the paragraph is the rearrangement of the following paragraphs from the *Sinorama Magazine* article.

'...Essentially this is a union between marginal people in two places,' explains Hsia Hsiao-Chuan, 'each side hoping to better their prospects through marriage.'...[T]he male uses his economic clout to obtain a spouse, while marriage gives the female a means to ensure her economic well-being.

'These marriages are something of a gamble,' admits Chung Chuan-Hui, another of Meinung's recent bridegrooms, who helps his family work their fields and doubles as a taxi driver... (*Sinorama Magazine* 1995: 51)

From the second to the sixth paragraphs of *Taiwan Daily*, the reporter did not even bother to rearrange the organization of the *Sinorama* article. The paragraphs are simply the condensation of the *Sinorama Magazine* article.<sup>6</sup>

There are institutional reasons for the well-known plagiarism among media reporters. According to a journalist of a major newspaper in Taiwan, since the newspapers companies require a good amount of writing (around 2000 words daily), their major task is to turn in 'enough words' by three o'clock in the afternoon everyday. The journalists develop a network by which this task can be easily achieved. Since pressure is common, the journalists form an informal friendship network, by which they share news and reports. If one finds a story not worthy enough for exclusive reporting, s/he would share it with friendly colleagues for them to submit in the subsequent days.

The journalists I interviewed also point out the differences between urban and rural areas in terms of the possibility of sharing stories. In urban areas, especially in Taipei City, the newspaper companies usually assign multiple reporters, each of whom has specific report topics. Contrarily, in less urban areas, every reporter works independently in the assigned geographical districts, normally covering multiple residential districts. Everything happening in these districts is within this particular reporter's obligations. Consequently, to avoid missing any important event, reporters of different newspapers sharing the same districts have to exchange stories. Since the phenomenon of marrying 'foreign brides' is much more common in rural and semi-urban areas than in metropolitan cities, the instances of plagiarizing stories are more prevalent, which in return constructs a wave of transnational marriages.

*Authorizing description*

In addition to plagiarism, it is noteworthy that what was reported in *Sinorama Magazine* as a quote from Mr. Chung (a Taiwanese man who married an Indonesian woman) is changed in the *Taiwan Daily* as having been said by Lee She-Tung – the Director of the People's Service Center.<sup>7</sup> The opinion expressed by a Taiwanese man thus appears furnished with more 'authority.' The use of 'expertise' is a common mechanism for 'authorizing description' (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Those considered of higher social status, such as experts, scholars, and governmental officials are often quoted to make the reports more convincing and 'real.' The Director of the 'People's Service Center' with no direct connection to transnational marriages is thus invested with more authority than an ordinary Taiwanese man.

Before I received my PhD in 1997, there were no 'established scholars' who had done substantial studies on the 'foreign brides phenomenon' in Taiwan. While working on my dissertation, I was interviewed by the reporter of *Sinorama Magazine*. The framework of her article was heavily, if not solely, derived from my sharing with her in the interview. Interestingly, in her long article, my name rarely appeared, whereas a lot of analyses and information provided by me in the interview became quotes from other 'experts,' such as the 'secretary to the director at Chengchi University's Institute of International Relations and a researcher on Southeast Asian issues, who himself is Indonesian-Chinese' (*Sinorama Magazine* 1995: 49). This researcher had not studied these transnational marriages.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, his position as the director of one major university's institute on Southeast Asian issues makes him more authoritative than me – then a doctoral student.

Moreover, to authorize one's description as 'facts,' one must show that proper procedures have been followed to establish it as 'objectively' known (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Statistics are constantly used to establish objectivity. At a press conference held by a women's groups in Taipei, among all panelists, including one legislator, two scholars, and two social workers, I was the only participant that had substantially studied the issues. However, the most quoted remarks in the next day's news coverage came from the other scholar, who provided statistics with 'authority' to prove the seriousness of the problems. As a young PhD, my substantial research on the foreign brides issues was considered less authoritative than that of the other scholar, not only because of her seniority in academia, but also because of the statistics she provided. Even though in this press conference I pointed out that there were no statistics available and explained why, the reporters still dismissed my remarks and extensively quoted the other scholar's comments with the statistics she provided.

*Fabricated statistics and equivocal wording*

When the statistics are not available, the news workers often use fabricated numbers or equivocal estimates to create a sense of 'realness.' These numbers are often from the 'impressionist estimates' of certain officials. For example, in the process of organizing the Chinese Literacy Program, I went to the Meinung Household Registration Office to collect the addresses of the 'foreign brides.' The director of the office remarked, 'As you will find out later, there is no easy way to figure out the exact numbers. But my impression is that there are more than two hundred... Probably half of them have run away.' At the opening class of the Literacy Program, the wife of the Kaohsiung County Governor paid a visit and gave a short speech. Many news workers fought to interview her. When asked about the number of 'foreign brides' in Meinung, she replied, 'Close to three hundred.' A friend of the MPA, who was a special assistant to the County Governor and who accompanied the Governor's wife to the opening class, later revealed to me, 'She was very nervous because she knew nothing about the foreign brides. She told me she just made up the number to pass.' It is not surprising to find in news reports that the so-called statistics of Meinung's 'foreign brides' range from 'more than 60' to 'close to 300', and the 'runaway rate' ranges from 'about 50%' to 'almost 90%.' Some news workers do not use fabricated numbers, but employ ambiguous expressions, such as 'numerous,' 'a great number of,' 'most' and 'it is commonly acknowledged' to construct a sense of prevalence and shared stock of knowledge.

*Collaboration with governmental agencies*

Most journalists are highly dependent on the news and data released by governmental agencies. The *Taiwan Daily* article cited above quoting a local official of the Service Center

for People, which has no business related to 'foreign brides,' is a vivid example of media workers' inclination to quote officials, as if the reports are not complete without remarks of governmental agents regardless of their qualifications.

As mentioned, the journalists are institutionalized to find ways to fulfill their tasks easily and efficiently. To increase the chances of appearing in media coverage, any organization or individual who needs publicity learns that they have to prepare reports beforehand for journalists to assure appearance in the newspapers. Reports readily written and press conferences are the two most convenient ways for them to publicize such 'news' reports. However, only organizations with sufficient resources are able to call a press conference, and are familiar with the rules to which the journalists play in the news game. The government, on the other hand, needs the media coverage to publicize their decrees, policies and the purported achievements. Consequently, press conferences are often called by the governmental agencies. Once the news is released by the government, almost all media, especially newspapers, will report it with significant coverage, which creates a sense of prevalence of whatever the officials claim as social problems. Fishman has made a similar observation in a study of a crime wave against the elderly, and thus argues that crime news is indeed ideological because it reports crime as the police see it (Fishman 1978). Similarly, the news cited above about Southeast Asian prostitutes caught by the police was released by the force from a police station in Taipei, which also announced the most recent achievement in the 'An-Tai Special Mission,' aimed at sweeping away prostitution. The story immediately hit the news nationwide. All major newspapers reported it with appealing coverage featuring dramatic pictures (several women shamefully covering their faces in the police station) and thrilling titles, such as:

import of Southeast Asian prostitutes,  
3big erotic caves all fall  
arresting thai woman...bit by her  
cop panicked...quickly have hiv test  
(*United Evening News* 1995b)

taipei uncover two call girl stations  
arrest nine filipina and Thai prostitutes  
(*United Daily*, 31 May 1995)

uncover the multinational prostitution corporation  
defeat three call girl stations  
arrest nine prostitutes from Tahiland and the Philippines  
ten delivering taxi drivers and three owners of call girl stations prosecuted(*China Times* 1995b)

an-Tai special mission  
eminently uncover two foreign call girl stations  
(*Independence Evening News* 1995)

Another example is the media reference to the Foreign Affairs Department of the Police Administration Bureau.

...The Foreign Affairs Department of the Police Administration Bureau has done a study... and reports... the following negative effects... The Police Administration Bureau concluded in this study that these bi-national marriages have negative impacts on our society and should be prohibited... (*China Times*, 11 December 1991)

Three months later, another major newspaper referred to the Police Administration Bureau again,

The Foreign Affair Department of the Police Administration Bureau has done a study on the 'foreign brides' from Southeast Asia areas who married and obtained Taiwanese nationality

in the past ten years. The results are that more than 60% have reported marital problems, which has become a very serious social and family problem... One police officer... said the fundamental solution to this problem is to revise the current out-of-date rules of naturalization... The police often find such cases of immigration through fake marriage to obtain Taiwanese nationality. (*United Daily* 1992)

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It is not at all uncommon to find remarks of certain government agents inserted in the reports.

According to the statistics collected by Hsin-Chu city government, there have been 67 Hsin-Chu city residents married to foreigners, of which 47 are married to foreign brides... The city government officials analyze: those citizens who marry Southeast Asian foreign brides are generally ones with worse personal conditions. Earlier, they were mainly old retired soldiers. But it is not a good phenomenon to have too many foreign brides, because there are always cultural differences between different countries. Foreign brides may cause social problems such as divorce... (*Taiwan Lih Pao*, 13 September 1996)

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However, none of these reports inserted with official narratives is juxtaposed with dissimilar views from non-officials, although these so-called 'balanced reports' are the professed doctrines of the media profession. In the analytical special report entitled 'Southeast Asian Brides, Thousands Miles Marriages,' no Taiwanese men or Southeast Asian women are quoted, whereas a significant portion of this article is based on information provided by the Taipei Economic and Trade Office (TETO, a system equivalent of Taiwanese consulate) officials, including the typification of Taiwanese men marrying Indonesian women proposed by the TETO official in charge of interviews for visa applications. Incidentally, I met the reporter at TETO, while I was doing fieldwork in Jakarta in the summer of 1995. This reporter was then *China Time's* special reporter in Southeast Asia, whose major focus was on the trade and diplomatic relationships between Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries. Understandably, she had to maintain a friendly relationship with TETO officials at various levels. At the time I met her, she was doing a report on the roles of mass media in the political development of Southeast Asian countries. She was scheduled to interview the director of the Indonesian Information Office. Indonesia was under a semi-authoritarian government, which did not easily permit foreign journalists to do reports. This journalist got the access for an exclusive interview through the arrangement of the TETO officials indicating the cooperative relationship she had with the Taiwanese governmental agencies.

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Given the established cooperative network of governmental agencies and media industries, news reporters understandably tend to construct their stories based on official interpretations. This dependence on governmental information is not unique to Taiwan's media coverage. Gandy (1982) characterizes this supply of information by interested parties, such as the governmental agencies and corporation, as 'information subsidy'. By reducing the cost of acquisition, the subsidy gives increase the probability that the targets of the subsidy will consume more of the preferred information.

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This phenomenon of information subsidy commonly found in many countries has been further strengthened by the long history of 'clientelistic media' in Taiwan. To take the newspaper industry as an example, during the Japanese colonization, six private newspapers were forcibly annexed as a state-owned newspaper, which was taken over by the KMT government after Japan lost the Second World War in 1945. State and KMT-owned newspapers dominated the industry until the 1970s. While it is true that since the mid-1970s, two privately-owned newspapers, *China Times* and *United Daily*, have been recognized as the most popular newspapers, they were actually clientelistic media supported by the KMT government. Even after the restrictions on newspapers were lifted in 1987, *China Times* and *United Daily* still dominated the newspaper market until the late 1990s (Feng 2003).

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### The politics of media construction of reality

The Constructionist approach reminds us not to take any 'reality' for granted and provides a critical view of 'reality.' However, overemphasis on the constructive aspect of 'reality' leads to covering the power struggles in the construction process. Previously, I compared the reality constructions of the officials, the media and the individuals involved in transnational marriages and noted the apparent contrast between the official construction of what the transnational marriages mean and how those involved in the marriages perceive their transnational marriages. One point to be noted is the coincidence of the official and media reality constructions of this topic (Hsia 1997). That is, only a certain version of reality is privileged as the ultimate 'Truth,' whereas the others are viewed as valid if they are coincident with this 'Truth', and distortion, if they vary from it.

Since the public mostly gain their information from the mass media, media construction plays an important role in shaping the common knowledge shared by the public. The media are the vehicles through which certain interested groups can exert their influence tacitly in the disguise of 'objectivity' and to marginalize the voices in conflict with their interests. To further analyze the politics of media construction, I will look into my experience dealing with media workers.

#### *News filter*

The MPA and I developed an understanding of the phenomena which contradicted the official elitist perspectives. Our analyses pointed out that global and domestic unequal development are the root causes of the prevalent transnational marriages. Moreover, we refuted the 'social problem' framework and argued that what was problematic is Taiwanese society and those in the transnational marriages are victims of these structural problems in our society. However, since no access was allowed for us to the editing process by the media, we were always dismayed at how our main arguments were omitted and the theme manipulated by the narration.

In 1996, a team of news workers from a popular cable TV station contacted the MPA for an in-depth report on the 'foreign brides.' Originally, the MPA refused to introduce subjects for interview, because we had been extremely disappointed by earlier mainstream news coverage. The news workers continued to try to convince the MPA, and finally the MPA agreed and arranged a few 'foreign brides,' their husbands, parents-in-law, matchmakers, the Meinung Township Mayor, an official of the Meinung Household Registration Office, and members of the MPA staff to be interviewed. When interviewed, the MPA staff emphasized the structural causes underlying the transnational marriages, such as the deterioration of the agricultural sector as the result of urban-biased developmental policies, and the marginalized status of rural folks. They also rejected the public image of the 'foreign brides' as an 'exotic other.' However, through tactful visual effects and verbal comments, the transnational marriages were constructed exotic and problematic by the cable TV company.

At the beginning of the TV report, the audience sees the quiet rural scenery of mountains and rice fields, and women with traditional ethnic costumes making paper umbrellas, which have been constructed as Meinung's cultural commodity. The accompanying narration reported that:

The Southeast Asian brides have been fighting to marry Taiwanese men... Just a random walk in Meinung, our camera finds a foreign bride...

This is followed by an image of a 'foreign bride' shyly saying 'I don't know' to the reporter's question, 'Why did you come here to get married?' It is constructed as if the 'foreign brides' are so exotic that they can be easily identified at a quick glance. Note that the 'foreign



brides' were introduced by the MPA, rather than being easily spotted by the news workers on a 'random walk in Meinung.' They are indeed ethnic Chinese from Indonesia, who cannot be distinguished from other local Chinese merely by their appearance.

The narration continued,

*But* (emphasized by the narrator) this conservative rural town has lately been the site of many fresh topics.

The scene then turned from the quiet rural images to a busy wedding party full of traditional red symbols and firecrackers. The countryside and rural folks were constructed as conservative and dull figures who had had nothing to do until the exotic 'foreign brides' came into their boring lives.

The report is clearly male-centered. The reporters and the narrators are all men. More importantly, almost all interviews incorporated in the report are voices of men, including the Township Mayor, the official of the Household Registration Office, Taiwanese bridegrooms and their male matchmaker. The only female MPA staff member included was the Executive Director of the MPA. However, her feminist argument was curtailed. What was left was her comment on how the 'foreign brides' were grateful to have the Literacy Program. In addition to the 'foreign bride' saying 'I don't know' at the beginning, the only 'foreign bride' voiced in this report was an Indonesian woman commenting on how her Indonesian friends ran away from Meinung. Interestingly, she was accompanied by her husband when interviewed and her statements were often cut off by him. This is in clear contrast to the other Taiwanese bridegrooms, who were not accompanied by their wives when interviewed.

The report ended with a shot from the air looking at the crowded streets of downtown Taipei. The camera lens was then zoomed in with slow motion at a few women among the crowd. The narrator intoned,

However, looking at the whole of Taiwan, there are surprisingly as many as more than 20 thousand foreign brides submerged amidst our 21 million population. There are about 5 to 6 thousands entering Taiwan every year. What kind of social problems will they cause?

The 'reality' is thus revealed. These marriages are exotic as well as problematic. More importantly, twenty million Taiwanese are under impending threat from the untouchable 'other.' All of the opinions different from this theme were edited out. The critical perspectives that the MPA and I had argued for were completely omitted from the media reports, not only because we were not legitimate 'experts' (I was still a graduate student then) but also because we kept refusing to accept this 'social problem' discourse. For the media that thinks only sensational stories sell, if there are no 'problems,' then there are no stories worth covering. Moreover, our emphasis on Taiwanese society as the 'problems,' rather than as the victims threatened by the 'foreign brides,' would only jeopardize the comfortable and self-conceited feelings of numbers of Taiwanese themselves; consequently our insights were not appropriate to be reported.

#### *Process of silencing voices*

Given our experiences with many media workers, we became more cautious when dealing with them. In addition to filtering out important messages that contradicted the predetermined agenda the media had, the attitudes and behaviors of 'professional voyeurism' practiced by news workers were such that we considered them exploitative of the subjects. For example, a news team from one major TV corporation came to Meinung for a report on the Literacy Program. Before they went into the classroom, the MPA asked them to make their best effort not to disturb the class. Sadly, as soon as they came in the classroom, they shut

the windows, set up a spotlight and shot close-up pictures, which certainly intruded the flow of the class.

Learning from these bitter lessons, we decided to refuse as many media requests for reports as possible. Another popular cable TV news team contacted us again. I questioned their motives for doing this report, given that many media had already covered the same topic. I also criticized the media's professional voyeurism and their practice of ruling out voices in conflict with their ideology. The reporters immediately changed their frame of narrative from doing an 'objective' report to 'making the voices of the oppressed heard.' To make sure the voices of the oppressed really be heard, I requested them to discuss their edited videotape with the subjects before broadcasting it. Surprisingly, they agreed. Since I was still suspicious of the reporters' sudden decision to speak for the oppressed, I was not willing to be cooperative. However, I also realized the danger of being directly hostile to the media, because we would have to depend on them to publicize issues that concerned us and they could always easily destroy our reputation by a simple negative report. Therefore, my strategy was to postpone the process and encourage them to report other issues instead. Partly because of my uncooperative policy and their deadline to finish the story in three days, they avoided me and got access to 'foreign brides' through the teacher of the Literacy Program, Ms Kuei-Yin, who had no experience dealing with the media before. She was present as the reporters agreed with my requests, so she thought it was all right to introduce them to interview the 'foreign brides.' As soon as I was informed that the interviews had been done, I called the reporters and asked them to keep their promise of discussing their report before broadcasting. The reporter promised again, hastily but politely. The report was broadcast and the promises were broken. Ms Kuei-Yin and the two interviewed 'foreign brides' complained to me, so I called the reporter again. She had no intention of explaining or apologizing. 'It was only a *deal* (emphasized in English by her) between us. But since I found the subjects myself, it's none of your business,' she said 'professionally.' I emphasized that the subjects had complained to me. She refuted this by replying, 'I think it's your one-sided story. I have developed a very friendly relationship with them. They never complained to me.' I lost my patience: 'I need to talk to your supervisor.' She showed no hesitation, 'I don't think it's necessary. If you like, it's up to you.'

So the supervisor was contacted. He shouted at me, 'You are not their parent, so you have no rights to speak for them. If they have complaints, tell them to call me themselves.' I shouted back, 'Didn't you say your mission is to speak for the oppressed? You should know they don't know the rules of the game, so they need someone to contact you for them.' To my dismay, he replied, 'What oppressed? We are not their parents. We are not responsible. If we have to deal with third parties all the time, we will be tired to death... If you continue to harass us, I will sue you for interfering with free reports.' Ironically, this supervisor is a well-known humanist who had captured aspects of the lives of marginalized population through photographs.

Indeed, the main reason that I did not reject their request for a report was that two friends of mine who had worked in the media assured me that this supervisor had a good reputation. Yet his primary concern had become how to get jobs done efficiently because he was employed in the media industry, as he made very clear when he shouted, 'If we have to deal with third parties all the time, we will be tired to death.' Gubrium's idea of 'organizational embeddedness' well applies to this instance (Gubrium 1988). Under the capitalist logic of production, the TV company has to find ways to gain profits to maintain and prosper itself. Consequently, any humanist doctrine of 'speaking for the oppressed' becomes a specialty commodity that distinguishes itself from other marketable media.

The struggle of negotiating with the media industry over the rights of interpretation illustrates the process of silencing voices. Even when we proclaimed the status quo problematic, they discredited our argument efficiently, given the knowledge that we had to

depend on them for publicity and reputation. Furthermore, once they gained the materials for the stories, all the promises and claimed 'friendship' were left behind. One month later, another group of TV workers under the supervision of another well-known humanist contacted us. We refused their request. A journalist friend very friendly to the MPA warned us, 'If the information spread that the MPA is very critical of the media, they will probably be unwilling to publicize any of your issues of concern.' Her sincere comment and concern indeed summarized the political nature of the 'social construction of reality' in today's so-called information society. As Spector and Kitsuse (1977) argue, viable claims and definitions are those that live and that claimants can get away with. Viability is evident when participants give credibility to claims and definitions. Viability is often produced by media coverage. It is produced when officials and professionals warrant definitions, implement them, and accept responsibility for problematic conditions (Schneider 1985). The previous discussion of how media coverage is often done provides an example of the political nature of claim-making.

*Lack of accountability*

'Foreign brides' are not the only marginalized groups that have been negatively and wrongly portrayed or outright silenced. Despite various codes of ethics, without any form of enforcement mechanism, these codes barely have any effects. Consequently, the only way that those who feel damaged by media reports can go is the lawsuit. However, although there are libel laws stating that anyone can file a suit against the media for portrayals they find damaging, great obstacles are set up to hinder ordinary people from taking legal action against the media. First, the costs of hiring a lawyer and filing a suit to the court are very expensive. Second, after time- and energy-consuming trials, even if the judge eventually determines the media guilty of libel, the amount of compensation ordered to a plaintiff whose social status is considered low is minimal, probably not enough to cover all necessary fees incurred throughout the suit.

For instance, in 2004, a December issue of *Scoop Weekly Taiwan* published an article featuring a Vietnamese bride reportedly abused by her husband. The picture of this featured Vietnamese bride was an active member of TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT, a national organization of immigrant women that arose out of eight years of practicing the Chinese Literacy Programs for 'Foreign Brides,' see Hsia 2006a). However, this picture was taken from a public event organized to advocate rights of immigrant women and the story reported in this magazine was completely forged. In fact, the reporter did not even interview this featured Vietnamese woman. Since the report was brought to our attention, TASAT, with support of other organizations, held a press conference demanding *Scoop Weekly Taiwan* publicly apologize, but *Scoop Weekly* ignored our demand. After careful discussion with this Vietnamese woman and her family, TASAT decided to file a suit against the magazine. Initially, her family was very reluctant to file the lawsuit despite their rage. Though TASAT promised to take care of all expenses, they were still very worried that the time and energy consuming process would disturb their lives. With financial difficulties itself, TASAT still struggled to acquire monetary donations to hire a lawyer from a firm known to be supportive of marginalized groups. After reviewing evidence our lawyer provided, the judge constantly urged us to negotiate with the defendant and settle our case outside of court. While negotiating the compensation for libel, the lawyer suggested that we lower the amounts because based on previous court cases, the judges would evaluate the 'worth' of the plaintiff based on his/her social status. After 14 months of exhausting trials and negotiations, a settlement was made with the court's official documentation, and the compensation paid by the magazine was only enough to cover all expenses incurred in the process. Rather than allowing this media abuse to be settled in negotiations, we preferred to

continue the lawsuit until the judge made a court decision. Nevertheless, since the judge constantly urged us to negotiate, the lawyer suggested us to follow the judge's 'recommendation' which was in our best interests, because otherwise we might offend the judge and the court's decision would not be in our favor.

5 With relatively better social capital, such as support from TASAT and other organizations and a supportive and experienced lawyer, this Vietnamese woman, whose consciousness of rights had been relatively aroused by her involvement in TASAT, still had to go through a very difficult time to eventually have justice served to her. Imagine the tremendous obstacles the majority of 'foreign brides' have to face to fight against any media company. In other words, this lack of accountability in Taiwanese journalism further marginalizes 'foreign brides' in a society flooded by negative portrayals of them by the media.

#### *Constrained agency of media workers*

15 It is important to understand the working environment of media workers so that we do not attribute prejudiced coverage as an essential characteristic of these individuals. Studies have shown that media corporations often control the organization and operation of media worker unions in Taiwan (Lin 2002). As mentioned, the media in Taiwan has a long history of clientelism. Since the media was liberalized in 1988 after the lifting of Martial Law, various struggles of unions and campaigns for individual journalists signaled the growth of movement towards media workers autonomy. However, media workers faced worsening working conditions. The government's *laissez-faire* media policy has caught the mass media, including newspapers and TV, in a web of fragile financial situations, which have not only led to more sensationalization of stories, hoping to stimulate the interests of readers and advertisers thus boosting sales, but also worsening the working conditions of media workers (Feng 2003). Increasing layoffs resulting from replacement of humans by new technology and intensified competition in the media industry has put media workers under constant threat of unemployment. Consequently, their personal interests at the workplace virtually prohibit the formation of union consciousness and collective action. It is therefore not surprising to witness that, although the lifting of Martial Law allows the media workers to form unions, the percentage of unions compared to the number of media companies remains very low, and, more importantly, the consciousness of media workers has been weakened. Besides, the active members of most media workers unions are mostly blue-collar workers, whereas white-collar journalists consider themselves 'professionals' rather than 'workers,' and therefore not willing to join the unions. The most vocal journalists' group striving for autonomy, the Association of Taiwan Journalists, clearly defines itself as a 'professional' organization rather than a union. However, even this most vocal of associations has only a few journalists active in related issues and campaigns (Lin 2002).

40 In addition to direct control by media corporation owners, Chang points out that the feudalistic power relations resulting from journalists' loyalties to their corporations and their profession are indeed most effective ways of controlling media workers (Chang 2002). Lacking transparent and detailed criteria for work requirements and benefits (such as promotions and raises), journalists often suspect that their superior's personal preferences determine their status in the workplace, which leads to their loyalties being given to the higher-ups in the corporation. Moreover, journalists tend to internalize their loyalties to the media corporations as part of their profession, which in turn further weakens their consciousness of power relations and hinder their struggles for autonomy.

50 With all these constraints, media workers have a great tendency to comply with the rules and requests of the media companies, such as making sensational reports to make more profits for the companies. Marginalized groups, including 'foreign brides,' consequently become one of the targets for media workers hunting for more sensation.

### Media and national anxiety

Under structural constraints, most journalists can only adjust themselves to write reports that will meet the interests of the state and the owners of the media corporations. But why do the state and the media corporations need to construct the foreign bride phenomenon as a 'social problem.' How do the state and the media corporations jointly and individually benefit from this construction? Although sensational stories of 'foreign brides' may sell better, no direct evidence between the sensationalization of 'foreign brides' and an increase of profits for the media can be established. Regarding the interests of the state, one can argue that since in recent years the Taiwanese government has begun to initiate policies criticized by many social movement organizations as discriminatory against im/migrants from Southeast Asia and Mainland China, the state would benefit from the media's construction of the 'foreign bride phenomenon' as a social problem, thus legitimizing its policies. Nevertheless, the state had been very passive about 'foreign brides' issues until the end of the 1990s. No immigration policy was initiated and the tendency was to ignore the phenomenon, hoping that it was only a short-lived 'fad' (Hsia 2004b). Hence, before the end of 1990s, one could not argue that the state purposely used the media's negative portrayals of 'foreign brides' for its own interest during the time period this paper aims to analyze.

Rather than delving into the direct interests that the state and the media corporations benefit from by constructing the 'foreign bride phenomenon' as a social problem, it would be more meaningful to examine the stock of knowledge underlying these popular portrayals. In other words, one can look at these popular constructions as an articulation of the collective representation, that is, of what is considered 'believable' in the dominant discourse.

The official and media construction of reality regarding the transnational marriages between Taiwanese men and Southeast Asian women represents the dominant discourse available in Taiwan, which associates problems with lower class, women, and foreigners from the Third World countries. Moreover, the dominant discourse of classism, sexism, racism and xenophobia are also localized in the everyday talk and interaction of those in the transnational marriages (Hsia 1997). This dominant discourse perceiving the 'foreign brides phenomenon' as socially problematic is revealed in a national survey. In November 2003, *The Earth: Geographic Monthly* reports a survey indicating that 50% of the respondents were worried about the foreign brides phenomenon, and 60% believed that the number of 'foreign brides' (from both Southeast Asia and Mainland China) should be restricted, and 20% believed that foreign brides do not deserve equal treatment with Taiwanese citizens (*The Earth: Geographic Monthly* 2003).

This dominant discourse represents the 'national anxiety' shared not only by the governmental officials, the media workers but also the general public. As I began my research on the 'foreign bride phenomenon' in 1994, the governmental officials I interviewed immediately expressed their sincere concerns about the problems. They were very pleased that 'finally a sociologist was paying attention to the problems.' As one official commented, 'We are very eager to learn from your research regarding how to stop these marriages, because they will cause serious social problems and the quality of Taiwan's population will deteriorate!'

This fear of a deteriorating 'quality' (su zhi) of Taiwan's population was very commonly expressed by journalists approaching me (as indicated in many reports analyzed previously), and even by NGO workers concerned about social issues. It is important to analyze why this foreign bride phenomenon causes such anxiety. In addition to the lack of media accountability, the fact that sensational stories sell, and my lack of 'authority' as a graduate student then, the journalists' *sincere* concerns regarding the problems need to be

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taken into account to explain why they constantly portrayed negative images of foreign brides in spite of our continuous complaints and protests. It is worthwhile noting that media coverage analyzed in this paper includes the most popular newspapers (*China Times* and *United Daily*), newspapers and magazines well-known among overseas Chinese (5 *Sinorama Magazines*, *World Daily* and international editions of *Central Daily*), more regional newspapers (*Taiwan Daily* and *Taiwan Times*) and an alternative newspaper generally considered independent and critical (*Taiwan Lih Pao*). While these media generally have different orientations in terms of politics (and party politics), their representations of the foreign bride phenomenon converged, universally equated with 'social problems.' This convergence reflects certain culturally (socially) available resources to make sense of what Taiwan was facing, the increase of foreign women through marriage migration. These resources include discrimination against 'Third World countries' in general, and against Southeast Asia in particular. Similar negative constructions are found in public discourse against migrant workers from Southeast Asia (Cheng 2003).<sup>9</sup>

*Threat to 'Taiwan miracle'*

Our people have prosperous lives, high living standards, and easy access to money making. Therefore, Taiwan has become a paradise for foreign laborers, and many foreign women marry our men as means to obtain legal status to be able to work in Taiwan. (*China Times*, 11 December 1991)

The fear of people from less developed countries taking advantage of Taiwan's prosperity is prevalent in public discourse. This fear derives from the firm belief that 'Taiwan's Miracle' results solely from the diligence of Taiwanese people and has been deepened since capitalist globalization intensifies competition among nation-states. Capital flight of Taiwanese companies to Southeast Asia and Mainland China, and the import of migrant workers from Southeast Asia strengthen this national anxiety of protecting 'our' success from the poor, envious neighboring 'others,' who are perceived as coming to Taiwan to steal our jobs and dig our gold mountains.

Many studies show that the so-called 'Taiwan Miracle' is the result of international division of labor in the Cold War structure, including US military and economic investment in Taiwan (Chen 1995). Taiwan's relative economic success is highly situated in geo-politics after the Second World War. However, this perspective practically does not exist in Taiwan's public discourse. The dominant discourse, instead, has a strong essentialist sentiment perceiving Taiwan's success as a result of the true characteristics of the Taiwanese. The flip side of this essentialist discourse is the racist explanation of the underdevelopment of neighboring countries. The straightforward logic underlying this discourse is: Taiwan was as poor as other countries, therefore the only reason why Taiwan succeeded while others did not is that Taiwanese people in essence have better qualities (especially the quality of being hard-working) than other peoples. Peoples from Southeast Asia, including migrant workers, are constantly portrayed as barbarians needing civilization and modernization from Taiwan (Cheng 2003).

*Deterioration of the 'quality' of Taiwanese*

The belief in Taiwan's economic success as resulting from the superior quality of the Taiwanese parallels the fear that this great quality of the Taiwanese people is endangered by the influx of the 'low quality' peoples from surrounding poor countries. This anxiety over the deteriorating 'quality' of Taiwanese is specifically triggered by working-class women from poor neighboring countries. The fact that women have the biological abilities to give birth is often seen as problematic and dangerous for border controllers (Navins

2002). This fear of working-class foreign women reveals itself very graphically in Taiwan's specific policy of deporting female migrant workers as soon as they were found pregnant at their required regular medical check-ups.<sup>10</sup> While direct policy can be made to deport pregnant migrant women, the government cannot implement any policy to prevent 'foreign brides' from giving birth, as long as the government maintains its legitimacy as a democratic country. This inability to legally stop 'foreign brides' from producing the next generation becomes a great threat to the national belief of 'superior quality' of the Taiwanese.

This national anxiety can be illustrated by the following. Since I began the research on foreign bride phenomenon in 1994, the position of the central government was to ignore it, wishing that it was only a short-lived fad and would disappear in a few years. The only two departments of the government which showed concern about foreign bride phenomenon before 1999 were the National Police Agency and the Department of Health. The police was concerned about crime whereas the Department of Health was worried about the 'quality' of foreign brides' children. I was invited to share my knowledge of 'foreign brides' by certain agencies of the Department of Health and their focus was to establish an effective mechanism to monitor the births of 'foreign brides' and the ultimate goal was to control their fertility rate.

The government's position dramatically changed recently. The watershed of this change in position was the realization of the increasing number of foreign brides' children. In December of 2002, the Ministry of Interior released statistics indicating that one quarter of newlywed couples were Taiwanese with foreigners (mostly brides from Southeast Asia and Mainland China) and around one eighth of the new born babies were children of foreign brides. The Ministry of Education released other statistics in 2002 indicating that the number of foreign brides' children in first grade had increased fivefold in six years. Without any solid research, the Ministry of Education immediately established various programs with enormous funds to 'improve' the quality of foreign brides' children. In July 2004, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education publicly urged foreign brides 'not to give too many births,' and he deemed himself heroic for telling the truth that no one dared to speak in public: that is, the concern for the poor quality of the children of foreign brides.

This dramatically increasing concern of the 'quality' of foreign brides' children coexisted with the increasing media coverage concerning these children's higher risks of 'developmental delays.' An enormous number of media reports constructed foreign brides' children as developmentally delayed by repeatedly quoting non-grounded statistics provided by medical doctors and child development experts (Chang 2004). This wave of media portrayals of foreign brides' children as problematic was crystallized as the discourse of 'New Taiwanese Children' (xin Taiwan zhi zi), a phrase that first appeared in the cover story of *CommonWealth Magazine* in July 2004, and became a commonly accepted term in the public discourse referring to children of 'foreign brides.' In January of 2004, a well-known senior journalist, Ms Lin Chao-Cheng, made an in-depth investigation of the 'New Taiwanese Children.' From her investigation, she found that all of the statistics provided in the earlier media coverage about the higher risks of developmental delay among children of 'foreign brides' were merely fabrications, and she published a series of whole page reports for three consecutive days in *China Times* (Chang 2004). After her articles were published, the media were quiet for three months on these issues, but since April of 2004, a new wave of media reports about 'developmental delays' returned as if her reports never existed (Chang 2004). Moreover, I encountered several instances where governmental officials and experts in education persistently maintained that children of 'foreign brides' had much higher risks of developmental delay, even though Ms Lin's investigation had appeared and other reliable studies had shown that these children's performance was not poorer, and may be better, than average Taiwanese children's. For instance, Taipei County government asked two researchers to do a survey on the

performance of foreign brides' children in elementary schools. Based on a random sample in Taipei County, this study shows that the school performance of foreign brides' children not only do not lag behind that average of Taiwanese children, but more than 40% of foreign brides' children are among the top 30% of their classes. However, when Taipei County government held a press conference about their activities regarding 'New Taiwanese Children,' they purposely did not provide this research result to the media, because they believed that the results were false.

#### *Classism and sexism in the globalization context*

To further understand the national anxiety regarding the deteriorating 'quality' of Taiwanese, a historical review of how the discourse of 'population quality' (ren kou su zhi) evolved over time is necessary. The discourse of 'population quality' is closely related to family planning in Taiwan. Influenced by the US, Taiwan was singled out by policy experts to become the success story among East Asian countries attempting family planning. US experts suggested that overpopulation was the most important concern of Taiwan in seeking more rapid economic development, and that enforced control of the number of new births was the only way to solve the problem (Kuo 1998). By tracing media coverage, my previous study found that, by 1991, the discourse of 'population quality' focused on physiological aspects, advocating the necessity of eugenics (Hsia 2006c). Specifically, it focused on the proper age for women to give birth, and other physiological concerns for preventing infantile diseases.

In 1994, a New Family Planning was launched and the goal shifted from lowering population growth to 'proper age at marriage, proper number of births.' As aging, rather than overgrowth, had become a primary population concern, the New Family Planning geared towards encouraging women to give more births (two as the proper number) at the proper age (to prevent physiological problems). Although the focus was still on physiological aspects, it gradually shifted to more emphasis on 'education,' linking population quality to the level of education. For example, since 1995, the newspapers covered a series of stories regarding the low population quality of rural areas, aboriginal communities, and low-income families. These people were considered 'low quality' because of their levels of education, which is highly related to their socio-economic status. In the late 1990s, there were heated discussions about promoting Taiwan as the Asia-Pacific Regional Operations Center, in evaluating this proposal the population quality of Kaohsiung was used to question its competitiveness as a sea transportation center, because of the higher ratio of farmers and working class, and their lower education levels.

In 1998, it first appeared in the media that 'foreign brides' became the target for this New Family Planning. Since the financial crisis starting in late 1997, global competition became a burning topic in the media, especially when Mainland China became recognized as the 'world factory,' with impending threats to Taiwan's economy. The discourse of global competition juxtaposed concerns about how 'foreign brides' would cause population quality to deteriorate and endanger Taiwan's capacity to compete globally. Consequently it advocated also the need to attract a 'high quality' immigrant population and to 'improve the quality' of those foreign brides that had already entered Taiwan. The anxiety over the low quality of 'foreign brides' intensified after 2000, especially when the public recognized the increasing number of their children. The logic behind this anxiety toward foreign brides' children is the following: as fertility drops to a historical low point, there is a need to increase the 'quantity' of births. However, since the ratio of foreign brides' children among new-born babies has increased, the 'quality' of the births is in question. Therefore, considering the low quality of our next generation, Taiwan's capability to compete in the global economy is doomed.



From this historical overview, we can see that the target of 'low quality' discourse shifted from the lower class among the Taiwanese to the 'foreign brides' from neighboring, poorer countries. In other words, what is embedded in the discourse of population quality is classism, which at first revealed internal social contradictions and then became externalized by finding a new target: women from developing countries in the context of intensifying capitalist globalization. As Balibar (1992) argues, since the gap between the poor and the rich within the nation-state intensifies in capitalist globalization, new immigrants become the scapegoats for social contradictions. In this globalization context, the discourse against the new immigrants from poorer countries is not simply classism, but rather a racialized rhetoric portraying those from countries in the lower rank of the international division of labor as essentially inferior and thus not qualified to be part of Taiwanese society. In other words, classism has also been racialized and becomes 'racialized classism' (Tseng 2004).

In earlier media coverage, we could see that Taiwanese men were also seen as one of the 'social problems' threatening population quality. For instance,

...In those bi-national marriages, both parties have education much lower than the average Taiwanese education. These marriages in the long run will influence our population quality... (*China Times*, 11 December 1991)

However, these reports on the 'low quality' of Taiwanese men with foreign brides soon disappeared from the media and their 'foreign brides' became the sole evil-doers to be blamed. The supposedly 'negative' profiles of the 'foreign brides,' including low level of education and their working class status, are equally applicable to their Taiwanese husbands. This interesting omission of Taiwanese men in the imagined threat to population quality serves to further mobilize national anxiety. The appeal to urge 'foreign brides' to control their fertility because of their 'low quality' would be more difficult to embrace for the public, if the attention is brought to the fact that these 'foreign brides' can only produce children with Taiwanese men whose socio-economic status and level of education are equally low. That is, by arguing that 'foreign brides' should not give birth is actually arguing that the lower class of Taiwanese men should not continue their family lines, which would be too blunt a classism (and even fascism) for the Taiwanese to identify themselves with, and too dangerous for the government to openly agree with, lest it jeopardizes its legitimacy, especially among the working-class. The discourse of classism is therefore shifted to that of racialized classism, which serves to reveal this elitist national anxiety without confounding the status quo. In short, as capitalist globalization intensifies internal inequality, especially class division, within the nation-state, the political system as a whole benefits from the maintenance of a state of anxiety among the population, and also from focusing that anxiety outwards. By diverting attention from internal inequality to the 'problems' and 'threats' of the foreign brides (and migrant workers as well), the political system remains intact and unchallenged.

Furthermore, since 'foreign brides' can only have children with the participation of their Taiwanese husbands, if there is any problem with the children of the 'foreign brides,' the Taiwanese husbands should bear an equal share of responsibility for the problem. Ironically, the Taiwanese husbands have been omitted from the construction of the 'new Taiwanese children' discourse, which is rooted in sexism still prevalent in Taiwan.

In patrilineal Chinese society, women in Taiwan are still seen primarily as the homemakers, shouldering all responsibilities in child-rearing. This burden of 'motherhood' is reflected in public discourse – when certain youth commit crimes the discussion always centers on the 'broken family,' where the mother is given most of the blame. The costs of social reproduction increase as capitalist globalization intensifies (such as the dramatic increase of education due to privatization), whereas the state continuously fails to establish a systematic social welfare system and purposely lets the individual family take care of all

needs in the family. Consequently, an increasing number of Taiwanese women prefer to stay single or child-free. While the state and demography experts are anxious about the falling fertility rate and keep urging Taiwanese women to have more babies, the 'foreign brides' have filled in this role of social reproduction for Taiwanese society. However, sexism and the burden of motherhood shared by all women in Taiwan become even more unbearable for foreign brides because they are perceived as 'by nature' (because of classism and racialized classism) not having the abilities to raise children properly (Chang 2004). Even very trivial things like a baby's crying can easily be construed as evidence of their failure as good mothers (Hsia 2006d). Given the marginalized status of the 'foreign brides' in a society embedded in sexism, it is not hard to understand why most media reports are male-centered.

*The danger of 'low class' foreign women*

The burning threat that 'foreign brides' appear as to the Taiwanese is not only rooted in classism and sexism, but also in their 'foreign' female bodies. Taiwan's policy of incorporation, its laws of citizenship, has been based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, inclusive of people who can claim a common ancestral origin, real or imagined, and somewhat exclusive of people who do not share that commonality. Despite recent changes in the Immigration and Nationality Laws, it remains extremely difficult for foreigners to become citizens of Taiwan, except for spouses and children of Taiwanese citizens (Cheng 2002; Tseng 2004). Prior to the changes in the Nationality Law in late 1990s, foreigners could not be naturalized as Taiwanese citizens except for women married to Taiwanese men. Foreign women are seen as 'naturalizable' because of their ability to continue Taiwanese 'blood,' which apparently stems from patriarchal values perceiving women only as breeding objects, rather than independent subjects.

While this exclusionary practice of citizenship can be viewed as xenophobic, the resentment is mostly towards foreigners from the less developed countries. For example, in everyday idiom, 'foreign workers' only refers to blue-collar workers from Third World countries, and 'foreign brides' does not refer to women from developed countries married to Taiwanese men. Of all the projects aiming at 'improving' the quality of immigrant women and their children, none has targeted immigrant women from developed countries.

In the late 1990s, the immigration law was changed to include both male and female spouse of Taiwanese citizens as eligible for naturalization. The force behind this change was the lobbying efforts by a group of foreign men from the developed countries (especially the US) and married to Taiwanese women. The long tradition of exclusionary citizenship based on blood was first challenged and revised because of the pressure from 'Western' men, revealing that these foreign men, or even foreign women, from developed countries, did not constitute a great threat to Taiwanese society and consequently did not create national anxiety. What constitutes a threat and creates national anxiety are the foreign women from Third World countries, that is, the lower class in the international division of labor.

Taiwan's tradition of incorporation is not only exclusionary, but also patriarchal. This patriarchal tradition of citizenship allows many women from the less developed countries to immigrate to Taiwan through marriage. Since the Nationality Law requires foreigners to abandon their original citizenship to gain Taiwanese citizenship, very few foreign husbands (or wives) from developed countries attempt to apply for citizenship. Hence, the great majority of foreigners naturalized as Taiwanese citizens are marriage immigrants from less developed countries. This exclusionary and patriarchal tradition of incorporation thus allows 'foreign brides' to become Taiwanese citizens and their 'lower-class' status, not only

domestically but also globally, consequently creates collective anxiety in Taiwan, a society filled with classism and sexism. By constantly portraying 'foreign brides' as social problems, the media not only represents, but also reinforces classism and sexism embedded in the dominant discourse in Taiwan.

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### **Confronting national anxiety: strategies of transforming media construction**

By better understanding the politics of media construction, we can transform the dominant discourse more effectively. To ease the national anxiety analyzed previously, several strategies are employed by the im/migrant rights movement to provide alternative perspectives, in contrast to the dominant discourse (Hsia 2006a). In addition to the use of alternative media, such as documentary films produced by organizations involved in the movement, we also maneuver to attract attention from the mass media and report alternative perspectives the movement organizations want to project.

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Knowing the crucial roles the media play in constructing realities, movement organizations cannot only rely on alternative media, but also have to engage in the public discourse by gradually transforming the media construction. Despite structural constraints on the agency of media workers, Chang found that conscientious journalists often use tacit strategies of resistance, such as fulfilling routine requirements on time to spare more time and energy for more in-depth and interesting reports (Chang 2002). Those who have accumulated enough experience and expertise on certain subjects may also exert their power of knowledge to gain more freedom from supervision and more control of their stories. Instead of avoiding the media, we had learned from our experiences that it would be more effective to work with more conscientious and experienced journalists who have earned their reputation and are willing to find tacit ways of resisting media corporations. By working closely with these journalists, we can more effectively have our critical perspectives heard in mass media.

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To increase the chances of being reported in mass media, several strategies are employed. As mentioned, one of the main mechanisms of media construction is 'authorizing description'. To increase the chance of being reported in the mass media, we have organized scholars and experts on 'foreign brides' issues and we make sure that, at every press conference, speakers with established expertise will participate, so that their critical perspectives will be included in media reports.

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Another strategy is actively to provide the media with scenes and stories that would be considered worth reporting and can provide them with alternative frames of discourse. For example, at the first protest initiated by the Alliance of Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHRLIM), we invited TASAT (founding member of AHRLIM) to be at the front line. 'Foreign brides' organized by TASAT were at the front line voicing their dissent by performing a short play in front of the Legislative Yuan, which received great media attention. For example, in the morning of July 6, 2005, 'foreign brides' organized by TASAT took a midnight bus with their husbands, children and Taiwanese friends, to join the protest organized by Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants in front of the highest central government building, the Executive Yuan, against its decision to increase obstacles for obtaining citizenship. A major newspaper significantly reported this protest the next day with a vivid caption under the picture, 'New Immigrants Fighting for Rights: To Appeal for Suspending Exams Newly Required for Naturalization. A Group of Foreign Brides Marched to Executive Yuan with Traditional Straw Hats under Scorching Sun.' The steadfast looks of the 'foreign brides', with no signs of tiredness from a midnight bus trip, marching like heroines, were captured and crystallized as historical moments by photographers and reporters. This scene is in sharp contrast with how 'foreign brides' used to appear in the media, helpless and shameful,

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and this historical scene captured in the picture was repeatedly used in the newspapers afterwards.

It is crucial to note that the 'foreign brides' need a process of empowerment before they can appear in front of the public and the mass media with great confidence, and consequently drastically challenge the mainstream construction of them as problematic. Without this process of empowerment (Hsia 2006a, 2006b), 'foreign brides' often appear as victims<sup>11</sup> and reinforce the dominant media construction of them as problematic. With confidence, 'foreign brides' organized by TASAT have become significantly more active, not only being present, and speaking at various protests, but also giving lectures on multiculturalism and Southeast Asian languages and cultures. In 2005, they collectively published a book entitled *Don't Call Me A Foreign Bride*, drawing great media attention at the press conference for their book launch. These activities are not only considered by the media as worthwhile covering, but also suffice as viable images and perspectives critically challenging the existent media construction. In short, by actively engaging in the politics of media construction, the movement organizations have gradually transformed media construction, and consequently the public discourse, of the 'foreign brides phenomenon.'

## Notes

1. The word 'foreign bride' is common parlance in the media, reflecting discrimination against Third World women. I use the term in quotes to remind readers that the term is ideologically charged.
2. This is an informal name commonly used in the media since Premier Yu announced that he would devote three billions of \$NT to 'take care of foreign brides'.
3. When asked what they think of the 'foreign brides' phenomenon, most respondents, including governmental officials, members of the general public and those involved in the transnational marriages, referred to media reports to validate their arguments and concerns. Similarly, at many of the workshops and lectures where I was invited to discuss 'foreign brides' issues, the audience almost always referred to media coverage in raising their questions and concerns. Although scholars of reception studies have argued the high level of cynicism regarding the mass media, my studies and experience show that the Taiwanese audience may be cynical of the media, but nonetheless their 'gazes' of social issues are highly influenced by the mass media. Additionally, although many younger Taiwanese tend to get news from the Internet, it is worth noting that most printed media, TV and radio news programs have website versions and are widely circulated at various websites, blogs and university BBS systems. Therefore, even if the younger Taiwanese receive information from the Internet instead of conventional mass media, it is fair to argue that a good proportion of the information sources is from the mass media.
4. MPA is a community-based organization initiated by struggles against a dam-building project. I worked closely with this group to develop programs for empowering 'foreign brides'. Please see Hsia (2006b).
5. The *Sinorama Magazine* is a Chinese-English bilingual monthly magazine. The quotes from it are directly from the English version. The articles from *Taiwan Daily* are written in Chinese only. The translations coincide with the article in *Sinorama Magazine* if the Chinese wording in *Taiwan Daily* is the same as that in *Sinorama Magazine*.
6. Owing to limited space, these repetitive paragraphs are not presented in this paper.
7. KMT's organizations at local communities.
8. As of June 2006, when I looked up his publications available on Internet. whereon he has no publications related to these issues.
9. Brides from Mainland China are also highly stigmatized in the public discourse. Since this paper focuses on the media construction of the 'foreign brides' from Southeast Asia, the following discussion of national anxiety will continue this focus.
10. This policy was cancelled in November 2002 due to continuous protests by NGOs.
11. Many NGOs have 'foreign brides' present at the press conferences with tears and even with their faces covered. This may be well-meant to raise public awareness of the problems 'foreign brides' are facing, yet it reinforces the mainstream images of the 'foreign brides' as problematic and helpless victims.

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## Special terms

ren kou su zhi 人口素質

su zhi 素質

xin Taiwan zhi zi 新台灣之子

**Author's biography**

Hsiao-Chuan Hsia is Associate Professor at the Graduate Institute for Social Transformation Studies, Shih Hsin University, Taipei. As the first scholar studying marriage migration issues in Taiwan, her first book is entitled 'Drifting Shoal (流離尋岸): the 'Foreign Brides' Phenomenon in Capitalist Globalization' (in Chinese). Hsia is also an activist striving for the empowerment of immigrant women and the making of the im/migrant movement in Taiwan. She initiated the Chinese literacy programs for the 'foreign brides' in 1995, leading to the establishment of TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT). She is also the co-founder of the Alliance for the Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants.

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