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“Love” Across the Strait: Cross-Border Marriage Between Chinese Women and Taiwanese Men

Paoyi Huang

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“LOVE” ACROSS THE STRAIT:
CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE BETWEEN CHINESE WOMEN AND TAIWANESE MEN

by

PAOYI HUANG

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

“LOVE” ACROSS THE STRAIT:
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by

PAOYI HUANG

Advisor: Professor Hester Eisenstein

While cases of cross-border marriage involving “foreign brides” from Southeast Asian countries have been well-documented in Taiwan, little has been known about Chinese women married to Taiwanese men because of cultural and ethnic proximity. Given the complicated historical and political conditions between Taiwan and China, however, Chinese female marriage migrants constitute a very distinct social group. This dissertation is a qualitative investigation of the emergence and expansion of cross-border marriage between Chinese women and Taiwanese men. Unlike previous scholars who focus on the exploitative nature of the so-called “mail-order bride” (MOB) phenomenon, or solely emphasize aspects of commodification in cross-border marriages, I present cross-border marriages between Chinese women and Taiwanese men as multifaceted.

Both parties—Chinese wives and Taiwanese husbands—compose heterogeneous groups. Members of these groups come from different age groups, occupy diverse socioeconomic positions, and, most importantly, have varied motivations and anticipations for cross-border marriage. I examine the gender dynamics in cross-border
marriage households and further analyze the ways in which these marriages become a contested site where gender, class, and ethnicity intersect with each other. Inspired by feminist discourses, I acknowledge the agency of Chinese female marriage migrants and elaborate the ways in which these Chinese women produce their own narratives about gender equity to resist social stigmas and discrimination, both from their own families and from society at large.

I conclude with a discussion of foodways, which is not a common subject in the sociological migration literature. I show how food is not only a necessity of life but also a unique carrier of socially-constructed meanings; I also explore the ways in which differences in food preparation and dietary preference often become a source of subtle discrimination and conflicts in cross-border marriage households. Despite the structural limitation that Chinese female marriage migrants face at home, they find opportunities to prepare and share food together, and such occasions often evoke cultural memories. Through various food-related activities, Chinese female marriage migrants create a social food space and community among each other.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

It was an ordinary and pleasant gathering among some old friends on a typical cold and rainy winter day. I was visiting my hometown in Taiwan during the winter break, and everyone was curious about my new life in New York City. They were so excited about every trivia, and I occasionally had to remind them that a poor graduate student’s life is nothing like the TV drama “Sex and the City,” which was very popular at the time. After all, I spent most of my time in the dim library trying to catch up on endless readings, and the price that Carrie pays for a pair of Manolo Blahnik high-heel shoes probably would have covered my rent for one and half months. Getting a little bit tired of talking about the Big Apple, I switched the topic and mentioned that one of my cousins finally got engaged to a Chinese woman, and I hoped I would have the chance to attend their wedding because a wedding in the countryside usually means a vast amount of delicious traditional food, which my homesick stomach craved for. An unexpected and awkward silence was in the room, and apparently I was the only one who could not figure out what was wrong. The cheerful atmosphere resumed soon after we moved onto another topic. On the same night, I received an email from a friend who was at the same gathering; there was no word in the email but an attachment of a photo of an advertisement. The poster read:

Vietnam, China, Cambodia Brides
Cost:

1) 299,000 NTD for Vietnam
2) 199,000 NTD for China
3) 310,000 NTD for Cambodia

Process time:

1) Two months for Vietnam
2) One month for China

1 The poster was written in Traditional Chinese characters.

2 NTD stands for New Taiwanese Dollar. In the year of 2014, 1 USD roughly equals to 32 NTD.
3) Ten days for Cambodia

Advantages of getting a bride:

1) Money: they can work to improve your home economy – approximately 240,000 NTD per year.
2) Sex: you can have sex with them, and it is legal. Instead of going to prostitution which could cost you 80,000 NTD per year, you can have sex with your bride for free.
3) Housework: they will cook, do your laundry, and every kind of housework for you.
4) Reproduction: priceless!

I was furious and could not believe what I read. The photo was taken from a poster on a wire pole in rural Taiwan. My initial impression was that the content showed that these foreign women are considered as commodities that can be advertised publicly without any hesitation or rhetoric. Then I realized why there was such an awkward silence earlier at the coffee house. My friends, all well-educated and mostly from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds, thought my cousin “bought” a bride. The ideology that marriage is sacred and should be purely based upon “true love” is part of their belief system and deeply rooted in their upbringings. It is unthinkable that someone would “buy” a wife, yet their manners kept their mouths shut, hence the silent and awkward moment. This little personal episode I encountered left a strong and unforgettable impression and became the seed of this dissertation.

This dissertation is a qualitative investigation of the emergence and expansion of cross-border marriage between Chinese women and Taiwanese men. Unlike previous scholars who focus on the exploitative nature of the so-called “mail-order bride” (MOB) phenomenon (Belleau 2003; Glodava and Onizuka 1994; D. R. Lee 1998), or solely emphasize the dimension of commodification in cross-border marriages (Hsia 2004; Wang and Chang 2003), I present cross-border marriages between Chinese women and Taiwanese men as multifaceted. Both parties—Chinese wives and Taiwanese husbands—compose heterogeneous groups. Members of these groups come from different age groups, occupy diverse socioeconomic positions, and, most
importantly, have varied motivations and anticipations for cross-border marriage. I discuss the
gender dynamics in cross-border marriage households and further analyze the ways in which
these marriages become a contested site where gender, class, and ethnicity intersect with each
other. Inspired by feminist discourses, I also acknowledge the agency of Chinese female marriage
migrants. I further elaborate the ways in which these Chinese women produce their own
narratives on gender equity to resist social stigmas and discrimination, both from their own
families and from society at large.

1.1 The “Foreign Bride” Phenomenon

Migration flows have become increasingly feminized in the past few decades and so
scholars have identified the “feminization of migration” as one of the most significant aspects of
globalization (Castles, Haas, and Miller 2013). According to the United Nations’ database (revised
in 2008), female migrants have constituted a steady 49% of all international migrations in the
past two decades. Scholars have pointed out that previous research has focused on male
migrants and assumed that female migrants only travel to join their husband abroad (family
reunification); women’s migratory experiences, therefore, have long been neglected. It was only
in the 1970s that feminist discourses began to have some influence on migration studies. Feminist
scholars called for a gendered perspective but also cautioned against an equation of gender only
with women (Kelson and DeLaet 1999; Pessar 1999). Cross-border marriage between Chinese
women and Taiwanese men is an aspect of the feminization of migration, and it is important to
note that this type of marriage has never been a simple, personal, and private matter; rather it is
a complicated story related to the changes brought by globalization.

__________________________________________________________________________

3 The term “foreign bride” (or waiji xinniang in Mandarin) is highly problematic, and I will
examine terminologies in detail in chapter three.
4 Source: http://esa.un.org/migration/p2k0data.asp
For marriage migration, Asian women from Japan, Korea, and Vietnam migrated to the United States as “brides” of American soldiers since the 1940s. In the 1980s, the so-called “mail-order bride” phenomenon expanded, and Asian women, particularly from the Philippines and Thailand, migrated to First World countries such as Germany, Australia, and the United States (Angeles and Sunanta 2007; Cahill 1990; Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Robinson 1996). However, in the past two decades, East Asia has witnessed dramatic transformations in migration patterns, with many immigrant-sending countries becoming immigration destinations themselves. Within the region, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are the major destinations; Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are the main countries of emigration (Hugo 2005). In immigrant-receiving societies, these cross-border marriages have resulted in the creation of new social categories with derogatory connotations, for example, “waiji xinniang” (foreign bride) in Taiwan or “Japayuki” (Japan-bound) in Japan.

These immigrant-receiving countries—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—had been known for their ethnic homogeneity, a product of their restrictive immigration policies, which leaves marriage as one of the very few legal options to obtain a permanent residency and citizenship. Therefore, it is a rather sudden shock for these societies to experience a huge influx of female marital immigrants (Castles, Haas, and Miller 2013). The rapid increase in the number of cross-border marriages is mostly a product of transnational matchmaking agencies mediating between brides and grooms (Hsia 2004; Jones and Shen 2008; Robinson 2007; Yang and Lu 2010), and some scholars argue that female marriage migrants in East Asia are de facto economic migrants (Kojima 2001; H.-Z. Wang 2001).

The data I gathered from my field research, however, tells a different story. Although the possibility of improving one’s material life is one of the concerns in Chinese female marriage migrants’ mind, economic status is rarely the solo reason that accounts for their decision to migrate. Very often, their decision-making is not a straightforward linear process but has to be
traced back to previous migratory paths, and their motivations are multifaceted. I will document and analyze Chinese marriage migrants’ migratory experiences and incentives in chapter three. Among the major immigrant-receiving countries in East Asia, Taiwan has the highest percentage of cross-border marriages (Figure 1.1). While the cross-border marriage rate remains around 5% in Japan, in the low teens in South Korea, it hit a peak of 31.9% of all registered marriages in 2003 in Taiwan and since then fluctuated between 24% and 14%.

Figure 1.1 Cross-Border Marriages in East Asia

![Cross-Border Marriages in East Asia](http://www.dgbas.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=33342&ctNode=6130&mp=1)

East Asian governments in both immigrant-sending and immigrant-receiving countries have applied immigration policies in response to the gendered marriage migration flow. For example, the Philippine government passed a law that bans personal advertising and penalizes commercial marriage brokers (Ordoñez 1997), and the Vietnamese government also announced

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5 Source: Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan

its intention to invalidate all marriages mediated by commercial agencies (Wang and Hsiao 2009). On the receiving side, the opening of Taiwan’s National Immigration Agency in January 2008 was a milestone as the affairs of immigration are no longer administered under border patrol which is a lower-ranking and smaller division in the government. This indicates that the Taiwanese government has finally come to recognize the complexity and importance of immigration issues and thus allocate more resources and personnel to better its “management” of foreign population. The first step the Taiwanese government took was to enact a law to ban profit-oriented matchmaking companies. The National Immigration Agency envisioned that the law would bring a win-win situation to every party involved in cross-border marriage. For grooms and brides, service items and fees would become more transparent, thereby reducing the number of scams. For service providers, this would eliminate their negative image, close to human trafficking in society. The hidden agenda embedded in such a law, of course, was to actively reduce the flow of female marriage migrants. However, there is no evidence of such an effect.

Since the late 1980s, while Taiwanese society has become used to the scenario of foreign labor (guest workers), including Filipina caregivers, Thai construction workers, and workers in other sectors from Southeast Asian countries, another striking phenomenon has gradually appeared—female marital immigrants. Many Taiwanese men from rural areas began to go to Southeast Asian countries to find a “suitable bride.” Indonesia was the primary source in the early 1990s; each year more than two thousand Indonesian women left home, heading to an imagined prosperous land—Taiwan.

However, Taiwan did not welcome these Indonesian women. The Taiwanese government, hoping to tighten its border control, deliberately slowed down the processing of visas in order to reduce the number of Indonesian female marriage migrants entering the country (Hsia 2004). Such a border-control strategy, of course, did not prevent the increase in cross-border marriage. Taiwanese matchmaking agencies quickly responded to the government’s new measures and
turned their attention from Indonesia to Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and other Southeast Asian countries. In 2010, the three largest countries of origin for female marital immigrants in Taiwan were China (64.26%), Vietnam (20.23%), and Indonesia (6.95%) (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Marriage Migrants’ Countries of Origin

Among all female marriage migrants in Taiwan, Chinese women occupy a very special position. Cross-border marriage between Chinese and Taiwanese persons was only legalized in 1992. Chinese immigrant wives are the most invisible group in everyday life. While women who come from Southeast Asian countries are highly visible and are considered as “racially/ethnically others,” Chinese women, with cultural proximity and similar physical traits as Taiwanese, seemingly blend into the Taiwanese general public. While language is likely one of the biggest obstacles Southeast Asian immigrants face, Chinese women speak Mandarin Chinese, which is also the official language in Taiwan.

Yet the shared language does not guarantee a smooth adjustment for Chinese women. As China experienced a major language simplification movement under Chairman Mao, it takes time for Chinese immigrants to learn how to read traditional Chinese characters, and writing is usually difficult for them. Moreover, their accent is distinctive and recognizable, and Taiwanese often detect their accent and look down on their way of speaking. In the legal domain, because of complex historical and political issues between Taiwan and China, Chinese marriage migrants are governed under the “Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area” (臺灣地區與大陸地區人民關係條例) and other sets of laws that are drastically different from the laws for immigrants from other countries. For example, immigrant wives from Southeast Asian countries are allowed to apply for legal residency right after their migration, and after three to four years they can be granted the national identification, which goes along with citizenship and citizenship rights. Moreover, for marital immigrants from other countries, working permits are granted along with the status of residency. Once they are employed, their employer is required to provide labor insurance, along with other benefits. In contrast, Chinese marriage migrants have to go through an extremely complicated procedure which takes at least six years to obtain the national identification. Whereas marriage migrants from other countries are allowed to work with the immediate residency status they receive after migration, Chinese wives are only permitted to work during the residency years if their family qualifies as a low-income household, or if their spouse is handicapped or suffers a severe illness. That is to say, in the period of four to six years before they gain the status of “long-term resident,” Chinese marital immigrants in general are not allowed to work and are thus confined within the private family sphere. In addition, they are subjected to the ordeal of all kinds of paperwork, regular health

\footnote{Before the legislative amendment in 2008, in theory it took eight years for Chinese marriage migrants to obtain the national identification. However, in reality, the Taiwanese government set annual quota and strategically slowed down the procedure. Therefore, it was not unheard of that for some Chinese women, it took more than ten years to gain citizenship in Taiwan.}
checkups, showing they have no criminal record, and the surveillance of district police. Any violation could lead to a severe consequence—deportation. In short, compared to marriage migrants from other countries, Chinese immigrants face much stricter legal regulation, which all in all makes them a distinctive immigrant group.

1.2 Relevant Literature: Putting Cross-Border Marriage in Context

From the 1960s onward, scholars who were influenced by neo-classical theory used the “push-pull” analytical framework to explain migratory movement (E. S. Lee 1966; Bauer and Zimmermann 1998; Passaris 1989). The “push-pull” framework poses the causes of migration to be a combination of push factors that impel people to leave the areas of origins and pull factors that attract them to receiving countries. Based upon the push-pull approach, people from less-developed countries undergo low living-standards and lack of economic opportunities (push factors), and thus want to migrate to developed countries where higher wages and living-standards and demands for labor (pull factors) are on offer. For example, Aguilar argues that the Philippines’ economic dependence on the U.S. leads to unemployment and inflation, forcing many Filipino women to become prostitutes or mail-order brides out of financial need (Aguilar 1987). The push-pull framework was later criticized for, first, over-emphasizing decisions to migrate based upon rational calculations of costs and benefits and, second, neglecting contextual factors such as governmental restrictions. Scholars have also pointed out that the push-pull framework often failed to explain reasons why certain groups migrate to certain countries rather than others (Castles, Haas, and Miller 2013).

Terms such as “cross-border marriage,” “transnational marriage,” “hypergamy,” “exogamy,” “correspondence marriage,” “mail-order bride,” and “North-South marriage migration” are often associated, or even used interchangeably, in academic and popular literatures. In recent years, some scholars in migration studies attempt to blur the boundaries
between “maid,” “nanny,” “mail-order bride,” and “sex worker,” and argue that they should be discussed as parts of a common phenomenon (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, Arlie Russell 2003; Lauser 2008; Maher 2003; Piper and Roces 2003). It is useful to recognize that many domestic workers, marriage migrants, and sex workers often follow similar trajectories—migrating from the poorer, less developed global South, to the wealthier, more developed global North. But lumping all three groups together risks a conflation of the migrants’ various motivations with the different treatments and difficulties they may face in receiving countries. For example, women who migrate under the category of temporary workers know that their stay in the new land is short-term; on the contrary, immigrant wives migrate in the hope of establishing a new home and putting their roots in the receiving country. These two groups of migrants may develop different coping mechanisms when they face challenges in the receiving society; marriage migrants aim to obtain permanent residency while migrant workers know their stay is temporary. It is not uncommon to hear temporary migrant workers on short-term work visas saying that they are willing to endure tough working conditions to earn extra money as they are counting down the days to return to their homeland, and then their “real life” will begin. Unlike temporary migrant workers who have a clear returning date, marriage migrants, when facing difficulties, often feel trapped and do not see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Another salient example is the difference between paid and unpaid labor. On the surface, a stay-at-home immigrant wife’s daily routine may appear similar to that of a temporary migrant worker’s—grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children and elders. But whereas migrant workers exchange their labor for monetary gain, and in principle are in charge of their own income, marriage migrants’ labor for their households is often taken for granted in the name of love without any monetary reward. I will discuss this issue in greater detail in chapter four. There are numerous other differences between these categories of female migrants in addition the two examples mentioned above. Based upon my own field research, I believe it is
misleading to put these two forms of migration into the same category. This research focuses on Chinese female marriage migrants in Taiwan and aims to depict these migrants’ different roles—daughter, woman, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, worker—in the hope of rendering vivid portraits with multiple dimensions.

The phenomenon of cross-border marriage is most relevant to the so-called “mail-order brides” (MOBs) studied in the sociological and anthropological literature. In the United States, pictures of mail-order brides from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Russia are printed up in catalogs, and in more recent years on late night TV channels and online profiles (Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Perez 2003; So 2006). In other parts of the globe, the importation of women from the Philippines to Australia and Germany for marriage, and the “Asian Wives” in Japan, have all given rise to serious discussions among scholars (C. D. Clark 2001; Faier 2009; Kojima 2001; Nakamatsu 2003; Robinson 1996). From letter-writing to the use of websites, chat rooms, instant messengers, or other forms of media, it does not matter how international matchmaking has evolved along with technological advancement nor where such a phenomenon occurs, mail-order brides are often depicted as “gold diggers” or sometimes economic victims in their own poor homelands, and their marriages are viewed simply as “trade marriages” by the mass media and a narrative of mail order brides as a source of social problems.

Under the influence of the earlier White/Western, middle-class feminist perspectives, much research on mail-order brides adopted a sympathetic attitude toward the women, arguing that this phenomenon is a form of “traffic in women,” and seeing such marriages as an example of oppressive patriarchal exploitation (Aguilar 1987; Belleau 2003; Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Perez 2003). Within this trafficking framework, Glodava and Onizuka’s Mail Order Brides: Women for Sale is considered an authoritative reference. Glodava and Onizuka provide a few case studies, which involve domestic violence, most ending in divorce, to illustrate mail-order brides’ unfortunate fate. They argue that the “mail-order bride business” is a multimillion-dollar
industry in which women are literally “bought and sold” like commodities through catalogs. In their book, the authors described men who “buy” mail-order brides and “have control in mind more than a loving and enduring relationship.” The women who “sell” themselves through the catalogs are “traditional” women from Third World countries, and, in the case of Asian women, are unwilling to seek help, due to the Asian stress on the importance of harmony in the family.

Glodava and Onizuka take a Western-centric standpoint and go further to dichotomize the value system into “Asian/Pacific” (fatalism, deference to authority, suppression of individuality) versus “Western” (mastery of one’s own fate, challenger of authority, independence and individualism). In this paradigm, these Asian women are constructed as “inferior others” and are seen as victims of an exploitative capitalist and patriarchal system. Thus they need to be rescued by awakened and enlightened Western feminists. The authors conclude that women who have come to the U.S. as mail-order brides need to be educated regarding their rights, and that First World countries should help the Third World alleviate its poverty and powerlessness.

It is clear that Glodava and Onizuka see mail-order brides as “trafficked women,” duped into marriages and victims who are passive and unable to change their fates because of Asian cultural beliefs. Under the trafficking framework, mail-order brides’ marriage, distinguished from marriage in the rest of the population, is viewed as a byproduct of pre-modern sexist ideas that have been left behind the process of modernization. Based upon Glodava and Onizuka’s viewpoint, mail-order brides need to be awakened and emancipated by Western consciousness. Such research, on the one hand, falls into the trap of treating women as passive “exotic racial others” who are not in possession of agency. While claiming to promote gender equity and human rights, this type of research actually reinforces the common stereotypes of these women as “inferior others,” whose only hope for liberation is to give up their “traditional” Asian cultural beliefs and embrace Western individualism. Moreover, the trafficking perspective often assumes that men who marry mail-order brides are simply patriarchal actors, neglecting other possible
factors such as men’s marginalized status in society. In short, the trafficking framework regards power in terms of a simple dichotomy conterminous with the ownership of economic means, and it assumes that power is exercised in a linear direction—from men (capitalist domination) to mail-order brides (commodified female bodies).

Contemporary feminist discourse on gendered heterogeneity, power, and agency has brought new insights to the discussion of cross-border marriage. Scholars now call for more gender-sensitive approaches, looking at cross-border marriage through a new lens to complicate existing stories and examine the dynamics in light of macro structural changes (Constable 2003; Harzig 2002; Jones and Shen 2008; Newendorp 2008; Piper and Roces 2003; Robinson 2007). While recognizing the constraints, a number of scholars have begun to portray female marriage migrants as exercising agency (Constable 2003; Constable 2005; Faier 2009; Newendorp 2008; Y.-H. Wang 2011; Yang and Lu 2010). In other words, female marriage migrants are “subjects” or “agents”—a social force capable of acting in their own interests, not powerless and desperate victims simply waiting to be taught and rescued. In terms of the causes of marriage migration, some scholars have gradually shifted from the push-pull paradigm that focuses on economic incentives to the recognition of noneconomic motivations and have tried to tell multilayered migration stories.

Nicole Constable’s *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail-Order” Marriages* is a particularly important scholarly contribution to the debates (Constable 2003). In her study of Filipino- and Chinese-American marriages in the U.S., Constable first problematizes the notion of “mail-order bride” and offers other ways of understanding correspondence marriage. Inspired by contemporary feminist ethnography, Constable argues that the label of “mail-order bride” obscures the degree of selectivity and choice exerted by most of the women, and that the popular image of mail-order brides as women who are subservient and marrying out of economic desperation is “flawed for its orientalist,
essentializing, and universalizing tendencies, which reflect many now-outdated feminist views of the 1970s.” Though recognizing that some women are indeed unaware of the risks of using introduction services for international marriages, Constable’s approach is to see women as exercising agency, albeit with more or less constrained power. That is to say, women choose to use introduction services, decide to engage in the international courtship, then to marry foreigners and to migrate, and opt to become permanent residents and/or citizens in the new country.

Constable’s approach provides a way to re-examine the taken-for-granted notion of modern marriage, which privileges marriages said to be built on the basis of romantic love and the free choice of two individuals, while devaluing the so-called traditional marriages that are formed through institutional arrangements. Marriage as an institution needs to be discussed in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class. Unlike Glodava and Onizuka’s study that conflates migrant women’s often complicated intentions and decision-making processes, Constable’s perspective leaves room for these women and men to emerge as people with multiple dimensions, and to portray them as people who both exert power and are subject to it within a historical and global context. One possible danger of adopting this framework, however, is to over-romanticize the “mail-order bride” phenomenon. While acknowledging female marriage migrants’ active role in the process of correspondence marriage, it is crucial to bear in mind that such agency does not guarantee a successful marriage nor eliminate difficulties female marital immigrants may face in the receiving society.

The recognition of female marriage migrants’ agency helps us develop a fuller picture of cross-border marriage on an individual micro level, yet we also need a meso-level analytical framework to relate individual experience and motivation to larger social, economic, and political structures. In other words, we need to understand how structural forces are processed by agents and thus localized in their everyday lives. Here, geographer Doreen Massey’s notion of “power
“geometry” and feminist migration scholars Patricia Pessar’s and Sarah Mahler’s conceptual model of “gendered geographies of power” are particularly useful (Mahler and Pessar 2006; Massey 1994).

Massey uses the term “power geometry,” or to be more specific—“power geometry of time-space compression”—to introduce complexity to the ways in which time, space, and mobility are experienced in the current phase of global capitalism. Massey observes that the conditions of modernity that lead to time-space compression also place individuals in particular social locations regarding access to power. In her own words, “For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to those flows and interconnections. ...it is also about power in relation to the flows and the movement. ...some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it.” The phenomenon of border crossing—who, why, when, where, and how—depends on a complex set of factors including gender, ethnicity, class, age, nationality, state, and so on. When examining migration, Massey’s concept of “power geometry” helps us consider not only how people’s social locations influence their mobility, but also migrants’ agency as initiator and transformers throughout the process.

For the phenomenon of cross-border marriage, Massey’s concept of power geometry provides a means to examine whether women are simply at the receiving end of mobility and men are the initiators. Moreover, what can people achieve through cross-border marriage? To be liberated from certain gender constraints embedded in the local “marriage market”? To gain upward geographic mobility on the global map? In the discussion of Taiwanese-Chinese cross-border marriage, Massey’s idea helps us see that many Chinese female marriage migrants have experienced prior internal migration process in China before they eventually migrate to Taiwan, which I will discuss in chapter three.
Building upon Massey’s work, Mahler and Pessar develop a conceptual model called “gendered geographies of power.” Four major components of their model are “geographic scales,” “social location,” “power geometry,” and “social agency.” Pessar and Mahler urge us to bring gender into a transnational perspective in migration studies and point out that “gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales ... across transnational terrains” (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 445). They pay close attention to people’s social locations which they define as “positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors” (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 445–446). The innovative aspect of the conceptual model lies in their discussion of agency. Mahler and Pessar regard agency “as affected not only by extra-personal factors but also by quintessentially individual characteristics such initiative.” More importantly, they call for the recognition of “the role of cognitive processes such as the imagination, as well as substantive agency” which is often neglected in migration studies. In other words, people may not execute everything they plan in perfect terms, such as obtaining dual-citizenship, sending remittances to the home country, and so on, but it is important to take into account that much of what people actually do in the transnational terrain is to imagine and plan for the sometimes unforeseeable future.

In the context of Taiwan, cases of cross-border marriage that involve female marital immigrants from Southeast Asian countries, particularly from Vietnam and Indonesia, have been well-documented. Scholars have generated a sizable literature that covers a wide range of common topics such as the causes of migration (Hsia 2002; Nguyen and Tran 2010; Tien and Wang 2006), the mechanism of profit-oriented matchmaking agencies (H.-Z. Wang and Chang 2003), state policies in both the immigrant-receiving and sending societies (I.-C. Kung 2006), domestic violence (Tang and Wang 2011), female marriage migrants’ agency (Y.-H. Wang 2011), and grass-root organizations (C. Lin, Wang, and Wu 2008).
Among these scholarly works, I have especially benefited from Hsia Hsiao-Chuan’s work. Hsia is among the first to point out that discussions of the phenomenon of cross-border marriage cannot stay at an individual level and she calls for a structural analysis that sheds light on how global uneven development influence individual’s marital decision (Hsia 2002). Hsia focuses on the trade relations embedded in cross-border marriage and coins the term “commodified transnational marriage” to distinguish marriages resulting from study abroad and work. She draws insights from Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system theory and argues that capitalist development has led to global unequal development and an international division of labor among core, semiperipheral, and peripheral states that further affects marriage markets. The deteriorating economic condition in the periphery forces women to search for husbands in the core and semiperiphery countries. Marginalized men in the core and semiperiphery societies do not possess any advantages in local marriage markets and thus look for women from less developed countries. In short, Hsia views the phenomenon of commodified transnational marriage as to be a result of capital internationalization and labor liberation. What we learn from Hsia’s work is that marriage is far beyond a private and individual matter. Her research shows how political-economic forces shape certain groups of people’s movement, and how people with disadvantaged positions in different societies respond and negotiate global capitalism and transnational cultural flows.

Quite a few scholarly works on marriage migrants in Taiwan lump Chinese and other marriage migrants together (J.-J. Chu and Sun 2010; 邱珹雯 2005; 陳小紅 2006). Although this type of research accurately points out the general discrimination female marriage migrants face in Taiwan, such research neglects the fact that Chinese marriage migrants occupy a specific position in Taiwanese society and are subjected to specific sets of laws. Antonia Chao’s long-term projects draw a lot of attention, but Chao’s studies focus on a very specific group among Chinese marriage migrants—middle-aged women (a majority with divorce records in China) who are
married to old Taiwanese veterans, and she targets domestic violence cases (Chao 2004; Chao 2008). Other studies adopt a quantitative approach. For example, Yi and Chang argue that social contact between ethnic groups, including female marriage migrants from different countries, help reduce ethnic antagonism (Yi and Chang 2006). Echoing Yi and Chang’s emphasis on political inclination, Tsai further finds that the Taiwanese general public’s opposition towards female marriage migrants is not because of economic threats they pose but is rooted in ethnic nationalism (M.-C. Tsai 2011). Different types of studies enhance our understanding of female marriage migrants, and this dissertation aims to emphasize the heterogeneity of Chinese marriage migrants, the specific challenges they face that are different from Southeast Asian women, and their life narratives.

1.3 Statement of Research Questions

One of the objectives of this dissertation is to study the dynamics behind the emergence and the expansion of cross-border marriage between Chinese women and Taiwanese men, and its impacts on the immigrant-receiving country—Taiwan.\(^8\) Thus, the first set of questions I ask are: who are the people involved in such cross-border marriage? Under what circumstances, both micro and macro, have these cross-border marriages been formed? In such a gendered flow, what is that Chinese women try to pursue and escape through migration? How do they construct the meaning of their own migratory path? Instead of painting a general picture that is inevitably oversimplifying the experience of Chinese marriage migrants, I call attention to the heterogeneity among the group. It is true that many Chinese marriage migrants share a similar socio-economic family background and partake of similar migratory routes—firstly an internal migration, from

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\(^8\) The Chinese women I study are the ones who entered Taiwan after 1987 (the termination of martial law). My research does not include Mainland Chinese women who migrated along with Kuomintang (KMT, the Nationalist Party) to Taiwan after being defeated by the Chinese Communist Party during the Chinese Civil War in the late 1940s.
agricultural villages in the Chinese inland to first-tier cities along the coast such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and then an international marriage migration to Taiwan. Yet, they come from different educational backgrounds, have different occupations and prior working experiences, meet their Taiwanese husbands in assorted ways (commercial introduction agency, online chat room and instant messenger, workplace, friends, and so on), and the range of their ages is extremely broad—from the early 20s to the late 50s. These differences help explain various migratory motivations and influence how the women adapt to new life in Taiwan. I will sketch their life narratives in what I hope is a vivid way, studying them both as unique individual and as well as members of collective groups.

As I noted in the previous section, inspired by contemporary feminist discourse, many scholars have turned to an emphasis on female migrants’ agency, selectivity, and choice, as opposed to seeing them as the powerless objects of subjectification. I accept this proposition but would further ask, under what circumstances can Chinese female marriage migrants in Taiwan exercise agency? Facing various kinds of discrimination in both the private and public spheres, how do these Chinese women negotiate, accommodate, and/or resist different formations of power?

Unlike women who migrated along with family members and often settle in ethnic communities that abound with inter-personal supports, Chinese female marriage migrants in Taiwan arrive alone and are usually dispersed widely in individual native families across different areas. What are the challenges the Chinese female marriage migrants face in their everyday life in Taiwanese society? Large-scale political-economic processes may inform people’s movement, but in a patriarchal society like Taiwan, how do intimate and relational gender dynamics play out within cross-border marriages? Local district offices, non-governmental organizations, and many community colleges offer various workshops and classes for marital immigrants. Such classes do not always specifically target Chinese marriage migrants. What can Chinese immigrant gain from
such classes? Modern technologies make it easier for migrants to keep connections with their homelands. What kind of transnational ties do the Chinese women maintain with their homeland? Do the Chinese women and their households benefit from the transnational ties?

As a political entity which is recognized as a nation by only twenty-one members of the United Nations, Taiwan not only faces tremendous challenges in participating in the world polity, but also must deal with internal disputes over its collective national identity. These disputes revolve around Taiwan’s relationship with China; China is understood either as a threat to sovereignty or a potential source of new sovereignty through unification. Given the general public’s polarized attitudes towards China, how is Taiwanese society receiving the influx of Chinese marriage migrants? Given the increasing tensions among ethnic groups in Taiwan in the past two decades, how do perceptions of Chinese marriage migrants differ across different ethnic families? With little knowledge about ethnic tensions in Taiwan prior their migration, how do Chinese female marriage migrants cope with ethnic and political issues in their families?

1.4 Research Methods

In the preliminary research stage, I surfed on two online forums where many Chinese female marriage migrants use to exchange information, share their personal stories, and most importantly, gain emotional support from what they refer to as their “virtual natal family.” The online forums gave me a glimpse of some aspects of Chinese marital immigrants’ life and motivated me to research the topic. I was able to use the forums to establish initial contacts, yet

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9 After the PRC succeeded in outing the ROC as the representative of China at the United Nations in 1971, and the U.S. president Richard M. Nixon visited the mainland the following year, Taiwan (ROC) has faced severe difficulties in searching for international recognition and restoring diplomatic relations with most countries in the world due to the opposition from the PRC. Only 21 UN member states maintain formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and its official national title—“Republic of China,” is virtually unrecognized in the international community.
I was also highly alert to the fact that such forum users may be a more advantaged group among Chinese marital immigrants, as they have the knowledge and leisure to go online and use such forums.

I began my formal research in the summer of 2008. Since then, I have been to Taiwan every summer and winter break and on average stayed four and half months each year. When I was not in Taiwan, I kept in touch with my informants via instant messenger such as Microsoft MSN and QQ.

This is qualitative research using mixed methods. I first describe the methods in detail and then discuss methodological issues raised in the fieldwork.

Archives

I analyzed several types of documents and a couple of DVDs and a film as part of the research. Documents include official government reports and publications, media reports, non-governmental organization reports, and teaching materials that are used in various classes held by local district offices and NGOs in Taiwan. The official government reports and publications examined included relevant demographic statistics, the rules regulating marital immigrants, evaluations of the “immigrant bride” phenomenon, and publications such as booklets providing information for marriage migrants to adapt to Taiwan. I also gathered and analyzed media reports on Chinese immigrant bride issues, from newspapers, television news, and magazines. Non-governmental organization reports I used were from the Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Services (CARES). This NGO was established in 1950, initially set out to assist members of Chinese diasporas, particularly those from the Indochina Peninsula. After the repeal of martial law in 1987 in Taiwan, the NGO was transformed and began to target services to Chinese marriage migrants. Video materials include one documentary film, “Marriages on the Borders,” directed
by Tsai Tsung-lung, and one DVD, “Chinese spouse’ in pursuit of happiness,” released by Mainland Affairs Council.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation took place in several locations and various occasions—the National Immigration Agency (NIA) headquarters in Taipei, border interviews at the control zone of Taoyuan International Airport, a wide array of government- and NGO-sponsored events, the Taiwanese government’s press conferences and public hearings, educational training programs and life adaptation classes held by district offices, community colleges, and NGOs for Chinese marriage migrants. In some of these classes, I simply sat in along with Chinese marriage migrants, whereas in others, my role was as a teaching assistant. In one of my major field sites—a NGO that provides assistance to Chinese immigrants—I was sometimes put to use providing basic English lessons and game playing with their children. While not teaching or in class with Chinese marital immigrants, I “hung out” in the office, rotating from the kitchen to the reception area. The space is not roomy; therefore I inevitably overheard most phone conversations, ranging from heated domestic fights and disputes about child-rearing, to personal banter. The limitation of space also allowed me to closely observe interactions between social workers and Chinese immigrant wives.

Besides providing the training and life adaptation classes that many local government offices offer, NGOs also organize educational and recreational activities for Chinese marriage migrants and their children that often take place outside of the office, especially in summer. Over the course of my research, I participated in more than a dozen of these activities; I went to the activities my informants went to and did what they did there. On these occasions, my role varied. Sometimes I simply accompanied immigrant groups on tour as an additional participant. In other cases, social workers integrated me into their program, or I helped take care of children. One additional thing I did was to take numerous photos for some Chinese marriage migrants with
more disadvantaged family backgrounds who did not have a smart phone or a camera. After the activity ended, I sat down with these women; they selected the photos they liked, and I printed them out or made a simple photo book for them. They appreciated my efforts so that they could have a visual record for precious moments with their young children. Such experiences allowed me to have more intimate conversations with some of these women and to earn their trust, thus establishing stronger bonding, which then provided a good foundation for in-depth interviews later on.

In addition, I observed meetings Taiwanese men and their families attended at the matchmaker’s home, where they discussed detailed arrangements such as the proper amount of dowry, wedding banquet location, and so on. Such meetings made me realize that cross-border marriages formed through marriage brokers cannot be seen as merely business transactions. Very often the groom and his family stayed in touch with the matchmaker after the wedding, for example, they would attend the weddings of others and their celebrations of new-born babies. Matchmakers often play the role of a marriage counselor to give advises and other helps to the newly-wed couple, and some cross-border couples, after developing their own networks, often become matchmakers themselves. In short, different actors involved in such cross-border marriages form an extensive social network. Once I got to know some Chinese marital migrants better, I also joined their social gatherings in homes and leisure sites. For Chinese women who do not have children, social gatherings mostly happened at inexpensive cafe, KTV, and department stores.\footnote{KTV refers to karaoke box which originated from Japan and became a popular entertaining establishment throughout East Asia.} For Chinese immigrants who have children, their schedules were centered on the kids, and meeting points usually were small parks and plazas near to kindergarten and
Throughout the course of my field work, I interacted with around 120 Chinese marital immigrants and their children, along with about two dozen social workers, government officials, and teachers. Of these, there were approximately forty to fifty immigrants and their family members with whom I interacted on a regular basis, and from these, I drew twenty-seven key informants.

**In-Depth Interview**

Although my research focus is on Chinese female marriage migrants, marriage, after all, is a collective activity, especially under the Han and Confucius traditions. I also included their families, matchmakers, social workers, and relevant government officials in in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews I conducted were semi-structured. I usually started by exploring Chinese women’s migratory narratives and their experiences in Taiwan, such as how they met their husband, how they decided to get married to a Taiwanese man and moved to Taiwan, their first impression of the receiving society, their interaction with in-laws, and then gradually moved to more specific topics like child-rearing, working experiences, social network, transnational ties with their natal family, and their political views. Even though I prepared a general interview outline, the way each interview proceeded depended on the dynamics at the moment. Most interviews with Chinese marriage migrants ranged from three to five hours. For some more complicated cases, I interviewed the same person twice or even three times to allow them finish their personal stories and let the themes emerge more clearly. Occasionally, Chinese marriage migrants’ husbands and/or parents-in-law, particularly mothers-in-law, asked to join. In such cases, I would conduct a group interview first, and then tried to find another chance to have an individual interview with the Chinese marriage migrant.
Interviews with government officials were more structured and concise. I asked about their observations of cross-border marriage, the guidelines and training for border interviews, and their opinions about current immigration policy. They all gave me permission to record the interviews, but when they touched on issues they considered sensitive, they would ask me to stop recording, and then remind me to resume at appropriate times.

In-depth interviews with Chinese marriage migrants were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. In some instances, they would talk in their own dialect or use certain expressions that only prevail in specific regions of China, and I had to ask them to explain in Mandarin Chinese as I do not speak their dialects. Interviews with their husbands and families alternated between Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese. All interviews were recorded, and then transcribed by myself.

1.5 Tales of the Field: Methodological Issues

As Hammersley points out, many scholars challenge traditional ethnographers’ realist conception of validity and argue that, “the data which ethnographers use is a product of their participation in the field rather than a mere reflection of the phenomenon studied, and/or is constructed in and through the process and analysis and the writing of ethnographic accounts” (Hammersley 2013, 2). As soon as I “entered” my field sites, I realized that there was another variable to be evaluated—me, the researcher. Ethnographic knowledge is a result of social relations and interaction, therefore my own biographical background, proclivity, and social positions inevitably shaped my epistemological lens of observation and comprehension (What do I see and hear? How do I know?). These attributes influenced the research in all phases, from forming and revising research questions, my conduct in the field as to how I presented myself to research participants, to evaluating the relevance of materials and then finally reporting my findings. In other words, the researcher is never transparent in any ethnographic inquiry. My presence and status channeled the influx of data mediated by my interactions with the research
participants. Questions such as how they perceived my positions and responded to research agendas and whether my positions allowed me to be an “insider” or put me as an “outsider” are all relevant issues in fieldwork.

In addition to these issues, the dilemma of power in fieldwork has long been a serious concern in the discussion of ethnographic investigation. The ethnographer learns about research participants’ lives through interactions in which the ethnographer unavoidably connects to informants in deeply human ways. Yet the ethnographer later becomes the official storyteller of informants’ lives, the solo author of interpreted texts which, though unintended, may result in negative consequences for informants.

However, no matter how imbalanced the power relation in fieldwork may be, it is important to keep in mind that power is never stagnant but relational and shifting. Informants are by no means passive recipients but active participants. Although they do not write the texts themselves, research participants hold power in the production of knowledge as they decide what to share and how to share, and such decisions are often shaped by their constructions of the researcher. The asymmetrical power relation is fundamentally rooted in ethnographic practice, and such power dynamics have an impact on how questions are defined, which informants are given validity, how interactions are interpreted, and how ethnographic texts are produced. Feminist standpoint, postmodern, and postcolonial scholars emphasize how relationships between researchers and research participants are dynamic and ever-changing, and they further question the interpretive authority of the ethnographer by calling for the recognition of social and cultural situatedness of ethnographer and writing. Feminist ethnographer Nancy Naples argues that, although not a perfect solution for overcoming distortion or exploitation in research relationships, by utilizing reflective strategies that are informed by standpoint epistemology framework, ethnographers “become aware of, and diminish the ways in which, domination and repression are reproduced in the course of research and in the products of their work” (Naples
In other words, to critically and self-reflexively deconstruct our own ethnographic practices can help researchers construct ethnographic accounts with fewer negative consequences. In this section, I will unpack my research process, situate my cultural and social locations, and discuss how my status influences this dissertation project.

**Why Do You Want to Study “Them”?**

Initially, I planned to start the search for informants through personal connections, as one of my cousins is married to a Chinese woman and many of his neighbors whom he had friendly relationships with also have Chinese spouses. Maybe I was a bit too naïve; I did not expect I would encounter too many obstacles as they are relatives and neighbors of my relatives, though I have to admit I do not have close relationships in the neighborhood. When hearing about my research in a casual conversation, my uncle’s and his neighbors’ responses were: “why bother to study them? Don’t you need something better for a degree in America?” People were perplexed by my interest in Chinese marriage migrants’ lives. The remarks I heard, mostly from Taiwanese husbands and parents-in-law, men in particular, also indicated that even though these Chinese women are married to Taiwanese men and reside in Taiwan, they are still seen as “others.” Furthermore, my research interest—cross-border marriage with a focus on Chinese female marriage migrants’ lives—was regarded as too domestic, therefore a feminine and trivial issue, and led to doubts about whether it was good enough to earn a degree in an advanced country—the U.S. Soon I learned that I would have to present my research in a different way and “upgraded” my interests as immigration policy or demographic changes so that some Taiwanese parents-in-law and husbands would perceive my interest as a legitimate research topic and introduce the Chinese marital immigrant in their family to me. Although I was able to get in touch with some cross-border marriage families in this initial stage of research, I did not pursue more recruitment through personal connections, nor did I use much data I gathered in the initial phase of the
research. However, my experiences are still valuable as I began to learn that how Chinese marriage migrants are stigmatized and how families deal with the perception of “buying a bride.”

**Who Are You?**

My own status—an unmarried female doctoral student, born and raised in Taiwan and living in the United States for years—proved mostly positive in understanding the practices, motivations, and emotions of people in my research, though not without predicaments. I remember one particular episode vividly which happened when I just “entered” the field. It was a government-sponsored outdoor event that was set out to promote multiculturalism, and I went with a few Chinese women whom I had recently met at a language class. While chatting, they were surprised to learn that I was a Taiwanese. None of them believed me when I introduced myself, and suddenly my role as a researcher was reversed as they took a great interest in me and became the ones asking a lot of questions. I was shocked and tried to understand why I did not appear to be Taiwanese in the eyes of these Chinese marriage migrants. Was it because of my Mandarin accent, my manner, and/or my appearance? Should I try to change anything? Would I get “better” data if I were perceived by Chinese marital immigrants as a “true” Taiwanese? A couple of Chinese women said that I speak Mandarin in such a “standard and correct” way, like a newsreader. I am aware that I do pronounce words in a prescribed way that may slightly distinguish me from the Taiwanese general public, but I certainly do not have a Chinese accent and there is no way these Chinese immigrants could mistake me for a Chinese national. I asked them if they did not think I was a Taiwanese, where did they think I was from. Answers were all over the place, and in fact they could not articulate the reasons that I did not, in their own words, “look like a Taiwanese” to them. I eventually had to show them my national identification card to “prove” that I was indeed Taiwanese. It was one of those cute anecdotal moments in ethnographic research, but what is worth mentioning was that it was not an isolated incident; similar incidents happened over and
over again later on in my fieldwork with other groups, and my designation among some Chinese marriage migrants became “the girl who is writing about us in English.”

After I spent more time with Chinese marriage migrants, they realized that I was Taiwanese, yet they did not associate me with “other Taiwanese people” in the society. It is puzzling and difficult to pinpoint a specific reason that they did not perceive me as Taiwanese at first. Perhaps they regarded me as disconnected with Taiwanese society because I left the island since college, or perhaps they sensed my friendly attitude that might be significantly different from the gaze they received from the Taiwanese general public. I gradually realized that such strange and ambiguous images they have towards me in fact facilitated my data collection tremendously. During the course of my fieldwork, I heard numerous times a Chinese marital immigrant saying “you are the first real Taiwanese friend I make,” or “I am only telling you this because you are not like other Taiwanese.” To some of them, I was not simply a friend, but a de facto Taiwanese friend who was not so Taiwanese. It became clear to me that my U.S. connection was translated into a distance from Taiwanese society, and therefore they were comfortable with me as I was “not one of those Taiwanese reporters who write bad things about Chinese.” Moreover, knowing that I would be writing in a foreign language also made Chinese marital immigrants feel “safe” to talk freely, because it was unlikely that people in their surroundings would come across the texts I produced.

Although my own life journey that created a connection to the U.S. and somewhat disassociated me from Taiwanese society helped me gain access to Chinese female marriage migrants, my social locations did not always result in smooth and positive encounters in field sites. One example was the objection I faced from some Taiwanese husbands, especially those who used introduction agencies to get married. In a government-sponsored life adaptation program located in an old neighborhood of Taipei City, I noticed that a few Taiwanese husbands always came to pick up their wives after class ended. Initially, I thought they were taking great care of the women
so they did not have to take crowded buses, but after a couple incidents I learned the truth was far different. One of the husbands, a middle-aged man whose appearance suggested he might have a labor-intensive occupation, after seeing me walking downstairs with his wife a few times deliberately warned me to stay away from her. I had no clue where and how I offended him given the extremely limited interaction I had with him at the time. His wife apologized for his hostile attitude to me in the next class. When I asked why he seemed hostile to me, she hesitated for a short while and eventually said “he is worried that you would have bad influences on me.” She did not elaborate further but let me wonder in dark what possible bad influences I have. This was not a isolated incident. On a different occasion, another Taiwanese husband jokingly “advised” me to stop the research and find a husband before I lost my “market value”; otherwise I would “rot as an old virgin in a library.” After meeting some more guarded Taiwanese husbands, I gradually learned that in their own construction, I represented the image of a modern independent woman who “studies too much.” These Taiwanese husbands expect their wives to play a traditional gender role—assisting the husband and devoting themselves fully to family, and they are afraid that their wives would receive the “wrong ideas” from me and run away. Some of these Chinese female marriage migrants followed their husband’s orders to keep a safe distance from me, and others, despite their husbands’ opposition, kept up friendly relationships with me.

Such uncomfortable encounters only happened a few times during the course of my fieldwork, but all these hostile Taiwanese husbands shared a similar profile—working-class men who used introduction agencies to get married. Although this cannot be objectively verified, I gradually developed a sense that the unfriendly exchanges might be a result, at least in part, of class differences. These Taiwanese husbands told their wives not to hang-out with me because I studied too much and was not an exemplary model for a good wife. The unspoken script, however, might be that my middle-class upbringing led them to think that I saw them as immoral men who “buy a wife,” like my friends’ reaction towards my cousin’s wedding. It is easy to presume that as
a researcher, I would have easier access and smooth interactions with my own countrymen, given the shared language and culture, yet for this specific instance, it proved to be the opposite. My middle-class proclivity appears to be polite and friendly to these Chinese wives, especially the newly-weds, and they wanted to make a new friend. Because they just emigrated and haven’t developed a full understanding of how the Taiwanese general public sees cross-Strait marriage formed through introduction agencies, they did not hold any prejudice towards me. On the other hand, these Taiwanese husbands are cultural insiders in the society and highly aware of the stigma attached to their marriages, therefore they may have suspected that I would be judgmental about their marriages and deploy a guarded attitude. Throughout my entire fieldwork, working-class Taiwanese husbands who used introduction agencies were the group that I found the most difficult to talk to because of gender and class differences. The conversations and interviews I had with this group of Taiwanese men were often in the Holo language. Although I am a native Holo speaker, I sometimes felt that my accent and choice of words reflected my middle-class upbringing and further created a distance or uneasiness. I relied heavily on their Chinese wives who often served as a lubricant. These Taiwanese husbands’ unfriendly attitudes towards me lessened as my relationship with their wives got closer, and they opened up to tell me their life stories, yet my interactions with them stayed on a more formal level.

When I interacted with government officials, social workers, and Chinese marriage migrants’ families, my social position resulted in a completely different story. Most Taiwanese in-laws implicitly assumed that I would think and act like them, as I am Taiwanese as well, and there is a “Chinese bride” in my extended family. Such assumptions, albeit often false, helped me gather data because they felt at ease in sharing their opinions with someone like me. Nevertheless, I was sometimes emotionally troubled on hearing all sorts of prejudiced remarks from some of my fellow nationals. Although I sought an empathetic understanding and tried to locate their remarks in a historical and structural context, I sometimes felt like an accomplice when I just sat
there listening to their discriminatory words and finding myself unable to use a skillful and polite way to argue against their prejudice without provoking them.

Perhaps the most challenging situation was in the few group interviews I conducted. For various reasons, some families preferred to be interviewed together. I found myself in an embarrassingly sandwiched position in those instances. Taiwanese parents-in-law (mostly mothers-in-law) thought that I was “on their side” and sometimes asked me directly, in the presence of their Chinese daughters-in-law, to “teach” them how to behave “more like an educated Taiwanese” as my age was closer to theirs. At the same time, Chinese marriage migrants, often in a marginal position in the family, seemed to expect me to “defend” them and reason with their parents-in-law. I also witnessed a couple of family quarrels. After a few group interviews, I decided that I would try to avoid group interviews as much as possible, or at least try to have a separate individual interview aside from the group interview. I made this decision not only because I felt distressed at being caught between different parties involved in a group interview, but more importantly, I sensed that the narratives I heard on such occasions were often tainted by delicate social relations. For example, in one group interview a Taiwanese mother-in-law expressed how grateful she was to her Chinese daughter-in-law, because now she no longer had to worry that no one would take care of her son when he got old. She certainly painted a rosy happy family picture in front of me. Perhaps her intention was to “save face,” or, like the English phrase, did not want to “wash one’s dirty linen at home.” However, later on the Chinese daughter-in-law reached out to me and asked for a chance to listen to “her side of story,” as she felt that her mother-in-law verbally abused her all the time. In another case, the Taiwanese husband insisted on accompanying his wife at the interview, and I noticed that he constantly interrupted and “corrected” his wife. Although a group interview provided an opportunity for me to observe interactions, such instances led me to understand how important it is to create a comfortable and
safe space for subjects to express themselves freely, especially for those who occupy a less privileged position.

**Are You Going to Be A “Bride” in America?**

In explaining how gender, as a personal characteristic that carries social meaning, is a profound fulcrum altering field relations, Carol Warren points out that “the fieldworker is the (embodied) research instrument” (Warren 2001). My field practice echoes some feminist ethnographers’ argument that a more open dialogue may be possible when a female fieldworker studies female subjects. Moreover, my own migratory experience enabled me to develop an empathetic understanding of the difficulties a woman encounters when living in a foreign country. Although my research participants and I share some commonalities such as gender, race, and to some extent, language, I found that the differences in educational backgrounds, class, marital status, motherhood, and age also shape the field relations significantly. Quite a few of my informants hold a college or junior college degree, but the majority came from a working class or lower-middle class family background. As much as I was interested in my subjects’ (mostly Chinese female marriage migrants) lives in Taiwan, they were also curious about the details of my life in the United States. Though I was living on a meager fellowship, in these Chinese women’s eyes, the fact that I could “afford” to stay in school, and even more profoundly, a school in the United States, meant that I occupied a privileged position. However, such a position was perceived and interpreted differently among Chinese marital immigrants.

Elderly Chinese marriage migrants, particularly those who were married to old veterans, tended to see me as their little sister who was in need of life coaching lessons. Once they learned I was unmarried and still in school, unlike younger Chinese mothers who often asked me to help their children’s homework and explain to them the education system, elder Chinese marriage migrants are likely to see my pursuit of an advanced degree as a waste of time for a woman, and
that the diploma would severely “damage” my “value and prospects” in the marriage market. The salient marker of the class difference between these women and me, as they perceived it, was not necessarily education level, but skin color. They often “complimented” my fair skin tone and said “you must be from a good family,” as it is an indication that I did not need to toil under the sun. Drawing from the hardship they have experienced in their lives, they constantly told me not to spend too much time studying, but instead to actively seek opportunities to marry a White American man. “Then you will be a ‘Taiwanese bride’ in American, just like us,” and we all laughed. Their comments on my personal life and their views of marriage may seem outdated and racist, but it is important to understand their life narrative in a historical context, which I will discuss in chapter three.

Like all ethnographies, mine is a particular account, conditioned by my own positioning, and to some extent, also by fluctuations in cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan. I do not claim to make generalizations about all Chinese female marriage migrants in Taiwan based upon the findings from my fieldwork. One of the objectives in ethnographic research is to establish deep and meaningful connections with informants in order to understand their behaviors, and eventually, to see the differences between what people do and what people say they do. By engaging in various activities with these immigrants, I was able to gain insights that were not revealed in interviews. Moreover, thinking through Chinese marriage migrants’ comments on my own ways of life also helped me better understand their perceptions of marriage and the power relations embedded in the Taiwanese cultural and social system that shaped their lives.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

The remaining chapters of the dissertation are structured as follows:

Chapter Two: Historical Contexts & Contemporary Trends
This chapter gives a basic introduction to the immigrant-receiving site—Taiwan. The objective of this chapter is to provide a historical narrative and to lay out contemporary cross-strait relations that enable a better background that can help appreciate how and why cross-border marriage becomes a contested site in which gender, ethnicity, and national sovereignty entwine with each other.

Chapter Three: One Strait, Two Stories

I start this chapter with a close examination of the terminologies that are used to refer to Chinese marriage migrants. This analysis not only shows how terminologies have changed over time, but more importantly, also clarifies how and why Chinese female migrants’ body has become subjected to sexism and nationalism. Furthermore, I sketch a portrait of Chinese wives and Taiwanese husbands and also explore different forces that bring these people together to form marriages across the Taiwan Strait.

Chapter Four: Wife or Worker?

This chapter illustrates the patriarchal power relations within cross-border marriage households. In particular, I explore how cultural values of filial piety influence intergenerational relations. I also demonstrate that in the absence of public provisions of care, cross-border marriage becomes a strategy for men with less financial resource in Taiwan to obtain care.

Chapter Five: The Taste of Home

This chapter builds on previous chapters to consider the gendered power dynamics within cross-border marriage through a discussion of foodways, which is not a common topic in the sociological migration literature. I also carefully depict how food is not only a necessity of life but a unique carrier of meanings that are socially constructed, and how differences in food
preparation and dietary preference often become a source of subtle discrimination and conflicts in cross-border marriage households. Despite the structural limitation that Chinese marital immigrants face at home, they find opportunities to prepare and share food together, and such occasions often evoke cultural memories. Through various food-related activities, Chinese marital immigrants create a social food space and community among each other.
Chapter 2: Historical Contexts & Contemporary Trends

As anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff remind ethnographers, “no ethnography can ever hope to penetrate beyond the surface planes of everyday life, to plumb its invisible forms, unless it is informed by the historical imagination” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). This chapter thus aims not only to provide a basic introduction to the region of study but, more importantly, to lay out a historical context of the immigrant-receiving society. Understanding this context allows a better comprehension of the background of Chinese female marriage migrants’ daily life, the source of conflicts and tensions, and the emergence of cross-border marriage as a site where gender, ethnicity, and national sovereignty interact with each other, which I further examine in following chapters.

During the course of my fieldwork, my subjects, especially the ones who hadn’t lived in Taiwan for long, often complained that they were treated, by Taiwanese society and government, worse than marriage migrants from Southeast Asian countries. They asked questions and made complaints such as “why is my neighbor nicer to a Filipina maid than to me?”; “How come immigrant spouses from Southeast Asian countries get working permit and national ID before us?”, and “why is my father-in-law, a benshengren (Native Taiwanese), have a more hostile attitude toward China than the less-developed Southeast Asian countries?” Chinese marital immigrants were puzzled and hurt by this differential treatment, partly because the education they received in China taught them that Taiwan is a baodao (treasured island), a lost province of China that will eventually come back to the motherland, which inevitably led them to consider themselves, compared to their counterparts from Southeast Asian countries, culturally and emotionally closer to the Taiwanese and therefore entitled to equal if not better treatment. Yet the reality they face is a completely opposite story.
The reason why Chinese spouses are treated differently from other foreigners is not determined by cross-border marriage itself, but by contestations over sovereignty that are embedded in cross-strait relations. In addition to the differential treatment they observe, it also takes time for Chinese marriage migrants to understand the domestic ethnic landscape in Taiwan, how ethnic tensions could affect them even in their family life, and the required strategy to handle all sorts of situation they did not expect previously. From micro-level matter such as how Chinese marriage migrants negotiate ethnic tensions in family, to meso-level question like why the influx of Chinese marriage migrants induce public anxiety about immigrants’ national commitments and identification, to macro-level issue such as the Taiwan government imposes particular regulation on Chinese marriage migrants and their cross-border marriage because of its uncertain sovereign status and contested political ties with China, all these intertwined and delicate issues cannot be fully understood without a historical narrative. This chapter serves as prelude to later analysis.

2.1 Geography & Demography

Taiwan (Republic of China) is composed of the island of Taiwan and other remote small islands. The island of Taiwan is located between China to the west across the Taiwan Strait (130-220 kilometers), Japan to the north, and the Philippines to the south. With a total area of 36,181 square kilometers, Taiwan is slightly larger than Belgium or the state of Maryland. ¹ Because of its ravishing landscape, Portuguese explorers called it Ilha Formosa (beautiful island) in the 16th century. Most people think the name “Taiwan” is of Chinese origin, but, in fact, it is a Dutch name from the first Dutch settlement in the early 17th century (Tsai 2009).

¹ Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan (http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat/index.aspx)
Taiwan has a population of 23.5 million people with four major ethnic groups—Austronesian aborigines, Holo-speaking people, Hakka, and Mainlanders. Austronesian aborigines are descendants of the earliest settlers on the island and make up a bit less than 2% of the population. Hakka people, whose ancestors came mostly from Guangdong Province of China, constitute approximately 11%. Holo-speaking people, whose ancestors came from Fujian Province of China and began to settle in Taiwan in the 17th century, are the largest group that makes up roughly 77%. About one to two million Chinese migrated to latecomers and their descendants are referred as guo-seng-ren (lit., people of other provinces, Mainlanders), and the group makes up 10% of the population. Among these groups, the combination of Holo and Hakka are often categorized as the “Native Taiwanese” or the local Taiwanese in contrast to the Mainlanders (see Figure 2.1). It is important to note that except for the status of Aborigines, which is clearly defined by law, others are subjective classification. Ethnic identity is often viewed as formed by common ancestry and/or common culture, but scholars like Melisa J. Brown point out that “culture and ancestry are not what ultimately unite an ethnic group or nation ... identity is formed and solidified on the basis of common social experience, including economic and political experience” (Brown 2004, 2). In the context of Taiwan, ethnic distinctions often have a significant influence on people’s political views, particularly on the issue of Taiwan’s national identity and cross-strait relations.

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2 Melisa J. Brown notes that there have been debates among scholars like Hill Gates and Mao-kuei Chang on whether “Mainlander” should be used as an ethnic distinction. Brown argues that, although Mainlanders as a group do not have the same ancestry and culture, they do share similar political constructions and living experiences. She therefore suggests that “Mainlander” is indeed an ethnic distinction and should be capitalized, like “Han” and “Aborigine” (Brown 2004, 2). I agree with Brown’s argument and so follow the same usage here.

3 Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan (http://sowf.moi.gov.tw/stat/year/list.htm)
2.2 Early Settlers (17th century)

Taiwan has been subjected to various outside rulers for centuries, which shaped its unique historical experience. Taiwan’s complicated historical trajectories inevitably contribute to its struggle for a collective identity, and scholars like Stephane Corcuff aptly describe Taiwan as “a laboratory of identities” (Corcuff 2002, xi). The earliest appearance of Chinese inhabitants in Taiwan has been the subject of heated political debates, as Chinese nationalists have been trying to prove that the island of Taiwan has always been part of the territory of China. Scholars like John E. Wills show that, even in 1600, Taiwan “was on the outer edge of Chinese consciousness and activity” (Wills 2007, 85). According to Wills, Taiwan was inhabited mostly by the Aborigines, and during the course of the 17th century, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, English, and Dutch all sought to establish settlements to take advantage of the island’s commercial value.

The Dutch fought off competitors, including Chinese and Japanese pirates, to build their first forts in southern Taiwan in 1624, which marked the first foreign occupation on
the island. Around the same period of time, the Spanish also established a settlement in northern Taiwan but eventually ceded it to the Dutch in 1642 (Wills 2007). The Dutch rule in Taiwan did not last long because of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition in China. Cheng Cheng-kung, also known by the English name of Koxinga, was a self-styled Ming Dynasty loyalist. He commanded a significant naval force and fought the Manchus throughout the 1650s, but eventually was defeated and then retreated to Taiwan, where his troops expelled the Dutch. Koxinga brought a massive influx of immigrants from China and established the first Han Chinese polity on the island, thus Taiwan gradually became sinicized. After Koxinga’s death, his son did not relinquish his father’s dream but continued developing the island as a base from which to overthrow the newly founded Qing Dynasty. The reign of the Cheng family in Taiwan finally came to an end as the Qing military took over Taiwan in 1683 and administratively placed Taiwan under Fujian province (Croizier 1977; Simon 2005).

2.3 The Chinese (Manchu) Presence (1683-1895)

Soon after the Qing undertook formal administration of Taiwan, it prohibited family migration in the hope that only seasonal laborers would enter Taiwan. Specifically, from 1684 to 1788, Chinese women were not permitted to migrate to Taiwan (Brown 1996; Shepherd 2007). Even though the Qing administration set a ban on mixed marriages between Han Chinese and the Aborigines, young and rootless Chinese men still sought out aboriginal women for wives. As a result, many Taiwanese people are in fact not “purely”  

4 Koxinga was born in 1624 in Hirado, Japan. His mother was Japanese, and his father was maritime adventurer from Fujian province, China. Croizier points out that Koxinga’s image has changed over the time and eventually became the nationalist symbol not of dynastic loyalty but of patriotic resistance to foreign occupation (Croizier 1977).
Han but have mixed ancestry, especially with ancestral ties to Austronesian aboriginal tribes who inhabited on the west coastal plains (Simon 2005).

Even under the Qing’s rule, foreign powers still coveted Taiwan because of its strategic location. For example, Japan signed treaties with the Aborigines and established a military presence in eastern Taiwan in the 1870s. The French briefly occupied northern Taiwan during the Sino-French War (1884-1885) (Garadella 2007). Eventually, the Qing upgraded the island to a province in 1887 and started a series of modernization projects, but these projects did not last long. In 1895, Taiwan, along with Penhu (Pescadores Islands, a group of islands located about 50 kilometers west of the island of Taiwan in the Taiwan Strait), were ceded in full sovereignty to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which marked the start of a half-century of Japanese rule.

### 2.4 Taiwan under Japanese Rule (1895-1945)

Resenting the idea of another foreign occupation, Taiwanese elites founded the Republic of Formosa on May 20, 1895, in the hope that an independent Taiwan could not be handed over legally to Japan by the Chinese Qing.⁵ These elites’ idealism—taking the American and French models to build Asia’s first republic—was soon proved to be a fragile dream in the face of Asia’s first imperialist militant power. The modern Japanese troops squashed large-scale organized resistance by the end of 1895, even though sporadic local guerilla activities continued until 1902 (Lamley 2007).

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⁵ Although beyond the scope and purpose of this chapter, there are many different English translations for 臺灣民主國, such as the Taiwan Republic and the Formosan Democratic Republic. For detailed discussions, see (黃昭堂 1993).
Drawing insights from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Scott Simon argues that it was Japan that “first imagined ‘Taiwan’ in the sense of an ‘imagined community’” (Simon 2003, 113). It was with this imagination that Japan ruled Taiwan differently from the Dutch, the Cheng family, and the Chinese Qing. Not only did Japan lay out a solid foundation of modernization in Taiwan, including agricultural and industrial development, it also united the island into one efficient administrative system by taking a general population census, producing modern maps, and setting up a household registration system. Japan also implemented two doctrines—“assimilation” (*dōka*) and “equal treatment under one view” (*isshi dōjin*)—though not surprisingly Taiwanese people could still only be second-class imperial subjects (Morris 2004). With such doctrines, Japan launched various cultural programs, from eradicating what the Japanese saw as the two most backward Manchu customs—women’s foot-binding and men’s Manchu-style queue (pigtail)—and established official Shinto shrines and name-changing. Under the strict colonial rule, Taiwan had been transformed into a relatively stable and prosperous island by the 1930s. By the end of the Japanese administration, the majority population had learned Japanese, and outstanding students were sent to Japan for higher education, some of whom later joined circles of Japanese intellectuals.

Despite the fact that Japan killed thousands of Taiwanese people, the Japanese colonial rule is widely remembered as a time of great public order and modernity in Taiwan. To this day, many older Native Taiwanese people are still proud of their Japanese education or even the time they served in the Japanese army. These collective historical memories are important because they did not only affect elder generation but also were passed onto following generations and shaped their views.6 The Japanese colonial legacy

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6 In anthropologist Scott Simon’s five-year fieldwork in Taiwan, he documented that many of his interviewees, who did not actually live under the Japanese rule or were too young to
in some elder politicians occasionally creates political turbulence. For some Native Taiwanese people, these shared and/or re-constructed social memories allow them to narrate the KMT rule as yet another colonial occupation and in fact more repressive than the preceding regime. It is crucial to address these historical memories rooted in the Japanese colonial era because they play an influential role in shaping ethnic boundaries in Taiwan.

This historical context also helps us better understand the ways in which Chinese female marriage migrants experience different ethnic tensions in Taiwanese society. In my own fieldwork, Chinese female marriage migrants, across generational and regional backgrounds, were surprised to learn of the general friendly attitude of many Native Taiwanese people towards Japan, which is very different from the education and the prevailing anti-Japanese in China. For example, just after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, one informant asked me in a Skype conversation to persuade her husband not to donate money to Japan as she could not understand his reasoning and thought that they could use the money for other purposes. Middle-aged Chinese women who are married

have any accountable memory of it, described how Taiwanese society was better in the Japanese colonial era in contrast to the Chinese Nationalist regime (Simon 2003).

7 For example, Taiwan’s former President Lee Teng-hui (the first democratically-elected and also the first native-born Taiwanese president) publicly declared his cultural fondness and emotional attachment to Japan which irritated Chinese nationalists in Taiwan and Beijing authorities.

8 According to the Japanese Red Cross Society, Taiwan, with a relatively small population, ranked as the second largest oversea donor. Details can be found: (http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/recovery/AJ201304030146) (http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/03/12/2003527601)

The informant was puzzled and frustrated that her husband and parents-in-law decided to donate money to Japanese society, even though their family was not particularly well-off. On the other hand, her husband told me that both his parents and he wanted to help not only out of a general compassion but also they felt “close to” Japan. He also explained
to Mainlander veterans encounter different ethnic tensions as their husbands’ life narratives and ethnic and national identities are distinct from those of Native Taiwanese. These issues will be discussed in Chapter Three and Four.

2.5 Under the Chinese Nationalist Party Rule

Following the surrender of Japan at the end of the Second World War, Taiwan was handed over on behalf of the Allies to the Republic of China led by Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (KMT, the Nationalist Party). In the Chinese Civil War, the KMT was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and eventually retreated to Taiwan in 1949. Although only a province of the KMT-led Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan then became the de facto ROC. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—commonly-known now as China.

After more and more Mainlanders arrived on the island, different cultural expectations from ethnic groups soon turned Taiwan into a contested site of identities. It is worth noting that language barriers also made communication difficult, if not impossible, as the majority of the local population spoke only Hoklo and Japanese, and the Mainlanders spoke Mandarin Chinese and other Chinese regional dialects. As the most modern and perhaps the wealthiest province in the ROC in the 1940s, Taiwan was stripped of raw materials such as sugar, salt, and coal, as well as industrial goods like machinery.

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that his family did not give any money after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, because they saw China as a threat to Taiwan.

9 Taiwan was “returned” to Chinese rule in 1945 based upon a 1943 agreement in Cairo Conference (without consulting any actual Taiwanese people) among Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang did not made a serious effort to claim that Taiwan belonged to China, as the constitutions written in 1925 and 1936 did not include Taiwan as a province of China. America, in fact, played a crucial role in determining Taiwan’s fate (Copper 2012).
railway wiring, and factories after the KMT takeover in 1945. The unemployment rate skyrocketed, with rapid inflation and severe shortages of food and other basic necessities, and public health standards and social order deteriorated dramatically (Copper 2012; Morris 2004).\textsuperscript{10} Corruption was rampant at all levels of government and the military. After a fifty-year Japanese administration, the Native Taiwanese had been accustomed to the modernist expectations of efficiency, order, and more importantly, polite civil society. They viewed the incoming Chinese population, particularly soldiers, as poor, uncivilized and undisciplined, and the KMT government as backward, corrupt, and inefficient. Many people were nostalgic about the clean environment and the safe society enforced by strict social rules and the laws under the Japanese administration and identified themselves as culturally closer to Japan to assert their superiority relative to the Mainlanders (Simon 2005).\textsuperscript{11} From the Mainlanders’ standpoint, they regarded the Native Taiwanese as poisoned by Japanese imperialism, and Taiwan as just a land for a temporary stay, as the KMT set a jihad-like project for taking back mainland China.

The worsened economy and exacerbated tensions between Mainlanders and Taiwanese eventually led to the 2:28 Incident in 1947.\textsuperscript{12} Several KMT plainclothes police officers beat a middle-aged widow for selling contraband cigarettes and then fatally injured some bystanders on the evening of February 27, 1947. As news of the incident

\textsuperscript{10}The high unemployment rate was distinctive among the Native Taiwanese. According to Andrew D. Morris, about 37,000 Taiwanese lost their positions in the KMT-led government. While on average 56% government posts were held by Taiwanese during the Japanese-rule era, the figure dropped to 22% in the KMT regime (Morris 2004).

\textsuperscript{11}It is important to note that such resentment sometimes was voiced in class terms, such as Chinese soldiers washed rice in toilet bowls or did not know how tap water worked.

\textsuperscript{12}There have been scholarly debates on the terminology, and some scholars insist on using “2:28 Massacre” instead of “2:28 Incident” to refer this historical event. See further discussions: (Shih and Chen 2010; Simon 2003; Edmondson 2002).
spread, the Native Taiwanese’ anger towards the KMT regime broke out. Protesters put up signs written in Japanese such as “Down with Military Tyranny”; they also chanted slogans in Taiwanese like “Let Taiwan rule itself” (Morris 2004). As the raw rage boiled and violence erupted in streets, the Native Taiwanese elites formed “2:28 Resolution Committees” to demand an investigation into the incident, an end to government corruption, the implementation of democratic and economic reforms, and limited self-rule. Such demands soon became the basis for a widespread movement in which the island’s middle class were heavily involved. Instead of responding to Taiwanese people’s demands, however, the KMT governor Chen Yi requested military reinforcement from Chiang Kai-shek. As soon as the troops landed on Taiwan, they started massive, indiscriminate killings in the streets and civilians’ homes. For the following several months, thousands of Taiwanese, particularly intellectuals who were seen as a potential threat to the KMT regime, were systematically arrested, tortured, and executed (Simon 2003; Shih and Chen 2010). It is difficult to study the history of this period of time as the KMT government tried to erase public memories by destroying records and silencing the general public. However, George Kerr, a U.S. State Department official stationed in Taiwan at the time and an academic in later years, described his first-hand observations and offered an analysis independent of the KMT’s control in the book Formosa Betrayed (Kerr 1965).

The 2:28 Incident’s influence on Taiwanese national identity is absolutely paramount. For many Native Taiwanese people, the event not only demonstrated that the KMT was yet another foreign and violent conqueror, but also planted the idea of opposing the acceptance of a Chinese identity in the minds of an entire generation and their offspring. One renowned example is Taiwanese elite Peng Ming-min, a former

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13 Estimates of the number of executed Taiwanese in 1947 massacres vary widely from 10,000 to more than 20,000 (Shih and Chen 2010).
presidential candidate, who publicly denounced his Chinese identity and hoped his descendants would marry foreigners to remove Chinese blood from the lineage (Peng 1972).

Politically, the KMT's project was to assume absolute subjugation of Taiwan, to this end, martial law based upon repression and coercion was soon imposed and the era of “White Terror” began. 14 Any advocacy of Taiwan’s independence—meaning the proclamation of Taiwan as a sovereign state independent of China—was brutally suppressed. By the end of 1950s, the KMT government had taken approximately 1,400 political prisoners and had executed a couple thousand more (Morris 2004).

Culturally, facing resistance from members of Taiwanese society, especially from the local elites, the KMT regime’s agenda was to implement sinicisation. Propaganda campaigns such as “Cultural Renaissance” and “Cultural Reconstruction” were introduced. The KMT's cultural project aimed to rid Taiwanese society of Japanese influences, to counter the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976), and most importantly, to make Taiwan a safe haven for preserving traditional Chinese culture and thus claim to be a place for authentic “Chineseness.” Among all the cultural policies, the national Mandarin-centered language policy was arguably the most influential. People were forced to speak only Mandarin and learn traditional Chinese characters. 15 By imposing a mono-language policy on the predominantly Japanese-, Holo-, and Hakka-speaking population, the KMT government intended to compel the Taiwanese general public to conform to its sinicisation

14 KMT’s martial law was established in 1947 and lasted until 1987, which is the longest period of martial law in human history.

15 Traditional Chinese characters are used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, whereas simplified Chinese characters have been used in China since Chairman Mao Zedong launched the simplification movement in the 1950s.
agenda and also to legitimize its rule. The sinicisation projects were not limited to language enforcement but extended to a centralized curriculum designed to teach students history and geography about China but not Taiwan. A wide-spread saying best depicted the absurdity of the KMT’s cultural policies—“geography class teaches history and history class teaches mythology” (Simon 2003).

Economically, Taiwan went through several phases in a relatively short period of time, from an agricultural-based economy in the 1940s to one of the four “Asian Tigers” by the 1980s, and then to recent struggles after the financial crisis in 2008. The KMT government adopted a model of state-controlled development, and in response to global economic restructuring in the 1960s, Taiwan’s economy was redirected to fit into a worldwide, Western-directed economic system by introducing export-oriented industrialization (EOI). Export processing zones (EPZ) were set up, with inexpensive power, tax exemptions, cheap utilities, and a low-wage and “docile” labor force to attract foreign investment (Castells 1992). The state owned the majority of capital-intensive enterprises in heavy industries, but left most small businesses unregulated to cope on their own. On the one hand, Taiwan’s approach allowed its capital-deficient small enterprises to take a fast path to industrialization without expensive costs and to quickly gain access to the international market. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that could be set up by members of the rural lower middle-classes also allowed Taiwan to achieve a

16 According to Manuel Castells, Taiwan was the first country to establish export processing zones (EPZs)—a model that was later adopted in many Third World countries. It is also important to note that martial law had strong economic implication—workers were not allowed to strike. Therefore, the nationalist government could advertise Taiwan abroad as having a cheap and docile labor supply (Castells 1992).

17 The major industries, along with major political positions, were overwhelmingly occupied by the Mainlanders. The Native Taiwanese did not have much option but to focus on small industry and entrepreneurship.
considerable equality of income distribution. On the other hand, this pattern of development resulted in a highly market-dependent economy, thus making Taiwanese capital extremely vulnerable to international economic circumstances such as world recession, oil crisis, and trade restrictions/negotiations. By the 1980s, Taiwan had become one of the newly industrialized economies (NIEs), and occupied a semi-peripheral position in the world system (E. N. Chow 2002; Rubinstein 2007b). The rapid economic development along with a low unemployment rate, fairly equal distribution of wealth, and social and political stability from the 1960s to the early 1980s is now the well-told story of the “Taiwan miracle.”

The Nationalist Party often portrays itself as a superior leader guiding Taiwan to economic prosperity, but the picture of the “Taiwan miracle” is incomplete unless we bring in the American factor (A. Lee 2004; Copper 2012). The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 launched the first hot war of the Cold War era, and the U.S. government decided that it was vital to include Taiwan as part of its Asian front against communism. The U.S. government only officially recognized the Communist Party’s People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the government of China in 1979. That is to say, for thirty years, the U.S. bought into Chiang Kai-shek’s fictional idea that the ROC regime in Taiwan was the rightful government of China. As a result, Taiwan was known as “Free China” for a long time. On the one hand, the intervention of American military forces in the Taiwan Strait kept Taiwan out of communist China’s hands. On the other hand, the U.S. helped solidify the harsh KMT regime and gave it tacit approval despite the fact that the party was no longer welcome by many Taiwanese people (Morris 2004; Simon 2005).

Development assistance, including a massive influx of aid and technical advice provided by the U.S. government, played a crucial role in Taiwan’s post-WWII industrialization. From 1951 to 1965, the Nationalist state received $100 million in
nonmilitary aid every year, and U.S. financial aid alone constituted nearly 40% of gross investment (P. C. Wang 2007). In addition to billions of dollars of American taxpayers’ money, the U.S. government, with the aim of proving that capitalism was a superior way of development, continuously subsidized export production in Taiwan. By the 1980s, Americans’ purchases accounted for almost half of Taiwan’s exports (Rubinstein 2007b).

Taiwan faced its biggest crisis in the international arena starting in the early 1970s. Although the U.S. had championed Chiang Kai-shek’s regime as the legitimate government for China for more than two decades, Communist China had been gradually gaining international recognition. Perhaps the biggest win for the PRC came in 1971 when the United Nations General Assembly voted to award China’s UN seat to the PRC. The ROC delegation immediately walked out of the assembly. It was an embarrassing moment for Chiang’s ROC, which had been one of the founders of the UN and was a Security Council member. The pivotal point was Henry Kissinger’s famous secret trip to China in 1972, which paved the way for Nixon’s visit and then the announcement of the Shanghai Communique. Facing the possibility of direct conflict with the PRC in Indochina, the Nixon administration eventually normalized US-PRC relations, and thus solidified the complete isolation of Taiwan in the international polity (Appleton 1972; Rubinstein 2007a).

Signs of civil society were gradually developing along with the series of diplomatic setbacks. Taiwan’s growing middle class, especially intellectuals and students, began to feel more dissatisfied with the restrictions on freedom of expression under martial law. Opponents of the KMT regime, though punished mercilessly, used Chiang’s weakening international standing to call for recognition of Taiwan as an independent nation, and continued engaging in political activism and challenged the legitimacy of Chiang’s rule in
Taiwan. These opponents gradually formed a loose political faction that was known as *dangwai* (lit., outside the party) (Morris 2004; Simon 2005).  

### 2.6 Contemporary Taiwan

The 1980s was a critical decade in Taiwan’s history, seeing intertwined economic and political restructurings. Taiwan’s labor-intensive, export-oriented economy suffered from currency appreciation, wage spiral, and import quotas imposed by the U.S. government (A. Lee 2004; Simon 2005). Politically, Taiwan experienced a transition from hard totalitarianism to soft totalitarianism and then to quasi-democracy (Rubinstein 2007a; Morris 2004).

On the economic front, Taiwanese SMEs, known for their speedy adaptation, began to move their capital and factories to Southeast Asian countries, and later on to China, for cheaper labor, inexpensive land, raw materials, and less restrictive environmental regulations. Taiwan’s capital outflow initially started with SMEs, because they were the most vulnerable ones in the market-dependent economy. Yet their relocation triggered a chain reaction—large enterprises also began offshore investment (A. Lee 2004). Although Southeast Asian countries were the initial destinations of Taiwan’s offshore production investments, they soon turned to China. After four decades of separation since the end of the Chinese Civil War, the Taiwan government lifted the ban in 1987 on Taiwanese civilians visiting their families in China. Later on, other civilian activities such as tourism were also permitted, and cross-border marriage also became possible. Such policies paved the way for Taiwanese businessmen’s investments in China.

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18 Under martial law, Taiwan was a one-party state and people were not allowed to form political parties. Therefore, political dissidents formed different groups and were loosely referred as *dangwai*, which later became Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).
By 1991, Taiwan had become the second largest investor in China, surpassing the United States and Japan (Hsing 1998). From 1990 to 1995, realized direct investment from Taiwan to China reached more than US$30 billion which accounted for 34% of Taiwan’s overall outward investment (A. Lee 2004, 43).  

On the political front, Chiang Kai-shek had already left government affairs to his successor—his son Chiang Ching-kuo—several years before his death in 1975. The young Chiang’s rule of Taiwan was a “mixed bag.” On the one hand, his government still suppressed dissidents in brutal ways. On the other hand, Taiwan’s political liberalization began with Chiang Ching-kuo. Compared to Chiang Kai-shek, who portrayed himself as “Savior of the People,” but used coercion to rule Taiwan, and fixed his eyes on retaking China, the young Chiang regarded himself as a populist and had a more tolerant view of Taiwanese political activities. Aware that intense ethnic tensions could seriously harm the nation, he tried to solve the problem by increasing the Native Taiwanese people’s participation in the ROC governance (Copper 2012; Rubinstein 2007a; Taylor 2009). Throughout the 1980s, the illegal dangwai movement continued to gain momentum in Taiwan. Leading members of the dangwai defied the KMT government’s ban and formed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986. Instead of harsh suppression, the young Chiang held back the hard-liners in the KMT and pushed the party

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19 The actual size of capital outflow from Taiwan to China has been much higher than the official statistics, because many Taiwanese companies invested through their subsidiaries or paper companies registered in Hong Kong due to delicate cross-strait relations (Schive 1995).

20 The KMT has long maintained connections with secret societies. Chiang Ching-kuo’s regime sometimes took actions through secret societies. One famous example was dissident Lin Yixiong’s mother and his twin daughters who were murdered by nationalist gangsters associated with one of the young Chiang’s sons (Taylor 2009).
to adjust. Thus Taiwan officially entered an era of two-party politics. Under strong pressure, Chiang Ching-kuo also lifted the half-century long martial law in 1987, which was a milestone in Taiwan’s democratization process. Moreover, to ensure his pro-Taiwan legacy could be carried on in the Mainlander-dominated KMT, he handpicked his successor Lee Teng-hui—a Taiwan-born, Japanese- and American-educated agricultural economist (Morris 2004).

Lee Teng-hui’s own life narrative is a vivid microcosm of Taiwan’s unique historical trajectories—his Hakka ancestors had assimilated into the Holo culture, and he lived under the Japanese rule before the age of twenty-two. His worldview was initially shaped by Japanese education, and later on with Western influence as he earned his doctoral degree at Cornell University (S. H. Tsai 2005). Sharing the sentiment of the “sorrow of being a Taiwanese” with other Native Taiwanese in his generation, Lee has a well-developed sense of Taiwan identity which makes him a very different leader compared to his predecessors (D. Tsai 2002, 59).

When Lee came to power in 1988, he inherited a political and military apparatus that was still tightly controlled by the Mainlanders. At the beginning of his presidency, he skillfully maneuvered a path between the pro-unification loyalists’ demand for a Republic of China and the pro-independence supporters’ cry for an independent Taiwan. After he gained greater control of his party, Lee became more vocal about his Taiwan identity and pushed for an “indigenization” (bentuhua) process, which repositioned national identity, opened up new discussions of historical memories, and redistributed power (Rubinstein 2007a).21 It became possible to speak openly about the 2:28 Incident, and classified

21 Scholars use various terms interchangeably in this context, such as “indigenization,” “localization,” “nativization,” or “Taiwanization” (M. Chang 2003; Hughes 2013; P. R. Katz 2002; Rubinstein 2007a).
archival materials were made available to scholars. In 1995, Lee formally apologized for the 2:28 Incident and financial compensation was offered to victims’ families (Simon 2003). During Lee’s twelve-year presidency, Taiwan was transformed from Chiang’s authoritarian regime to a vibrant democratic society.

Lee Teng-hui’s project of bentuhua and attempts to breaking through Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation in the international arena made Beijing authorities think that they were dealing with a ticking time bomb of Taiwan’s de jure independence. To send a strong message before Taiwan’s presidential election, Beijing commanded a series of large-scale missile tests from 1995 to 1996, which became the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Beijing’s actions were proved to have the opposite result of further alienating the Taiwan populace, and Lee won the first direct presidential election in 1996 (Scobell 2000). In regard to the issue of Taiwan’s sovereignty, Lee sought to promulgate the idea that Taiwan can assert a right to determine its own separate destiny on the basis of shared principles and experiences. His announcement of the “special state-to-state” formula in 1999 infuriated Beijing (Copper 2012).

Being highly aware of the complexities and entanglements of ethnic tensions in Taiwan, Lee understood that it was not possible to fully democratize the island or foster a new and separate collective identity solely based on the majority Holo-speaking population. Other ethnic groups such as Hakka and the Aborigines often felt their interests had been neglected and questioned a new Holo chauvinism. The Mainlanders and their descendants, though a minority in absolute number, still held important positions in key industries. With a vision of a multicultural society, Lee developed his “New Taiwanese” discourse that aimed to be inclusive and opens the possibility of Taiwanese civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism (S. H. Tsai 2005). According to a series of nationwide surveys conducted by the National Chengchi University’s Election
Study Center, at the end of Lee’s presidency, the percentage of people who accepted a solo Taiwanese identity had risen from 17.6% in 1992 to 36.9% in 2000 (see Figure 2.2). The longitudinal survey shows the trend that acceptance of the solo Taiwanese identity has been increasing steadily over the past two decades, with the latest poll showing 57.1% in 2013, while the solo Chinese identity decreased significantly and the dual identity also decreased.

Figure 2.2 Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese

Source: The Election Study Center, National Chengchi University. (http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/course/news.php?class=201)
In 2000, Chen Shui-bian—a Holo-speaking Taiwanese DPP candidate won the presidential election which marked the first presidency for the pro-independence party. Chen systematically advanced a process of “de-sinitization” during his eight-year presidency in the hope of consolidating Taiwan’s separation from China, but this direction of de-sinitization changed dramatically after the KMT’s pro-China Ma Ying-jeou took office in 2008. In the past two decades, Taiwan gradually became a divided society—divided along lines of ethnicity and national identity (Hughes 2013; C. Clark and Tan 2012).

2.7 Cross-Strait Relations

Cross-strait relations have gone through different phases since the end of Chinese Civil War, from complete hostile opposition to frequent cultural exchanges and unofficial political talks. President Lee Teng-hui’s much-publicized visit to Cornell University in 1995 ignited Beijing and marked the start of a new collision phase in cross-strait relations. China decided to shelve unofficial talks with Taiwan that had begun in the early 1990s (Copper 2012). The downward spiral in cross-strait relations accelerated after President Chen Shui-bian took office in 2000. The Chen administration launched some moves, such as freezing the National Unification Guidelines and a campaign to join the UN, which outraged Beijing. China’s response was straightforward and brutal—the number of ballistic missiles directly targeted at Taiwan soared to over 1,000 (Yu and Kao 2012). The campaign to isolate Taiwan in the international arena also escalated, such as blocking Taiwan’s bid to participate in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Health Assembly (WHA). Such actions not only affected Taiwan’s diplomatic relations with other countries, but more importantly, Taiwan’s forced isolation status put its people in all sorts of danger. For instance, prior to the breakthrough in 2008, Taiwan’s medical authorities were excluded from all the World Health Organization (WHO) activities, therefore was ineligible to gain access to vital medical information to fight epidemics. President Chen’s
series of actions not only infuriated Beijing but also made Washington consider Taiwan as a trouble-maker in the region and accuse Taipei of provoking Beijing and thereby “endangering Taiwan and American security” (Hickey 2013). The pro-China KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou came to power in 2008 and reopened semi-official negotiations and signed a series of accords with China. Since then, cross-relations have entered a more peaceful phase.

On the economic front, since China’s “Open Door” policy, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have been experiencing rapidly increasing regional economic integration. Hong Kong has remained the biggest source of foreign direct investment for China for years. Lately, Chinese officials even explicitly proposed the concept of a “Greater Chinese Economic Zone,” which can be initiated through signing trade pacts (P. C. Y. Chow 2013, xiv). In 2003, Hong Kong and China signed a free trade agreement—Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA)—and at the time it was framed as a generous favor from Beijing to help Hong Kong at a time of economic downturn. A decade later, the results of CEPA remain a debatable issue, but undoubtedly it has made the Hong Kong economy much more dependent on China. Moreover, such economic cooperation provides a platform for the Chinese Communist Party to work strategically with local economic elites. Although such trade pacts are said to aim for normalizing trade relations in goods, services, and investments across borders, but the unspoken yet obvious indication is to use economic interdependence to induce further political integration (Chiou, Hsu, and Huang 2013).

A similar story is happening between Taiwan and China. Although Beijing authorities have never officially denounced the possibility of using military force to invade Taiwan, with China’s newly gained standing as an indispensable powerhouse of the global economy, Beijing has acquired a new confidence and perspective on the Taiwan issue.
Portraying itself as a “peaceful rising” power in the international arena, China’s approach gradually shifted from reliance on military threat to utilizing soft economic power to pave an irresistible condition for unification. Diplomatically, China uses its economic status as the biggest export market for neighboring countries such as Japan and South Korea to form a united front in the region to contain Taiwan’s push for formal independence (Y. Chu 2004). Economically, in 2002, China surpassed the U.S. and became Taiwan’s largest export destination for the first time in history, and the total trade with China was worth US$18.5 billion. A decade later, the total trade value reached US$121.6 billion. Taiwan’s investment in China has also grown substantially over this period; the accumulated total amount from 2002 to 2012 reached US$104.6 billion. It is safe to say that China has become Taiwan’s most important trading partner; in other words, Taiwan’s economic dependence on China has been increasing.

Perhaps as Foucault’s widely-circulated quote suggests—“Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 2012). Political resistance in Taiwan has been sparked by Hong Kong’s development as a daunting example and its looming economic integration. In 2012, Want Want Group, a pro-Beijing conglomerate, tried to buy a Taiwanese newspaper—*China Times*—to expand its media empire. Such a business acquisition triggered worries over press censorship, which ultimately led to a wave of anti-media monopoly movement. Although protesters were unable to stop the conglomerate’s

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acquisition of *China Times*, their actions successfully attracted more attention from Taiwan’s civil society, and the consequent pressure eventually stopped the conglomerate’s second acquisition of *Apple Daily* (Yuen 2014).

The biggest and latest form of resistance, known as the Sunflower Movement, erupted in March 2014. Protesters occupied Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan (Taiwan’s national legislature) for twenty-four days to oppose the ruling and pro-China KMT’s plan to pass Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA). CSSTA is a follow-up treaty to the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), which was signed in 2010 and is widely viewed as a replica of Hong Kong’s CEPA. CSSTA vows to substantially liberalize dozens of key industries to cross-straits investment, including certain communication industries that are relevant to national security concerns. On March 30, half a million people joined the demonstration and took to the streets in front of the presidential hall to express their disapproval of the pro-China KMT government. It is worth pointing out that the Sunflower Movement should not be seen as a single incidental outbreak but a culmination of periodic protests that accumulated over the past few years (Rowen 2015).

Unlike previous protests, the Sunflower Movement successfully generated media coverage and sparked vibrant discussion in Taiwan’s civil society. Its long-term influence remains to be seen and theorized, yet some distinctive features in this large-scale movement are worth highlighting. First of all, the movement brought up the China factor into the public limelight for much broader and deeper discussion. Although the threat from China has never disappeared, discussion of the China factor in Taiwan’s civil society

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has been stagnant as the island is polarized between advocates of unification and independence, leaving no room for further imagination and meaningful dialogue. The radical action of occupying the Legislative Yuan created an opportunity for people to think beyond the trade pact—to re-examine the current cross-relation and its future direction (Ho 2015; Rowen 2015; Tzeng 2014).

Secondly, perhaps with an ironic twist, the acknowledgement of the China factor actually signifies the emergence of a collective identity in Taiwan, especially among younger generations. Such a collective identity may not form along the ethnicity lines which resulted a split society, but more about shared cultural beliefs, values, and choices of life. As anthropologist Liu Shao-hua, who has been doing fieldwork in China for more than a decade, writes, while China puts economic development as its very top priority and sacrifices other aspects, it also indicates a particular core value deeply rooted in the culture. With the frequent exchanges between China and Taiwan, it is not uncommon to hear Chinese people comment that Taiwanese society is “too democratic and too free,” therefore it is inefficient to speed up economic development. The Sunflower Movement showed the Taiwanese general public’s response— it is not avoidable to engage with China, especially with the deepened economic dependence, yet certain boundaries regarding ways of life and freedom cannot be crossed (Liu 2014). The large-scale demonstration was a clear warning that the highly-educated Taiwan populace sent to the Ma administration about their concerns of the government’s and big corporations’ pro-China standpoints.

Last but not least, and directly related to the topic of this dissertation, Chinese marriage migrants and their offspring were not seriously attacked in heated discussions of cross-strait relation during the Sunflower Movement. Unlike some politicians and commentators in the older generation who expressed concerns about national security through targeting Chinese immigrant wives and voicing discriminatory language, young
student leaders and participants in the Sunflower Movement were able to adopt a fairly rational attitude to separate the Chinese communist government and its threat, from the growing population of Chinese marriage migrants in Taiwan. Even though some sensitive topics came up, such as the criteria for Chinese immigrants to form a political party, and how such a party could potentially alter the political scene in Taiwan, the discussion in general stayed at a peaceful level.

More than half a million Taiwanese citizens now live and work in the PRC and have gradually become convinced that China offers greater prospects, thus relocating their entire families; how this will affect their self-identification and their influence on Taiwan’s domestic politics remains to be seen. Some, especially business elites in top conglomerates, with vast economic interests at stake, appear to develop a more benign view of the PRC and become more open to unification. Others, on the contrary, see the drastic differences across the Taiwan Strait and become even more convinced that unification is not a desirable destination. On the island, the subject of this dissertation, Chinese female marriage migrants have become the biggest immigrant group. The impacts that these marriage migrants and their children have on Taiwan’s collective identity landscape and political consequences remain to be seen.
Chapter 3: One Strait, Two Stories

As I described in the first chapter, the term “foreign bride” is highly problematic, especially in the Mandarin Chinese context. In this chapter, I introduce the discussion of Chinese marriage migrants by first examining the evolution of terms referring to them. Through a detailed analysis, I will show the way in which Chinese female marriage migrants are sites where gender, class, and nationalist ideologies intersect. Activists who advocate for immigrant rights have invited all female marriage migrants in Taiwan to create a new term to name themselves. I will argue, however, that some of these attempts to take over the “power of naming” paradoxically fall into a patriarchal fallacy of defining immigrant women by the relationship to their Taiwanese husbands and families.

The representation of Chinese marriage migrants in the mass media is often conflated to greedy gold-diggers or poor girls from remote agricultural villages, but in fact Chinese marriage migrants are a very diversified group, at least as varied as their Taiwanese husbands. I try, then, to depict this group’s heterogeneity and analyze its members’ social positions and motivations for pursuing cross-border marriages.

3.1 Language Matters

The term, dalumei (mainland little sister), was probably the earliest term used to refer to Chinese women (not limited to marriage migrants) in the mid-1990s. At that time, the word dalu (mainland) indicated economic backwardness, and simultaneously hinted that Chinese women would have a strong motivation to make money. The character mei literally means little sister or young woman, but to review it more closely, the character in classical parlance has often referred to a female lover, and the connotation is a sexually-desired young woman with low socio-economic status. In the local context, dalumei is also a vernacular way to refer to a kind of lettuce, usually one of the cheapest in the markets.
The major signifiers embedded in the term *dalumei* are money, sex, and immorality. To sum up, the term *dalumei* implies a young woman, coming from a low status and making herself a cheaply available sex object for monetary gain, with her immoral characteristics further offering her exploiters moral justification. The term is also associated with sensational media constructions such as those about Chinese women who form a “shame marriage” in order to go to Taiwan and, once they land on Taiwanese soil, run away and become prostitutes to make money. Most of my informants were aware of the term and its negative connotations, and some of them vividly recalled and described to me how they learned this term and its meaning. For example, Chi told me that she asked a middle-age vender in a local traditional market why the vegetable is named *dalumei*, and the vender replied, “oh...we’re selling the vegetable at such cheap price. I’m not referring to you, but as you know, many Chinese women are selling themselves at very cheap price as well.” Although the term *dalumei* rarely appears in mass media nowadays, I still heard people using it quite a few times during the course of my fieldwork.

*Dalu Xinniang* (mainland bride) is the specific term that is used to name a Chinese woman who is married to a Taiwanese man. *Waiji Xinniang* (foreign bride) is mostly used for marital immigrants from Southeast Asian countries, but people sometimes also use this term for Chinese female marriage migrants as well. Both terms are problematic. First of all, the character *xin* literally means new, and in this context, a newlywed, a bride. No matter how old they are or how long they have been married and lived in Taiwan, they are still being called *xinniang*. For all marriage migrants, whether one has been naturalized or not, Taiwanese people still perceive them as *waiji* (foreign national). Such usage indicates the “outsider within” position marriage migrants occupy in Taiwanese society. In Chao’s study, her informants jokingly said that they are *dalu laoniang* (mainland old woman) (Chao 2008), and in my own fieldwork, Chinese women teased and called
themselves *dalu obasan* (mainland middle-age woman).¹ These women were not satisfied with the term *dalu xinniang* imposed on them, and by making jokes and twisting the language, they showed how absurd and discriminatory the term really is. *Dalu Xinniang* is also a gendered term. Because Chinese marriage migrants are seen as permanent “others,” there is no corresponding term like *Taiwan Xinlang* (Taiwanese groom) in the local context. Moreover, the term *xinniang* (bride) hints at an image of a young innocent woman. Using such terms to refer all Chinese marriage migrants not only ignores their actual status, but more importantly, infantilizes women.

*Dalu Peiou* (mainland spouse) is another term used to refer to Chinese marriage migrants, and when I interacted with government officials, they sometimes “slipped” into using this term instead of *xinyimin nuxing* (new immigrant female, discussed later). Although the term has its administrative purpose, needless to say, it neglects Chinese marriage migrants’ subjectivity and regards these women as an appendage of their Taiwanese husband. Some government officials explained to me that they are sympathetic to Chinese women’s marginalized positions in society and that the government is doing a lot to help because “after all, now they are one of us. They are not *dalu xinniang*, they are *Taiwanese* daughters-in-law” [italics added]. These government officials thought that they were progressive as they saw the problematic and discriminatory nature embedded in the term *dalu xinniang*, but what they were not aware of was the nationalist patriarchal ideology in their words. It is true that one of the roles these Chinese women play is that of the Taiwanese daughter-in-law, but using such a term for the group implies that their status as individuals residents/citizens is not recognized and the legitimacy of their residence in Taiwan solely comes from the patriarchal structure. Yet such usage has its

¹ *Obasan* is Japanese, but the term is widely used to refer middle-aged women in Taiwan.
appeal to people. When Chinese marriage migrants fought for their right to work, the rhetoric they used included “we are not stealing Taiwanese people’s jobs,” “we are not dalu xinniang but taiwan xifu (Taiwanese daughter-in-law),” and “we are mothers of Taiwanese sons.” It is a common strategy to use similarity and connection (we are related to Taiwan) to fight for equality, but such usage paradoxically reinforces the mark of “otherness” and fails to challenge the cultural hegemony.

As a scholar, Hsia Hsiao-chuan not only studied marital immigrants from Southeast Asian countries but, inspired by Paulo Freire’s theory of “pedagogy of the oppressed” and Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed,” she and local activists established a Chinese literacy program that aimed to empower marital immigrants (Hsia 2002). Though Hsia’s research was not on Chinese marriage migrants, she, along with some feminist activists, felt the need to overthrow the discriminative terms (waiji xinniang and dalu xinniang) imposed on marriage migrants in Taiwan. The Awakening Foundation, the most well-known feminist NGO, held an event called “Please Call Me ...” to encourage marriage migrants to submit articles on how they feel when they are called waiji xinniang or dalu xinniang, and what term they would like to be called. Eventually, the term xinyimin nuxing (new immigrant female) got the most votes. Now the term is used on the government’s official documents, websites, and most news on mass media. However, during the course of my fieldwork, most Taiwanese people did not use this term in daily life, and a significant portion of Chinese marriage migrants I encountered were not aware of the term. None of the matchmaking agencies use the term on their website. To sum up, it is a crucial step for marriage migrants to speak out and take over the power of naming, but it is a long journey to educate the general public and to achieve equality.

3.2 Chinese Wives
As I mentioned previously, Chinese marriage migrants in Taiwan are far from a homogeneous group. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that one of the most important measurements to differentiate Chinese marriage migrants is age difference. In other words, the generational differentiation explains different motivations for cross-Strait marriage and various interpretations of marriage among Chinese marriage migrants. The generational differentiation could be seen as a strong sense of identity that is shaped by political movements that happened in different era. Therefore, I divide research participants into two different cohorts by historical events—to be more specific, whether or not one has experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Here I will describe these two cohorts accordingly.

### 3.2.1 The Cultural Revolution Generation

In the life-adaptation classes held by local governments, I did not meet many Chinese women who belonged to the Cultural Revolution generation; the ones I did meet, however, were very enthusiastic introducing me to their friends and brought me in their gatherings. In the end, I met more women in this group at small eateries and traditional local markets. This group of women was the first wave of marriage migrants in Taiwan. They experienced the Chinese Cultural Revolution in their teenage years or earlier, and the majority of them are more than fifty years old. There are certain characteristics that they share in common; for instance, most of them have a previous marriage and children in China, and they married Taiwanese rongmin (veteran soldier, see the section 3.3.1 for further discussion).

The Chinese Cultural Revolution left indelible marks on these Chinese women. First of all, women’s status and gender relations were transformed significantly in this era. When discussing women’s status and gender roles in China, it is of paramount importance
to point out that the women’s liberation movement there did not derive from a feminist agenda but from the socialist state’s political imaginary, a component of class struggle (Y.-L. Chang 2009). That is to say, the opposite side of women’s liberation is not necessarily the patriarchal social structure but imperialism from western colonizers, feudalism of Confucian culture, and capitalism. Moreover, the leading roles in the women’s liberation movement in communist China were often played not by women but by men. As Lisa Rofel points out, the question of women’s liberation was the critical terrain on which the new socialist regime endeavored to construct its modernity, and so it was thus tied to a defense of the nation (Rofel 1999). Various kinds of propaganda about women’s liberation appeared in different eras: women as the “masters of the country” in the 1950s, women who “walk out of the house” during the Great Leap Forward period, and the Four Selves campaign in the early 1980s.² Yet none of this propaganda was as widespread and influential as the slogan during the Cultural Revolution—“women can hold up half the sky.” Mao’s poem—“China’s daughters have high aspirations, they love the battle array, not feminine attire,” best depicts the image of Chinese women under his rule. Prevailing sayings like “men and women are the same, and whatever male comrades can achieve, female comrades can achieve, too,” illustrates the Chinese Communist Party’s idea of gender equality. The Iron Girl campaign emerged in such a context and women from all regions participated in traditional male-dominated sites such as oil fields and heavy industry. Similar to the discussion of the ideological aspects in the women’s movement in communist China, the transformation of the gendered division of labor should be seen as the consequence of political mobilization rather than the objective (Jin 2006). All this rhetoric reveals that women’s emancipation was measured by taking the male standard as

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² The Four Self campaign (四自) was self-respect, self-confidence, self-improvement, and self-reliance (自尊、自信、自立、自强).
the norm and essentially the patriarchal social structure remained untouched. Heterosexual normative masculinity was seen as progressive and femininity was regarded as oppression. The “Iron Girl” was the symbolic heroine image created in the Cultural Revolution; while the gender ideology behind it provided women, especially working-class women, opportunities to challenge the traditional gendered division of labor, women of that era were desexualized.

Another outcome of the Cultural Revolution relates to the average educational levels. The schooling years were shortened, and intellectuals were considered as enemies of the people and sent to rural labor camps to “reconstruct thoughts” with “revolutionary spirits.” Propaganda of that era included “we’d rather have laborers who are not cultivated than intellectuals who exploit people,” “Don’t learn the ABCs and we will be revolutionary,” and “the more knowledge, the less progressive.” Therefore, Chinese women of that era received very limited and basic education, and they became the first group of people to be laid off from state-owned enterprises after Deng Xiaoping initiated the political and economic reforms. Given their age and schooling background, it was extremely difficult for them to find another job.

Last but not least, the Cultural Revolution also had huge impacts on people’s personal lives. All the Chinese marriage migrants I encountered in this generation had previous marriages in China. Their earlier marriages should not be interpreted merely as personal choices but understood in a broader historical context. After the passage of a new Marriage Law in 1980, the divorce rate increased significantly in China (Honig and Hershatter 1988). Before the implementation of the new Marriage Law, the courts insisted on legitimate reasons for divorce, and such legitimacy usually meant serious political differences. The new law recognized love and affection as a basis for marriage. That is to say, the absence of love and affection could be a criterion for divorce. The new Marriage
Law made it easier to get divorced and the working unit no longer intervened in marriage, which meant that the consequences of divorce were less severe. However, the increasing divorce rate in the early 1980s should be seen largely as the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, many marriages were formed on the basis of instrumental reasons. For example, one informant who was originally from an urban bourgeois background and became one of the sent-down youths told me that she married a farmer who was in the Youth League in the hope of escaping the horrors her parents experienced. She eventually got divorced after suffering from years of domestic violence.

According to Honig and Hershatter, new policies made it possible for original urban dwellers to return to the cities. Since their marriages in the countryside were mostly contracted for instrumental reasons, once divorce opened up the possibility of returning to the cities, these marriages were soon called into question (Honig and Hershatter 1988). Divorce also occurred as a consequence of class differences. Among rural couples, when one of the partners, usually the husband, moved up the class hierarchy, the status change brought new contradictions into a marriage, which often ended up with divorce. Once divorced, women may have faced the possibility of losing their residence, as most couples, following the patriarchal Han tradition, lived in housing assigned by the husband’s work unit. Moreover, although the Cultural Revolution may have changed some gender ideologies, it did not eliminate the stigmatization of a divorced woman. As a result, many women did not benefit from the new Marriage Law but became victims of it.

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3 Xiang’s parents were both considered as intellectuals and labeled as rightists in the Cultural Revolution. She witnessed how her uncle heavily criticized her father’s “problematic thoughts” in public because he wanted to show his loyalty to the Party, and such instances made her realize that she did not have the “right” natal family. Marrying a farmer, in her own words, meant “buying insurance.”
The Cultural Revolution generation was placed in marginalized position and experienced the rejection of Maoism in the post-Mao era as the state turned to a different pursuit of modernity. Perhaps because of their unique experiences, I often found myself overwhelmed by how quickly people of this cohort poured forth their life stories to me. Chinese marriage migrants who belonged to this generation, apparently influenced by the idea of heroic socialist diligence, were generally very proud of their endurance and hard-working spirit. With a couple of exceptions, they loved telling me of the hardships they experienced in the Cultural Revolution and the dramatic social changes after that. In most cases, they have been living in Taiwan longer than other marriage migrants in the younger generation and have obtained working permits and citizenship. However, because they tended to speak with a heavy accent and had limited schooling, they often were concentrated in very low-paid jobs that most Taiwanese people refuse to do, such as janitor, washing dishes in small restaurants, and cleaning jobs paid by the hour.

Unlike the young generation Chinese women I will describe later, the Cultural Revolution generation women usually spoke in extremely pragmatic terms about their motivations and expectations of their marriage with Taiwanese veterans. For these middle-aged, divorced women, the primary concern was their children’s well-being, and cross-Strait marriage offered the possibility of enhancing their children’s future.

Hua was a fifty-year-old woman from the Shangdong province. Like many people who have been through the Cultural Revolution, Hua did not receive much formal schooling. After graduating from junior high school, she started working in a sock factory. Her son, Yunpeng, was seventeen years old and enrolled in a boarding school in Shangdong. Hua learned about migration regulations and strategies from her elder sister, who was married to a Taiwanese veteran, and planned her migratory route very carefully. In 2000, she applied for a visa to enter Taiwan to visit her ill grandfather who retreated
with the Nationalist Party to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War. The visa allowed her to stay in Taiwan for three months. During her temporary stay, her elder sister introduced her to a veteran who frequented the bistro where she worked as a waitress. Hua described how she made the decision:

When my sister introduced him to me, my first reaction was that there was no way I’m marrying to a man who is older than my father. Forty years! He was eighty-two at the time; forty years older than me! Then I calmed down and tried to think through the pros and cons. Yunpeng was nine years old then, a very smart boy, and I want the best for him. People in my generation, we work hard, and we are tough enough to endure everything. But without good guanxi (network), I won’t be able to earn enough money to give him a good education. Wang [Hua’s husband] agreed to pay for Yunpeng’s education, and his son did not have a problem that he put my name on his will as long as I take good care of him. Also, I was forty-two at the time; I had to come up a good plan for my elder life, too. My sister told me that Taiwan’s national healthcare system is far better than what we have in China. All in all, I wanted to stay in Taiwan, and marrying Wang was my only option. It was not a perfect arrangement because I miss and worry about my son all the time, but it’s a good choice—good for everyone.

Hua articulated her decision-making process in a crystal clear and calm fashion, almost as if she were telling a stranger’s story. She gave me a detailed account of various jobs she had in Shangdong, from factory work, through work in a restaurant, to selling clothes as an individual vendor, and she told me how hard and bitter her life was. Contrary to some younger informants who had high expectations before marriage and then got hit badly by the reality after migration, Hua knew exactly what she was getting into and had absolutely no unrealistic expectation. She knew that, as a veteran, Wang received around $1,000 each month as a stipend from the Taiwanese government, which was not much by local standards. But Mr. Wang owned a small apartment, and with his son’s consent, Hua would be entitled to part of the apartment after Wang passed away without possible complications. In other words, through cross-Strait marriage, she could secure the future for her son and for herself. She explains,
People like me, we lived through that crazy period of time [the Cultural Revolution], and so the fear is always there. I have to fight for my son and myself to survive. Before Wang, my sister introduced younger men to me, but they were all 'abnormal' [people with disabilities], and I knew they wouldn’t be able to offer much in addition to the residency status. Mr. Wang is old but he seems to be a man with integrity; he promised to support Yupeng and me, and I felt a sense of security with him.

Middle-aged, divorced women like Hua are fully aware of the limited prospects they have in China. Given their minimal educational level and skill sets, it is difficult for them to send their children to good schools or to invest in their adult children’s career. Therefore, they look for reliable elder Taiwanese veterans who are willing to offer economic support to them and their children. Cross-Strait marriage provides an option of upward mobility. Although economic support from elder Taiwanese veterans plays an important role in these Cultural Revolution generation women’s decision-making process, it is noteworthy to point out that they are also prepared to work hard to earn a living by themselves. In this instance, the job opportunities and potential income in the migration destination—Taiwan—become another motivation for these women.

Besides the security she could obtain from marriage, Hua knew that even though Wang was still in good shape when they got married, it would be her major, if not only, duty to take care of him when his health declined. After all, it is “part of the deal,” in her own words. In addition to cleaning the apartment and cooking the meals, she has to take Wang to the hospital, manage different doctors’ appointments and medicines, and massage him daily. In short, she is a 24-hour on call live-in maid for Mr. Wang without a stable monthly payment. After hearing about the “daily tasks” of Hua and other women, I always asked them whether, if they knew before they got married about the role they would be playing in the household as a caregiver to an aging veteran, would they still opt for marriage migration instead of labor migration? Quite a few of them looked at me as if
I had asked the most ridiculous question. Hua, who saw me as a naïve little sister in need of life lessons, again, articulated her reasoning,

I know how much a foreign maid gets paid here [Taiwan], but it’s not the route I’d choose for myself. When their contract ends, they either have to go back to the homeland, pay huge fee to the brokers and reapply again, or enter the black market. Both are troublesome and risky. Also, I was already forty-two years old. How many more years can I still work? How many employees would take me?

From Hua’s words, we can see that short-term simple monetary gains are not a strong incentive for the Cultural Revolution generation women to migrate. In fact, they know that aging veterans are not well-off in the local context, and some of them do not even get a monthly allowance.

To fully capture the complexities of the Cultural Revolution generation women’s motivations, anticipations, and strategies for cross-Strait marriage, we need to understand them from a life course perspective—a cycle of care-giving and care-receiving in which three generations of multiple actors are involved. The cross-Strait marriage between Cultural Revolution generation women and elderly Taiwanese veterans is essentially a care relationship in which different types of care—physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and educational—are involved and exchangeable. The core in such care relationships is expected reciprocity. As I mentioned earlier, the veterans are in relatively good shape at the time of marriage and do not require immediate and intensive care; therefore, at this stage, Chinese marriage migrants can work and earn a higher salary than they could in China. The intensive care is expected in the future when the veterans’ health declines; at this point, the Chinese marriage migrants will be the caregivers that they know and anticipate at the time of marriage. Meanwhile, the elderly veterans are not merely being cared for but also play the role of care-provider to Chinese women’s children by sponsoring their education or investing in their businesses. In turn, the Cultural
Revolution generation women anticipate that their children will take care of them in old age. To sum up, the Cultural Revolution generation women migrate to marry for sustainable long-term well-being, not for short-term financial gains. The key factors here are the relatively higher salary they can earn in Taiwan, the inheritance and pension the veterans leave them, the veterans’ investment in their children, and Taiwan’s healthcare system. Therefore, from the Cultural Revolution generation women’s view, cross-Strait marriage offers far better long-term security than labor migration.

As I mentioned earlier, Chinese female marriage migrants should not be seen as a homogenous group that come from the same background or share the same goals; the group is diverse and such heterogeneity accompanies different interests and perhaps even generational conflicts. Although most of the Cultural Generation women I met acknowledge that very few people in China have three-generation-cohabitation households there, they nonetheless believe that the intergenerational conflicts in cross-Strait marriage households are due to young urban Chinese wives’ individualistic attitudes. They usually point out that the young urban Chinese wives are the product of the one-child policy and are spoiled princesses who, in contrast to themselves, cannot endure any hardship. The Cultural Generation women also tend to blame the young urban generation as partly responsible for the negative image of all Chinese female marriage migrants in Taiwan. They criticize the young urban women as pursuers of material comforts under “corruptive” western capitalist influence; because of this, the younger women have stronger motives to get involved in illegal activities such as human trafficking, prostitution, and shame marriage. On some occasions, I even heard the Cultural Generation women say that “we deserve the national ID because we are hard workers, and they don’t.” Such accusations of course cannot be proved, but to some extent they reflect how the Cultural Generation women see the younger urban women.
3.2.2 The Young Generation

Chinese female marriage migrants who do not belong to the Cultural Revolution generation fall into the age range of twenty to late thirties. Compared to the Cultural Revolution cohort, the young generation Chinese women are a much more diversified group in terms of backgrounds and motivations. Many Chinese women I met belong to the “post-80 generation.” In other words, they were born and grew up in the post-Mao era. The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the devastating aftermath of the Cultural Revolution presented the biggest crisis for the Chinese Communist Party in its nearly three-decade rule, and the CCP’s response was to officially terminate the Cultural Revolution, to seize the power of the Gang of Four, and to reject everything Maoism represented. Mao and his generation of leaders built their political legitimacy on the basis of armed revolutions, and the post-Mao leadership could no longer count on such a legacy. The post-Mao generation of leaders then turned the new mandate to economic development, and the most important change was the introduction of a market economy, which later known as “economic reform.” Unlike women in the Cultural Revolution generation who lived through the period of time when the “Little Red Book” was worshiped and memorized word for word, the younger cohort grew up under Deng Xiaoping's rule in which extreme leftist thoughts were heavily criticized. Whereas it is a norm to fear and obey authority and esteem the heroism of proletarian power among the Cultural Revolution cohort, the younger generation does not necessarily consider labor as the most important construction of their identities.

In response to the rapid growth of the population and as part of the modernization drive, the CCP initiated demographic policies in the 1970s that promoted delayed marriage

4 The term “post-80 generation” (八零後) refers to people who were born after 1980.
and encouraged couples to have no more than two children. The goal set in 1977 was to reduce China’s annual population growth rate to 1% within three years (Feng, Cai, and Gu 2013). In September 1980, the CCP formally introduced the “one-child policy.” With a few exceptions in rural regions where couples with one girl have the right to have another child, the law is rigorously enforced. The younger Chinese marriage migrant cohort was born in the one-child policy era; women from rural backgrounds may have siblings, but most urban dwellers do not. On the macro-structural level, the “one-child policy” resulted in a sex-ratio disparity, a speedily aging population, and the “little emperor” syndrome, and in the micro sphere, intergenerational conflict in families is common. The parents of the younger generation cohort are members of the Cultural Revolution generation and their life is deeply tied to their working unit. Unlike the job security their parents had, the younger cohort bears, on the one hand, the high expectations that their parents have for them, and, on the other hand, faces capitalist competition in the market economy.

Among the younger generation, a substantial number of Chinese marriage migrants I met during my research were part of the ever-increasing internal migrant population in China. Chinese women who come from rural areas and move to urban settings tend to give work quite different meanings compared to women who grow up in cities. They do not see the image of “iron girl” as an ideal path, but since most of them started working at a young age and are usually very proud that they are so brave to leave home and survive in a big city, work constitutes an important part of their life story. When they are not allowed to work in Taiwan, then, they sometimes feel lost and have a hard time adjusting to their new lifestyle.

Unlike the Cultural Revolution cohort who share a similar background as middle-aged divorced women, along with motivations for marriage migration (seeking a long-term security), the younger cohort is a much more diversified group. Younger Chinese
women originally from urban settings tend to have a higher educational level and held a
desk-job or work in the service sector before marriage. They tend to emphasize that they
lived a comfortable life in their hometown and did not marry for economic reasons. In
some cases, they would point out that infrastructure in their hometown is more “modern”
than in many places in Taiwan. Shen is a 28-year-old woman from Shenyang and used to
work in a small franchised salon, and she says,

Even though my parents’ salaries are not as high as the white-collar people
here [Taiwan], we’re not those village people who marry out their daughter
to build a modern house. The cost of living is less expensive there, and we
live very comfortably by the local standard. Now you see me in casual
outfits because I don’t go out, and I have to do a lot of housework and take
care of children. But when I was working in Shenyang, I wore ‘A+ Chanel’
suits and high-heeled shoes to visit my clients, and I wouldn’t go anywhere
without full makeup. As an unmarried woman, I was free, and I spent all
my money on clothes, handbags, and cosmetics. [italics added]

Shen’s friend, Lulu, a 32-year-old woman from Guangzhou was in the same conversation.
She worked as a car salesperson, and she says,

As a salesperson, I met a lot of different people through work. To be honest,
I had a lot of [marital] choices. I was young and pretty and I could have
married whoever I wanted, but I came here. Taiwanese people think we’re
not acculturated and look down at us, but from my perspective, Taipei is
less developed than Guangzhou. We have eight-lane roads and glass
curtain wall skyscrapers in my hometown, like what you see in American
movies. But the district I live in Taipei, where you call it a ‘historic
neighborhood,’ the streets are all narrow and the buildings are ugly and old.

So, why did these Chinese women decide to marry a Taiwanese man and move thousands
of miles away from home? Shen, Lulu, and other women with similar backgrounds admit

\[5\] A+ is the highest level of counterfeits in China. According to my informants, even staff
at brand name stores cannot differentiate the difference between A+ counterfeits and
authentic products. Although the price tag is cheaper than an authentic piece, an A+
counterfeit is not cheap by ordinary working people’s standard.
that the Taiwanese popular culture and their own in-person contacts with Taiwanese men influenced how they perceived Taiwan and Taiwanese men in general. Shen says,

I watched and read so many of Chiung-yao’s works when I was a dreamy teenage girl. Of course I knew romance novel must be different from reality, but what was portrayed in those TV dramas and romance novels really attracted me. There were some Taiwanese business men in Shenyang, and unlike local men, they all seem to be more gentleman-like [italic added].

“Gentleman-like” is a term that these Chinese female marriage migrants often use to describe Taiwanese men. When I ask what kind of behavior counted as “gentleman-like” and what exactly the term means to them, I received intriguing answers. Lulu gave an example that her supervisor, a Taiwanese man in his 30s, called his girlfriend in Taiwan every day and ordered flowers online to be delivered to her workplace. A small mundane example like this left Lulu with a strong impression that Taiwanese men, in Lulu's own words, “spoil their girlfriend like a princess.” In general, before they got married and moved to Taiwan, they perceived (or imagined) Taiwanese men as well-dressed, soft-spoken, romantic, and the “soft southern Taiwanese accent” sounded less masculine and less aggressive to their ears. Interestingly, they also associated the “gentleman-like” quality with western modernity. Such associations further translate to gender constructions and expectations, which I will further investigate in chapter four.

Another common reason for these Chinese women from urban areas to migrate could be described as a sense of adventure. They enjoy the urban life and express their desire to “see the big world.” As they often say in a slightly discriminatory tone, they regard themselves as more cosmopolitan and “not like village people who are afraid of everything modern.” In this instance, these Chinese women think Taiwan is more connected to the western world and a Taiwanese passport is more useful for their future.
Chinese marriage migrants from urban settings are less likely to use introduction agencies to get married to a Taiwanese man. They show a high degree of nostalgia when they describe their life in their hometowns mostly because they enjoyed higher social status and autonomy before migration. Among all Chinese female marriage migrants, women from urban areas are the most tech-savvy group and they participate in various online forums. Because of their previous urban working experiences, higher educational background, and frequent use of technology, they are highly aware of the negative gold-digger image that Chinese wives have in Taiwanese mass media. Their defensive reactions towards such stigmatized perceptions are also much stronger than those in other groups.

When I touched upon the question of why and how they decided to migrate, the often spent a lengthy amount of time describing the details of their old life and repeatedly emphasized that they did not marry for economic reasons. They consciously differentiate themselves from other groups of Chinese female marriage migrants, particularly the ones who are from remote regions and use introduction agencies. In some cases, what they say about their own countryman could sound much more poignant than sensational stories in Taiwanese tabloids. At the same time, they acknowledge that an important reason for them to marry a Taiwanese man was to pursue a “better future.” Their definition of a “better future” does not necessarily lie in material life but their own construction of advanced western modernity. Such views could be explained by the lack of exchange between China and Taiwan for forty years. Before tourism was allowed, Chinese mostly learned about Taiwan from their own formal education and from the mass media. Taiwanese romance writer Chiung-yao’s novels and the TV drama her company produced were very popular in China in the 1990s, and many Chinese women from urban areas mentioned that her works were a major resource for their “learning” about Taiwan. Their perception of Taiwan influenced their marital decision and they often had higher, if not false, anticipation and expectations of married life. Unfortunately, they generally feel the
reality after their migration does not live up to their expectations and they have a much harder time adjusting to their new life compared to other groups of Chinese female marriage migrants.

A higher percentage of Chinese women who are originally from rural areas used introduction agencies to get married to a Taiwanese man. Some of them utilized their networks in China and eventually established unregistered introduction agencies along with their husbands and made a good profit out of matchmaking. The result is often a small chain migration—Chinese women from remote regions often introduce women from the same village to marry their husband’s coworkers, relatives, and friends. These women’s Taiwanese husbands also tend to fit into the profile of the marginalized group that appears in previous studies on Taiwanese men who marry Southeast Asian women—small business owners, men in remote agricultural villages, or men with disabilities. Compared to Chinese women from urban settings, this group of women has lower educational level and their working experiences before marriage is concentrated in agriculture and shop floors. Their primary migratory motivation was to improve their family’s economic conditions. Although they often did labor-intensive work after getting married, quite contrary to Chinese women from urban settings, they do not complain as much.

Lichun is from a small agricultural village in Henan province and has been living in Taiwan for about a year. Her husband, Mr. Wu, runs a gas station, and she has been working with her husband. Lichun only met Mr. Wu for three times before she decided to marry him. Her marital choice was not only about her own future, but rather, her entire family’s. I learned that at the age of 26, she was considered “too old” in her village and faced some pressure from her parents and relatives. She was worried that her unmarried status would further bring more gossip to her parents and she wanted to get married as
soon as she could. At the same time, she realized that it would not be easy for her to find an ideal man in the local context. Her friend helped her to get in touch with a Taiwanese-operated introduction agency, and without knowing much about Mr. Wu, Lichun made up her mind. She explains,

My parents really want me to get married; otherwise they don’t look good in the village. They thought Wu and his parents look like honest people, and also more presentable than village people. To me, it was good that they promised to help my parents build a new house and support them. Mrs. Lin [the matchmaker] also told me that it’s much faster to earn money in Taiwan; what I could earn in a month in Taiwan equals ten months in my hometown or something like that. I felt I didn’t have much to lose. Even if the marriage turns out badly, at least I get a chance to see the outside world, still better than staying in the village.

From her description, we can see that her decision-making process was not an individual but a collective matter. Lichun and her parents believe that Mr. Wu will bring a brighter future to not only her but the entire family by providing long-term financial aid. Although she admits that she basically married a complete stranger, she thinks it was worthwhile to take the risk because of the bitter living conditions in her hometown.

These women’s working conditions in Taiwan are often very harsh by local standards, but they seem to accept the situation, as “better than the farm work in my village.” Their motivation to pursue a cross-border marriage is mostly to improve their economic situation. During the course of my fieldwork, Chinese women who directly came from remote areas (without the experience of internal migration in China) and who used introduction agencies were the most difficult group to reach. From the contacts I had, I learned that most of their Taiwanese families do not “allow” them to take life

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6 My experience is consistent with that of some social workers. They told me that when they have home-visits, women in cross-border marriage formed through introduction agencies have a higher rejection rate.
adaptation courses. Some of them also say that their working schedule is so full that they do not have any time and energy to participate in other activities. Their husbands and parents-in-law also tended to be more guarded and skeptical about my role as a researcher and they often insisted on a group interview. Although large-scale introduction agencies usually advertise Chinese women from rural regions as innocent and docile, it does not mean these women really have a very traditional sense of gender construction. In fact, they often use their own father as an example to demonstrate that their natal family has a more equal division of labor, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

3.3 Taiwanese Husbands

I categorize Taiwanese men with Chinese spouses into two different groups—veterans and non-veterans. Such a categorization is not an arbitrary decision because the veteran is part of a distinctive social group in Taiwanese society. Iris Young conceptualizes a social group by differentiating it from attributes and associations and further defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life. Member of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience” (Young 2011). Young also points out that for oppressed groups, group identities and boundaries often are not constructed by the group members but imposed by outsiders. Veterans, with a complicated historical and social construction, occupy a very peculiar position in Taiwanese society and their motivations in marrying Chinese women and the characteristics of their marriages are all significantly different from those in other cross-Strait families. In this section, I will sketch a portrait of both groups.

3.3.1 The Veteran (rongmin)
Rongmin (lit. “honorable citizen,” veteran soldier) in Taiwan is a term referring to retired military personnel, regardless of ethnicity and rank. However, the veterans I encountered in this project belong to a very specific group within rongmin—low-rank Mainlander soldiers who migrated to Taiwan from different parts of China with the Nationalist Party and remained unmarried at retirement age. Their single status was not a result of a personal choice, but rather the state’s interference. Chiang Kai-shek’s government imposed a marriage ban on soldiers in 1952 in the name of national security—to increase combat capacity in order to retake mainland China. Yet scholarly research indicates that this marriage ban was in fact part of a military restructuring plan that was supported by the U.S. government and one of the purposes was to cut down the budget of benefits for soldiers’ families (S.-W. Lin 2003). It is crucial to note that the marriage ban was only imposed on low-ranking Mainlander soldiers, but not on officers. By enforcing such a marriage ban, the KMT government also separated these low-ranking Mainlander soldiers from the civil populace, which further reinforced the ethnic divide. The marriage ban was relaxed in the late 1950s and eventually lifted in 1974. Although some soldiers managed to find a Taiwanese wife, the majority remained unmarried because of the combination of their low-income status, ethnic divide, and their age past the so-called marriageable age by local standards.

According to the Veterans Affairs Council, at the end of 2011, there were 18,248 veterans with a Chinese spouse. Among the group, 71.7% were elder veterans (above 65-years-old). The statistic is different for veterans married to women from Southeast Asian countries. The age bracket of veterans with the largest number of foreign spouses from

7 Source: Veterans Affairs Council, Taiwan
http://210.69.190.57/vacrs/stmain.jsp?sys=100&funid=defjsp1
Southeast Asia (51.9%) is adults under 49-year-old. For veteran-Chinese couples, the national average age of veterans is 73.9 years, and their Chinese wives’ average age is 50.7 years. The average age gap of veteran-Chinese couples is 23.2 years.

A few characteristics of this particular social group are worth mentioning here. First of all, it is important to note that many of these low-ranking veterans were originally from poor agricultural villages in China and were semi-forced to join the Nationalist Party’s army at a very young age. Because of the Chinese Civil War, the majority had very limited schooling or were even illiterate. Secondly, most Mainlander veterans reside in juancun (lit. military personnel’s dependants’ village, referring to a community where military personnel and their families live); though not purposely, a juancun is usually segregated.¹ Last but not the least, in the course of their military years, these low-ranking soldiers built close and solid “comradeship” with their fellows. The strong ties between low-ranking veterans are also reinforced by living in the same juancun and the fact that they do not have biological kin in Taiwan.

Most of these low-rank aging veterans never married but they managed to take care of themselves and each other in their communities over decades; why, then, did they opt for cross-Strait marriage? The question needs to be elaborated in a broader context. Unlike other social groups in Taiwan who mostly rely upon their children and relatives to provide care in old age, elderly Mainlander veterans have to count on their fellow veterans and most importantly the state. Despite the marriage ban that severely impedes veterans’

¹ There are two types of juancun. The first type has a formal legal definition—public housing compounds that were built by the government to accommodate military personnel and their families. Yet this type of housing is mostly for higher-ranking officers. The second type of juancun refers to the settlement where low-ranking soldiers built for themselves, and many of these houses were not registered or built illegally.
personal life, the KMT government has long considered veterans’ welfare as a high priority and allocated a great deal of resources to them. For example, there are three major medical centers that cater to the specific needs of veterans and there is always a hospital near a juancun. Moreover, the government provides local transportation for veterans to go to hospitals, and the health insurance of veterans and their dependents is also heavily subsidized. The state’s care of veterans’ well-being is not limited to physical health. There are veteran service centers that are responsible for general services, and liaison officers are assigned for home-visits. So, why did aging veterans actively seek to marry Chinese women for their old-age care?

Mr. Wei is a veteran soldier originally from a relatively well-off family in the Shangdong province. He was forced to join the Nationalist Army to fight the Japanese when he was only fifteen years old. Mr. Wei lives in the same building as Hua and her husband. Unlike Mr. Wang who has a very thick Shandong accent, Mr. Wei speaks standard Beijing Mandarin, and he is fluent in many regional dialects, including Hakka and Holo. I remember my first visit to Mr. Wei’s apartment vividly. It was a very small apartment, full of all sorts of the old and unidentifiable objects Wei hoarded, and everything was covered by a thick layer of dust. Yet among all these dusty objects, there was a large framed photo of Chiang Kai-shek, and the dark golden frame was wiped clean, almost shiny. When I told Mr. Wei that I hadn’t seen such a photo of Chiang Kai-shek in years and that the photo is probably a rare antique nowadays, Mr. Wei reproached me and said that “you young people should learn to respect our great leader. How dare you are to call his name directly? He was the President Chiang! [italic added]” I apologized, and Wei started telling me about the hardship he had endured in the army and how he felt “President Chiang” was the only person who truly cared about soldiers’ well-being through
listening to his broadcasts on radio. Like other veterans, Wei does not have any relative in Taiwan, and the closest person he has is Mr. Wang.

Even though he knew it was impossible to get married when he was in the army, Wei dreamed about having a family. After retiring from the army, he tried different jobs from driving a taxi to working at a restaurant, and eventually he landed as a superintendent of a big apartment building. Being a superintendent allowed Mr. Wei to save more money because residents would give him red envelopes for Lunar New Year Eve, and he could also rent out his own apartment for extra income. Once he had more savings, he started considering marriage again. Mr. Wei knew that, as an old veteran, he was in a disadvantaged position in the marriage market, so his initial strategy was to find a young woman from an Aboriginal tribe. He succeeded in finding an indigenous woman who agreed to marry him, but only to have his heart broken later. After he gave a betrothal, which he spent most of his savings on, to the woman’s parents, the whole family vanished. The incident undermined Wei’s confidence and made him give up the idea of marriage. In the late 1980s, many Mainlanders went back to their hometown to visit their remaining relatives in China, and some of Wei’s fellow veterans got married to women from their hometown. News travelled fast in veterans’ community. Fellow veterans’ experiences encouraged Wei, and after forty years of separation, he finally made the homecoming trip to Shangdong in 1989. Wei’s relatives were eager to introduce local women to him, but he turned down several matchmaking offers. He said,

I didn’t trust them, any of them, my relatives and those women. It did not matter whether we are biologically related or not. Don’t believe it when people say blood is thicker than water. They were all too poor, and all they wanted was my money. In my first trip, I bought everything for my sister, but they even stripped off my watch in the last minute right before I left. I came back with empty hands.
Mr. Wei insisted that the poverty conditions were beyond my imagination and he gave me a very detailed account of the various items, such as a toilet and refrigerator that he purchased for his relatives. Because of the previous scam he experienced in Taiwan, Wei became cautious about his relatives’ motives. At the same time, he realized that, although his pension is meager and he cannot afford a paid caregiver in Taiwan, he could live very comfortably in Shangdong. Wei “adopted” one of his nieces and lived with her family for some time until he felt they used his money mostly on their children and neglected his needs. It is important to note here that the adoption was a social contract done orally between Wei and his niece but not institutionalized, largely due to the legal incompatibility between China and Taiwan at the time. Wei was disappointed and felt betrayed, and he saw the adoption as a failed experiment. He then returned to the old dream–finding a suitable woman to marry. One major reason that Wei opted for the idea of marriage again was that he wanted to live in Taiwan owing to its more advanced healthcare, and a Chinese marriage migrant is allowed to enter and live in Taiwan. Wei told me, “at least I have to find someone to give me a proper funeral.”

Learning from previous experiences, this time Wei came up with a new strategy – to have a “probation” period. He targeted middle-aged women who “do not look too smart or too pretty and need a job.” Wei thought a smart and pretty woman might run away when better opportunities presented themselves. He found Chitung, a forty-year-old woman selling groceries in the street with a fifteen-year-old son. Wei hired her as a live-in caregiver for several months before he proposed to get married and relocate to Taiwan. In his own words,

My health was still pretty good at the time, so I was able to travel back and forth between China and Taiwan. But eventually I have to find someone who can take care of me when my health gets worse, someone I know, someone I can trust, someone I can watch TV with and have dinner with.
I’ve helped organize quite a few funerals for my fellows already. I don’t know if there will be anyone left to organize a funeral for me if I don’t get married.

From Mr. Wei’s description, we can see that despite the benefits the veterans receive from the government and the mutual care from their fellows, the veterans still regard old-age care provided by family members to be a better way. Among the aging veteran husbands I met, quite a few of them considered their age unsuitable for marriage and opted for adoption as their first choice. The adoptions, however, did not work out for various reasons. For example, since the adoption cannot be formally institutionalized, the bonding between the veterans and their adopted children is often not strong enough to ensure the veterans get the care they desire. Moreover, most veterans would like to reside in Taiwan to receive the better healthcare there, and it becomes a problem as the socially adopted children cannot migrate to Taiwan to take care of the veterans. As a result, cross-Strait marriage becomes a feasible solution to old-age care for aging veterans.

To sum up, while non-veteran Taiwanese husbands often have multiple reasons for pursuing a cross-border marriage such as carrying on the family lineage and specific expectations of gender roles, most old veterans I met made it clear that what they truly want is to find a companion who is willing to provide different types of care for the rest of their life. The financial subsidies and health benefits veterans receive from the Taiwanese government provide a sense of stability and ensure their basic well-being. Yet the welfare from the state and mutual support from fellow veterans are not sufficient enough for some veterans, especially the ones whose health is relatively good. The companionship they long for involves daily physical care which is expected for the future, emotional support, and, to some extent, sexual pleasure. Given their own social location in Taiwanese society, the veterans are fully aware of the difficulties of finding a suitable wife who is willing to provide the types of care they desire. The lifting of martial law allowed veterans to go to
China, which in turn provided veterans with opportunities to find a wife, usually through relatives’ introduction. These veterans’ age may seem inappropriate or unsuitable for marriage, but they promise long-term security as a compensation for their age. This long-term security that the veterans offer to their Chinese wives includes legal residency status in Taiwan which also means potential higher income, sponsoring the wives’ children’s education or small businesses, buying property in China under the wives’ name, and leaving an inheritance and pension entitlements. As I mentioned in the previous section, the two parties usually discuss and negotiate the terms of these practical matters prior to marriage, and compared to cross-Strait marriages by younger generations, both sides have relatively clear understandings and expectations for their marriage. One thing worth mentioning here is that although the practical matters are negotiated, there is rarely a large betrothal at the time of the wedding or any large monetary transaction and legal procedures at the initial stage of marriage. Many veterans have experienced scams like Mr. Wei, and they are cautious not to give everything away too fast in order to protect themselves and ensure that they will receive care at old age. While acknowledging that it is more affordable and also considerably easier to marry a Chinese woman to gain the type of care they desire, it is also important to note that veterans regard their cross-Strait marriages as equal exchanges, a “win-win” situation rather than exploitation.

### 3.3.2 Non-Veterans

Previous studies on cross-Strait marriages rarely include Taiwanese husbands in the picture. When they are mentioned briefly, researchers focus on the age gap between cross-Strait couples and the disadvantaged positions these Taiwanese men occupy in society, such as disabled, low-income, Aboriginals, mentally-ill, and so on (陳小紅 2006). However, I would like to point out that these Taiwanese husbands, though some of them
may indeed occupy a marginalized position in Taiwanese society, are certainly not at the very bottom of the social strata. Hsia Hsiao-Chuan is one of the few scholars who includes and documents Taiwanese men with an Indonesian spouse (Hsia 2002). In her widely-cited study, Hsia documents that a man has to pay the matchmaking agency between 10,000 USD and 15,000 USD if he successfully marries a woman, only 10% of which goes to the woman’s family as a dowry. In addition to the broker fee, it is also expected that these Taiwanese men will wire money, on a regular basis or not, to his wife’s family to help build a house or to contribute to other family expenses. Based on the statistics released from the Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Taiwan’s Per Capita GDP reached $20,000 USD in 2011, for the first time in its history. In my research, Taiwanese men who went through an introduction agency to get married paid slightly more than Hsia’s informants. The fact that these Taiwanese men could afford to pay this amount of money to a marriage broker tells us that these men are not at the very bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy in Taiwan.

During the course of my fieldwork, I encountered dozens of Taiwanese husbands and the portrait of these Taiwanese men (non-veterans) with a Chinese spouse is a heterogeneous one. Granted, some Taiwanese husbands I met indeed occupied marginal positions (low socioeconomic status, physical disability) and therefore were less desirable partners for marriage. But there were also many engineers, low- or mid-ranking civil servants, and small business owners. We have to ask, in addition to the relatively low socio-economic status that make these Taiwanese men less desirable, what are other possible reasons driving Taiwanese men to actively seek a spouse abroad? And why did

9 Source: Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan
they go for Chinese women, but not women from other countries? If Taiwanese men’s first marital preference is Taiwanese women as commonly assumed, is there really a “bride deficiency” or marriage squeeze in the domestic marriage scene?

On a breezy summer night, I went to Wufen Pu—a huge clothing wholesale open-air market—with Yen and her husband Mr. Chu. Yen was eager to introduce her husband to me. While we were waiting at a subway station for her husband to join us after work, she said to me in a proud tone, “he has a master’s degree in engineering; you are both cultivated intellectuals so you will have common topics to talk about.” I did not respond with words but smiled politely. I was, however, very curious and intent to find out what motivated Mr. Chu to go to China to look for a wife.

Mr. Chu looks like a typical middle-age engineer one would find in Science Park in Taiwan—glasses with slim golden frames, a plaid shirt, a black leather belt with silver metal buckle, khaki pants, a pair of comfortable but not stylish shoes, and an overloaded messenger bag. Yen told me before that he is 40 years old, but, with his baby face, he looks much younger than his actual age. From an earlier incident, I learned that Mr. Chu is probably a frugal, if not penny-pinching man, even though his salary is in fact a few times higher than the average. He chose a small street vendor for us to have a simple dinner. Since I had not had authentic Taiwanese “night market” food for a long time, I was actually enjoying this food despite possible sanitary concerns and the crowded environment. Although I insisted on paying for my portion, Mr. Chu said “this is small money and you are still a student” and then paid the entire bill.

When Yen shopped around the market, Mr. Chu and I had a lengthy and interesting conversation. At the beginning, I was not quite sure how to approach him with the topic I considered as private and sensitive, especially as he was the first Taiwanese
husband I had a chance to engage in a long conversation. Mr. Chu seemed to be much more comfortable with the topic than I was. Before I even asked anything, he started talking about his life experiences and his own observations. His opening line was astounding to me—“would a young, pretty, and educated Taiwanese woman like you ever choose to marry a Taiwanese guy like me?” I could not think of any ethnography method books I have read that cover such a topic. My immediate response was to tell him that although I dressed in a casual and youngish fashion, I am actually not that young by Taiwanese standards, and I am just a poor graduate student trying to get my degree while struggling to pay my bills. After my brain gradually recovered from the shock, my social skills returned. I complimented Mr. Chu by saying that he looks great at his age and he seems to be a nice guy with a steady job that pays a good salary, so I could not think of any convincing reason why he would have any difficulty getting married. I was being honest and sincere, but Mr. Chu responded with a slightly sarcastic tone.

You are too idealistic. Do you really think a young, pretty, and intelligent Taiwanese woman in her right mind would ever choose to marry a man like me? No, they don’t. You think I haven’t tried those expensive Taiwanese matchmaking services? I did, many of them, and don’t even bother to ask me how much money I have wasted on memberships and paying dinners for those Taiwanese women; they all have ‘princess syndrome.’ I am a divorced mid-aged man living with my parents. Normal Taiwanese woman would never marry me. They are all trendy and independent, so they wouldn’t want to live with my parents and take care of the household. A few co-workers in my company got married to Chinese woman, so I realized that though I’m not rich, Taiwanese men in general still have an edge in China. I asked my co-workers’ wives to introduce people to me, and now I’m a married man! [Italic added]

I remained speechless for a few seconds after his words. He politely apologized for losing his temper a bit and said he did not mean that I was one of those “princesses.”

Mr. Chu clearly had tried relentlessly to seek marriage opportunities in the Taiwanese domestic marriage market, but unfortunately failed and left with deep
frustration. Later on I had quite a few chances to interact with other Taiwanese husbands with similar backgrounds (educated, stable income, white-collar job) on various occasions, and I have lost count of the number of joking sarcastic “marriage proposals” I received during the course of my fieldwork. I gradually learned how to handle these awkward situations with ease and tried to find the commonality among these Taiwanese husbands. I do not disagree with the importance of a man’s socio-economic status in the marriage market, and the global economic restructuring has an undeniable impact on individuals’ marriage choices. However, from my own fieldwork, I have reasons to believe that there are also cultural factors influencing the increase of cross-border marriages in Taiwan.

In a study of transpacific marriage between highly-educated Vietnamese women and low-wage and low-status Vietnamese immigrants in the United States, Thai illustrates how intersecting global processes and cultural beliefs brought two “unmarriageables” into marriage (Thai 2005). In Thai’s research, highly-educated Vietnamese women resist patriarchal arrangements by avoiding marriages with local men whom they think will only confine them to domestic roles. Ironically, influenced by traditional gendered ideas, these women do not want to “marry down” economically and socially. Some of them would rather endure the often painful stigma of singlehood and childlessness, while others choose to take an alternative path – marry abroad in hope for a husband who is immersed in western culture and will practice gender equity in marriage.

On the other side of the story, Vietnamese male immigrants often experienced downward mobility after migration and are stuck in low-wage earning jobs in bottom-level social strata in the United States. They are aware of their disadvantages in the local marriage market, and more importantly, in the eyes of these men who are influenced by traditional Asian and Confucius hierarchies, they want to be respected by their wives. In Thai’s study, we can see how globalization not only rapidly opened impersonal markets of
capital and goods, but also a rather personal market of emotions and marriages. These cross-border marriages may be labeled as “global hypergamy.” They are global insofar as they involve men and women from different regions of the world. They can be regarded as hypergamous in the sense of geographical hierarchy—an immigrant man with low socio-economic status in the first world economy, though seen as unmarriageable in the local marriage market, can be appealing to educated women from the third world economy.

Similar to the Vietnamese men in Thai’s study, some Taiwanese husbands I encountered like Mr. Chu and his coworkers experienced difficulties in finding a suitable wife in Taiwan but believe Taiwanese men still “have advantages” in China. Their belief partly comes from their own socio-economic status and partly has to do with the larger Taiwanese society. For example, a couple of Taiwanese husbands explained to me that one of the “advantages” a Taiwanese man has is that the Taiwanese passport, compared to a Chinese passport, is more convenient in terms of travelling. Other reasons include better health care, more westernized thus more “advanced.” In other words, these Taiwanese husbands perceive themselves to be uncompetitive in the domestic marriage market. Meanwhile, with a decent white-collar job, they think that their educational background and income level are appealing in China and that Taiwanese society also offers some attractions to Chinese women. They imagine that what they can offer fits into the traditional norm—for women to “marry up,” not only in the sense of individual socio-economic status, but also in geographical opportunity.

Such phenomena are not unique to Asia. Constable’s research on correspondence marriage between American men and Filipino and Chinese women also indicates that
gender ideologies play an important role (Constable 2003; Constable 2005). In her study, American men blame American women for being too independent, too career-oriented, and too “feminist,” and in their eyes these women are not suitable wives and mothers. These American men expressed their desire for the “good old-fashioned days” in which roles and duties in a marriage are not shared equally but follow a more traditionally gendered division of labor. The search for traditional brides is associated with the decline of patriarchalism and men’s nostalgia for imagined “good old days.”

In my fieldwork, of course not every husband I talked to was as observational and analytical as Mr. Chu, and might not have been able to elaborate their personal experiences and viewpoints deliberately, but they certainly shared similar sentiments. Shuiyun was a 22-year-old woman from a small agricultural village in Fujian province, and her husband Mr. Kuo was the owner of a convenience store located in a fairly good school district. Mr. Kuo is an introverted and hard-working man. When I first met Shuiyun, she refused to be interviewed because she thought that she was just an ordinary girl from a small agricultural village and her life story was nothing worth talking about. After I helped her install simplified Chinese and QQ–instant messenger software that is very popular in China—on her newly-bought computer, she opened up a bit and started talking to me. She finally agreed to be interviewed under one condition—her husband had to be present during the interview. Later on, in another conversation, I learned that it was her husband’s idea to accompany her and to be included in the interview.

Constable problematizes the notion of “mail-order bride” and offers other ways of understanding these women’s experiences. She argues that the label of “mail-order bride” obscures the degree of selectivity and choice exerted by most women, therefore she uses the term correspondence marriage as opposed to mail-order bride.
Mr. Kuo has a very busy schedule since he runs a convenience store which is open 24 hours a day and 7 days a week like other convenience stores in Taiwan. He hires several part-timers with minimum hourly wages, but he still stays in the store for most of the business hours except late night shifts. I suggested that we could have the interview in a coffee shop that is just one block away from his convenience store, but Mr. Kuo insisted that we go to a small park near a temple which is about 15 minutes away by walking. He said, “an air-conditioned coffee shop is indeed nice in such horrible weather, but I’d rather sweat and endure the heat outside so nobody hears us.” I respected his concerns and noticed that Shui-yun did not speak a word in the entire discussion.

Mr. Kuo is a high-school dropout in his late 30s, and just got married to Shui-yun a few months ago. Since Mr. Kuo works long hours in his store, he does not have too much time and chances to meet women. His parents asked friends and matchmakers to introduce Taiwanese women to Mr. Kuo. Unlike Mr. Chu, who was very outspoken, Mr. Kuo carefully chose words to describe his marriage:

I’m not ashamed of myself; I earn a decent income and have a Toyota. My family owns the building, so I don’t have to pay rent for the store and that saves a lot of cost for running the store. I am the only son, and my parents and I live in the same building, but on different floors. I only feel sorry because they had to worry that I would end up alone. I actually don’t mind being single, but I don’t want them to worry. Looking for a wife in China was the last option, but we’ve tried everything else. What could I say? The city girls are into glamour; they like...what is it called? LV? That handbag probably could cover one part-timer’s monthly salary. The girls I met all have nail polish, and my parents said that means they won’t do housework. You know...I’m a good man, not a pig-head (meaning chauvinist in this context), but I need someone who can work with me in the store, who can

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11 It is clear that Mr. Kuo is very far away from the “glamorous world” he referred to. I believe what he referred to is a Louis Vuitton logo handbag, which was very popular at the time. I roughly calculated in my head, and the cheapest Louis Vuitton handbag can easily pay for three part-time workers in Mr. Kuo’s store.
cook and take care of my parents. I don’t have the luxury to maintain a wife who only goes to the salon and does nothing.

Mr. Kuo looked at me as if he were examining the goods in his store, then he said “you are good; you are different than others; you don’t carry a LV so men will marry you.” I admitted that I do not own a Louis Vuitton bag. Shui-yun nodded to agree with her husband. Speaking with a heavy accent, Shui-yun always seemed shy when trying to express herself. She told me that so far she likes her new life in Taiwan, “listening to the radio and working in the store with air-conditioning is much better than what I had to do in my hometown. Taiwanese girls are all spoiled; you should try not to be like them. Hard-work would earn you a good husband, and you should try before it’s too late.” Shui-yun associated my fair skin tone with a desk-job, which she apparently did not consider as “hard-work.” My status as an unmarried woman who just turned thirty concerned her a lot. Although she is younger than me, she always acted like a big-sister towards me. Every time I chatted with her, with all sincerity, she reminded me how important it is for a woman to find a good husband. In her own words, “Don’t marry an American man; they all have complicated sexual relationships. Find yourself a good Chinese man who will bring money home.”

Among the Taiwanese husbands I met, some indeed fall into the category of rural low socio-economic status as in Hsia’s study, and their decisions to use matchmaking agencies to find a Chinese wife were a result of the intersection of their personally disadvantaged positions and global economic restructuring. News on mass media often portray these Taiwanese men either as unethical men who would threaten to sue the matchmaking agency when they find out their wife is not a virgin, or stupid uneducated people who fall into the matchmaking agency’s scam, or moral deviants who “buy” a wife. It is important to recognize that these husbands, though not at the very bottom of the
socio-economic strata, are often considered as unmarriageable in Taiwanese society. Facing the pressures derived from traditional Han-Chinese family value—to get married and have a son to carry on the patrilineage—using introduction agencies to find a spouse abroad is probably the only option they have.

On the other hand, there are also many Taiwanese husbands like Mr. Chu and Mr. Kuo, with a lower-middle or middle class background, actively seeking marriage opportunities with Chinese women. Certain themes frequently appeared in conversations—“I can’t afford a Taiwanese wife,” “Modern Taiwanese women are high-maintenance and they don’t suit my parents,” “It is too exhausting to find a decent Taiwanese wife.” Unlike the group of Taiwanese men with disadvantaged positions mentioned above, these Taiwanese men, given their socio-economic status, are not considered unmarriageable in the Taiwanese society. Although they often “complained” to me about how undesirable they are in the local marriage market, one of the major reasons that drives them to search for marriage prospects in China is their imagination and expectations of marriage. Similar to the American men in Constable’s study, an ideal marriage to these Taiwanese men involves a more traditionally gendered division of labor. Feminists’ efforts have transformed Taiwanese society in a significant and speedy way. More and more Taiwanese women receive higher education and are financially independent nowadays, especially in big cities, and these “modern women,” as my Taiwanese male informants labeled them, are concerned with gender inequality rooted deeply in family. Although still influenced by heterosexual normative ideologies, it is not uncommon to hear young professional women saying that “if I will turn to be a maid after getting married, why can’t I stay like a princess in my natal family?”

Introduction agencies also play an important role in the picture. Even though the Taiwanese government has banned profit-oriented matchmaking agencies, many of them
simply changed their names and became government-certified organizations. I visited more than a couple dozen matchmaking websites and interviewed several matchmakers. Despite the collective efforts of changing negative terms such as dalumei and waiji xinniang to xinzhumin (new resident) or xinyimin (new immigrant), matchmaking agencies use the term daluxinniang (mainland bride). Larger-scale introduction agencies have evolved and established their own networks and local contacts, so instead of lumping all Chinese women together they now categorize women by their origin and advertise each province’s characteristics, such as compatibility of religious beliefs, folk customs, and food preferences. Matchmaking agencies further note that Chinese women from the northeast region tend to be taller with fair skin tone, women from the southwest provinces are still innocent, and so on. What’s noteworthy is that most matchmaking agencies emphasize the characteristics of “mainland brides’” like docility, diligence, ability to endure hardship, devotion to family, and low divorce rate, and such descriptions are particularly applied to less developed regions like Hainan Island in south China and the inland provinces. Such rhetoric feeds into Taiwanese men’s imagination and desire for a traditional female figure.

In this chapter, I closely examined the changes in terminology that refer to Chinese female marriage migrants in order to show the deep discrimination and unequal relationships embedded in language. Through the collective work of female marriage migrants across countries of origins, and scholars and activists, a new term was coined—xinyimin nuxing (new immigrant female)—in the hope of de-stigmatizing all female marriage migrants. However, the term xinyimin nuxing only appears on official documents and some parts of the mass media. Most people, including government

12 Just to list a few examples:
http://www.mate99.org/guilin/guilin.html;
http://marry.khwfe.com/;
officials, social workers, and most Chinese marriage migrants and their Taiwanese families I met, do not use the term in daily life. In the process of fighting for their rights, Chinese female marriage migrants point out the absurdity of the old terms. Yet instead of asserting their subjectivity with multiple roles, they adopt a strategy that fits Taiwanese nationalist rhetoric by focusing on their affiliation with the receiving society—they are Taiwanese daughters-in-law and they are the mothers raising the next generation of Taiwanese. Such discourse may have its strategic purpose, but it inevitably reflects and reinforces a patriarchal hegemony.

Chinese female marriage migrants in Taiwan are by far not a uniform group. These women come from different parts of China, speak different dialects, and have different educational levels and class backgrounds. Such diversities also indicate that they do not share one single motivation to migrate and they do not have the same expectations and imagination of their destination. Taiwanese mass media conflates Chinese female marriage migrants with an image of gold diggers, and most news reports are sensational stories like that of a young Chinese woman running away after taking her elderly and honest veteran husband’s lifetime savings, or of a Chinese woman using marriage as a cover to get into the sex industry. Previous scholarly works have tended to see Chinese female marriage migrants as a collective group. In this chapter, I have tried to portray the heterogeneity among Chinese women and differentiate them by age group and place of origins. I laid out the motivations of different groups for cross-border marriage. Moreover, while Chinese female marriage migrants may experience similar adaptation difficulties and be subject to similar discrimination in Taiwanese society, it does not mean that they automatically build up solidarity to fight for their rights. Rather, in my fieldwork I found that different groups of Chinese female marriage migrants hold various prejudices towards each other based upon their previous living experiences in China. The Cultural Revolution
generation women criticize the young urban group’s attitudes towards work and see them as the reason why Chinese female marriage migrants are labeled as gold-diggers. The young urban group of women defend themselves by emphasizing their relatively comfortable life in their hometowns and asserting that they do not migrate for economic reasons. They distance themselves from the stigmatized gold-digger label by pointing to the rural women who use introduction agencies and associate their marriage as a commodity exchange. All these examples demonstrate the diversity among Chinese female marriage migrants.

Previous studies rarely put Taiwanese husbands on the map, and, when they do, they focus on the marginalized position these Taiwanese men occupy in society. In this chapter, I explored how low-rank aging veterans’ marital choices have been hugely shaped by historical events and state policies, and, despite the benefits they receive from the government and supports they receive from their fellow comrades, I showed how they nonetheless see cross-Strait marriages as providing better care for their old age. Marginalized Taiwanese men are included, and I lay out how these men actively seek cross-border marriage under familial, cultural, and economic pressures. I have also included a group of Taiwanese husbands who are by no means in marginalized locations in the local context. These Taiwanese husbands are well-educated with white-collar jobs and cannot be categorized as “unmarriageable.” An important factor in their marital decision-making process is their expectations of gender roles in marriage; these expectations, ironically, are often the opposite of those of their wives’, a topic further analyzed in the next chapter.
It was one of those typical summer afternoons in Taiwan, hot and humid, with occasional thunderstorms. The unbearable weather forced most people to stay in air-conditioned places, with only one exception—teenagers with endless energy to release were still hanging out in the streets in Ximen Ting, once the oldest city center from the Japanese colonial era then turned into a neighborhood that is famous for its youth culture. They are often in small groups, holding funky-flavored ice cream, talking loudly, and shopping for the latest trendy, mostly bad-quality, but inexpensive clothing.

Yen, Mei, Ju, and I were on our way to a small joint that is famous for its Taiwanese-style taro shredded ice after the language class at the Immigrants Hall. I noticed that some teenagers were looking at us, not with any hostility, but certainly with curiosity. From their gaze, I realized that the way we dress, our age, and our accents made our group an unusual presence in this neighborhood. I felt tired in such weather, and could not imagine how I survived so many summers during the years I grew up in this city. I secretly hoped that we could walk faster to our destination, but the other three women were all fascinated by the cheap and wide selection of clothing and jewelry, so we entered a few shops along the road. They tried on different hair accessories but eventually put them all back and did not buy anything. Finally we arrived at the joint, and I was so relieved just by the first breath of cool air. When I told them that I had never had taro shredded ice before, all of them raised their eyebrows high to show how surprised they were. I then had to explain to them that I had left Taiwan for more than a decade, and even though I came back to visit my family almost every year, it is impossible for me to keep up with all the trends in Taiwan. All of them have lived in Taiwan for less than two years, but they suddenly acted as if they were the locals and were eager to introduce
different flavored shredded ice to me. At that moment, I could not help but wonder who is more “Taiwanese” among us.

After a short while, we were calmed down by the taro shredded ice and air-conditioning, far away from the heat and the crowded streets. Mei was the one who first showed friendliness and invited me to join the group, and she started asking me about my life as a graduate student in the United States. Before I said anything, our conversation was interrupted by a phone call for Ju. She then explained in an annoyed tone, that her mother-in-law called to kindly remind her that she should not “fool around” outside for too long. Ju’s mother-in-law asked Ju not to come home late because she was craving for a specific dish for dinner that needs a long time to prepare. Yen looked at her, nodded, said with full empathy, “I understand.” After a sip of taro shredded ice, Yen looked into my eyes directly and asked me if I knew what the ugliest and worst thing about Taiwan is. I hesitated. As the only Taiwanese in the group, I was trying to think of an answer that is fair to my home country and also would not induce any potential discomfort among us. But before I could find a perfect solution, Yen answered her own question—the Taiwanese mother-in-law. She continued,

Before I moved to Taiwan, my friend told me that I should prepare two knives—one to kill the Taiwanese mother-in-law, and the other to finish my own life. I thought it was a bad joke, but now I realized that I was too naïve to overestimate myself and underestimate how difficult a Taiwanese mother-in-law could be.

Yen’s words triggered extensive complaints, and they began to give me all kinds of examples with vivid details. Not surprisingly, they started by describing the conflicts in regard to housework, especially cooking and cleaning. Ju told me that *si lao tai po* (literal translation—the dead old woman, referring to her mother-in-law) is a cleaning freak, who refuses to wear the same clothes just because it got one drop of clean water. Ju described
how her mother-in-law touches the window frame everyday to check whether Ju wipes dust in the exact way she instructs. “This adds tremendous amount of burden on me, you know,” she frowned and shook her head slightly, “I can never really finish the laundry, it’s just impossible. What I do all day is just clean, clean, and more clean.”

Yen and Ju’s experiences are not atypical; in fact, other Chinese immigrant wives I met or interviewed shared similar experiences with them. It made me wonder why these women have so many conflicts with and resentments towards their mothers-in-law. Although it is not unheard of that married Taiwanese women experience quarrels with their mothers-in-law, being a marriage immigrant, do Chinese marriage migrants suffer differently from Taiwanese women? Facing such difficulties, what are the strategies these Chinese marriage migrants use to cope with their mothers-in-law? Is there any form of resistance?

4.1 Marriage and Family Organization in Traditional Han Chinese Culture

Although the primary focus of my research is Taiwan, the historical context of my research necessitates an examination of family organization in a broader sense, starting from the Han-Chinese family system. In this section, I will discuss the organization of marriage and family and the relation of these two institutions to the larger society in traditional Han-Chinese culture.

Over centuries, Confucianism has been regarded as a synonym for traditional Chinese civilization and laid out a patrilineal social structure. In a study comparing Chinese and Western patriarchy, Gary Hamilton argues that one of the distinctive features of Chinese patriarchy is its focus on social positions, whereas Western patriarchy is rooted in personal authority. That is to say, in Western traditions, the patriarch’s personal
qualities are emphasized and he exercises power directly to his dictates, while the emphasis in Chinese patriarchy is its “ultimate supremacy of roles” (Hamilton 1990, 92). Based upon Confucian doctrines, the ideal society is a harmonious and hierarchical social system in which every actor knows his or her own position and behaves according to his or her prescribed roles. *Wulun* (the five human relationships)—sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend—is the principle governing the propriety of social relations. Under the guidance of *Wulun*, “sovereign and subject should be just to each other, father and son should love each other, husband and wife should distinguish their separate spheres, elder and younger brother should have a sense of precedence, and friends should have faith between each other” (Mencius and Ivanhoe 2011; Y.-L. Fung 1949). It cannot be stressed enough that, among these social relations, the “parent-child” (father and son) axis is the central and the most important one.

Confucianism also lays out the protocol for appropriate marriage and family life. Marriage in traditional Han-Chinese culture has never been an act of romantic love between two individuals, but an act that is designed to create ties between two extended families. Since the husband-wife axis is not as significant as the parent-child axis, the major purpose of marriage is not to have a “wife” for the groom, but to find a “daughter-in-law” to continue the family line and help out with the household chores for the man’s extended family (H.-M. Kung 2014). Arranged marriage is thus the product of the ultimate parental authority ensuring that the child gets a proper spouse.

The ideal family structure was an extended joint household in which five generations lived together as one unit, but due to low life expectancies and economic conditions, only very well-off families were able to put the ideal protocol into practice (Lang 2013). For average families, three-generation-cohabitation (the stem family)—
parents with one married son and his wife and children living in one household—was the common practice. Among countless teachings, the “Three Obedience” best illustrates a woman’s status in the Confucian system—to obey her father in youth, to obey her husband in marriage, and to obey her son in widowhood. In short, the Confucian family system can be characterized as patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal, and as organized according to rigid gender and generational principles: in other words, men over women and elders over youngsters. It is important to point out that family, in the Confucian system, is not only the microcosm of government but also the most basic and fundamental unit of sociopolitical and socioeconomic order. Some scholars, like Judith Stacey, pushed this idea further and argued that in the Confucian tradition, family, economy, and society were essentially one system governed by the same principle—filial piety (Stacey 1983).

*The Hsiao Ching*, a Confucian classic, identifies the code of filial piety as “the foundation of virtue and the root of civilization” (Makra 1961). The notion of filial piety is therefore not only a major cultural norm that guides inter-generational relations in the private sphere, but also an embodiment of all the virtues of a human being that affects reputation and success. Aligned with other Confucian ideologies, *The Hsiao Ching* emphasizes the interests of family over the needs of the individual. The explicit teaching can be demonstrated in the following quote—“Restricting one’s personal desires and enjoyment in order to support one’s parents—this is the filiality of the common people. ... if filial piety is not pursued from beginning to end, disasters are sure to follow” (Makra 1961). Individual identity is trifling; what significant is one’s kinship positions such as the first son, the first daughter-in-law, and so on. One is obligated to fulfill his or her filial duty according to the prescribed role, and when one violates the code of filial piety, one would face social pressure and severe punishment.
According to the Confucian principle of filial piety, children should respect, obey, and serve their parents. The principle further requires a son to support his parents in old age and to take care of them both materially and spiritually. For instance, one should keep parents company and not go far away for prolonged periods of time. One’s filial duty also does not end with the death of parents. As Mencius said, “there are three things that are unfilial, and the greatest of them is to have no posterity” (Mencius and Ivanhoe 2011, 84).  

It is of paramount importance to have a male heir to carry on the family name for the continuation of the family line because daughters are not considered suitable to perform this function. A Chinese proverb best highlights the logic behind the gender differentiation here—“A ‘married-out’ daughter is like spilled water.” This old proverb reveals that when a woman gets married, she is seen as given away to her husband’s family from her natal family’s point of view. In ancient times, a married woman usually took her husband’s last name, and she no longer counted as a core member in her natal family. Following this logic, only a male heir is able to legitimately continue the family blood line. Therefore, to be childless, and especially to fail to produce a son, is to seriously fail to carry out filial responsibility.

The emphasis on filial piety in the Chinese tradition can be further understood through an analysis of Confucian ontology, which assumes that individuals’ lives are the continuation of their parents. Confucian philosophers conceptualize the family by using the analogy of the human body. Each family member plays a certain role that represents a specific part of the human body, and together they form an inseparable and interdependent entity. The ideal Confucian society can thus be characterized as a

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1 Mencius (372-289BC) was a profound Confucian philosopher right after Confucius himself.
This discussion provides us with basic information about the structure and ideologies of the Confucian marriage and family system, but this information is from the dominant male perspective in which a continuous patrilineage is emphasized and an absolute female subordination and loyalty is expected. Margery Wolf's detailed ethnographic account is profound because it enhances our understanding of the family structure from the female stance (Wolf 1972). According to Wolf, a Chinese woman lives in two separate places during her lifetime—her father's household and her husband's household—but she is not fully a member in either family. In her father’s household, she is a temporary member because she is expected to marry a man and she is not entitled to inherit her father’s lineal property. In fact, a woman’s name cannot even be recorded into her father’s genealogy. In her husband’s family, she is considered an “essential” outsider brought into the family for the purpose of bearing a new generation. Wolf suggests that a woman only finds a sense of belonging in what she calls the “uterine family.” In her father’s household, the uterine family consists of her mother, and to some extent her mother’s children; in her husband’s household, a woman has to create her own uterine family by having children. Whereas the Confucian family structure, from a male standpoint, stresses an unbroken lineage with power and property passing from generation to generation, Wolf argues that the uterine family is formed from a woman’s needs. In her own words, “The uterine family has no ideology, no formal structure, and no public existence. It is built out of sentiments and loyalties that die with its members, but it is no less real for all that” (Wolf 1972, 37).

In the case of inter-generational relations, the older generation is expected to carry out its parental responsibilities and set good examples for the younger generation to follow.
in order to secure their children’s respect and support in the later phase of life. Though filial piety is usually understood in terms of the obligations of the younger generation to the older generation, it does not mean that the older generation simply exploits the younger. Child rearing is seen as a long process of social investment with an expected payment in the later part of life. A popular Chinese saying articulates the parent-child bond—“Raise a son to secure the life in old age.” Traditional Chinese parents pay economic and emotional costs to raise children, particularly in terms of educational investments, and to some extent the purchase of a house as a preparation for sons. Children are then expected to return the filial debt to their aging parents later in life. The emphasis of reciprocity and mutual dependence in a Chinese family has been articulated as a form of “inter-generational contract” (Ishii-Kuntz 2000). As I discussed earlier, one is expected to put the interests of the entire family before his/her own.

The mother- and daughter-in-law relation is peculiar among intergenerational relations in the Confucian family system. The mother-in-law serves as the patriarch’s deputy in the family, and the daughter-in-law is directly subject to the older woman’s unchallengeable authority. As Wolf observes, women in these prescribed family roles—mother-in-law/mother and daughter-in-law/wife—are structurally locked in competition for the support and the loyalty of the same person—the son/husband. Since the son is a member of his mother’s “uterine family,” and the parent-child axis is much more important than the husband-wife axis according to the principle of Wulun, the sandwiched man often sides with his mother. Wolf notes, “To fail one’s father produces shame before the outside world, but to fail one’s mother has psychological effect that is far, far more painful” (Wolf 1972, 160). The mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law are constantly placed in antagonistic positions. Everything the young bride wishes to gain—power, autonomy, and the man’s loyalty—would come at her mother-in-law’s expense. The family
structure and the life course of a woman are cyclical. Once the young woman creates her own uterine family by bearing a son, she gradually gains seniority status as she grows old. When her son brings a new outsider into the household, she then uses the only opportunity in her life to exercise dominance, which occur in relation to the newly-wed bride. Another tyrannical mother- and daughter-in-law relationship thus begins. Exploring the relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law in the traditional Confucian family system, I will later discuss, in sections 4.3 and 4.4, the ways in which class and nationalism shape the relationship between the Taiwanese mother- and Chinese daughter-in-law in modern Taiwan.

4.2 The Family Structure in Contemporary Taiwan

As I noted in the last section, an extended joint household is considered as the ideal family structure in traditional Confucian Han-Chinese culture. In reality, modern Taiwan has deviated from the model of san dai tong tang (three-generation cohabitation) for various and intertwined reasons. Rapid and significant social and economic changes (see the discussion in chapter 2) have led to the transformation of family living arrangements. The incorporation of Taiwan into the world system and international markets also introduces the Western life-style, which includes the model of nuclear family. The average family size in Taiwan steadily decreased, from 5.57 (persons in one household) in 1961 to 2.9 in 2010. Nuclear family constitutes 54.5% of all households, and stem family is only 16.4% in 2010.²

² Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan
One major social change in the past few decades is that more and more women receive higher education. From Figure 4.1, we can see that in the younger generation, the percentage of women who received higher education actually surpassed the percentage of men. Along with advanced education, women’s employment rate has also grown. In 2009, the rate of female labor participation reached 49.6%, and the rate is even higher among young, highly educated women in urban settings. As a result, dual-earner households have become a common life-style as well as an economic necessity because housing prices and the cost of living are high in urban area.

Figure 4.1. Ratio of Male and Female Who Received Higher Education, 2009

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3 Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan

Labor in the statistics here is defined as a person who is over the age of fifteen and capable of working.

4 Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan
With the increased rate of female labor participation, more and more women have gained financial independence. Young, well-educated, financially-independent Taiwanese women tend to reject the idea of living with parents-in-law because they would like to maintain their autonomy in the household. For these women, a major consideration even before marriage is whether or not the young couple has to live with the husband’s parents. With all the factors described above and the influence of the Western life-style, the conjugal household arrangement has gradually outpaced the traditional practice of three-generation cohabitation in contemporary Taiwanese society.

However, though Western individualism has its increasing influence, the notion of filial piety still occupies an important role in Taiwanese society. Sending aging parents to a nursing home is still viewed as a serious violation of filial piety, and the adult children can face criticism from his/her social circle. By comparing the census data from 1986, 1996, to 2002, we find that it is a declining trend for elder citizens to live with their adult children. But when we compare the data with Western countries, the percentage is still a lot higher.\(^5\) Based on the 2002 census report, 61.7% of people who are over the age of 65 live with their children, and only 7.5% live in a nursing facility. It is also important to note that in 2002 about half of elder citizens still considered cohabitation with adult children as the ideal living arrangement. The percentage is much higher than in the United States, and also significantly higher compared with other Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan (see Figure 4.2).

\(^5\) The Taiwanese government defines elder citizen as a person who is over the age of 65, which is different from the UN’s definition—the age of 60.
Figure 4.2. Elder Citizens Consider Cohabitation with Adult Children as the Most Ideal Living Arrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>59.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inter-generational power dynamics are a two-fold story. When a couple’s wages count as the major source of household income, adult children in current generations who reject three-generation cohabitation living arrangements may face less financial penalty than in the past. On the other hand, parents who have less financial means and depend on their children often make themselves valuable by providing child-care and domestic help to secure their well-being in the family. In research on relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law at two points of time in a rural village, Rita Gallin points out that mothers-in-law who are from a higher class background with more financial means

6 Source: Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, Taiwan

https://www.dgbas.gov.tw/lp.asp?CtNode=3233&CtUnit=927&BaseDSD=7&xq_xCat=02
tend to hold the power to distribute family properties, thus enjoying more traditional parental authority. In contrast, mothers-in-law with a less advantaged class background heavily depend on their children for a secure elderly life. Gallin concludes that the cultural norm of filial piety is unpredictable under external economic and social conditions, and economic development in Taiwan has uneven effects on inter-generational relations among women with differentiated class backgrounds (Gallin 1994).

Inter-generational relations within the Han-Chinese family have long been analyzed through the lens of Confucian notions of filial piety. Gallin’s research brings the vital issue of individual class background along with macro factors such as social and economic changes in society into the discussion. However, Gallin’s research was done in the 1950s and the 1980s, and the paper was published in 1994. One must wonder what the current situation is in Taiwanese society. Moreover, Gallin’s research never really answered the question why elder care and class background play such an important role in the discussion of inter-generational relations.

In Taiwan, elder care has long been considered a matter within the private sphere. The social security system for elder citizens was introduced fairly recently and is extremely underdeveloped, with only very minimal benefits from a small portion of the elderly population. Because of the demographic change, elder care is becoming a major issue in Taiwanese society, and without a comprehensive and functioning social security system, the entire responsibility of elder care falls on the individual family. To cover its failure to provide a better social security system, the Taiwanese government favors the three-generation residential structure by providing tax cuts and public housing subsidies.

The privatization of elder care has a huge impact on individual households. Even with the feminist movement in the past few decades, domestic care is still largely viewed
as a feminine domain. Women with advanced education and financial means are not free from the burden of household chores and elder care. In fact, there are more and more career women struggling to maintain a functioning balance between their work and family. Such a conclusion can be further supported by the evidence of a closer examination of female labor participation. Although female labor participation has grown, it does not automatically translate into better gender equity in society, and there are quite a few hidden stories. According to the 2000 census data, the number of women who are capable of working but are not employed reached 3.84 million, and 34% of this population left work because of marriage and domestic care. Yi’s study points out that about half of married women who stay in the labor force turn to part-jobs and/or get into the informal sector. In other words, compared to men who seldom leave or change employment due to marriage and family responsibility, Taiwanese women are more likely to sacrifice their career and personal interests for the family.

When young couples want to maintain their autonomy by avoiding living with parents, but have concerns about their filial reputation and are also afraid of facing moral judgments, what is the solution for such a dilemma? Lan’s research partly answers this question (Lan 2002; Lan 2003). She argues that the current generations of married couples “subcontract filial piety” in order to keep their autonomy without damaging the ideal of filial piety. Lan elaborates that filial care in modern Han-Chinese society is experiencing a transfer chain which consists of two components—gender transfer and market transfer. Gender transfer of filial care is nothing new but is deeply embedded in the Han-Chinese tradition, that is, the filial duty a married male adult carries is transferred to his wife—the daughter-in-law—in the family. What is new in the contemporary Han-Chinese society is the later component—market transfer. By “market transfer,” Lan means that filial care is being transferred from kin caregivers to waged non-family domestic
workers. Lan states that since the 1980s, an increasing number of dual-earner households have hired low-cost migrant women from Southeast Asian countries to take care of aging parents, and this phenomenon is not exclusive to Taiwan but is also popular in Hong Kong, Singapore, and California, which are heavily populated by ethnic Chinese.

Lan’s argument is well-composed, and her research provides an insightful perspective to re-examine the micro private sphere in the context of macro economic and social changes in the Han-Chinese culture. Dual-earner middle-class households, facing the dilemma between filial duty and individual autonomy, choose to outsource elder care to waged migrant domestic worker to lessen the burdens. What remains unanswered is what the solution is for men with fewer financial resources. In my study, the solution for some of these men is simple and clear—to find a Chinese woman to marry.

4.3 Mother-In-Law

Quarrelsomeness between Chinese mother- and daughter-in-law is widely acknowledged, from sensational soap opera to serious academic research. The data from my fieldwork also confirms such a phenomenon. Whereas Chinese marriage migrants use all sorts of negative terms such as “the old witch” and “the tyrant” to refer to their mothers-in-law, they seldom show the same resentments towards their father-in-law. When asked, they often depict their fathers-in-law as “nice gentlemen” who usually remain silent in regard to household matters. A few informants even emphasized that their fathers-in-law understand the difficult situation they are facing with their mothers-in-law, and are very generous to them. From Mei’s own words,

He does not talk much, not even to my mother-in-law. He spends most of his time reading newspapers and watching TV. But once he told me that he knows that my mother-in-law could be a very difficult person to please. He
encourages me that *what cannot be cured can be endured*. He cannot do anything for me, nothing, but I still appreciate him. [Italic added]

“To endure” does not sound too much of an encouragement, and it could easily to be interpreted as the father-in-law is using a subtle way to ask Mei to defer to the mother-in-law. However, Mei reads the message to mean the father-in-law understands and sympathizes with her situation. One must wonder why there is such a big difference between how Chinese marital immigrants perceive their mothers- and fathers-in-law. Are Taiwanese mothers-in-law really as evil as these Chinese marriage migrants described? What is so special about the relation of mother- and daughter-in-law?

According to the Confucian ideas of family organization, women are considered as kin keepers and bearers of cultural tradition from one generation to the next. For example, although the man is the one who carries the family name, it is usually the woman who knows and prepares the details, such as food and space arrangements for *pai-pai* (ancestor worship). Moreover, the eldest married son is morally obligated to reside with and care for his aging parents, but the actual work of serving a man’s elderly parents is mostly performed by his wife. The man, who is usually the major breadwinner, mainly offers the financial means for the family, but it is his wife, who acts as his filial surrogate, provides personal care and assistance to his parents on a daily basis. Therefore, the interaction between mother- and daughter-in-law is usually more frequent and intense, compared to the relation of a married woman and her father-in-law, or the relation of a man and his wife’s parents. Therefore the relation between mother- and daughter-in-law becomes a rich site for investigating the gender and power dynamics within a family.

Yi-Hua is a healthy 72-year-old woman, living with her 80-year-old husband, her son, and her Chinese daughter-in-law. She complained to me how “all” Chinese women are lazy with unacceptably low sanitation standards. In her own words,
She [the daughter-in-law] said I gave her too much work to do, but can’t she see how filthy it is if she does not clean the apartment every day? She is just the same as the other dalumei who lives across the street. This must be because they grew up with a low level of culture in China. How could cleaning and cooking be considered too much work? Which work? Which daughter-in-law doesn’t do all these? We all did housework before, and in my generation I didn’t have much assistance from modern technology such as washing machines and vacuums. These dalumei are just lazy.

Yi-Hua’s complaints are best summarized by a common Chinese proverb—duo nien si fu au cheng po (a daughter-in-law suffers for many years to become a mother-in-law). In the traditional Han-Chinese culture, a woman “earns” her footing by bringing a male heir to her husband’s family and gradually establishes her senior status as time goes by. As Margery Wolf observed half a century ago in Taiwan, young women, as “outsiders within” a patriarchal family, suffered years of hardships but eventually became authoritative figures themselves; as such, they were the patriarch’s female deputies, reinforcing patriarchal domination over the next generation of young women (Wolf 1972). The difference in nationality adds another layer in the relationship between the Taiwanese mother-in-law and the Chinese daughter-in-law. In this context, we see that Yi-Hua brought up her personal history of enduring the hardship her mother-in-law gave her and surviving the lack of technological home-making aids in order to show how incompetent and lazy her daughter-in-law “really” is. Her daughter-in-law’s status of “outsider within” is further strengthened not only because she is a “temporary member” in her husband’s household, but also because of her nationality. In traditional Han-Chinese culture, one of the mother-in-law’s major duties is to train the daughter-in-law for her role, and the mother-in-law tends to pick up on the daughter-in-law’s faults to assert her authority. In this case, Yi-Hua perceived her daughter-in-law as lazy and incompetent not only because the young woman lacked home-making experience and needed to be educated, but also because Yi-Hua connected her negative impression of China to her daughter-in-law. This
example demonstrates the difficulty that Chinese female marriage migrants face in their attempts to play the role of Taiwanese daughters-in-law.

4.4 Chinese Daughter-In-Law

As a marriage migrant, the role of the daughter-in-law is probably the first thing a Chinese marriage migrant has to learn after her arrival in Taiwan. Most of my informants lived with their parents-in-law. Those who did not live with the parents-in-law often reside not far away, sometimes in the same neighborhood. Only a few informants’ parents-in-law lived in other counties.

A typical day for a Chinese marital immigrant of course varied with each household. The two key factors are whether she has children, and whether she resides with her parents-in-law. Ju, who has no child and lives with her parents-in-law in their late 70s, gave a snapshot of what a typical day for her looked like. She has to get up before her parents-in-law do, usually around 6:00 am. After preparing a traditional Taiwanese-style breakfast for her parents-in-law—congee (rice porridge), a few small dishes such as pickled vegetables, scrambled egg with scallion—she puts a load of dirty clothes in the washer to soak for an additional 15 minutes before she presses the start button as her mother-in-law had corrected her quite a few times. When Ju gave extra details about washing clothes, I sensed that there was a strong emotion hidden in her lengthy description which I could not precisely identify. After a few moments, she burst into tears and said in an angry tone,

Can you believe what that si lao tai po [the mother-in-law] said to me about washing clothes? She first asked me if I have ever seen a washer in my life, then started telling me where the start button is and how to operate the machine. You Taiwanese people just assume that Chinese are all poor and desperate. Indeed I’m not from a wealthy family, and the washer we had back home is not as sophisticated as the one here, but I can read, and I can
I figure out by myself. I know I have to respect her since she’s an elder, but the question is just outrageous and her tone was simply unbearable.

Ju felt insulted by her mother-in-law’s question, so she talked back to her mother-in-law and that eventually led to a serious fight. She recalled that the fight was resolved by her husband’s mediation, but she asserts that she can never forget how angry she was at the moment. Every time she does laundry, the washer reminds her of how her mother-in-law looks down on her and her family in China.

After doing the laundry, she gets herself ready to take her father-in-law to the hospital for his physical therapy. The hospital is not in the same neighborhood, so they have to take public transportation or a taxi, depending on the weather. She gets free time when her father-in-law is with the therapist, and usually she calls her friends, not necessarily to talk about important matters but just to chit-chat. By the time she and her father-in-law arrive home, it is around 10:30 am. She has to rush to a local traditional market to buy fresh groceries, since her mother-in-law is very picky about food.

The local traditional market is a battlefield for Ju. “Everyone knows everyone there [the traditional market], and they all speak Taiwanese. I was so afraid to just open my mouth. When I force myself to speak, people would know I’m from mainland China and they look at me and sometimes they ask mean questions.” Even though Ju has been taking the Taiwanese language class at the Immigrants Hall, she is not able to converse fluently in Taiwanese. Ju mentioned that she would prefer to go somewhere else to shop for groceries, but her mother-in-law insists that the traditional market offers cheaper prices and fresher food. Unlike franchise supermarkets where everything is neatly displayed on shelves, labeled with the item’s name and price, where shoppers just put the goods they want in a cart, then check out at a cashier with very minimal interaction, a local traditional market is usually the major public space where housewives socialize with their neighbors.
As Ju described, people know each other in the traditional market, and a transaction is not merely an exchange of products and money, but people also engage in conversation.

Ju felt very lost and helpless at the local traditional market. First of all, she did not know how to choose the “right” vegetables and fruits that her mother-in-law wants. The groceries are not labeled. Vendors sometimes just hand write the unit price on a card board and put the sign randomly near the products. There are foods that Ju has never seen before, thus she has no prior knowledge of how to determine the quality. Moreover, her distinctive accent in Mandarin Chinese marks her “outsider” status in the traditional market. She does not get a small bunch of scallion, a few chili peppers, or a piece of ginger for free, as other Taiwanese housewives normally get when they purchase vegetables. The worst part comes from the fact that she did not know how to bargain with the vendors in Taiwanese, and even when she made an effort to bargain in Mandarin Chinese, it was often unsuccessful. As an obvious result, with the same budget the groceries she can bring home are much less than those of her Taiwanese counterparts, and that evokes her mother-in-law’s harsh criticism of her home-making skills.

Grocery shopping is a simple daily errand for most people, but for Ju, it was a frustrating task she had to accomplish. Ju finally found a not-so-perfect strategy for herself and her family. She modestly asked her mother-in-law to guide her through the local traditional market. Ju’s mother-in-law first rejected the idea because she felt ashamed that her son is married to a mainland Chinese woman, but she eventually agreed since this might save her trouble in the future. For a couple of mornings, she went through the traditional market with Ju, introduced Ju as a newcomer to vendors whom she has known for years, taught her how to choose good quality food, and politely asked long-term neighbors and vendors to take care of Ju. Ju’s life in the traditional market did not become
perfect after the visits with her mother-in-law, but she felt that vendors, though still not giving her equal treatments, are nicer to her now.

After the challenging grocery-shopping, Ju has to prepare a light lunch for her parents-in-law and herself. A typical afternoon is full of domestic chores – hang up the clothes from the washer to let them dry naturally, ironing, and cleaning the apartment. Two times a week, she goes to the Immigrants Hall for the language class, which her husband encouraged her to attend and her mother-in-law permitted. Then she cooks a “proper” dinner—four dishes, one soup, and rice for the entire family. After washing dishes, it’s her free time. She usually excuses herself not to join the rest of the family watching TV in the living room, because she is tired of non-stop Taiwanese news channels. Moreover, Ju’s father-in-law loves watching certain talk shows featuring political commentators. Not only is Ju indifferent towards politics, she is highly aware that political debate is a very sensitive issue in Taiwan. In order to avoid any possible trouble, she chooses to stay out of political issues. Instead of listening to “nonsense political debate,” Ju stays in the bedroom to use Skype or QQ to chat with her brother who works in Shanghai, and occasionally with her old friends in China. Ju emphasizes that she does not complain about her life in Taiwan to her brother, because she is afraid that her parents would be very worried. After all, she concluded, she is not the most unfortunate one among Chinese marriage migrants she knows of. “I can go online to get information, to connect with families and old friends, and also make new friends from the forum. I know my situation is not the worst.”

If one only sees Ju’s schedule on paper and does not listen carefully, Ju’s daily routine could easily be viewed as an ordinary housewife’s day anywhere in Taiwan. What is different in her story is the discrimination embedded in every detail of her daily life. Interaction between mother- and daughter-in-law could be very subtle and complicated.
If Ju’s mother-in-law gave instructions about how to use a washer in a nicer friendly tone, her question could be interpreted as over-worry with good intention from a cautious elder. But since there were already negative experiences accumulated from the past, Ju perceived this incident badly. In fact, what Ju’s mother-in-law said to her actually reflects the way many Taiwanese, especially if they are older, view Chinese marriage migrants.

During the course of my fieldwork, many Chinese marriage migrants experienced similar encounters with their Taiwanese parents-in-law and/or other relatives. Chi, a soft-spoken Chinese woman in her mid-30s, described her interaction with her mother-in-law who passed away two years ago.

I accompanied her [the mother-in-law] to the local traditional market, because she was not in good health and could not carry heavy stuff. She did not want to acknowledge that I am her daughter-in-law. When a neighbor asked if I were a maid hired to take care of her, she did not say a word to clarify. When I was pregnant, a friend of hers congratulated and said she will soon be a grandmother; she replied by saying ‘there is nothing to treasure or to be happy about.’ She really hurt my feelings.

Chi told me her mother-in-law once asked her if she had watched television before, when she lived in China. Similar to Ju, Chi admitted that she was from a remote agriculture village in inland China where living conditions are not as modern as in the big cities on the east coast. She elaborated that what was hurtful was not the question itself, because it was true that her family did not have a television when she grew up. What saddened her was that her mother-in-law spoke in such a sarcastic tone to show her superiority. Unlike Ju who is outspoken, has a strong personality and chose to talk back to her mother-in-law, Chi decided to endure and keep it to herself. Only when she talked to me, did she express her deep sorrow about how she felt she was being looked down by her Taiwanese mother-in-law, and the general Taiwanese society. She kept saying that she really has changed a lot after migrating to Taiwan. From washer to television, I have heard almost identical
situations over and over again, just the objects in each story were different. Why have so many Chinese immigrant wives encountered such harsh and ignorant questions? How do they cope with the difficult situation?

One reason Taiwanese mothers-in-law assume ignorance on the part of Chinese marriage migrants is that they are older and tend to have relatively little knowledge of contemporary China due to the segregation between the two countries over the past half century. The education these Taiwanese people received from the KMT regime under martial law depicted communist China as a living hell where people suffered from extreme poverty and starved to death. Even though China is an emerging power in the world, going through dramatic social and economic changes, it may be difficult for elder Taiwanese to overcome the old stereotypes and they still consider China as a backward country where living standards are low.

4.5 The Husband Factor

Research has shown that Asian American males are more traditional than their female counterparts and tend to endorse more the traditional family arrangement, and Chinese and Japanese American females are concerned with playing the role of a traditional Asian wife and/or docile daughter-in-law when they face marriage choices (Kim 2006; Ferguson 2000). However, in the study of women’s relationships with mothers-in-law in Chinese immigrant families, Shih and Pyke find that when conflicts and disagreements occur between wife and mother, Chinese American husbands do not insist their wives defer to their mothers and behave as obedient daughters-in-law. Instead, Chinese American husbands tend to support their wives, and they negotiate with their mothers for their wives. The authors argue that husbands and wives in these Chinese
immigrant families in fact form a “cross-gender alliance” that empowers the status of daughters-in-law (K. Shih and Pyke 2010).

It is commonly assumed that egalitarian gender attitudes have developed unevenly among Taiwanese men and women. Modern Taiwanese women think it is unfair to consider children-rearing and domestic work as women’s business since they work as hard as men do. They also demand more autonomy and refuse to play the role of submissive wife and daughter-in-law to serve their husbands’ parents. In Lan’s study, we see that these women hire migrant domestic workers to become a “madam” themselves to avoid conflicts with their parents-in-law. In my research, Chinese marriage migrants do not enjoy the same bargaining power as the Taiwanese women in Lan’s study. First of all, Chinese marriage migrants’ husbands often do not have the financial means to hire domestic help. Moreover, due to the Taiwanese government’s regulation of working permits, most Chinese women are not allowed to work legally. They could try to find a job in the informal sector, but this often does not generate a good income and they have to take the risk of being reported. Therefore, many Chinese marital immigrants are housewives and stay-home mothers; “outsourcing filial duty” is not an option for them.

When facing conflicts and disagreements with mothers-in-law, in addition to seeking their husbands’ alliance, Taiwanese women can also turn to their own natal families and friends for support. As marriage migrants, Chinese women cannot do this because they are far away from their natal families and relatives. It is also not easy for them to build up local contacts and social support, because many Taiwanese parents-in-law and husbands often filter, discourage, or even forbid Chinese marriage migrants to go out and make friends. The logic is similar to employers’ attitudes towards immigrant domestic workers—they do not want these foreign domestic workers to have contacts with the outside world, because it may provide opportunities to learn tactics to rebel against
employers’ rules and acquire knowledge of their own rights. In consequence, Chinese marriage migrants are likely to be isolated and confined within households, and have much less social support compared to married Taiwanese women. When Chinese daughters-in-law encounter conflicts with their Taiwanese mothers-in-law, the immediate, and perhaps the only help they can reach for is from their husbands. Thus Taiwanese husbands usually play a crucial role in determining how the quarrels between Taiwanese mother- and Chinese daughter-in-law end up.

During the course of my fieldwork, I found that Taiwanese husbands are fully aware of their mothers’ discriminatory attitudes towards their wives, and see the conflicts between the two as “natural” and inevitable. Unlike Chinese American males who negotiate on their wives’ behalf with their mothers in Shih and Pyke’s study, Taiwanese men seem to employ a backstage compensation strategy. For example, when Chi told her husband about his mother’s biased attitude towards her, Chi’s husband did not communicate with his mother nor did he ask her to change her attitude. Instead of negotiating with the mother-in-law to improve Chi’s status in the family, Chi’s husband told Chi that his mother was old and not in good health, so she should respect the elder and try to endure the harsh and unfair treatment. However, it would be too simple-minded to quickly say that Chi’s husband takes his mother’s side and does not respond to Chi’s feelings. What he chose to do is to “compensate” Chi in other respects. Chi described in a pleasant tone,

I understand he is also in an uneasy situation between his mother and me, like a piece of squeezed meat in a sandwich. Even though we have arguments about his mother all the time, I know he has tried to repay me in his own way. It’s just he also has to be a filial son to his mother. When I was pregnant, he sometimes took me out to sight-seeing or to watch a movie, but he lied to his mother by saying we went to see a doctor so that his mother wouldn’t be mad at me.
By the white lie, Chi’s husband showed that he cares about Chi, but he, as a filial son, does not want to provoke his mother.

This backstage compensation strategy is not uncommon. In an informal conversation with Chun-Chieh, a 43-year-old Taiwanese man whose wife is a 30-year-old Chinese woman, insisted, even though he dislikes lying, a little white lie to both his mother and his wife is the only way to keep the two important women in his life happy. He further gave me a thorough example of how the dining table could be an everyday battlefield in the family. His mother often criticizes his wife’s cooking harshly in order to assert her own superior expertise in culinary skills. When his mother complains at family dinner time, he would never defend, not even say a word for his wife, and sometimes he would even echo his mother’s critique and agree that his wife should better her skills in Taiwanese cooking. However, he would compliment his wife’s cooking in an exaggerated way when they have their own private time together.

4.6 Resistance

Foucault’s examination of power changes over his lifetime, but he makes clear in his later work that power ultimately does inhere in individuals, including the ones under surveillance and/or being punished. In The Subject and Power he writes, “something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action” (Foucault 1982) At the risk of oversimplifying, power is not “possessed,” but exercised. People do not possess implicit power, but rather power is an action which individuals engage in. Where power exists; there is also resistance. To use the abstract theory in context, it is easy to see how Taiwanese husbands and their natal families dominate household dynamics, but do Chinese female marriage migrants also exert power? As
noted earlier, inspired by contemporary feminist discourse and postcolonial theories, some scholars in migration studies critique previous perspectives that tend to see “mail-order brides” as powerless objects of subjectification, and turn their lens to emphasize female marriage migrants’ agency, selectivity, and choice. This leads to a further question—under what circumstances can Chinese female marriage migrants exercise their agency? How, exactly, do these Chinese women negotiate, accommodate, and resist?

Here, James C. Scott’s work on domination and subordination in which he seeks to explain how we can read the often hidden political conduct of subordinate groups provides a useful tool to interpret and understand the dynamics in cross-Strait marriage households (Scott 1992). Scott introduces two concepts—public transcript and hidden transcript. The public transcript indicates the open performance between dominant and subordinate groups and is exhibited under direct surveillance. The hidden transcript, on the other hand, is the disguised and covert discourse that takes place offstage and away from the surveillance of the dominant group. Another dimension is that resistance happens when the hidden transcript surfaces and is displayed in the face of domination. He uses ecumenical examples to demonstrate the formation and ramification of hidden transcripts in which the subordinate group creates alternative ideologies, dissident subcultures, and undisclosed resistance that he further calls infrapolitics. Scott points out that the subordinate group rarely adopts confrontational behaviors, and if we aim to grasp the whole picture of power relations, we need to read the hidden transcript of the subordinate group. Scott’s framework is particularly useful in understanding the power relations in cross-Strait marriage households as filial piety plays such a profound role in Han-Chinese culture and daughters-in-law are expected to serve and obey to her parents-in-law. Drawing on his proposition, we can see that Chinese female marriage migrants’ open interactions with their families are just the public transcript but not the
entire story. For example, some Taiwanese husbands insisted on accompanying their wives for interviews, and they often interrupted or even answered for them. Chinese wives, with very few exceptions, never disagreed or showed any impatience in front of their husbands. Yet when I had a chance to talk to them individually, they almost always found a way, subtle or direct, to express their views that are different from their husbands’. Therefore, only by carefully reading the hidden transcript—what they think and what they do offstage—can we have a better comprehension of the power dynamics in cross-Strait families.

4.6.1 The Hidden Transcript: Discourse of Gender Equity

In her study of Filipino immigrants in the United States, Espiritu points out that cultural reconstruction is especially important for Filipino immigrants since the Philippines was once a U.S. colony (Espiritu 2003). Gender, from her point of view, is not only a major factor in ethnic identity, but also a strategic site that provides an opportunity for the minority group to claim cultural superiority over the dominant group. Historically, female sexuality has always been a marker that colonial rulers used to demonize the racialized others. Espiritu argues that it has long been neglected that the subordinated group also criticizes the dominant group to construct their own identity. In her research, Espiritu reports that Filipino immigrants’ parenting is highly gendered. They tend to restrain their daughters’ autonomy much more than that of their sons. The reason, Espiritu elaborates, is that these Filipino immigrant parents attempt to construct “a model of Filipina womanhood.” By identifying Filipino femininity as modest, nurturing, and family-oriented, Filipino communities distinguish themselves from the dominant group—White Americans. Meanwhile, Filipino communities portray White women as sexually immoral and American individualist culture as deviant. Espiritu concludes that by sanctioning women’s behavior to present an impeccable image to the host society, Filipino
immigrant communities exert their moral superiority and self-worth in the face of subordination in the U.S. Notably, Espiritu reminds readers that such a strategy is not without a high cost. The way Filipino immigrant communities police women’s bodies may have positive effects on national and ethnic self-respect, but it also reinforces patriarchal power.

Espiritu’s research demonstrates how profoundly the conduct of private life can be connected to macro social structures. The Filipino immigrant communities’ resistance depicted in Espiritu’s study is about a strategic way that a marginalized group employs to counter the demands of assimilation from the mainstream society. Such a strategy might be seen as passive resistance without substantial and constructive influence in the larger society. However, it is meaningful to the minority group, because the resistance serves as an affirmation of self-worth for them to face all sorts of discrimination they encounter in everyday life.

In a pattern somewhat similar to what Espiritu reports for Filipino immigrants, I found that Chinese marriage migrants also develop their own narrative of gender equity to counter the subordination they experience, especially within the private sphere. While Taiwanese mothers-in-law perceive these Chinese women as less acculturated people who grew up in a poor country and sometimes use abusive language to show their superiority, Chinese marriage migrants interpret the demands from the mothers-in-law as feudal poison left over from the Japanese colonization. Yen, a 33-year-old woman who has a previous marriage with a Chinese man, poignantly states how “handicapped” Taiwanese men are in terms of household work. From Yen’s point of view, her husband’s incompetence in domestic work is mostly due to the way her mother-in-law has spoiled him. In her own words,
The old witch [referring her mother-in-law] said that a man should not wash his own underwear, and I’m supposed to hand wash [underwear] for him. How difficult is it to wash your own underwear? Why can’t he learn? We Chinese women do not wash men’s underwear like you Taiwanese women do. She must be poisoned by those Japanese chauvinist thoughts. I’ve never hand-washed any man’s underwear, never, and I will not do that ever. I’m proud that I’m a Chinese, and if I have a son, I would teach him in the Chinese way – he has to learn to wash dishes, mop floors, etc.

Yen then went on to describe that her mother-in-law considers domestic work to be women’s duty, and instead of asking her husband to share household work, she should let her husband rest after a long day of work. Because Yen had a previous marriage in China before, she used her own experience as evidence to claim that Chinese mothers-in-law do not exploit their daughters-in-law, and Chinese men do not consider doing domestic work as shameful. In our conversation, Yen could not emphasize enough that from her observation Taiwanese men behave like chauvinist pigs, and they do not have any understanding of gender equality. Yen concluded that the fact that her mother-in-law lacks any gender consciousness is because of the Japanese education she received. Unlike Japanese and Taiwanese submissive women, she claimed that the Chinese society, because of its experience of a communist revolution, is indeed gender equal and thus more progressive.

I politely asked Yen how old her mother-in-law is, and she said her mother-in-law is in her early 60s. I quickly calculated in my mind, and realized that it is impossible that Yen’s mother-in-law could have received any formal education during the period of Japanese colonial era (1895-1945). It is true that Japanese colonization left distinctive marks on Taiwan, and older generation Taiwanese who lived through the Japanese colonial era and received Japanese education may even feel closer to Japan than to China, as discussed earlier. However, in Yen’s case, it does not really matter whether her mother-in-law actually received a Japanese education, or whether it is true that Japanese culture
is patriarchal and Japanese women all are oppressed. The important message conveyed in her narrative is that by depicting her Taiwanese mother-in-law’s unreasonable demand as culturally backward, she finds a way to express the view that she is proud to be a Chinese in the face of discrimination.

Yen’s observation of Taiwanese men and mothers-in-law is shared by other Chinese women I met. Xing is a college graduate in her early 30s, and she used to be a kindergarten teacher before she migrated to Taiwan. Xing’s mother-in-law is also well-educated and retired from a public high school. Xing told me that because she did not live with her husband before marriage, she was shocked when she found out that her husband does not know how to do any household work.

When he [the husband] came to Guanxi to visit us to discuss the wedding and dowry, my mom was hospitalized. He bought some really good-quality and expensive fruits, but then we found out that he did not even know how to peel an apple. It was an embarrassing moment. My mom said I will have a hard life if I insist to marry this man, and now it proves she is right. My husband has absolutely no skill in doing any kind of household work, and I think this is partly his mother’s fault. I think it’s wrong to spoil a man, so I want him to learn, for his own good. But when I tried to teach him how to mop the floor properly, my mother-in-law stopped me by saying that a man should invest his time doing more meaningful work. This is just ridiculous. When my mother was sick, my father cooked and did all the work. What would happen to this household if I get sick seriously?

Like Xing, other Chinese marriage migrants often use their parents as model examples to show that maybe China was not as prosperous a society as Taiwan when they grew up, but Chinese society is much more advanced in terms of gender equality. There are all kinds of measurements social scientists use to determine a society’s level of gender equity. However, in this particular case there is no need to argue whether Chinese society is in fact more advanced than Taiwanese society. It is, however, of paramount importance to read such discourse as Chinese female marriage migrants’ “hidden transcript” in which they
show their disagreement with their mothers-in-law and maintain their self-esteem through asserting Chinese society’s superiority in terms of gender equality in the private sphere.

Like other marriage immigrants from Southeast Asian countries, Chinese women migrated in the hope of a better future, but only to find out the realities are not so rosy. Facing discrimination, Chinese marriage migrants denounce Taiwanese society as culturally backward in terms of gender equity because of the uneven division of labor in the household they experienced. In particular, Chinese marriage migrants criticize their Taiwanese mothers-in-law and consider their attitudes as lacking gender consciousness and as feudal. The construction of Taiwanese mothers-in-law as culturally backward allows Chinese marriage migrants to affirm their self-respect and to underscore their superiority. Reinforced by memory and nostalgia, Chinese female marriage migrants further claim that Chinese society is more advanced than Taiwanese society. It is a rhetoric, a strategic cultural (re)construction that Chinese marriage migrants have developed to resist the negative stereotypes the Taiwanese general public have towards their homeland.

4.6.2 Revealing the Hidden Transcript

Although Chinese female marriage migrants often complained about their marriages to me, most of them nonetheless diligently play the roles of good wife, mother, and daughter-in-law as they want to have a successful marriage, and a harmonious household. They rarely see divorce as a feasible solution, and the reasons are varied. For some of them, especially the ones from rural regions, divorce is still an unthinkable route, a taboo. They are worried that their natal family would “lose face” and the foreseeable gossip around the divorce; moreover, they are afraid that they won’t be able to re-marry. However, many Chinese female marriage migrants admit that they either think of or have
used divorce or leaving Taiwan as a bargaining chip to negotiate with Taiwanese families. Yen, who has successfully utilized this strategy for a favorable outcome, described,

I felt like a bird in a cage because I couldn’t go anywhere by myself except the language class. I wanted to take classes to prepare myself to become a makeup artist or a hair dresser once I obtain my national ID. But my husband said the tuition is too expensive, and he just wanted me to stay home to take care of his parents. We had several bad fights. Eventually, even though I wasn’t really serious, I told him that if he doesn’t let me take the class, I would go back to China and he’ll have to find another woman to run the household. I won! He promised that he’ll pay for the tuition once he receives his annual bonus.

Ju followed Yen’s words and said that “this trick can’t be used too often, otherwise they’d detect and it will lose its effect.” Yen and Mei nodded and agreed. Mei told us that she had thought of threatening her husband as a way to increase her monthly allowance, but she did not put her thoughts into action because she was afraid how she could respond if her husband took the threat seriously and asked for a divorce. The three of them quickly said in a joking tone, “only use this one on super important thing!”

It was clear that none of them felt their marriage was bad to a point that they would seriously consider divorce. Saying “I will go back to China” is more like an ultimatum, a signal of threat. Although their labor is taken for granted and underappreciated, Chinese female marriage migrants often quickly develop a fair assessment that their existence in the family is valuable, and under certain circumstances, is even hard to be replaced. As they said, “who would clean the house and prepare the meals? Who would take care of the kids and the parents-in-law?” In a less common case, a Cultural-Generation Chinese woman told me that once she was so angry and said to her husband in vengeance that not only would she leave Taiwan, she would not sign the divorce paper so that he could not find someone else to remarry to take care of him. All these examples show that Chinese female marriage migrants are fully aware that they and their Taiwanese families and
essentially in an interdependent relationship. They and their natal families in China may depend upon the economic resources their Taiwanese husbands provide, yet their Taiwanese families also heavily rely on their unpaid labor. For some Chinese female marriage migrants who have been living in Taiwan longer, they learn how difficult it is to find a suitable domestic caregiver and how expensive it costs. Such information either inspires or further reinforces their recognition of their own value in the family. Chinese female marriage migrants who got married through introduction agencies even point out that if they really returned to China, not only would their Taiwanese families lose a worker for their business or farm, and a caregiver in the household, but also the money paid to the commercial agencies.

Once Chinese female marriage migrants recognize that they and their Taiwanese families are mutually dependent, they find the space to maneuver, to negotiate within the structure in creative ways. Threatening to leave Taiwan is just one of them, needless to say, the most severe one. Threatening to leave, from my point of view, is no longer a hidden transcript like the gender equity discourse I described in the previous section. Quite the contrary, it is a confrontational action, a more direct resistance they engage in the face of the dominant group. Although they are still in the subordinated category, they discover all sorts of “little tricks” such as “accidently” burning the husband’s favorite shirt or delaying the meal time, to fight against unreasonable requests from their husbands’ families. They are well aware of the unwelcome consequences these “little tricks” might cost them, so they do not apply such strategies frequently. They carefully maintain an equilibrium in which they establish themselves in an irreplaceable role, yet at the same time, negotiate favorable outcomes for themselves.

Hidden or unhiden, the development of counter narratives and various strategies demonstrate one fact – there is no absolute hegemony in cross-Strait marriage households.
It is always a dynamic with constant negotiation and contestation. The seemingly dominant group, Taiwanese husbands and their families, employ various strategies such as limiting the women’s social contacts or prohibiting them from working, to control Chinese female marriage migrants. But their hegemonic control is never fully achieved, as the interdependent relationship creates contradictions and further allows a space for possible resistance. In short, Chinese female marriage migrants should not be seen as passive victims waiting to be educated and rescued. Instead, we can see their agency from their marital decision-making process to how they cope with challenges in their marriages. I do not intend to romanticize their situations, as they certainly face all sorts of difficulties and discriminations both in the family and in society. What I try to suggest is the need to understand Chinese female marriage migrants as active agents who, though in subordinated positions, recognize their value in the family, produce counter narratives, continuously seek space to resist, and utilize their strength to negotiate with the dominant Taiwanese family members.
Chapter 5: The Tastes of Home

“Wow, you bought cherries, expensive. Just put down the fruits on the dining table and go play with the kids, you xiao-chieh has no use in the kitchen.”¹ This is the first thing I heard as I entered Chiang-min’s apartment. I hesitated and wanted to offer my help for preparing lunch, but Kung, another Chinese marriage migrant and a mother of two children, said to me, “Listen to Chiang-min. She knows her stuff; she is the boss when it comes to cooking!” Kung then led me to an air-conditioned room where six children, from age two-and-half to age seven, were playing. In less than 45 minutes, Chiang-min came to knock on the door and told us lunch was ready. All the kids seemed quite hungry from playing relentlessly for the entire morning; they ran to their mothers knowing they would soon be well-fed. I smelled extremely hot and spicy food in the air and recalled that Chiang-min is originally from Sichuan, a province in southwestern China that is famous for its hot and spicy regional cuisine.

In addition to the six children, there were five adults in this gathering—four Chinese mothers and me. On an occasion like this, children were no doubt the center of the little universe. Mothers were busy preparing food for small children, such as taking off fish bones, cutting meat into small pieces, and so on. Older children did not need constant care and supervision from adults, so they sat in the living room watching television while eating their lunch. However, it did not mean that mothers paid no attention to the kids. As if they had eyes in the back of their heads, these mothers knew when to remind the children to eat when they were distracted from watching television or

¹ The literal translation is Miss, which is used to refer to young and unmarried women. In this context, my personal status as a graduate student and an unmarried woman was automatically interpreted as being inexperienced in cooking and household chores.
started playing with each other. This was just another normal day to them—a little bit chaotic but under control. With all the noise, I heard Kung calling my name saying, “Paoyi, if you do not like hot and spicy food, I hope you at least could tolerate the extreme flavors. I know all these dishes are probably all too salty and too spicy to your taste, but this is what we eat.” All of a sudden, other Chinese mothers stopped their actions and looked at me. Kung’s warm concerns caught me at an embarrassing moment—I just accidentally swallowed a chili pepper, choked, and could not stop coughing. Chiang-min, the very hospitable hostess, went to get me a glass of cold water and said, “Oh...I’m so sorry, I totally forgot to prepare a less-spicy portion for you.”

Finally I stopped coughing, and while I was trying hard to save Chiang-min from the trouble of preparing other foods for me, I overheard Chi-hua’s conversation with Ping—a newly-wed Chinese marriage migrant who had just moved to Taiwan a couple of months ago. Chi-hua first asked if Ping needed to cook for her husband and in-laws, then she advised Ping to be extra careful when it comes to condiments. Because, in her own words, “unlike us, Taiwanese don’t eat salt!” I could not help but laugh and said, “of course we eat salt!” Nobody seemed to care about my objection, and all the Chinese marriage migrants began to engage in an enthusiastic conversation, mostly about the differences between their own tastes and their Taiwanese in-laws’ food preferences, and the difficulties they have faced on the dining table.

Listening to their conversation, I was in fact experiencing a big “cultural shock.” I have heard that marriage migrants from Southeast Asian countries encountering some difficult situations in the kitchen domain, which is totally understandable given the fact that the type of cuisines they grew up with are indeed very different from Taiwanese. For example, Thai fish sauce is one of the most commonly used condiments in Southeast Asian cuisines, one can easily find it in almost every dish. Many Taiwanese, especially older
generations who tend to be less exposed to exotic food, dislike its strong and distinctive flavor. Hence, the potential conflicts and the difficulties for immigrant wives to adapt are foreseeable. With the growing population of Southeast Asian marriage migrants, some local governments offer Taiwanese-style cooking classes in the hope of assisting them to adapt their new lives in Taiwan.

A couple of studies have documented the challenges that Southeast Asian marriage migrants face and their adaptation process. For example, female marriage migrants’ dietary habits are often limited by other family members’ attitudes towards foreign food, yet these women play an important role in the reproduction of Hakka2 tradition (T. Chang and Chang 2008). Lim points out that while Vietnamese immigrant wives sometimes cook in a fusion style so that other family members will accept the food, they also use food to create and maintain an ethnic boundary (Lim 2006). Given the geographical proximity and cultural similarity, I did not anticipate that cooking and/or food would even be an issue in Chinese marriage migrants’ households. The lengthy conversations at Chiang-min’s lunch gathering opened a new door to me.

This chapter builds on previous chapters to demonstrate the gender differentiation and power dynamics within the family in respect of food preparation and diet preferences. To what extent do Chinese marriage migrants implement their own food preferences and to what extent is dietary decision-making often constrained by the family structures? I will also show that food is a carrier of meanings that are socially constructed, and how differences in dietary preference can become a source of subtle discrimination in intimate relationships. Although Chinese marriage migrants may face difficult situations in their very own households, I also suggest, once again, that they are not powerless victims.
Chinese marriage migrants utilize various opportunities to share food among themselves, to create a social food space, and these occasions of food-sharing inevitably evoke cultural memories.

5.1 The Kitchen as a Battlefield

In order to examine these topics, it is important to address some background about foodways and the role of food in a culture. The term “foodway” is a relatively new term in the English language; it loosely refers to everything about eating such as food preparation, food habits, food production, acquisition and consumption (D. Y. H. Wu and Tan 2001). Generally speaking, foodways can be understood as the practices and regulations that dictate all the food-related experiences in their sensual and social aspects. The discussion of foodways has never been of central importance within sociology, but its neighboring disciplines have a long-standing interest in the field (T. Brown 2011). For example, psychology has accumulated a wide range of analysis on the sensory, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of eating, and not surprisingly many historians have shown us the impact that access to food resources can have upon broader social, economic, and political processes (Beardsworth and Keil 1997).

It is probably within the discipline of anthropology that the analysis of foodways has been particularly well-developed. Claude Lévi-Strauss, with his structuralist gaze, examines myths to uncover underlying universal structures. Although he faced numerous critiques and he himself revised his structuralist formations in his later works, his idea of a “culinary triangle” which lays out in diagrammatic form the transitions between nature and culture that are associated with food has had considerable influences (Counihan and Esterik 2013).
Following the structuralist tradition, Mary Douglas in her widely-cited article “Deciphering a Meal” analyzes the food practices in her own home to unveil the symbolic meanings of human behavior (Douglas 1972). She firstly draws the key distinction between two contrasted food categories - *drinks* and *meals*. Although both drinks and meals are considered as social events, according to Douglas, meals are named, in sequence through the day, with specific structures, and their elements are arranged in a hierarchal order based upon their importance and symbolic significance. Drinks, though they sometimes also have named categories, unlike meals they are not so specifically structured. Going through great detail to identify the tripartite structure (A + 2B)—one stressed element accompanied by two unstressed elements—Douglas further concludes that the involvement in such repeated and structured meals is one of the crucial ways to experience and to maintain family memberships. In other words, the restrictive pattern—sharing meals functions as a social boundary marker which draws the line of the family’s symbolic and emotional existence and only certain categories of non-family are allowed to cross the line. Douglas’ statement, no matter how profound, of course has its limitation. The analysis is based upon the food practices of one upper-middle-class Jewish family located in the U.K. in the 1970s. One may easily find that a working-class family with another ethnicity and a different location would have very different food practices. However, the valuable insight Douglas offers is to see food as coded messages, and patterned meals as boundary markers of micro-scale social systems.

All in all, what we can learn from various anthropological writings is that food conveys specific cultural meanings, and we can unveil social relations through the examination of foodways. Undoubtedly, food is one of the absolute necessities of sustaining human beings’ lives, but what makes the study of foodways even more interesting is that what we eat is an important indication of who we are, where we come
from, and possibly who we want to be. Within sociological immigration studies, discussions of food often have been associated with migrants’ health, religion, and entrepreneurship, but not so much with the role foodways play in inducing conflicts or harmony in cross-border marriage households. In this section, I will elaborate how patriarchy ideology is still prevailing in terms of foodwork, how Chinese female marriage migrants’ decision-making in food matters heavily depends on family structure, and the way these women engage in cultural reproduction through food.

Before female marriage migrants build up any social networks, family is usually the first site where they encounter and experience all sorts of cultural practices in the receiving society. Unlike immigrant wives from Southeast Asian countries whose first obstacle is language, Chinese marriage migrants often find their first battle in the kitchen. For these marriage migrants, the kitchen is not only a physical space where one prepares and cooks food, but a field of cultural practice where a power hierarchy is subtly embedded.

In the course of my fieldwork, I found that the key factor determining whether the kitchen becomes a battlefield or not for Chinese female marriage migrants is the living arrangements. When Chinese immigrant wives do not live with their parents-in-law, they tend to have more control in the household. Mei-li, a 34-year-old Chinese immigrant wife, understands how “lucky” she is when she compares her marriage to others.

It’s true that my husband expects me to do all the grocery shopping and to cook. I don’t think that’s fair, but my situation is easier. We do not have children, and my parents-in-law live faraway in Pingtung. When I cook, I only need to take care of my husband’s taste bud, not an entire army. When I’m lazy and don’t feel like to cook, I buy food from the market where I sell clothes in the morning. There are so many food stands, and actually they all taste better than what I cook...”
We were having a simple hot-pot lunch at Mei-li’s apartment when this conversation happened. Two other Chinese immigrant wives—Yen and Fang—immediately said they envy Mei-li, because both of them live with their parents-in-law. Mei-li was afraid that she sounded like she was bragging about her own marriage, so she started to emphasize that her mother-in-law calls from time to time to give her “secret recipes” that suit her husband’s tastes.

Mei-li did not receive any higher education, but compared to other Chinese female migrants I know, she has the most career-oriented mindset and is very ambitious to start her own business in Taiwan. She actively maintains her connection with the small garment factory where she worked in China before she got married and moved to Taiwan. Even though her husband has a steady income as a computer software programmer and the amount of money he earns is enough for the family, Mei-li decided to utilize her old resources to acquire cheap clothes from the Chinese factory and sell them in the local traditional market in Taipei. Since Mei-li did not have a working permit yet, she was working in the “black market” and her income was not taxed. Mei-li explained that she strategically builds up friendly relationships with other vendors in the market, because she is afraid of being reported to the local police. In the worst scenario, she could be deported.

From Mei-li’s case, we can see that even in such a dual-earner family—in fact Mei-li’s net income is higher than her husband’s—foodwork is still considered a woman’s responsibility. Mei-li’s economic power does not grant her a free pass for foodwork. She still does all the grocery shopping, and when she does not cook, she is the one buying food and bringing it back to the family. Yet Mei-li admits that she feels entitled not to cook sometimes because she also works hard and brings money into the family. Moreover, she specifies that though her husband’s dietary preference is part of her concern, she basically cooks whatever she wants and is convenient for her. The fact that she is financially
independent and her parents-in-law live faraway gives Mei-li more freedom compared to other Chinese female marriage migrants who are homemakers with a three-generation-cohabitation arrangement.

In three-generation-cohabitation households, Taiwanese mothers-in-law are the major figure delivering dietary knowledge. Not only do they know the Taiwanese ways of cooking, they are also the ones who know the men’s food preferences in the family. In other words, they are the gatekeepers for cultural reproduction. As newcomers to the three-generation-cohabitation family, most Chinese female marriage migrants consider the kitchen to be the mother-in-law’s territory and would not start cooking presumptuously based upon their prior knowledge and their own food preferences. Their initial experiences in the kitchen most likely begin with assisting their mother-in-law, for example, preparing ingredients, and washing dishes after meals. My informants explained to me that they observed and learned from their mother-in-law very carefully, because they knew cooking is probably the biggest task in the household, especially if they are stay-home wives/mothers.

Chi is the youngest among her seven sisters in her own family. Though she grew up in a small agricultural village and had to help out on the farm since she was a little girl, she did not know how to cook before she got married because cooking was mostly taken care of by her mother and elder sisters. Chi was fully aware that her lack of cooking skill could be exaggerated as a major shortcoming in the household, so she chose to be a very humble pupil to learn cooking from her mother-in-law who lived with them in the first few years of their marriage. In her own words,

I always stayed in the kitchen after finishing the tasks my mother-in-law assigned to me. While she was cooking, she taught me tips at the same time, especially for Hakka dishes – that’s her specialty. It was always busy in the
kitchen, endlessly washing, chopping, making Hakka vegetable buns, etc. But it was also the time that she taught me how to manage things from her own experiences of being a homemaker for the entire life. For example, chicken breast is usually the cheapest meat, but no one in the family likes its dry texture. The secret is to marinate the chicken breast in a little bit of rice wine and add a little bit yam starch, then the texture will be soft and tender. Everyone eats it and the cost is low.

Chi’s mother-in-law passed away a few years ago, and although she actually gave her a hard time, Chi showed genuine appreciation for her mother-in-law’s culinary advice. Not only did her mother-in-law teach her how to cook, but more importantly, she also told her what her husband’s dietary preferences were and passed along knowledge of how to economize on the family’s food bill without sacrificing their taste buds.

Chi’s story is quite typical among my informants. Most of them live or had lived with parents-in-law, and their mother-in-law, with no exception, took care of everything related to food, from grocery shopping to cooking. Women seem to be the head of the kitchen domain, responsible for food preparation and production, yet under the Han-Chinese patriarchal structure, it would be deceiving to think that women are in full control. In fact, men often play the decisive role of supervising how resources are allocated, and their diet preferences are usually prioritized. Chinese female marriage migrants are expected to perform the role of a “good” daughter-in-law and a “good” wife, therefore, their own food preferences are often at the bottom of the list.

Once Chinese female marriage migrants become more familiar with the routines in kitchen, their role as an assistant to their mother-in-law could change to the chef of the family for daily meals, but not for big holidays. At this stage, they occasionally bring their regional flavors to the dining table. Whether a particular regional dish can stay on the family menu and appears frequently mostly depends on other family members’ attitudes.
In summary, economic power has certain impacts, but how much control Chinese female marriage migrants have on the family's food scene heavily depends on the family structure. In a nuclear family setting, Chinese immigrant wives tend to enjoy more autonomy in the kitchen domain. Although Taiwanese husbands’ food preferences are taken into account and even prioritized, compared to big families, it is still easier for Chinese wives to negotiate food management. In the three-generation-cohabitation family setting, Chinese female marriage migrants face more challenges. They are responsible for most of the foodwork, yet they often have to compromise their own dietary preferences. The food scene in general is gendered and corresponds to the power structure in the family. However, it is important to note that the power structure is never immutable, and could change with time. Even within the same power structure, similar events could have very different outcomes based upon the relationship the Chinese immigrant wife has with other family members.

5.2 You Are What You Eat

Within migration studies, the access and management of food is a frequent topic of discussion in various research on migrant domestic workers. Hondagneu-Sotelo in her study of Latina live-in housekeepers in Los Angeles informed us that many of these immigrant women work without a written contract but commonly assume that proper meals would be included in the workplace—the employer’s home (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). What “proper meals” mean thus becomes a debatable issue in the twilight zone. In her research, Hondagneu-Sotelo finds that employers have very diverse ways of dealing with food. While some employers stock up their pantry and welcome their employees helping themselves with food, others’ cupboards may be bare because they only snack at home after a long working day, and some others may economize on food bills to give domestic workers lower-quality food. Regardless of how employers deal with the issue of
food, Hondagneu-Sotelo concludes that Latina immigrant domestic workers are “keenly aware of how food and meals underline the boundaries between them and the families for whom they work.”

On the other side of the globe, Pei-Chia Lan, in her research on Southeast Asian migrant domestic workers in Taiwan, pushes this approach further by telling complicated stories with sophisticated analysis (Lan 2006). She views food management as a crucial mechanism that draws the boundaries of exclusion or inclusion between employers and migrant domestic workers in households. Through closely examining the control of the distribution of food and the arrangement of eating meals, Lan argues that the division of how to eat and where to eat symbolizes the class hierarchy in an employment relationship. With an emphasis on agency and heterogeneity, Lan constructs typologies—maternalism, personalism, distant hierarchy, and business relationship—to show variations of boundary work. Furthermore, Lan identifies three major structural factors—the class positioning of employers and domestic workers, the ratio of care work to housework in the job assignment, and the temporal-spatial setting—to explain why particular employers and domestic workers lean toward a certain type of interaction. For example, middle-class employers tend to downplay status hierarchy but highlight their achieved status to contrast themselves with the old rich, whose privilege is often based upon heritage. The liberal guilt of well-educated middle-class employers, though they do not necessarily treat their migrant domestic workers “better,” frames the employment relationship as an equal-footing business arrangement as opposed to the feudal tradition of domestic servitude. While acknowledging migrant domestic workers’ varying human capital, Lan does not hesitate to point out that “employers are usually the power holders who take initiatives to frame the dynamics of employment relationships, charting the bounded terrains for the workers to negotiate social boundaries and private zones.”
From these studies of migrant domestic workers, we see that food serves as a boundary marker that distinguishes migrant domestic workers’ status from employers’ family in the same household. Although the boundary is often negotiated between the two parties and boundary work is an ever-changing interactive process by nature, one can say without any doubt that there is an asymmetrical power relation between employers and migrant domestic workers. Whereas employers have the upper hand, migrant domestic workers, no matter how much employers rely on them, tend to have very limited power in the employment relationship.

What is the situation of food consumption and management in cross-border marriage households? There are some undeniable similarities but also drastic differences. First of all, unlike migrant domestic workers who clearly do not belong to the family they work for, Chinese marriage migrants, though often seen as outsiders marring into Taiwan, are family members in essence. Although many of these Chinese marriage migrants’ daily routines may seem strikingly similar to a migrant domestic worker on the surface—grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and the elders—instead of a monetary and contractual employment relationship, Chinese marriage migrants’ labor in the domestic sphere is considered to be “labor of love.” Of course there are more sophisticated ethnic categories such as Holo, Hakka and so on in Taiwan, but in an extremely broad sense, Chinese female marriage migrants, and their Taiwanese husband and in-laws could all be categorized as Han. However, given the complicated political relation between Taiwan and China, does food also serve as an ethnic boundary marker in such cross-border marriage households as described in previous research on migrant domestic workers?

One of the recurring topics I heard during the course of my fieldwork was the types and amounts of condiments used in daily dishes. Bin is a 34-year-old immigrant wife who has two young children and has been living in Taiwan for seven years. She is the only child
in her family and is originally from Liaoning province. After graduating from college, she moved to Shanghai and worked as a secretary in a small Taiwanese-owned company where she met her husband. Bin told me that in the Northeast region of China which includes Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces, the characteristics of local cuisine are the generous usage of oil and the emphasis on salty flavor. She further explained that perhaps partly because of the extreme cold weather and the fact that her mother is Chaoxian zu—an ethnic minority group in the Northeast region of China that shares the language and other cultural aspects with Koreans—her family eats very hot and spicy food in addition to the regional cuisine’s emphasis on oil and salty flavor. Bin spoke in a very clear and elaborate fashion, explaining that hot and spicy food helps the body sustain the cold weather, and assorted pickled food represents the ancient wisdom passed down generations to preserve vegetables because hardly any plant survives in the extreme weather. In our conversation, I sensed that Bin is very proud of her homeland and the cooking style she learned from her Chaoxian zu mother.

As if life purposely tricks Bin, everything she is proud of in the regional cuisine she grew up with had become problematic in her new life in Taiwan. Bin and her husband live with her husband’s widowed mother who retired as a low-ranked civil servant a few years ago. Bin recalled the “cultural shock” she experienced,

Before we got married, I already knew that it takes a few years to obtain the working permit. My husband told me that our family doesn’t need me to work illegally just for additional income, so I prepared myself to be a good wife, a good homemaker before I came here. My mother-in-law did not ask me to cook, but I thought cooking is part of my responsibilities as a daughter-in-law. I still remember so vividly how much time I spent on preparing the first dinner, I wanted to make a good impression. The dinner turned out to be a disaster. My mother-in-law did not even finish half bowl of rice. My husband did not want to make me feel embarrassed, so he forced himself to finish the food, but it was too spicy to him and he had to drink a lot of iced water.
The awful experience did not defeat Bin. Despite her own food preference, she decided to learn how to cook the so-called “Taiwanese cuisine” in the hope of satisfying her husband and her mother-in-law’s taste buds. However, she soon realized that the dining table could be as cruel as a battlefield, and words could be more hurtful than a chef’s knife. She described,

I’m not trying to say that my mother-in-law is a horrible person. She has been nice to me in many other ways. But when it comes to cooking, her words are harsh. She said my cooking is *killing* her and her son because of the amount of oil and salt I use. How would I try to kill my own husband? I really try to accommodate their tastes, but it is not easy to change everything overnight. She said only village girls and uneducated people cook with lots of oil, salt, and MSG, and she criticizes me being a lousy wife because I don’t know how to cook healthy food. I really didn’t know MSG is not good for health; everybody uses it in China and it was never a problem!

I had a chance to chat with Shiou-ling, Bin’s mother-in-law when Bin went to pick up her elder son from the kindergarten. Shiou-ling acknowledged Bin’s contribution to the family—she cleans the apartment diligently, has a good sense of budgeting household expenses, never shows impatience when she had to accompany Shiou-ling to hospitals. Nevertheless, Shiou-ling had very negative comments on her Chinese daughter-in-law’s cooking style. Despite all the good qualities she praised, Shiou-ling insisted that Bin is not a “qualified” wife and mother because of her lack of “proper knowledge” of healthy cooking, which she considers the most important responsibility of a wife and a mother.

In the middle of our conversation, Bin got back from the kindergarten with her elder son. To my surprise, Shiou-ling suddenly raised her voice and said, “it is common sense that the general rule of healthy diet is low sodium, low cholesterol, and high fiber. These *dalumei* come from backward society, like what Taiwan was forty years ago, not wealthy and people did not have much knowledge, so they used MSG. But who uses MSG for home-cooking nowadays?” I felt really embarrassed at the moment, and Bin who was
standing behind her mother-in-law shrugged her shoulders and gave me a look as if she were saying “I told you so.” It was clear that Shiou-ling had no intention to hide her dislikes but wanted Bin to hear the negative comments. At the risk of sounding like I was taking sides with Bin, I deliberately spoke in a softened tone yet pointed out that Bin has a bachelor’s degree in accounting which is a strong indicator of intelligence and learning ability. Shiou-ling did not let me finish my sentence and said,

I know she has a college diploma, and that’s part of the reasons I agreed my son to marry her. But no matter how strong China is becoming economically on the world map, the fact that it is not a developed country and people lack of modern knowledge of healthy diet remain the same. See how many food safety issues they had? I only have a degree from junior college, but I know how to take good care of my husband and my son. She [referring to Bin] doesn’t. The excess amount of oil, salt, MSG, and chili peppers she uses could lead to all kinds of disease, many scientific studies have proved it, and most of we Taiwanese know about it! [italics added]

Bin’s experience is hardly unique. Many Chinese marriage migrants I have encountered shared similar experiences. In addition to oil, salt, MSG, different types of chili pepper, and some other strong-flavored condiments, a few Chinese marriage migrants also mentioned that their Taiwanese family members complained about the amount of rice and meat they cook for each meal and the use of animal fat. For example, Jing-ru, who is originally from Hubei province and lives not only with her parents-in-law but also extended family members in a tao tien tzuo³, told me that she learned not to use certain cuts of meat. She shares the cooking responsibility with her brother-in-law’s wife, so she only has to cook three to four dinners a week. It also took her some time to adjust her cooking style, mostly reducing the usage of chili pepper, oil and soy sauce, to

³ Tao tien tzuo refers to an independent unattached family housing, usually two to four floors. The housing style mostly exists in rural areas and suburbs where property is less expensive. Such housing is suitable for traditional three-generation cohabitation, and in some cases, unmarried daughter(s) cohabit in the same building as well.
accommodate her Taiwanese family members’ taste buds. Because her husband encourages her to learn “Taiwanese cooking,” Jing-ru took a series of cooking classes held by the local government. She proudly told me that her family members acknowledge and compliment her improvement, and now they are willing to try the regional cuisine she cooks occasionally.

Unlike Bin who received negative comments from her widowed mother-in-law, Jing-ru’s difficult time came from her unmarried sister-in-law. Jing-ru explained that she used to cook side pork, sometimes refers to as pork belly, which contains more fat compared to other cuts and is suitable for various stew dishes. Her sister-in-law, like many other young and trendy Taiwanese women, cautiously monitors her weight and watches what she eats in order to maintain a slim figure. Not surprisingly, she picked up Jing-ru’s cooking style and complained a few times that the family can afford to buy leaner portions of meat, and it is Jing-ru’s fault that she lacks “modern” knowledge to look after family members’ health. In her own words,

Compared to those Southeast Asian brides I met at cooking classes, I think I’m already very lucky. My sister-in-law and I get along well, so I don’t think she spoke with bad intention. I also appreciate that my family gave me time to adjust [my way of cooking], and now I know how to cook dishes that satisfy most of the family. Nevertheless, it still hurts when I heard she said “only poor peasants in the old times eat so much pork belly so often.” You know…I am from an agricultural village, and my parents are farmers.

Jing-ru admitted that it never crossed her mind that pork belly would be considered unhealthy, and she cooked it not only because of its cheaper price but also the high proportion of fat gives the meat a smooth and soft taste. After her sister-in-law’s comments, Jing-ru reduced the frequency of buying pork belly. Moreover, although not very actively, she started listening to radio broadcasts and watching TV programs that are about healthy cooking.
From the above examples, we can clearly see an asymmetrical power structure in cross-border marriage households. Although Chinese marriage migrants are often the ones who do most of the grocery shopping and cooking, their Taiwanese families nonetheless ask them to assimilate, to adopt Taiwanese cooking. Thus it is only natural to ask what exactly “Taiwanese flavor” or “Taiwanese-style cooking” is. It is not an easy task to clearly define “Taiwanese cuisine” given its really complicated history. While originating in Chinese Hokkien foodways, some researchers argue that Taiwanese cuisine has become a distinct tradition after years of adaptation and indigenization (Zhang and Yang 2004). In a broader definition, Taiwanese cuisine is based upon Hokkien regional cuisine, with a significant Japanese influence from the colonial period (1895-1945). After the Chinese Civil war, Chinese mainlanders from all different provinces migrated along with the Nationalist government, and the regional cuisines they brought with them enriched Taiwan’s food scene. In the past couple of decades, with the launch of democratization and the indigenization policy, different ethnic groups such as Hakka and aborigines’ cuisines gradually attracted more attention and diversified the so-called Taiwanese flavors. As a culinary category, it is generally agreed that Taiwanese cuisine tends to be lighter flavored compared to other Chinese regional cuisines. The usage of oil, salt, and other condiments is fairly moderate. Since Taiwan is an island, fresh fish and all sorts of seafood play significant roles in the cuisine (Y.-J. Chen 2008). Therefore, Chinese marriage migrants, particularly those who are from Sichuan, Hunan, and the Northeast region, who grew up accustomed to heavy flavors found it difficult to quickly change their cooking style to adjust to their Taiwanese family members’ dietary preferences.

However, regional culinary differences are not sufficient to explain the difficult and possibly confrontational situations Chinese marriage migrants face. Food, a material reality and a nourishing substance, is linked with various connotations, interpreted
differently by different people in place and time. It is important to point out that dietary preferences are not viewed as merely regional variations but a highly classed issue in such cross-border marriage households. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu provides copious amounts of ethnographic details on food in French families to demonstrate the relationships between food and class. He argues that the French dominant class, with the disappearance of economic constraints, defines the popular tastes by opposing coarseness and fatness, and pursuing the light, refined, and delicate flavors which then become a form of social censorship. On the relationship between food and the physical body as a social product, Bourdieu writes, “Tastes in food also depend on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, ...whereas the working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape, and tend to go for products that are both cheap and nutritious, the professions prefer products that are tasty, health-giving, light and not fattening” (Bourdieu 1984).

Food and eating habits of course cannot be discussed independently of general lifestyles. In Jing-ru’s case, not only did she not know pork belly would be seen as unhealthy, initially she even felt wronged because high-fat ingredients with lots of rice were never a concern in her hometown where most people are farmers doing labor-intensive activities regularly and need lots of calories to sustain themselves. Yet Jing-ru’s sister-in-law who has a white collar 9-to-5 office job in a big city is under peer pressure to “look fashionable and professional;” her preference for lean meat and small amounts of carbohydrate intake is not only suitable for her daily physical activities, but also consistent with the modern discourse on healthy diets. Although Jing-ru’s sister-in-law mentioned the issue of home economy, family budget is not her major concern here, but the possibility of gaining weight from the high-fat dishes Jing-ru cooks. She associates the high-fat ingredient—pork belly—with peasants in the old days which she thinks should be long abandoned because
people are supposed to acquire modern knowledge. Meat, or to be more specific, meat with high proportion of fat, thus become “classed.” By classifying pork belly or any other high-fat food as lower class, Jing-ru’s sister-in-law also draws a symbolic boundary between herself as the well-educated middle class Taiwanese and Jing-ru as an ignorant working-class Chinese peasant girl who needs to learn from her betters.

Economic means are not the sole determinant of class. When Bourdieu analyzes the relationship between food and class, one group is particularly worth mentioning—teachers. Bourdieu states that compared to those with substantial economic buying power, teachers possess more cultural capital and thus are inclined to “pursue originality at the lowest economic cost and go in for exoticism (Italian, Chinese cooking etc.) and culinary populism (peasant dishes).” Bourdieu also points out that teachers are also almost consciously against the new rich and their foodways. In both Jing-ru and Bin’s cases, their Taiwanese family members emphasize the association between modern knowledge and healthy cooking. Despite the fact that Bin has a bachelor’s degree, her mother-in-law, Shiou-ling, sees Chinese society as not as developed as Taiwanese society. Therefore, Bin’s cooking style is not regarded as the result of a different regional foodway but a lack of cultivation.

Similar exchanges happened quite often in other cross-border marriage households during the course of my fieldwork. Although most Chinese immigrant wives are not from wealthy families, many Taiwanese families are fully aware that China is becoming an important economic giant on the world map, whereas the economic growth in Taiwan has been stagnant in recent years. The mass media is full of stories about Chinese tourists’ extravagant consumption in Taiwan. Instead of comparing these economic aspects, Chinese marriage migrants’ Taiwanese in-laws tend to stress the qualitative differences between the two societies. From their point of view, Chinese
marriage migrants’ cooking style—the generous usage of oil, salt, MSG, and other condiments—is unhealthy and a result of their lower class background from a less developed, less civilized society. One of the frequent examples they give is Chinese tourists’ lack of proper manners in popular sightseeing spots and dining etiquette in restaurants, for example, chewing loudly with the mouth opened, crossing each other’s chopsticks when they eat, using their own chopsticks to flip and pick up what they want in a shared bowl or plate, and so on. All these behaviors they have seen in person, read about, or learned from the media, inevitably reinforcing their negative perceptions of China. They often end the conversation by saying, “you know...like what Taiwan was forty or fifty years ago.” The subtext here, of course, is that the new Chinese rich may have money but still lack proper manners and tastes.

To conclude, food is never neutral. Different ingredients are given different meanings in space and time. Certain foods may be perfectly suitable in one society but convey negative connotation in another. Indeed there are objective culinary differences between the so-called Taiwanese flavors and Chinese regional cuisines, but the tension in cross-border marriage households, especially in three-generation-cohabitation settings, is not merely about culinary characteristics. Food consumption and cooking styles do not only draw an ethnic line between Chinese female marriage migrants and their Taiwanese in-laws, but serve as a marker of status and class. Chinese immigrant wives’ food preferences and cooking habits such as the general usage of oil, salt, MSG, and/or other condiments are associated with their national origin, and further classified as the lack of modern knowledge and inferior. In the name of a “healthier” diet, Taiwanese in-laws often despise Chinese marriage migrants’ cooking habits and ask them to adapt.
5.3 Home, Sweet Home?

In addition to the similarities and differences between immigrant wives and migrant domestic workers mentioned in the previous section, another research issue concerns notions of home. For live-in domestic workers, even though they may spend more time in the household than their employers, there is no doubt that they consider the physically defined household as their workplace not their “home,” and they look forward to their time-off. The same physical space is presumably Chinese marriage migrants’ home, sweet home. Already facing discrimination in society, is home a safe harbor for Chinese marriage migrants?

In the era of migration, studying the concept of home within a bounded, physically defined space becomes problematic. Thus it is important to emphasize the way people themselves experience and understand the environment. Food, as a material, has been used to research migrants’ collective memory, self-identification and sense of inclusion or exclusion, as food is perceived through a combination of senses and evokes the experience and construction of home. For example, Sutton points out that food sent from migrants’ home constitutes a symbolic process of restoring fragmentation through reconstructing the sensory totality of the world of home (Sutton 2001). In its very sensual dimension, activities such as food making and food consumption serve as vehicle for the projection and recreation of the abstract meaning of home. “Min yi shi wei tian⁴,” “Chifan huangdi da⁵,” all these proverbs show the paramount important role food plays in the Han Chinese culture. As discussed in previous sections, Chinese female marriage migrants are

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⁴ The complete quote is “guo yi min wei ben; min yi shi wei tian,” and the translation is “a nation’s primary focus is its people, and food is the ultimate necessity of the people,” similar to the English idiom “bread is the staff of life.”

⁵ The literal translation is “eating is as important as the emperor.”
responsible for all or at least a large share of foodwork, yet their dietary preferences are often compromised as they are at the lower end of the hierarchical power structure in the family. While their “tastes of home” cannot be realized at home in Taiwan, how do Chinese marriage migrants cope with their nostalgic feeling towards their original home?

I first met Chi-hua at the “New Life Adaptation” workshop held by the Mu-Zha district office. This series of workshops hold various classes for the “new immigrants,” mostly referring to female marriage migrants from Southeast Asian countries and China. Topics cover a wide range including computer skills, cooking, Taiwanese dialect and learning traditional Chinese characters. Considering that many immigrant wives have young children, local government offices usually provide free child-care services during the class time. I chose to go to the workshops on Taiwanese dialect and traditional Chinese characters, because unlike other workshops which tend to have a more mixed student body—marriage migrants from China and also other Southeast Asian countries—this series of workshops mostly targeted Chinese marriage migrants. The workshop met from 2pm to 5pm three times a week, and I usually arrived at least half an hour earlier to help set up the classroom and chat with the instructor and other early arrivals.

Chi-hua was one of the participants who usually arrived early with her two children, a five-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl, to enjoy the free A/C. The classroom was always busy before the class started. Mothers tried to feed their children while they played with each other, and at the same time engaged in conversation with other mothers. Some mothers bought lunch from nearby small vendors, and some brought home-made food to feed their children. Looking at all the utensils and containers they brought with them, I thought it really took a lot of effort even though they lived close by the district office. Chi-hua explained to me that she always came early not only because of the free A/C, but more
importantly, though it could get really chaotic, it is much more interesting to eat with others. She said,

Of course it’s not pleasant to take two young children, carry all the stuff, and walk 10 minutes under the sun. But it is just so much more fun to have lunch here [in the classroom]. At home I always have lunch with kids and my mother-in-law, and we watch TV when we eat. Here, it’s true sometimes kids get out of control because they play with each other, but I also get to make new friends and eat the real Chinese food with them.

Chi-hua’s words rightfully point to the hidden and unexpected value of workshops held by local governments—a legitimate social space for marriage migrants. Many of my informants are home makers and live a somewhat isolated life. Apart from their immediate family members—their Taiwanese husband and in-laws—they lack channels to build up their own social networks. The workshops held by local government offices, with their initial intention to teach marriage migrants languages and other skills to assimilate into Taiwanese society, coincidentally provide an opportunity for marriage migrants to mingle and expand their social circles.

Very soon I noticed that the exchange of food was the unspoken norm among Chinese marriage migrants. This exchange seemed to emerge naturally—after the workshop ends, people talked about what they could bring for the next class. The arrangement is never fixed, because with young children to feed and mothers-in-law to take care of, they understand very well that anything could happen at the last minute. However, when someone brings food to share, everyone becomes so cheerful and passionately engages in conversations. “Delicious!” “What is your secret recipe?” “This is the real food!” “The dish tastes almost like the one my mother used to make.” “We have a similar dish in my hometown, but we cook it in a slightly different way.” These are some of the comments I heard most frequently. What’s intriguing to me is how often they used the word “real” to describe the food. When asked, Chi-hua said,
I’m from Hunan, so all Taiwanese food is way too mild to my taste. Everything here is not real, they are flavorless! My husband once took me to a so-called Hunanese restaurant, because I felt homesick when I was pregnant. I was so disappointed; the food was not authentic. You can’t just put a couple dry chili peppers and call it a Hunanese dish, that’s cheating. I’m not a great cook myself, but I can cook better than the chef in that restaurant, because I’m Hunanese and those are our dishes. The food shared among classmates here are real, because we are all from China. [Italic added]

For Chi-hua, Taiwanese food is flavorless and not substantial, thus not real, because of the mild usage of condiments. As a pregnant woman, she enjoyed certain dietary privileges such as dining in the Hunanese restaurant. There are a lot of regional Chinese cuisine restaurants in Taiwan, especially in areas where more Mainlanders and second-generation Mainlanders reside. However, the flavors in such restaurants may not be the same as in China for various reasons such as the accessibility of certain ingredients, the diminishing population of old mainlanders in Taiwan, the need to adjust to the tastes of local clientele, and modern food trends in Taiwan, and so on. Therefore, Chi-hua’s experience did not ease her homesickness but triggered an even deeper nostalgia. It is also interesting to note that despite the fact that Chinese marriage migrants in the workshops come from different provinces and actually have different ways of cooking, Chi-hua overlooks these regional variations but focuses on their common national origin.

Authenticity is a recurring topic in Chinese marriage migrants’ conversations. Chiang-min, originally from Si-chuan, earned fame as a fantastic cook among her classmates. She often brought her home-made food to share with other Chinese marriage migrants. The spicy smell would stay in the air for hours and often made Ms. Li, the program coordinator in the district office, tear and cough badly when she came in the classroom to talk to the instructor after the class ended. Constantly receiving sincere compliments from her classmates, Chiang-min felt valued for all the effort she put in.
Moreover, a sense of satisfaction and achievement was developed in the process, which she felt she lacked as a housewife. She hopes to open a food kiosk or a small bistro serving authentic Sichuan food once her two children reach schooling age and she can have more free time for herself. Being a proud cook, Chiang-min is picky about the ingredients she buys in the local market. She said,

The Sichuan peppercorn here [Taiwan] is just not right. It is supposed to numb your tongue, but the ones you can find in the local market here are just not strong enough. If it is not strong, it is not good. There are also different types of liang fen in Sichuan, but you can’t find all of them here. Last time I went back [to China], I brought back two big suitcases full of dry goods – peppercorns, chili powder, paste, chili oil, etc. I gave some to my friends because those are the best gifts – they are from home. That’s the only way one can cook real food.

Chiang-min then described how much she cherished the ingredients she brought back from China. Since she cannot afford to fly back to China every year, and the supplies she gets from friends are not on a regular basis either, Chiang-min is very careful with her stock of dry foods. She would only use these ingredients when she cooks for her Chinese friends, because her Taiwanese husband and in-laws “cannot taste the difference.”

I did not comment on Chiang-min’s words at the moment, but with a genuine curiosity, I did a little bit of research. What I found is that many foods, especially dry foods and medicinal herbs, sold in Taiwan are actually not produced in Taiwan but imported from China. The price is usually cheaper than for the same product produced in Taiwan. Therefore, many vendors who sell goods imported from China tell customers that what they sell is locally grown in Taiwan, so that they can charge a higher price. The key here is not whether the ingredients are in fact from China or not, but the emotional attachment these Chinese marriage migrants have with their own flavors. Our knowledge and

6 Liangfen is a type of wide flat noodle that is made of either peas, or green beans, or rice.
experience of food first come from home, and the memory is perpetuated, contested, and even reinvented in various ways later on in life. With limited agency in food consumption in their own households, Chinese marriage migrants, despite coming from different regions, have collective memories and establish a special bonding, a sense of belonging through food sharing. Home, as a physical space, is normally considered a private sphere where people are supposed to feel safe to express themselves, to satisfy both their physical and emotional needs. Ironically, for Chinese female marriage migrants, home is where they spend most of their time, devote the most efforts, yet also the major source of their distress. It is in the air-conditioned, unstylish classroom, a public space, located in the local government office, that Chinese female marriage migrants feel free of judgments.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Whereas previous research has lumped Chinese female marriage migrants in the same category with marriage migrants from other countries, mostly Southeast Asian, I have focused on Chinese women as a specific social group. Certainly, female marriage migrants in Taiwan, wherever they are from, face common challenges and a new term was coined—xinyimin nuxing (new immigrant female)—to refer to them. Yet cross-Strait marriages between Chinese women and Taiwanese men deserve to be investigated on their own, not only because different sets of laws apply to them, but also because Chinese female marriage migrants consciously distance themselves from other marriage migrants. Moreover, the historical and political complexities between China and Taiwan are an additional factor in cross-Strait marriages, not presented in other cross-border marriages. For example, while some Chinese female marriage migrants, based upon their own life experiences and the formal education they received in China, think Taiwan is a lost province of China, and that people of China and Taiwan are just “one big Chinese family,” their Taiwanese families, particularly the Native Taiwanese, have a distinct national identity. Such tension could be intensified then manifested in a twisted way in cross-Strait marriage between Mainlander veterans and their Chinese wife. Research specifically focusing on Chinese female marriage migrants is, I believe, necessary, and the findings of this project allow for a more complete understanding of the social and cultural lives of this group.

Sensational stories about Chinese female marriage migrants appear in the mass media in Taiwan constantly, from national TV news to weekly tabloids. Most of the news stories are about human trafficking, shame marriage, and in some rare cases, domestic violence and Chinese women’s assaults towards Falun Gong. The media coverage constructs a very negative image of Chinese female marriage migrants, and such negative
images inevitably influence how the general public perceive this social group and cross-border marriage. Scholarly works focus on the commodification aspects of cross-border marriage. Yet during the course of my fieldwork, I found that Chinese female marriage migrants are not a homogenous group, and they have different motivations and expectations of cross-border marriage.

Women who belong to the Cultural Revolution generation tend to have limited formal schooling and children from their former marriage. Their cross-Strait marriage with Taiwanese elderly veterans can be regarded as an explicit strategy of care exchange. Low-rank Mainlander veterans are the victims of KMT government’s marriage ban in 1951. Although these veterans are socio-economically marginalized in Taiwan, they are in fact politically salient, particularly to the KMT regime, as part of the nationalist ideology. Such political symbolism is reflected in the term referring to the group—rongmin (honorable citizen). In addition to designated medical centers, transportation aids, and home-assisted care, low-rank Mainlander veterans also enjoy various subsidies, all provided by the state. Yet the state-provided care mechanisms, in many elderly veterans’ eyes, nonetheless are not sufficient as the system only accommodates their medical needs and partial physical care. Therefore, elderly veterans, particularly the relatively healthy ones, actively arrange their own old-age care that will potentially fulfill other needs. The lifting of martial law in 1987 allowed them to return to China to visit their families and relatives and, moreover, to find a wife there. For their part, middle-aged divorced women do not foresee a bright future for themselves in both the job and marriage markets in China. The Taiwanese government’s welfare policies to veterans and its immigration regulations indirectly provide long-term security for these women, and therefore cross-Strait marriage appears to be a better option than labor migration. Cross-Strait marriage between these two particular groups represents a strategy of a long-term reciprocity of care.
In addition to the Cultural Revolution Generation, I further categorize the younger generation Chinese female marriage migrants by their places of origin. Women who directly come from rural regions have a higher proportion of using introduction agencies, and their primary reason for emigration is to improve their own and their families’ economic condition. The Taiwanese husbands tend to be in a marginalized position in Taiwan, and are under pressure owing to traditional Han family values to continue a patrilineage. Among all the Chinese female marriage migrants, this group may be in the most disadvantaged situation. Most of them are quite young, work in labor-intensive jobs, and at the same time are responsible for most of the household chores. Because of the negative image of cross-border marriages formed through introduction agencies, their Taiwanese family often has a deep distrust of them. Members of their Taiwanese family worry that they may run away, so they are more or less confined to the household and have limited social contacts. This type of cross-Strait marriage has greater resemblance to those discussed in prior studies of cross-border marriage between Taiwanese men and Vietnamese or Indonesian women.

Unlike Chinese women from remote areas and the Cultural Revolution generation, urban Chinese female marriage migrants usually have higher educational levels, and some of them are college graduates. Being highly aware of the stigma attached to marriage migrants in the receiving society, this group of Chinese female marriage migrants carefully differentiate themselves from their fellow citizens, particularly from those who use introduction agencies, by emphasizing that they did not migrate for economic reasons. They consider Taiwan a more westernized and advanced society than China which may provide them a window to see the world. Such views also lead them to “assume” that there is more gender equality in Taiwanese households. Ironically, the Taiwanese husbands they marry often opt for cross-Strait marriage because of more traditional expectations of
gender roles. Unlike elderly veterans or Taiwanese men in marginalized positions, this group of Taiwanese husbands usually has had decent education and white-collar jobs. They are by no means “unmarriageable” by local standards. Yet they consider urban Taiwanese women unsuitable for marriage because these women refuse to fit into traditional gender roles as a docile wife, a filial and submissive daughter-in-law, and an ideal mother who takes care of every single aspect in the household. Not surprisingly, the opposite anticipation of gender role from Taiwanese husbands and Chinese wives often leads to disappointments and conflicts. Although urban Chinese female marriage migrants also experience various forms of discrimination and difficulties in the private sphere, compared to women from rural regions, this group of women are relatively less confined by their Taiwanese families. Since Chinese female marriage migrants are not granted working permits right away, they often use the “gap years” to take language or other life adaptation classes provided by local governments or NGOs. In this way, they have more social contacts and further establish friendships. Moreover, urban Chinese female marriage migrants are also more tech-savvy and participate in online forums where they connect with other women with similar backgrounds and build up support systems.

In chapter four, I examined the dynamics in cross-Strait marriage household. One key factor that greatly influences Chinese female marriage migrants’ marriage quality is living arrangements. Couples who decide to live as a nuclear family tend to have more freedom and fewer conflicts. The prevailing cultural norm of filial piety, the privatization of elder care, and skyrocketing housing price in urban areas are the common reasons that people choose to have three-generation-cohabitation living arrangement. In a traditional three-generation-cohabitation household, the man, usually the eldest son, is the main breadwinner who provides the financial means for the entire family. Although from the lens of patriarchal lineage ideology, the son should bear the responsibility of filial piety,
the actual tasks of fulfilling filial piety such as providing personal care and assistance to aging parents, in fact, is often delegated to the wife, which can be seen as a gender transfer. Previous research shows that dual-earner middle and upper-middle-class households adopt the strategy of outsourcing filial old-age care to waged migrant domestic workers to gain individual autonomy and lessen physical and psychological burdens, which adds a dimension of market transfer (Lan 2002). In this project, I found that lower-middle and working-class households, which lacked sufficient financial means to hire live-in migrant domestic workers, saw cross-border marriage as a way to maintain a patriarchal Han-Chinese family structure. In the three-generation cohabitation household, the Taiwanese mother-in-law often plays an authoritative role, serving as a kin keeper passing cultural tradition from one generation to the next, and the Chinese daughter-in-law is therefore subject to her authority. Those who see their daughters-in-law as coming from a less developed country, especially Taiwanese mothers-in-law, often have discriminatory attitudes. In these cases, as a result, the intergenerational conflicts between Taiwanese mothers-in-law and Chinese daughters-in-law are often much more severe.

Foodways, as I have noted, are not a common topic in sociological immigration studies. There are only a couple of studies that discuss the role of food in cross-border marriage between Taiwanese men and Southeast Asian women. Perhaps because of cultural proximity, no prior research has examined foodways in cross-border marriages between Taiwanese men and Chinese women. Before I started my fieldwork, I certainly did not anticipate that cooking and/or food would even be an issue, yet numerous Chinese female marriage migrants I met constantly talked about issues around food and thus opened a new window to me. As anthropologist Mary Douglas observed, food is not only an absolute necessity for sustaining human beings’ lives but involves coded messages. In other words, what we eat is an important indication of who we are, where we come from,
and possibly who we want to be (Douglas 1972). Food is often a contested site in cross-Strait marriage households, particularly in three-generation-cohabitation settings. Although there are objective culinary differences between the so-called Taiwanese flavors and various Chinese regional cuisines, the tensions over food in cross-Strait marriage households are not merely about different culinary characteristics. Rather, food consumption and cooking styles serve as a strong marker that differentiates Chinese female marriage migrants and their Taiwanese in-laws by status and class.

In the intersection of patriarchy and nationality, Chinese female marriage migrants are often at the very bottom of the power hierarchy within the family. Although they are responsible for most, if not all, foodwork, their own dietary preferences are usually compromised. Not surprisingly, food becomes a prominent site of nostalgia. While their “tastes of home” cannot be realized in private sphere—their physical home—they creatively utilize public space—schools, parks, NGO’s or local government’s classrooms—to exchange their own regional flavors. Food sharing becomes a significant basis for Chinese female marriage migrants’ interactions. Through food sharing, Chinese female marriage migrants not only exchange concrete materials that they bring from the homeland and abstract knowledge, but more importantly, they maintain collective memories and establish a sense of belonging.

This research project offers an ethnographic account of cross-Strait marriage between Taiwanese men and Chinese women. Their cross-border marriages can be seen as part of the feminization of international migration. Whereas prior studies tend to consider Chinese female marriage migrants as a whole or even examine this group with other groups of marriage migrants, I focus on the heterogeneity of the group and lay out their different motivations and expectations for marriage migration. Inspired by Constable and other feminists’ works, I do not see Chinese female marriage migrants as
passive victims who were duped into marriage and need to be rescued or educated. Rather, drawing from James C. Scott’s concept of public transcript and hidden transcript, I detailed how Chinese female marriage migrants produce a counter narrative of gender equity as a form of resistance. Moreover, once they recognize their contributions to their families, they are able to use their strength to negotiate for better outcomes. I do not intend to paint an overly rosy picture of Chinese female marriage migrants as they remain in a subordinate position and face many challenges, but I would like to suggest that they are not completely powerless either.

During the course of my fieldwork, there were a lot of negative emotions coming from different research participants, including Taiwanese husbands, mothers-in-law, and of course Chinese female marriage migrants. Very often the discriminatory attitudes of Taiwanese families towards Chinese women and the mismatched expectations of Taiwanese husbands and Chinese wives were partly due to the lack of social contacts and information between China and Taiwan. This may be changing, different forms of exchanges across the Taiwan Strait have been deepened continuously in many ways, from tourism to popular culture. The Taiwanese general public presumably should develop a more accurate understanding of China. Under the KMT regime, the Taiwanese government also changed policies and lessened regulations such as the procedure of applying for the national identification. Looking ahead, an important topic of investigation will be whether newcomers who arrive in the future as marriage migrants from China will share similar motivations as their predecessors and experience the same forms of discrimination in Taiwan.

Taiwanese scholars are gradually turning their attention to topics related to the second generation of female marriage migrants. Most research investigates the second generation of Southeast Asian mothers, focusing on the socialization, language acquisition,
and educational attainments of young children. This research uses survey data and adopts a quantitative approach (F.-C. Chang and Wang 2014; H.-D. Fung and Liang 2008; Tao, Yin, and Hung 2015; Y.-Y. Wu and Tsai 2014; Lu and Lai 2010). A few studies that include the second generation of Chinese mothers place them under the general category of “children of new immigrants” (Tao, Yin, and Hung 2015; Tao, Yin, and Hung 2015). As I have explained in this dissertation, Chinese female marriage migrants are a distinct group among all marriage migrants in Taiwan; following a similar train of thought, I believe that there are compelling reasons to research the Chinese-Taiwanese second generation as a unique social group. For instance, unlike women from Southeast Asian countries whose language barrier may affect the way in which their children acquire Mandarin, Chinese women, though they often experience challenges in reading and writing in Taiwan, have no difficulty in oral communication despite their distinct accent.

Due to the scope and purpose of this dissertation, I did not include the children of Chinese marriage migrants in my analysis. In future research, however, scholars can productively explore the issue of child-rearing. From my preliminary observations, although Chinese mothers were the main providers of their children’s daily needs, they rarely made major decisions by themselves with regard to such issues as the choices of schools and extracurricular programs. These kind of decisions were often made jointly with their husbands, or even with their parents-in-laws. Investigation of the power dynamics in these decision-making processes and the effects of these dynamics on the children in these families would extend our understanding of the issues I examine in this dissertation.

Given that Chinese marriage migrants grew up outside of Taiwan, scholars can also further investigate the way in which the human and cultural capital of these migrants affect their philosophy of child-rearing and their children’s performance in school. For
example, do Chinese mothers have adequate resources to help them understand the education system in Taiwan? How do these mothers interact with Taiwanese school teachers and other parents? Do their children encounter any discrimination in school? As I have analyzed in chapter four, Chinese marriage migrants produce their own narratives of gender equity and perceive themselves as more progressive in order to counter the harsh treatment they receive from their Taiwanese mothers-in-law. How do their concepts of gender equity affect child-rearing? Do they allocate equal resources to daughters and sons?

The estimated total fertility rate in Taiwan in 2015 is 1.12, the third lowest in the world and only slightly higher than Singapore and Macao.¹ Accordingly, marriage female migrants are often seen by the general Taiwanese public as “reproduction machines.” Despite the prejudices encoded in this term, these migrants, along with their children, are changing Taiwan’s demographic composition. These changes, in all their complexity, are worthy topics of further study; my hope is that this dissertation will enrich our understanding of this distinct group of female migrants.

¹ The World Factbook, CIA, USA
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