

Bring the family back? Comparing cultural values between foreign migrant
brides in Taiwan and The Netherlands

Chyong-fang Ko
Research Fellow
Institute of European and American Studies
Academia Sinica
Taipei, Taiwan
ko@sinica.edu.tw

Paper to be presented at the European Population Conference 2008
Barcelona, Spain. July 9~12, 2008.

Bring the family back? Comparing cultural values between foreign migrant brides in Taiwan and The Netherlands

Chyong-fang Ko *

Abstract

Generalized results from in-depth interviews with 15 Mainland Chinese and Southeast Asian women married to Taiwanese males and 14 Asian women married to Dutch males are used to show that female marriage migrants are not merely on the receiving end of enforced social norms in host societies. Female marriage migrants are not only biological and cultural reproducers, but trans-cultural mediators and negotiators. Almost all of the informants value marriage and family, and would like to form permanent conjugal relationships with their husbands. They prize children and express the desire to raise them with their biological fathers. The majority of the informants believe that they are obligated to provide geriatric care to their aging parents-in-law, and would like to live with their adult children when they themselves are elderly and/or disabled. The results indicate that Asian women married to Taiwanese males are purposefully selected by their in-laws to fulfill traditional familial roles that are currently ebbing in Taiwan, therefore the brides have fewer opportunities to maintain aspects of their indigenous cultural lifestyles. Nevertheless, they recognize that they must make compromises or otherwise wait until the time comes when their in-laws inflict fewer restrictions or when they can convince their husbands to establish their own households. In contrast, Asian women married to Dutch citizens may not prefer residing in The Netherlands, but they marry Dutch men by their own will. They have broader social space to maintain their cultures of origin, yet they also absorb Western feminist ideals to free them from certain Asian traditions.

Transnational marriages, especially between Taiwanese husbands and immigrant wives from Mainland China or Southeast Asian countries, have attracted attention from the Taiwanese public and academics for the past two decades. Studies have shown that a significant number of Taiwanese males who are less competitive in local marriage markets

* The author appreciate the financial support granted by the National Science Council (Grant no. NSC96-2412-H-001-008, NSC96-2911-1-001-016-2) and the amicable research space provided by International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) at Leiden, the Netherlands between August and November, 2007.

(e.g., farmers, fishermen, the elderly, divorced, co-residing with disabled parents, partly disabled) tend to use their economic advantage to marry relatively young, physically active and attractive women from countries still at the beginning stages of their socioeconomic development (Chang & Ko 2006; Wang 2001; Wang & Chang 2002).

Many Taiwanese frequently ascribe women's motivations for marrying foreign husbands to economic goals such as the desire for a better life, expectations for comfortable working conditions, or the potential for providing financial assistance to their natal families. Many scholars and a large percentage of the general public describe this situation as a "commoditized" marriage, with grooms giving money to brides and their natal families in exchange for legal rights and access to a wife. This kind of exchange relationship is frequently described as resulting in power imbalances in the domestic sphere as well as in conjugal and inter-generational relations (Lu 2005; Wang 2007). From this standpoint, foreign wives are depicted as victims of globalization—that is, the increasing gap between developed and developing countries leading to a stratified cross-border social ranking, even if she gains more in status than the groom by agreeing to enter the marital relationship. Others argue that the imbalance in power relationships in the domestic sphere reinforces the traditional patriarchal lineage system in which females have inferior status.

The literature is filled with descriptions of female marriage migrants as vulnerable, exploited, marginalized, and inactive, but there appears to be a small but growing number of instances where women are pushing back against harsh treatment. In her study of 45 women from South Korea, China, and the Philippines who married Japanese men, Nakamatsu (2003) found that after a series of arguments, five women successfully convinced their husbands to live separately from their parents-in-law, a living arrangement that contradicts traditional rural Japanese social expectations that adult married children co-reside with aging parents to provide care. Shen and Wang (2003) reconfirmed the tendency among Taiwanese mothers-in-law to show their authority by making constant demands of their foreign

daughters-in-law, but they also found that some Vietnamese brides are avoiding direct confrontation yet still refusing requests via their conjugal intimate relationships—that is, they are convincing their husbands to defend them, which is unusual in Taiwanese families. Shen and Wang also describe instances in which Vietnamese wives threatened to have abortions unless the pressure on them to perform domestic duties was reduced. This is especially unusual in a country where producing a male heir is still considered important and where having children is a major motivation for going outside of the country to find a spouse.

Another issue for contention between foreign brides and Taiwanese in-laws is diet. Many elderly Taiwanese have very strict ideas about their diets that have been established over lifetimes, and therefore they are not willing to try the cuisines of other Asian cultures. Foreign daughters-in-law therefore have limited opportunities to cook their indigenous dishes except during pregnancy, when their Taiwanese in-laws are willing to compromise in order to produce a healthy child. According to Chang (2007), it is during pregnancy that female marriage migrants are allowed to experiment so as to create “foreign” dishes that their new families can accept.

In this paper I will use the foreign bride situation in Taiwan to demonstrate that female marriage migrants are no longer necessarily the powerless commodities they have been described as being. Based on the values of the host society, female marriage migrants are still expected to fulfill roles as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and caregivers for extended families. They may also be expected to practice social norms that differ from or contradict those of their own cultures, but there is evidence indicating that female marriage migrants are increasingly able to hybridize original and adopted values in their daily practices to fulfill their social roles and to make their family lives successful.

Since most transnational marriages in Taiwan are between Taiwanese grooms and brides from Mainland China or Southeast Asian countries via private social connections or commercial introduction agencies, most couples barely know each other prior their weddings.

Accordingly, chances are very high that their conjugal relationships and shared attitudes toward marital and familial life differ from those of transnational couples who marry for romantic love. For purposes of comparison, I will also report on Asian women married to Dutch citizens and who choose to settle in The Netherlands. Most Asian women married to Hollanders are not introduced by commercial agencies but meet through personal encounters. Many couples know each other for months or years or live with each other before marrying, making their adjustment issues very different from those women who move to Taiwan to live with their husbands' families.

Data and Sample

The sample consisted of 14 Asian women married to Dutch husbands and living in The Netherlands and 15 Asian women married to Taiwanese and residing in Taiwan. Members of the first group were interviewed between August and November, 2007 (snowball sampling); members of the second group were located via two Taipei-based literacy classes and interviewed between January and March of 2008.

Among the Asian wives living in The Netherlands (hereafter referred to as the “Dutch wives”), 2 were from India, 1 from Indonesia, 2 from Thailand, and 9 from Taiwan. As shown in Table 1, their mean age at the time of our interviews was 41.9 (between 30 and 60), an average of 1.6 years younger than their husbands (between 7 years younger and 3 years older). Average length of marriage or registered cohabitation was 12.5 years (1 to 36 years) and mean length of residency in Holland was 14.9 years (1 to 48 years). Twelve of the fourteen Dutch wives had undergraduate or graduate university educations, roughly comparable to their husbands'. The majority expressed satisfaction with marriages, but two described their marriages as “worthless” except for their children. Both were considering divorce, but they were unsure about the potential quality of life for single female parents in a foreign country. According to Asian values, unsuccessful marriages and single parenthood are sources of

shame and signs of failure.

Table 1 Age, duration of marriage, length of residency, and marital satisfaction among female marriage migrants interviewed for this study.

	Dutch wife (N=14)		Taiwanese wife (N=15)	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Age	41.9	(30~60)	31.3	(23~50)
Husband's age	43.6	(28~64)	44.9	(34~54)
Age difference (wife's - husband's)	-1.6	(-7~3)	-13.6	(-21~2)
Duration of current marriage (years)	12.5	(1~36)	7.3	(1~17)
Years living in host society	14.9	(1~48)	7.3	(2~16)
Marital satisfaction*	7.8**	(7~10)	6.7***	(1~10)

* Range between 1 (low) and 10 (high).

** one missing value.

*** two missing values.

The 15 Asian wives living in Taiwan (hereafter referred to as the “Taiwanese wives”) had a mean age of 31.3 years (between 23 and 50). Countries of origin were Vietnam (8), Indonesia (6), and Mainland China (1). As shown in Table 1, the Taiwanese wives were, on average, 13.6 years younger than their husbands; mean ages for wives and husbands were 31.3 and 44.9 years, respectively. Mean length of these marriages was 7.3 years (between 1 and 17), meaning that at marriage the average ages were 23.9 for brides and 37.7 for grooms; for indigenous Taiwanese couples the average ages are 28 for women and 31 for men. All of the Taiwanese wives were in their first marriage, and the majority expressed satisfaction with their marital lives. On a 1 to 10 (low-to-high) scale of marital satisfaction, 2 reported scores of 10, 4 reported scores below 3, and 1 said that her marriage was so bad that it could not be ranked on a scale. Average number of years of formal education were 8.7 for wives and 9.5 for husbands. A full one-third of the wives exceeded their spouses in terms of education.

Social demographic backgrounds: Taiwan

Before 1970, Taiwan was not a popular destination for international immigration because of its low GNP. Its economy grew rapidly during the 1970s; it earned a reputation as one of “Four Asian Tigers” and became an attractive location for long-term residency by foreigners. The country’s prosperity since the 1970s has improved domestic living standards and provided capital for Taiwanese entrepreneurs to invest abroad, leading to greater exposure of Taiwan’s success in other countries, especially in China and Southeast Asia. Accompanying socioeconomic progress includes advancement in women’s educational achievement and labor force participation, resulting in sharply increased demand for domestic assistance. Around the 1990s, the government started to relax rules for the entry of foreign laborers to ease shortages in the domestic care and manufacturing sectors. There are currently about 360,000 contracted foreign laborers in Taiwan, with more than 45% providing domestic assistance and care for the elderly (Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, R.O.C., 2008).

The mix of incoming labor and outgoing investment has created social spaces in which frequent interactions occur between Taiwanese and citizens of neighboring countries. As members of a patriarchal society, Taiwanese females have historically been accustomed to hypergamic marriages (often by arrangement) in which ascribed and achieved social status and chronological age serve as general guides for assortative mating. However, since the 1970s the gender-based educational gap in Taiwan has narrowed, therefore males with lower socioeconomic status (mainly resulting from lower educational achievement) are now facing severe challenges in marriage markets. In addition, due to the traditional preference for sons and a steady decline in fertility, males of marriageable age outnumber their female counterparts. According to figures provided by the Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior, among single Taiwanese 15 years of age and older, males outnumber females by more than 22 percent.

Accordingly, a large number of Taiwanese males are going abroad in search of suitable

mates, with assistance from private social connections or via arrangements made by commercial agents. Statistics show that 399,038 foreign spouses entered Taiwan between 1987 and mid-2007 (Department of Statistics, Ministry of the Interior, R.O.C). The majority of these foreign spouses were female (93.4%), and the most common birth countries were Mainland China (66%), Vietnam (21%), and Indonesia (7%). As shown in Figure 1, these foreign brides represent between 10 and 20 percent of all newlyweds in Taiwan during the past decade.

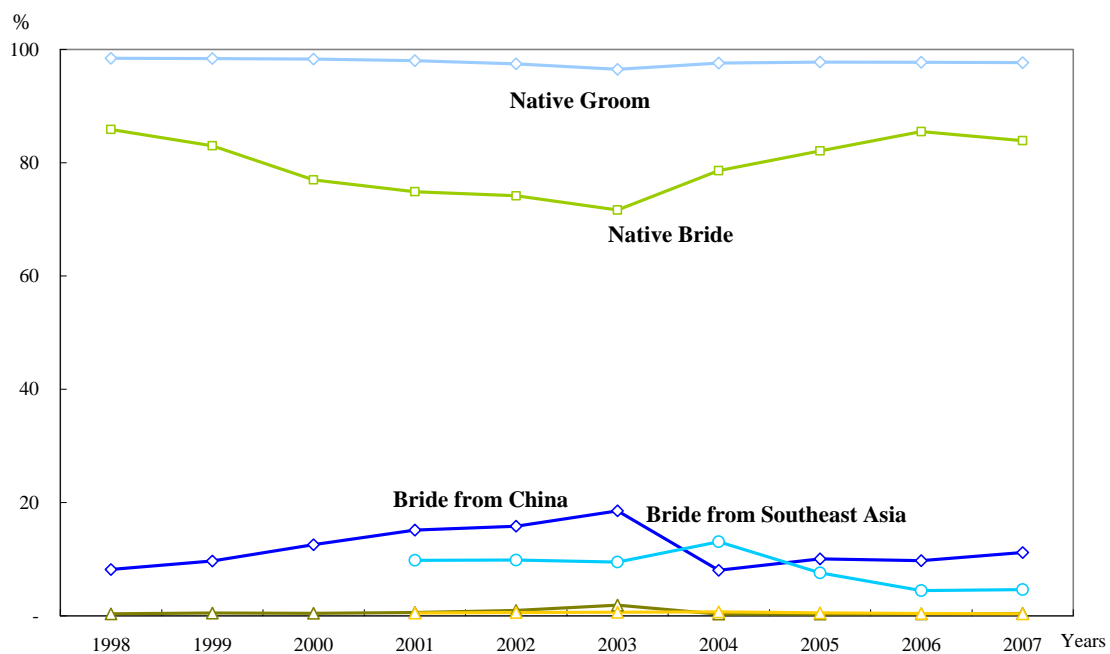


Figure 1. Newlywed brides and grooms moving to Taiwan by year and by region of origin.

Social demographic backgrounds: The Netherlands

Intermarriage is not common in The Netherlands, even though 10.7 percent of its total population in 2008 consisted of non-Western immigrants. Indonesians, Turks, Surinamese, and Moroccans are the largest non-Western immigrant populations in the country (Statistics Netherlands). Moroccans and Turks were initially recruited as labor immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s, and the populations of both cultures have grown for three reasons: family

reunification policies created in the 1980s, marriages to spouses from their countries of origin, and relatively high fertility rates compared to Europeans (Kalmijn, de Graaf & Janssen 2005). Neither Turks nor Moroccans spoke Dutch when they immigrated, and due to national policies they found it difficult to integrate into their host society.¹ In contrast, Indonesia and Surinam were former Dutch colonies, and immigrants from those countries are more familiar with Dutch culture and language and better integrated into Dutch society.

Endogamous marriages are very common among Turks and Moroccans in The Netherlands (Kalmijn & van Tubergen 2006; Tolsma, Lubbers & Coenders 2008). They tend to marry members of the same ethnic group from either the host society or from their countries of origin. Most cross-border but not cross-ethnic marriages are arranged by parents; brides are especially unlikely to resist the wishes of their parents in this regard. In contrast, intermarriage with Dutch citizens is common among Surinamese and Indonesians, who have greater potential to meet spouses via personal encounters (Trappenburg 2005). Due to the small size of its population, marriage patterns for other ethnic groups in The Netherlands are not well documented and have attracted less research interest.

Comparing cultural values between foreign migrant brides in Taiwan and The Netherlands

Attitudes towards marriage: Taiwan

Although it is fair to say that almost all Taiwanese wives view marriage in terms of financial security and/or overall improvement in status, it may be more valid to say that female marriage migrants view marriage as a career or permanent job requiring life-long commitment and devotion. Among the Taiwanese wives in this study, fourteen did not meet their spouses through personal encounters, but they all married Taiwanese according to their own will. They learned to speak Mandarin Chinese and to cook Taiwanese/Chinese dishes

¹ Contract migrant workers and their offspring were encouraged to retain their own cultural identity so that they could reintegrate into their home countries once their contracts expired (see Entzinger 2006).

before and after their arrival, and expressed eagerness to create families with their Taiwanese husbands and to work toward permanent residency in Taiwan. From their perspective, marrying abroad is similar to working abroad: as long as they fulfill their expected roles, their legal residence and economic security are guaranteed.

For foreign wives from Vietnam and Indonesia, perceptions of gambling, drinking, low work motivation, and extramarital affairs among men in their home countries are the most frequently cited reasons for marrying foreigners. Most of the foreign brides I interviewed expressed a preference for potential partners who are caring, generous, responsible, hard working, and capable of making money over humorous personalities or good looks. Only one mentioned appearance and educational achievement as being important in selecting a mate, stating, “My husband has to be taller than I, and his level of education has to be better than mine as well.” Two of the Taiwanese wives expressed their wishes for age similarities with their spouses, with both agreeing that 3 to 5 years apart is acceptable. In their cases the age differences were 12 and 20 years.

Ten of the Taiwanese wives said it is not considered socially acceptable in their original communities to live with one’s future husband prior to marriage, and observed that it is more acceptable for Taiwanese to have premarital sex or to live together with no intention of marriage. Two of the Taiwanese wives insisted that they would never live with a man before marriage, three said they would not allow their children to do so, and one said “it would be alright for my sons, but not for my daughters.”

Nine of the Taiwanese wives I interviewed described divorce as shameful and harmful to children but four did not agree with that assessment. Two did not give a definitive yes or no, with both agreeing that breaking up a marriage is not a good thing, but that one should be able give up a terrible marital relationship to have a better quality of life, since “it is possible to meet a better husband afterwards.”

The co-residency of a married son with aged parents to provide filial care is one of the

most valued social norms in Chinese culture. Its decline in Taiwan is a source of strong debate. Most Taiwanese parents-in-law assume that their foreign daughters-in-law will accept co-residence for two reasons: co-residency and filial obligations are still strong norms in their countries of origin, and their limited social networks in Taiwan will make it too difficult for them to live on their own. Among the fifteen Taiwanese wives I interviewed, thirteen did not object to co-residing with their parents-in-law, with most of them already doing so or having prior experience co-residing with elderly relatives. None of them reported serious tension, although a few complained about how hard it was to please their mothers-in-law. One interviewee told me:

My mother-in-law is picky. She always finds fault with the food I provide. My husband is very supportive, he stands by me. My husband thinks my mother-in-law has to prepare her own food if she does not like mine. My mother-in-law is old, and her mind is not clear. We respect her, and ignore her chattering, and will not argue about things with her.

Another Taiwanese wife complained,

My mother-in-law comments on everything I do. She criticizes me for wasting water while I am doing housecleaning. She looks down on me. She was rude to my sisters who came to provide maternal assistance prior to my delivery. I am disappointed in my husband, he is his mother's son, he never speaks up for me. I am glad that we finally moved out of my mother-in-law's house, I hope our conjugal relationship will be improved.

Attitudes towards marriage: The Netherlands

Conflicts with in-laws were not mentioned by the Dutch interviewees, a reflection of the almost complete lack of intergenerational co-residency that occurs in The Netherlands. Even knowing that living separately from parents-in-law is socially approved, six of the Dutch wives still expressed a willingness to invite their parents-in-law to live with them. One said, "Although my parents-in-law live independently, I still think we should go visit them whenever we have time. It's our responsibility to provide filial care." Most of the Dutch

wives stated that they enjoy their freedom despite being the recipients of less child-rearing assistance from parents-in-law. In addition, due to the country's well-established pension system, the Dutch wives are not responsible for supporting their parents-in-law financially—the opposite of the norm in most Asian countries. In Asian societies, the extent of contributions to the husband's aging parents is often a source of marital conflict.

Twelve of the fourteen Dutch wives met their spouses via personal encounters; one was in a marriage that was semi-arranged by her relatives and one was introduced by private social connections. The majority of the couples met each other at work, school, or traveling in Asia, Holland, or a third country. With one exception, all of the couples used English as their main language during the early stages of courtship; none spoke Dutch prior to settling in Holland. None of the wives stated that they had used marriage as a means of getting Dutch citizenship, and none reported a purposeful intent to marry someone from The Netherlands.

Although the majority of the Dutch wives I spoke with were well aware of Western cultural values prior to marrying Dutch husbands, five expressed strong disagreement with the idea of cohabitation before marriage. One said,

We fell in love after talking on the phone a couple of times, it seemed that we had known each other for years. I told my husband that I was willing to marry him and to establish a permanent relationship with him, but he must get my parents' permission, and that I would not have any intimate relationship with him before a formal wedding. He did as I suggested, and the wedding was held in my hometown. I told my husband that he is both the first man and the last man in my life. It's not the social norm to co-reside with parents-in-law in Holland, yet we get together quite often and maintain a good relationship. There are no intergenerational in-law conflicts so far.

Another Dutch wife who has been married for more than thirty years said,

I met my husband at school in Holland. His mother did not like me. She asked my husband, "There are so many white women around, why should you choose a colored woman for a wife?" I think Asian women are graceful, they are not inferior to white. Our marriage has lasted for more than thirty years even though my mother-in-law didn't like it. I am glad that I am not obliged to co-reside with

her based on Dutch norms. My husband is a wonderful man, he makes good money and shares his property with me. Our life style is neither Asian nor Dutch, we are more in Mediterranean style. We often eat Italian or French cuisines, we have dinner around 8 o'clock, that is different from most of the Hollanders.

A Dutch wife who married a widower told me,

It's not easy to be a stepmother, especially because I am a "foreigner," but I am doing all right so far. My mother-in-law told me that she used to complain that God had taken away her late [Dutch] daughter-in-law, but now she knows why. She said that God is giving her a chance to have me as a daughter-in-law.

Unlike the Taiwanese wives I interviewed, the Dutch wives did not show any concern for age differences between husbands and wives, with some marrying younger men—a very unusual situation in Taiwan. Instead of age, the Dutch wives emphasized such attributes as understanding, life-long companionship, Christian values, and respecting Asian cultural and social norms.

Money and domestic responsibilities: Taiwan

Due to national regulations,² language barriers, or childraising duties, almost all of the Taiwanese wives I interviewed were not eligible for employment of the type leading to quick financial independence from husbands or in-laws. Some get very small salaries working in small restaurants or as occasional informal sector employees. Depending on the family they belong to, they either keep this money for themselves or add it to a collective family income. Those wives who did not have paid jobs got allowances from their husbands or parents-in-law.

Those foreign brides who are forced to live according to traditional Asian norms have responsibility for all domestic work plus farm labor, yet they receive little allowance and have no voice in family decisions. However, they can gradually gain some power by expressing loyalty to their husbands' families and learning to speak Mandarin or Taiwanese

² Marriage migrants are not allowed to work before citizenship is granted. It requires at least three years of residency to become a Taiwan citizen.

Chinese dialect. One 28-year-old Taiwanese wife described her change in status this way:

My husband did not let me manage his earnings and the family bills in the beginning, so I gave all of my part-time earnings to him during the first year. I quit the part-time job one year later when I was pregnant. I am now a citizen and eligible to work outside since three years ago, but I was convinced to stay at home and to take care of our children. My parents-in-law are happy to have a grandson. My husband works with his parents in a remote area, they eat outside for lunch and dinner, so I do not need to cook for them. Hence I prepare Vietnamese style food for myself and the children. My daughter loves fish sauces. I am earning trust in the family. Now my husband gives his earnings to me. I do the family budget and he gets a daily allowance from me.

Another Taiwanese wife who has earned her citizenship but not the trust of her in-laws claimed that

Money is always one of the main causes of our quarrels. I take care of the children, do all the domestic chores, and help my husband in the family-owned grocery store. My mother-in-law does not trust me, she is always suspecting me of stealing from her or the household. My husband refuses to give me any pocket money. He says he has already spent money on purchasing life insurance for me. Insurance does not do me any good, because I am not the beneficiary. I get nothing if I leave this marriage. I don't want to go back to my own country as a divorcee, it's shameful. I hope the Taiwan government can protect my legal rights if my husband divorces me.

Money and domestic responsibilities: The Netherlands

Most of the Dutch wives have their own incomes, either through employment or from affluent natal families in Asia. Only two stated that they receive monthly allowances from their husbands. One employed Dutch wife told me:

My husband is very nice to me. I can keep all the money I earn from my part-time job, and he pays for all the family bills. He gives me 700 Euros per month to buy food and to pay for some small items for our ten-year-old daughter. I prepare a hot meal for the three of us every night. I insist on my Asian norm, that men should stay away from the kitchen.

During this interview her husband added, "All of my colleagues and friends envy me. They think I am a lucky Dutch man who is free from household chores yet gets no complaints from

his wife.”

One Dutch wife who has never held a job stated that her husband refused to give her an allowance:

My husband never gives me pocket money. I stay at home, do all the domestic chores and take care of the children, yet I get no access to his money and property. I have tolerated this for years just for my children’s sake. I want my children to grow up in a stable family with both biological parents around. After my children grow up, I told my husband that I would divorce him if he refuses to give me some pocket money.

I later learned that the husband agreed to give her a monthly allowance of 500 Euros.

For most of the Dutch wives who had grown up in Asian countries, the sharing of financial resources is a sign of affection that can also be used to build emotional boundaries and to create a sense of unity among family members. Most of the Dutch wives I spoke with stated that they share a single joint bank account with their husbands, and several seemed to state this with a sense of pride. It may be that from an Asian perspective, having access to a single joint bank account is a symbol of a happy and successful marriage. On the other hand, two of the younger Dutch wives I spoke with were involved in “three-bank-account” marriages. One told me:

My husband and I each have one private bank account. We have also set up a joint account to pay for shared living expenses. Each of us puts a certain amount of money into this account every month. I think this is a good arrangement. I can spend my earnings without consulting my husband. It is also easier for both of us if we get divorced someday.

Childrearing and interpersonal relationships: Taiwan

Thirteen of the fifteen Taiwanese wives I interviewed have at least one child; six of them have two. One is childless due to an unspecified physical problem, and another had only been married for one year when I spoke with her. Almost all of them consider children as valuable in their lives, and twelve said they would like to co-reside with their children when they are

elderly. None of them teach or plan to teach their children Vietnamese or Indonesian, primarily because they consider Mandarin and English as being important for their children's future achievements. The absence of passing down a mother tongue does not necessarily indicate discontinuity in their cultures of origin, but it does signify reluctance in terms of returning to their homelands. Most of the Taiwanese wives agree with the traditional norm of viewing education as one of the most direct paths to success and wealth. Hence, sacrifice in the name of short-term study and long-term education is promoted by foreign wives in a manner that is similar to indigenous Taiwanese wives.

Although most of the Taiwanese wives had never visited Taiwan before marrying their husbands, about half reported having friends or relatives who were also married to Taiwanese and living in Taiwan. This allows them to make new friends via old social connections, with mobile phones serving as convenient tools for maintaining friendships. Most of the Taiwanese wives said that they were not religious, and therefore did not make friends through religious services. New friends were made through their husbands (some of whom know or are related to other men whose wives come from the same country) and by meeting neighbors or foreign domestic workers. Due to a Taipei city government effort to “keep trash off the ground,” Taipei residents often see their neighbors when tightly scheduled garbage trucks arrive to pick up trash. This explains the comments I heard regarding “garbage collection” as an avenue for meeting neighbors and making acquaintances. In addition to talking to friends by phone, the Taiwanese wives also make every possible effort to get together with friends from the same country for singing, eating, and sharing stories of their lives in Taiwan. They feel obligated to support each other emotionally and—when possible—financially in this foreign land.

In traditional Taiwanese culture, marriage is not simply a union of bride and groom but of two extended families. This is true to varying degrees throughout Asia, making interpersonal relationships between cross-border family members both complex and difficult to maintain.

As most of the Taiwanese wives are still young, many still have parents or siblings living in their home countries, and therefore they phone home at least once or twice per month. There is a strong social expectation to bring gifts to parents, relatives, and close friends during home visits. Such gift giving pressure can become a heavy financial burden for Taiwanese wives, who tend to save every penny possible for this purpose. Feeling special pressure to make their parents happy, Taiwanese wives sometimes ask their husbands to purchase special gifts for them to take home. In Taiwanese and other Asian cultures, the act of a son-in-law giving gifts or money is viewed as a sign of respect and filial care. Daughters must fulfill this responsibility if the son-in-law cannot or refuses to do so; this issue is a common cause of marital conflict. At the same time, if a foreign wife's natal family is too poor to prepare any gifts for the son-in-law or his family (not necessarily large and expensive), the daughter may try to arrange something so as to "save face" in front of her in-laws.

One Taiwanese wife complained,

My husband is so mean to me, he never prepares any gifts for my parents. My parents are so nice to him, they always extend greetings to him whenever I visit home by myself and with the children. Recently my father has been very ill, yet my husband has neither sent tonic food nor made phone calls to him. I am worried about my father's health and I am very disappointed in my husband.

Childrearing and interpersonal relationships: The Netherlands

Although there is little, if any, social pressure to have children in The Netherlands, most of the Dutch wives I spoke with have children of their own; others were raising children from their spouses' previous marriages. None of the women who had no children of their own stated that it was their intention to remain childless. All of the Dutch wives, except one, said that they expected their children to speak the Asian language of their origin, all of them claiming, "My children have to know my culture." One of the Dutch wives said, "I hope my children will not make fun of my culture, and I hope they will enjoy the beauty of my

language.” Another argued, “Being a child of mixed cultures is not a bad thing, it’s a life-long asset.”

Most of the Dutch wives expect their children to succeed educationally, to find good jobs, and to maintain high social positions. Some shared their special expectations that their children will make positive contributions to society. Only one Dutch wife mentioned different expectations for sons and daughters, saying “I hope my son will be as independent as Hollanders and my daughter as graceful as Asian women.” The other thirteen interviewees had identical expectations for sons and daughters alike.

The Dutch wives who participated in this study complained about distant interpersonal relationships in their adopted country, with several describing the Dutch as “stingy and self-centered, they will not sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others.” However, one woman gave a very different perspective when she said, “Hollanders respect personal differences and give high regard to individual choices. They neither make decisions for others nor provide assistance without being requested. You must express your likes and dislikes directly to them.” A Dutch man married to an Asian woman told me,

Asian women are very reserved. They keep everything inside, and sometimes expect others to read their minds. My wife often gets mad at me and does not speak a word to me for days, and I don’t know why. In order to make her talk to me—because there are no other adults in this household to talk to—I simply apologize without knowing what I did wrong. I am getting better at reading her mind, but it would be great if she could just say aloud what she has on her mind.

Being frank with others, sometimes, is not highly valued in Asian societies. One Dutch husband complained,

My wife criticizes me when I say no to the food my mother-in-law offers. My wife thinks I should accept the food because it contains my mother-in-law’s love. I appreciate her love but I don’t want to eat that food at that moment. If I take the food, I am giving a lie.

Two other comments by Dutch husbands reflect significant differences in perceived responsibilities for gift-giving. One said, “I don’t know why my wife has to bring so many

gifts when she visits her homeland. She says they are not ‘others,’ they are family members and relatives. I think Asians have a broader definition of family members.” The other added, “Asians draw a wider range as a gift giving circle, and the networks are quite strong. My Dutch relatives often provide lip service to babysitting my daughter, but my wife’s relatives provide the physical service.”

A Dutch wife who has lived in Holland for 30 years said “We Asians always try our best to be generous to relatives and friends, and in return we always get instant assistance from them when needed. My husband is not generous to my relatives, and sometimes he is stingy with our children.”

Conclusion: Are female marriage migrants cultural mediators or negotiators?

As female marriage migrants, foreign women who marry Taiwanese men enter families in which conjugal and kinship relationships have roots that go back many generations. While there are many factors that determine the shape of cross-border marriages, Taiwanese do not make such decisions carelessly or randomly. Mainland Chinese, Indonesians (mainly ethnic Chinese), and Vietnamese are preferred due to linguistic or cultural similarities. In those countries, patriarchal family values dictate that females fulfill roles as a wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and producers of patrilineal descendents. This kind of social norm was once dominant in Taiwanese society, but is currently fading due to urbanization and modernization forces. Taiwanese females, especially those with advanced educations, are choosing spiritual and physical autonomy and financial independence. Recognized as a potential hindrance to personal and professional goals, marriage is increasingly being viewed by Taiwanese women as acceptable only if it is beneficial to other aspects of their lives. As a result, less educated Taiwanese men are searching for brides in foreign countries with traditional values and social norms similar to those held in Taiwan.

There is evidence indicating that female marriage migrants are learning how to

strategically hybridize social norms to make their family lives successful in their host countries while maintaining a discrete distance from their in-laws. When traditional family cultures are similar between Taiwan and countries of origin, this hybridization is easier to accomplish. However, language and diet remain significant challenges to foreign brides and important bonds that tie them to their natal families and cultural origins.

The Dutch wives who settled in Holland hold stronger cultural identities with their home countries because they did not choose to become Hollanders—they reside there and become citizens because it is their husbands' country. These women feed their families a combination of Dutch and Asian food, and their children are encouraged to learn the language of their mothers' ancestry. They value marriage and family in the same way as women who remain in their home Asian countries, and still hold strong beliefs concerning filial responsibilities.

In her book *Gender and Nation*, Yuval-Davis (1990) claims that females carry both biological and cultural reproduction functions. In this paper I have argued that female marriage migrants are not only biological and cultural reproducers, but also trans-cultural mediators and negotiators.

References

- Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, R.O.C. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from: <http://stat.evta.gov.tw/statis/stmain.jsp?sys=100&kind=10&type=1&funid=qrymenu2&cparm1=q14&rdm=nAsd9cL9>
- Chang, Han-Pi, & Ko, Chyong-fang. (2006). Transnational Marriage and Social Reproduction: Comparing Vietnamese and European Spouses in Taiwan. In H.-H. M. Hsiao (Ed.), *The Frontiers of Southeast Asia and Pacific Studies* (pp. 21-33). Taiwan: Academia Sinica.
- Chang, Ting-Ting. (2007). Foreign Spouses and the Spread of Haka Culture. Unpublished master's thesis. National Central University. Taoyuan. Taiwan.
- Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior, R. O. C. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from <http://www.ris.gov.tw/ch4/static/st20-0.html>
- Department of Statistics, Ministry of the Interior, R.O.C. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from: <http://sowf.moi.gov.tw/stat/gender/ps03-04.xls>
- Entzinger, Han. (2006). Changing the Rules While the Game Is On: From Multiculturalism to Assimilation in the Netherlands. In Y. M. Bodemann & Yurdakul (Eds.), *Migration, Citizenship, Ethnos* (pp. 121-144). New York & Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kalmijn, Matthijs, & Tubergen, Frank van. (2006). Ethnic Inter-marriage in the Netherlands: Confirmations and Refutations of Accepted Insights. *European Journal of Population* 22: 371-397.
- Kalmijn, Matthijs, de Graaf, Paul M., & Janssen, Jacques P. G. (2005). Inter-marriage and the Risk of Divorce in the Netherlands: The Effects of Differences in Religion and in Nationality, 1974-94. *Population Studies* 59(1): 71-85.
- Lu, Melody Chia-Wen. (2005). Commercially Arranged Marriage Migration: Case Studies of Cross-border Marriages in Taiwan. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 12(2&3): 275-303.
- Nakamatsu, Tomoko. (2003). International Marriage through Introduction Agencies: Social and Legal Realities of "Asian" Wives of Japanese Men. In N. Piper & M. Roces (Eds), *Wife or Worker? Asian Women and Migration* (pp. 181-201). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Shen, Hsing-Ju, & Wang, Hong-Zen. (2003). Norms of Integration and Strategies of Escape: Daily Life of Female Migrant Spouses in Taiwan. *Cultural Studies Monthly* 29. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from http://hermes.hrc.ntu.edu.tw/csa/journal/29/journal_park232.htm
- Statistics Netherlands, Voorburg/Heerlan, 2008. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/selection/?VW=T&DM=SLEN&PA=37325eng&D1=a&D2=0-2,127,133,198,216&D3=0&D4=0&D5=0&D6=a,!0-5&LA=EN&HDR=T&STB=>

G1,G2,G3,G4,G5

- Tolsma, Jochem, Lubbers, Marcel, & Coenders, Marcel. (2008). Ethnic Competition and Opposition to Ethnic Intermarriage in the Netherlands: A Multi-Level Approach. *European Sociological Review* 24(2): 215-230.
- Trappenburg, Margo. (2005). Restricting Family Rights: Philosophical Reflections on Transnational Marriages. In I. Honohan & J. Jennings (Eds.) *Republicanism in Theory and Practice* (pp. 173-185). London: Routledge.
- Wang, Hong-Zen. (2001). Social Stratification, Vietnamese Partners Migration and Taiwan Labour Market. *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 41: 99-128.
- Wang, Hong-Zen. (2007). Hidden Spaces of Resistance of the Subordinated: Case Studies from Vietnamese Female Migrant Partners in Taiwan. *International Migration Review* 41(3): 706-727.
- Wang, Hong-Zen, & Chang, Shu-Ming. (2003). Commodifying International Taiwanese-Vietnamese Marriages. *Taiwanese Sociology* 6: 177-221.