

This article was downloaded by:
Publisher: KKG Publications



Key Knowledge Generation

Publication details, including instructions for author and subscription information:

<http://kkgpublishations.com/social-sciences/>

Transnational Marriage in Taiwan: Challenges Faced and Adaptation Strategies Adopted in Experiencing a Different Culture

SHU-CHU YANG¹, CHING-MIN CHANG²

^{1,2} National Chiayi University, Chiayi, Taiwan

Published online: 17 August 2017

To cite this article: Yang, S. C., & Chang, C. M. (2017). Transnational marriage in Taiwan: Challenges faced and adaptation strategies adopted in experiencing a different culture. *International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 3(4), 142-147.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.20469/ijhss.3.20001-4>

To link to this article: <http://kkgpublishations.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/3/IJHSS-20001-4.pdf>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

KKG Publications makes every effort to ascertain the precision of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, KKG Publications, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the content. All opinions and views stated in this publication are not endorsed by KKG Publications. These are purely the opinions and views of authors. The accuracy of the content should not be relied upon and primary sources of information should be considered for any verification. KKG Publications shall not be liable for any costs, expenses, proceedings, loss, actions, demands, damages, expenses and other liabilities directly or indirectly caused in connection with given content.

This article may be utilized for research, edifying, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly verboten.

TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE IN TAIWAN: CHALLENGES FACED AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN EXPERIENCING A DIFFERENT CULTURE

SHU-CHU YANG¹, CHING-MIN CHANG^{2*}

^{1,2} National Chiayi University, Chiayi, Taiwan

Keywords:

Transnational Marriage
Foreign Brides
Different Culture

Received: 23 April 2017

Accepted: 14 June 2017

Published: 17 August 2017

Abstract. This is a study of how foreign brides in Taiwan adapt to the challenges of living in an unfamiliar society, particularly in terms of diet, religion, and language. Based on data collected in semi-structured interviews, the results indicate that foreign brides tend to prefer foods, which are excessively spicy and sour for the average Taiwanese. In terms of religion, most foreign brides adopt their husbands religion. As for language, it was found that foreign brides tend to be relatively direct in their manner of expression, and also tend to reply in a loud tone of voice, and that this leads to misunderstandings and makes their Taiwanese in-laws uncomfortable. It was also found that many foreign brides experience difficulties in the areas of medical care and shopping. As for the ways in which foreign brides respond to these challenges, it was found that many of those who have difficulty adapting to Taiwanese food express their dissatisfaction by eating little. With regards to religious activities, most simply follow their in-laws' customary practices, such as burning incense. As for language, it was found that they use various means to learn both written and spoken Chinese. Many foreign brides reported having difficulty with the taste of various Taiwanese foods, but that their in-laws didn't mind if they prepared some of their favorite foods for themselves. Many also indicated that their in-laws encouraged them to attend Chinese classes, but that there was little support for those who preferred to practice a religion different from their in-laws. The results of this study indicate that the government needs to make additional efforts to help foreign brides lay down roots in Taiwan and enjoy a happy family life, such as holding social events in various localities, running relevant training courses for foreign brides and their husbands, and promoting an overall environment which is more foreigner-friendly and linguistically diverse.

c

INTRODUCTION

Since the latter part of the 1990s, large numbers of Taiwanese men have married foreign women, thereby significantly increasing the cultural diversity of this previously very homogeneous Chinese society. As of May 2015, the number of foreign brides in Taiwan totaled 503,255, many of whom are from Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam (91,793) and Indonesia (28,444) (Ministry of the Interior, 2015). There are also many foreign brides from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macao, whose Chinese background makes it much easier for them to adapt to the life in Taiwan, both linguistically and culturally (Chen, 2007).

By contrast, due to their very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, foreign brides from Southeast Asia have considerable difficulty adapting to their new life in Taiwan, often resulting in pressure and conflict, and even making it difficult for them to raise their children. This issue has received increasing attention throughout the society in recent years (Hsieh & Huang, 2013). Amongst the many challenges facing foreign brides, those relating to linguistic and dietary differences are

often the most immediate and conspicuous (Chen, 2008). In a study of foreign brides conducted by Chu (2002), 42 percent of those from Vietnam reported having significant difficulty adapting to Taiwanese food, as was the case for 68 percent of Indonesian brides in a similar study conducted by Chen (2001). It should be noted that Asian societies, especially those in the Chinese cultural sphere, give much importance to food and family meals, and thus the dinner table is a key venue for the playing out of complex interpersonal relationships (Tseng, 2009).

As pointed out by Zhang (2005), communication styles, both verbal and non-verbal, are closely related to culture. Moreover, different cultures assign different meanings to various forms of verbal expression and body language, making it difficult to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings (Lee & Chang, 2004). In this regard, Hwang and Chang (2003) mention the example of a Vietnamese bride whose mother-in-law spoke to her in Taiwanese Hokkien rather loudly and quickly, giving her the impression that she was being scolded.

*Corresponding author: Ching-Min Chang

†Email: chingmin.chang@gmail.com

To be sure, religious beliefs exert a major influence on behavior, especially dietary customs. For example, Muslims (who constitute the majority of Indonesians) are forbidden to eat pork (Hwang & Chang, 2003). Moreover, according to Ko and Chang (2007), foreign brides from Indonesia tend to be more conservative than their Vietnamese counterparts.

Most studies on new immigrants in Taiwan have focused simply on cultural differences in terms of food, religion, and language, without examining the problems they face in the course of adapting to these differences. By contrast, most studies on new immigrants in America focus on their children's education and their ability to adapt to life in the United States (Hernandez, Denton & Macartney, 2008; Toppelberg & Collins, 2010), but few focus on the strategies they adopt in attempting to adapt to differences in the areas of food, religion, and language.

Thus, the focus of this study is on the problems new immigrants have in adapting to life in Taiwan, as well as the strategies they adopt for overcoming them. It is clear that any discussion of the problems faced by foreign brides and how to best address them must necessarily begin with an in-depth examination of the concept of cultural difference. In addition to helping foreign brides adapt more quickly to life in Taiwan, doing so will help Taiwanese gain a better understanding of the situation and cultural background of foreign brides, and also promote acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity in Taiwanese society. The results can help researchers, social workers, and policy makers in other countries better understand the difficulties faced by new immigrants.

The purpose of this study is to determine the cultural differences which most frequently give rise to difficulties for foreign brides (especially those relating to language, diet, and religion), as well as their experiences in attempting to cope with the challenges they face living in a foreign land.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Meaning and Significance of Cultural Diversity Education

Due to various historical factors over the past few centuries, modern Taiwanese society is composed of four main ethnic groups: Hoklos, mainlanders, Hakkas, and aboriginals. Only the aboriginals are not Han Chinese; yet each of these numerous indigenous tribes has been Sinicized to one extent or another. Each of Taiwan's main ethnic groups can be distinguished by its first language and various customs, and in recent decades, increasing emphasis has been given to cultural diversity, with each group asserting its distinctive characteristics (Wang, 2014). In light of the growing awareness of the value of cultural diversity, it has become increasingly important to un-

derstand and respect cultural differences and autonomy (Hung, 1999).

Increasing Cultural Diversity

The large number of foreign brides in the past two decades has added another distinctive layer to cultural diversity in Taiwan. It has also given rise to a wide variety of problems relating to differences in language and culture, prompting much research on related issues. For example, Hsieh and Huang (2013) found that most foreign brides marry for economic reasons, and that due to the significant difficulties they face in adapting, many end up regretting their decision to come to Taiwan. Chu and Sun (2010) discovered that due to widespread negative perceptions concerning foreign brides, they are subject to discrimination and poor treatment; some have even reported being forbidden to speak their native language with their offspring. Similarly, Lim (2006) found that most foreign brides have little choice as to the types of food they eat and prepare for their in-laws. These are just some of the many culturally-driven difficulties typically faced by foreign brides in Taiwan.

Nonetheless, some foreign brides have capitalized on their cultural background by setting up an ethnic restaurant, and ethnic business clusters have begun to appear in Taiwan in recent years (Chen, 2008). To be sure, interaction between foreign brides and native-born Taiwanese, both inside and outside the family, is set to increase long into the foreseeable future, making intercultural understanding and respect all the more important.

Strategies for Promoting Intercultural Adaptation

In connection with intercultural adaptation, it will be useful to refer to the first three steps of Schmidt and Finkbeiners (2006) model titled ABC's of cultural understanding and communication. In the first step, autobiography is used to engender self-awareness and overcome blind spots. In the second step, biography is used to gain insight into the experience and values of someone of a different cultural background. In the third step, cross-cultural analysis, the autobiography, and biography are compared and contrasted, with the differences and similarities discovered therein being made the basis for formulating strategies for intercultural adaptation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, purposive sampling was used to recruit 24 foreign brides from mainland China (7P), Vietnam (3P), Indonesia (4P), Thailand (3P), the Philippines (3P), and Cambodia (4P) with the help of people from the local Service Center for New Immigrant Families and related government

agency. Subjects (the foreign brides) who were interviewed in this study need to understand Mandarin or Taiwanese and are willing to participate in the interview. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant. With the consent of each participant, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were mainly conducted in a place where the participant felt comfortable and free to talk, including their homes and the meeting room at a school near their place of work.

The researchers used the outline of the interview to conduct a semi-structured interview. The questions in the outline of the interview served as the beginning of the dialogue between the researchers and the new residents (the foreign brides) and were an important tool for researchers to communicate with the subjects. During the interview, researchers usually would ask the interviewees to answer the interview questions in no particular order and hoped the interview was conducted under a relaxed and natural way for discussing the related issues.

The demographic questions were asked at the beginning of the interview which included the basic information of the new residents and her husband's family. Next, due to the adaptation of cultural differences, the researchers asked the foreign brides questions related to diet habits, religion, and language. In this section of interview, in order to reduce the uncomfortable feelings of the new residents, the researchers showed their care while asking the questions. After the questions were asked, they let the subjects have enough time to think through and answer the questions. When the subjects used the wrong words or sentences, the researchers would repeat the subjects' answers to make sure the subjects have their answers expressed correctly.

RESULTS

Adapting to Dietary Differences

Dietary differences

Different ethnic groups have their own dietary preferences. Thus, it's not surprising that the spicy and sour foods, as well as the "exotic" sauces and seasonings preferred by many foreign brides don't please the palate of the average Taiwanese. Similar to Hwang and Chang (2003), it was found that the main problem in terms of diet is that in contrast to most Taiwanese, new immigrants tend to favor spicy and sour flavors, and when cooking, they tend to use certain sauces and spices not found in Taiwanese cuisine. On the other hand, many foreign brides have little taste for typical Taiwanese dishes, such as boiled pork slices, soups, and grass jelly, as well as the post-partum foods customarily eaten by Taiwanese mothers. Thus, many foreign brides find it very difficult to adapt to typical Taiwanese

food, especially early on, often resulting in a strong yearning for the familiar flavors of their native place.

Adaptation Strategies

- a. Early on, when their knowledge of the local language is highly limited, foreign brides tend to attempt to express their difficulty adapting to Taiwanese food by using gestures, eating little or asking their husband to take them out to eat.
- b. Those attending language classes learn from their classmates recipes and where to buy hard-to-find ingredients. Other strategies reported include using the telephone to seek cooking advice from their mother, planting a herb garden, and bringing ingredients back to Taiwan following visits to their home country.
- c. Over time, many foreign brides gradually grow accustomed to Taiwanese food, arriving at a happy medium by learning how to cook meals combining Taiwanese favorites with a few dishes from their native place which their in-laws find acceptable.

Adapting to Religious Differences

Religious differences

Despite some differences in the way folk religion is practiced in Taiwan, brides from mainland China tend to readily adopt the customs of their in-laws. This result is similar to that of Hung (2009), who found that new immigrants who are Christians tend to adopt the religion of their husband's family, mainly to avoid conflict.

Adaptation Strategies

- a. Many foreign brides make an effort to accept and participate in their in-laws' religious practices, typically learning from their mother-in-law how to prepare and make offerings to the Earth Deity and for such holidays as Tomb-sweeping Day, the Hungry Ghost Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Lunar New Year.
- b. Some foreign brides first observe their in-laws' religious practices before deciding to either adopt their in-laws' religion or continue with their original one. Others, due to personal reasons, do neither, and instead convert to some other religion.

Adapting to Linguistic Differences

Linguistic differences

Apart from those from mainland China and those of Chinese ancestry who already know Chinese, foreign brides encounter considerable communication difficulties after arriving in Taiwan. And even after they gain some rudimentary skills in the local language, their manner of speaking tends to be rather

loud, direct, and unclear, often leading to misunderstandings and ill-will. The results of the present study also indicate that cultural differences regarding tone of voice are one of the main sources of misunderstanding and conflict (Hwang & Chang, 2003; Yang, Hung, Hou & Su, 2012). Moreover, many find that language difficulties make seeking medical treatment highly problematic. Limited language skills also prevent them from obtaining a culinary license required for working as a chef or baker. As for mainlanders, many strongly resent the various derogatory terms many Taiwanese use to refer to them. Thus, it can be seen that some of the greatest challenges faced by foreign brides are linguistic in nature. Due to various negative stereotypes in Taiwan about new immigrants (e.g., regarding them as “gold diggers”), and also out of fear that they might be led astray by their friends, many new immigrants are prevented by their in-laws from making new friends. This, however, can make it very difficult for them to learn the local language, since it leaves them with little opportunity to practice apart from Television and conversations with family members (Chu & Sun, 2010; Hsieh & Huang, 2013).

Adaptation strategies

- a. In the early stages, many resort to gestures, pointing, and other types of body language, or simply remain silent.
- b. Strategies mentioned for reducing conflict with their in-laws include seeking their husband’s help, apologizing, using a different tone of voice, moving out, and chatting with friends and family.
- c. Many reported using samples or gestures to request family members to purchase articles of daily use. As for strategies for improving their language skills, attending classes and watching television (many programs are subtitled) were cited most frequently.

DISCUSSION

This study showed that when foreign brides improved their language expression skills, resulting in conflict and dispute occurred due to differences in living habits and culture. These findings were similar to what Hwang and Chang (2003) and Yang et al. (2012) had found. Lee and Chang (2004) also found that tone and physical movements in different language and culture also led to misunderstanding or generation gap. In the dietary culture differences, current study found that the foreign brides usually solved family dietary culture conflicts by self-adjustment. This is the same as what found by Chen (2008). Nowadays, foreign cultures have formed economic and industrial settlements in Taiwan, and most of the foreign brides have felt that accessing their hometown diet and ingre-

redient appears to be more convenient than their home country. During the interview, the members of foreign brides’ new family said that in order to help foreign brides to adapt to the new living environment in Taiwan, their spouses took time to accompany them to attend activities, or helped them to enroll in housekeeping class, and their mother-in-law would also accompany them to go out and relax. This indicated that the ability of the foreign brides to adapt to the cultural differences is related to the socio-economic status of their new family. Liu (2009) and Chen (2008) had the same finding. That means that the foreign bride couple with moderate family status, their attitude towards marriage, and life adaptation will be at the mid and upper level. Their satisfaction level of the marriage will be between the general and the upper level. And the result of their adaptation to their daily life is also between moderate and good. Current study also found that the foreign brides chose to leave their home country to move to Taiwan to help their spouse take care of children and spouse’s family members, if their home country had worse living and health conditions than Taiwan. The ability to adapt to the marriage and the cross-cultural marriage research done by Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) showed that the adaptative ability of foreign brides to the lower living environment was better than the local women. And in terms of the ability to adapt to the new family’s lifestyle, compared to the local women, they were also doing better (Crippen & Brew, 2007). However, due to the negative values existing in the current Taiwan social media, some people in Taiwan still are seeing the foreign brides with a negative perception. Studies done by Chu and Sun (2010) and Kawaguchi and Lee (2017) had the same conclusions. This means that the multicultural awareness in Taiwan has still got a long way to go. Fifty percent of foreign brides who participated in the in-depth interviews lived with in-laws or other family members. This result was same as the studies done by Chen (2006) and Chiou (2009). Some of the interviewees, in the daily life adaptation, faced different living habits of the new family members (such as diet, language communication, and religious). Most of the foreign brides needed to do self-adjustment in many ways in order to maintain the regular family life and the harmony of the new family. In addition, Wu, Tsai and Siao (2010) found that a small number of foreign brides, because their children were now studying at the elementary school, would participate in school volunteer service. Therefore, in order to enable foreign brides to develop self-identity, to adapt to the life in Taiwan, the people’s network for foreign brides should be promoted, and subjects should be encouraged to participate in non-governmental organizations (such as volunteer services or civil service). Thus, they could gain the support from civic

groups and the friendship from their home country fellows. Current study had the same findings in factors that affected the civic participation of foreign brides as the studies done by Liu (2009), Chiou (2008), and Hsieh et al., (2009). The results showed that the higher the degree of family support, the more foreign brides participated in different skills license examination, in recreational activities, in staff training, and in the civic/government award activity. This also means that the support from the new family is very important for the foreign brides to participate in their social activities.

CONCLUSION

This study used language, diet, and religion to discuss the adaptation of foreign brides from a multiculturalist perspective. At the beginning, they tried to fit into their spouse's culture by exploring, trying, learning from their spouse's family, and the experience sharing from the fellow foreign brides.

The predicaments of maladjustment of personal life, the habits of doing grocery, and seeking medical advice experiences were mostly caused by language and culture differences (Kawaguchi & Lee, 2017; Lundberg & Pollak, 2007). Most of these inconveniences usually were assisted by their spouse. Therefore, there are various measures which the government can take to make it easier for foreign brides to adapt to their new life in Taiwan. First of all, the relevant authorities should consider allowing foreign brides to use their native language in the exam required for obtaining a culinary license. It would also be helpful to regularly hold local social events featuring ethnic foods prepared by foreign brides. Finally, there is a need to hold training courses for helping foreign brides and their husbands gain a better understanding of one another. Such measures will go a long way in promoting intercultural understanding and helping Taiwan's increasing population of foreign brides enjoy a happy and harmonious family life.

REFERENCES

- Chen, M. L. (2007). *The preliminary research on the life adaptation and responding behavior of foreign brides from Southeastern Asia and China to Taiwan* (Master's thesis). Asia University, Taichung, Taiwan.
- Chen, Y. Z. (2008). A study of the cultural identity, social adaptation and social network of new immigrants in Taiwan. *Journal of State and Society*, 4, 43-100.
- Chen, T. Y. (2001). *The adjustability of international marriage in Peng-Hu county comparison with Indonesian and Vietnamese brides* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan.
- Chen, M. L. (2006). *An action research of word recognition teaching to new immigrant women - Example of Ju-Dong elementary supplement school* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Hsinchu University of Education, Hsinchu, Taiwan.
- Chu, J. J., & Sun, P. H. (2010). Social exclusion study of Indonesian and mainland Chinese spouses in Taiwan. *Formosan Education and Society*, 20, 1-52.
- Chu, Y. L. (2002). *The lived experience of foreign brides in Penghu county* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Chiayi University, Chiayi, Taiwan.
- Chiou, S. W. (2008). International awareness education and the social participation of female immigrants: From discrimination experience in daily life. *Formosan Education and Society*, 16, 63-103.
- Chiou, M. Y. (2009). *Natal or conjugal family? The interaction between Southeast Asian female migrants and their mother-in-laws*. (Unpublished master's thesis). National Chi Nan University, Nantou, Taiwan.
- Crippen, C., & Brew, L. (2007). Intercultural parenting and the transcultural family: A literature review. *The Family Journal*, 15(2), 107-115.
- Hernandez, D. J., Denton, N. A., & Macartney, S. E. (2008). Children in immigrant families: Looking to America's future. *Social Policy Report*, 22(3), 3-22.
- Hohmann-Marriott, B. E., & Amato, P. (2008). Relationship quality in interethnic marriages and cohabitations. *Social Forces*, 87(2), 825-855.
- Hsieh, D., Qian, D., Wray, L., Xia, Y., Hor, Y. S., Cava, R. J., & Hasan, M. Z. (2009). *A topological Dirac insulator in a quantum spin Hall phase (experimental realization of a 3D Topological Insulator)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Hsieh, K. J., & Huang, L. C. (2013). Study on leisure lifestyle & life satisfaction of female foreign spouses from Southeastern Asia. *Tzu Hui Journal*, 9, 69-81.
- Hung, C. H. (1999). A view of multicultural education on civic education. *Bulletin of Civic and Moral Education*, 8, 167-179.
- Hung, C. M. (2009). *Changing foodways of southeast asian female immigrants in Taiwanese family*. (Unpublished master's thesis). National Chi Nan University, Nantou, Taiwan.

- Hwang, S. C., & Chang, W. Y. (2003). A study of marriage adaptation and children's education of foreign brides. *The Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 8, 135-169.
- Kawaguchi, D., & Lee, S. (2017). Brides for sale: Cross-border marriages and female immigration. *Economic Inquiry*, 55(2), 633-654.
- Ko, C. F., & Chang, H. P. (2007). A comparative study of the social values of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Taiwan. *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 4(1), 91-111.
- Lee, J. K., & Chang, M. C. (2004). Discuss the living adjustment of south-east asia brides from the culture viewpoint. *Community Development Journal*, 105, 101-109.
- Lim, K. T. (2006). The maintenance of ethnic boundary of the cross-border Vietnamese female in Taiwan: A research on the role of food. *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 3(1), 63-82.
- Liu, W. Y. (2009). *Public participation of female new immigrants in Taiwan: The perspective of empowerment* (Unpublished master's thesis). National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan.
- Lundberg, S., & Pollak, R. A. (2007). The American family and family economics. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(2), 3-26.
- Ministry of the Interior (MOI). (2015). *National immigration agency*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/6gn2Uc>
- Schmidt, P. R., & Finkbeiner, C. (2006). *ABC's of cultural understanding and communication: National and international adaptations*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Toppelberg, C.O., & Collins, B. A. (2010). Language, culture, and adaptation in immigrant children. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 19(4), 697-717.
- Tseng Y. W. (2009). *Mother's flavor? Food taste, culinary practice and famil relationships* (Unpublished master's thesis). Shih Hsin University, Taipei, Taiwan.
- Wang, Y. H. (2014). A reflection of practices of pre-entry counseling of foreign spouses in Taiwan- A perspective of multiculturalism. *Soochow Journal of Social Work*, 27, 61-85.
- Wu, Y. W., Tsai, C. C., & Siao, R. F. (2010). Parental involvement of Southeastern Asian female immigrants and its relationship to their children's school life adjustments. *Journal of Research in Education Sciences*, 55(4), 157-186.
- Yang, Y. N., Hung, S. J., Hou, S. F., & Su, Y. F. (2012). *Study on civil rights implement of the foreign spouses in Southern Taiwan*. The Report of the 2012 Support Programs of Counseling Fund on Foreign Spouse Care, Taiwan.
- Zhang, Z. J. (2005). Cultural differences of body language in nonverbal communication. *Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, 38(6), 168-170.

– This article does not have any appendix. –