



Subversions of the Social Hierarchy: Social Closure as Adaptation Strategy by the Female Marriage Migrants of Taiwan

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Abstract

This study explores how female marriage migrants employ various forms of social closure to help them adapt to the receiving society. As for female migration itself, although it has begun to dominate the migration flow it has not yet been discussed and theorized as a unique phenomenon in immigration studies. This phenomenon must, however, be viewed within the context of international hypergamy, which has become an increasingly notable trend in many countries, especially those of East Asia. Female marriage migrants, coming to Taiwan chiefly from Southeast Asian countries and from China, often are depicted by the mainstream discourse as being inferior. This study has found that by creating, and in some cases transforming, social closure, these female marriage migrants are able to reshape their group identity, to reposition themselves within the stratification at least within the parameters of their own minds, and thereby to cope with the discriminatory environment and unfavorable social hierarchy of Taiwanese society.

Keywords

Immigrants, female migration in Asia, social closure, international marriage

Introduction

A new trend of inter-national marriage has emerged and become especially notable in East Asian countries such as Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, as men in these economically developed countries seek marriage partners coming from the region's less developed countries, or economically deprived areas (Asakura, 2002; Kim, 2006; Lee, 2003; Nakamatsu, 2003; Ochiai et al., 2006; Piper & Roces, 2003). This trend of inter-national hypergamy can be seen as emerging out of the collision of patrilineal tradition and burgeoning feminism. On the one hand, the patriarchal culture shared by these East

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Asian countries places a strong emphasis on “producing a male heir” while implicitly preaching a creed of “the man marries down, the woman marries up.” On the other hand, the newly gained economic independence of young women has made a single lifestyle a valid option, especially when a woman can’t find a man who fulfills “the three highs”: high education, high income, and high height (tallness). Certainly in Taiwan the less desirable men, especially those who are either working class or rural farmers, find themselves at a great disadvantage in their local marriage market. Thus taking a bride from China or from the neighboring Southeast Asian nations has become an attractive option for them, given that their socioeconomic disadvantage becomes virtually unnoticeable owing to the unequal development among the various regions (Hsia, 2002).

Within East Asia, Taiwan has one of the lowest birth rates and also the highest percentage of inter-national marriage (Jennings, 2010; Shay, 2010). The influx of female marriage migrants (henceforth, FMM), coming mostly from China and from Southeast Asian countries, has made Taiwan a multi-ethnic society. As of 2003 the number of FMM had jumped to 31.9 percent, meaning that 1 out of 3.1 Taiwanese men was marrying a woman from outside Taiwan (Ministry-of-the-Interior, 2004). The FMM generally are perceived as being disadvantaged, less educated, and possibly incapable mothers owing to their cultural-linguistic differences, and thus there is a certain degree of discrimination, or at least prejudice, directed against them. In recent years the government has begun to implement tighter visa controls and to ban for-profit marriage brokers, owing to the supposed “public concern” about “fake marriage, real prostitution” (M.-L. Chen, 2004), thereby seeming to show support for such comments uttered about the FMM as “lowering the quality of the population” (H.-G. Chen, 2004). Views of the latter eugenic kind have cropped up in the discourses of Taiwan’s media (M.-L. Chen, 2004; Gao, 2003), its government (Han, 2004), its legislators (H.-G. Chen, 2004; Ke, 2006), its schools and teachers (Wang et al., 2006), and even in academic studies (Liu, 2002). Although the above-mentioned tightened governmental controls have cut 2003’s percentage almost in half, in 2008 foreign brides still were accounting for 15 percent of Taiwan’s marriages (Monlake, 2010).

While for many years my fieldwork has focused on the strategies FMM use to adapt themselves to the new host society, community, and family, here I am paying special attention to the various ways in which social boundaries are created, transformed, and maintained, boundaries that have their objective ethno-socioeconomic aspect but that nonetheless live, first and foremost, within the minds of the social actors themselves. The present analysis focuses on the issue of social closure, in relation to the role it plays in helping FMM to adapt themselves to the host society of Taiwan. Before we can begin to trace the process of social closure, however, as it plays itself out within the minds and lives of the FMM, I will begin with an overview, based on my fieldwork, of the overall situation for the FMM in today’s Taiwan.

Research Background, and Societal Perceptions of the FMM

Included in this study are both C-FMM and SEA-FMM, living in both rural and urban areas of Taiwan. Of the FMM I interviewed, half came to Taiwan from Mainland China and thus speak the same language as their receiving families, even if with a distinguishable Mainland accent. The other half are Southeast Asian FMM who have emigrated to Taiwan from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand and hence are not native speakers of Chinese but rather have had to learn it. Indeed, in the more than eight years that these women have lived in Taiwan, all of them have gained a basic fluency in Chinese (Mandarin) and/or Taiwanese,² with the latter being a dialect of Mandarin commonly used in rural communities.

Most of the C-FMM in the study have a higher educational level than do the SEA-FMM – a fact more or less reflective of the overall situation in Taiwan (Department of Civil Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, 2006). And yet, due to the hostility between the Taiwanese and Chinese governments, the Mainland Chinese diplomas possessed by C-FMM are under numerous constraints, which means that these women's previous educational achievements often are not deemed valid in Taiwan, or at least have to be certified on a case-by-case basis (Mainland Affairs Council, 2010).

Both the Chinese and the Southeast Asian-FMMs are indeed subjected to a certain degree of prejudice or even discrimination emanating from both public discourse and the media, but the two groups experience some notable differences in this regard. Given that the Mandarin accent of the Chinese FMM tends to make them recognizable by the native-born Taiwanese, their full command of the language doesn't keep them from being subjected to certain stereotypes in their everyday lives. Indeed, just like the SEA-FMM, they often are seen by the Taiwanese as having come from a "backward country" and having married "old men" who are either "retarded or low income." Thus they are "gold-diggers" who want to steal the resources of Taiwan, and eventually they will "lower the quality of the population" (Chao, 2009; Wang, 2003). In addition to the stereotype of being "low-quality gold-diggers" they are subjected to hostilities, or at least strong skepticisms, owing to the ongoing tension between Taiwan and China. Indeed their intention in coming to Taiwan, and/or their true devotion to their families, are more often called into question than is the case with the SEA-FMM (Z.-R. Chen & Yu, 2005). A study done by Chen and Yu (2005) has shown that the perceptions of Mainland-born FMM held by native-born Taiwanese tend to line up with the particular political inclination of each Taiwanese individual. More specifically, the more pro-Taiwanese-independence the individual is, the more negative his or her attitude is likely to be toward the C-FMM, and indeed toward all those immigration-related policies that help the C-FMM even though they also benefit the SEA-FMM.

² This study has been conducted in Chinese and/or Taiwanese because these are the languages the researcher speaks. Also please note that because the FMM who have participated in this study all have children in primary schools, this means they have been in Taiwan for at least eight years and hence have acquired a certain proficiency in Chinese and/or Taiwanese.

My study also has found, however, a significant difference between the attitudes held by the Taiwanese toward the C-FMM and the SEA-FMM. The host society's negative impressions of the Chinese FMM often do not include any real doubt as to their capability to be good mothers, with the absence of such a prejudice being particularly notable in the rural areas. A number of comments came my way – some from teachers and school staff members, some from “meddlesome people” who knew I was doing research on this topic; usually in private, but sometimes in more public settings – to the effect that the Chinese FMM, as compared to the Southeast Asian ones, experiences “fewer problems” when getting involved in their children's education. Indeed one rural principal I spoke to, in a private interview, even suggested that Chinese FMM make the *best* mothers:

“Simply my own experience tells me that the children of the Mainland brides sometimes – sometimes – do even better than the native ones. The mothers are more capable; you know: those Mainlanders are very aggressive!”

That principal's viewpoint was echoed by others I talked with in many rural areas. C-FMM often were spoken of as being “diligent,” “capable,” and “active,” even if it at times those words were loaded with such negative connotations as “aggressive,” “impolite,” and “calculating.” When it comes to these women's involvements in their children's education, however, those negative qualities seem to be seen by teachers, school personnel, family members, and neighbors as doing little to undercut the C-FMM's basically positive educational involvements.

In notable contrast to the generally rather muted, or hidden, stereotyping directed toward C-FMM – it rarely goes much farther than their being disparaged as incapable mothers owing to their, or more accurately their receiving families,' low socioeconomic status – that which the SEA-FMMs are subjected to is especially vicious, as in references being made to their “bloodline” or their being accused, even by legislators, of having “genetic defects” (Ke, 2006). Some observers have even used the term “triple discrimination” to refer to the cultural-linguistic, racial, and socioeconomic components of the discrimination such immigrants are up against (H.-G. Chen, 2001, 2004; C.-Q. Wang & Chen, 2004; Zhu & Meng, 2004). Granted, the SEA-FMM are treated better by the government when it comes to length of time needed to attain permanent-residency status, but as compared to the C-FMM they have suffered more in terms of being stereotyped as incapable mothers. Indeed, in the course of my fieldwork I often encountered Taiwanese people making such disparaging comments. For example, a part-time worker at the Taipei Immigration Center, affiliated with the Taipei city government, said the following after I had asked to speak with one of the Southeast Asian volunteer translators:

“She's not here yet. She must be late. You know, Southeast Asian people are just lazier. . . . You know that's why they [the SEA-FMM] marry into Taiwan, not us getting married there!”

Even schoolteachers sometimes made comments like this one: “It isn’t that they don’t want to be good moms; it’s that they aren’t able to.” A teacher in the city of Taipei sought me out when she heard I was doing research on the FMMs’ educational involvements and said this:

“I think it is a very important issue, since the children born to foreign brides are increasing rapidly. . . . Even though I have not taught any of them, I would guess they are slow learners not because they are stupid, [but] just because they come mostly from disadvantaged families – the fathers are of low socioeconomic status, and the mothers don’t speak any Chinese.”

One sees the prejudice at work most clearly in moderate-sounding views such as that one. For while most of the SEA-FMM are indeed disadvantaged in terms of their socio-economic status and/or their cultural-linguistic unfamiliarity, my fieldwork observations showed me that most of them have in fact turned themselves into very good Chinese speakers by the time their children are of primary-school age. And as for the children of the SEA-FMM supposedly being “slow learners,” I found that most of this study’s children who have SEA-FMM mothers are in fact doing splendidly in school.

Regardless, the social hierarchy has slowly formed within and around the mainstream ideology, with the FMM being located down in its lowest stratum, and this stratification, which some have called “racism with classes” (Tseng, 2009), presents a great challenge to the FMM. In the next session we will be exploring the ways in which the FMM maintain and revise the various form of social closure, all as a part of the ongoing process of adapting themselves to the receiving society of Taiwan.

Social Closure Employed by FMM as an Adaptation Strategy

While the concept of social closure has long been used by Weberian theorists to explain how advantages, resources, and status are accumulated and maintained by members of certain social groups (Parkins 1972, 1979; Weber, 1978), the present study will instead be looking at the various uses to which social closure is put by FMM as an adaptation strategy, with special attention being paid to the difference in this regard between the Chinese and the Southeast Asian women.

Dual Closure as the C-FMMs’ Adaptation Strategy

My study has found that as the C-FMM strive to adapt themselves to the receiving Taiwanese society they employ what Parkins (1972, 1979) has called “dual closure.” This type of social closure is a hybrid of the exclusionary type, which seeks to keep others beneath one in the social hierarchy, and the usurpatory type, whereby FMM envisioning themselves as being not just equal, but in some cases even superior, to those inhabiting the higher social strata.

Exclusionary Closure

My fieldwork revealed that the Chinese FMM quite invariably take a strong pride in being “ethnic Chinese,” with that fact bringing them at least an initial sense of confidence and entitlement. When one also takes into consideration the shared-language factor between the C-FMM and the native Taiwanese, one can understand why most of the Chinese FMM begin by seeing themselves as “the same” as the native Taiwanese in terms of “bloodline” and culture, and thus are unable to take seriously the stereotypes imposed upon all the FMM. Or to speak more precisely, even as they are slowly forced to acknowledge the difficulties they are having in adjusting to the new environment of Taiwan, despite their supposedly shared ethnic and cultural identity with their hosts, they go out of their way to insist that their own difficulties aren’t at all comparable to the far worse ones experienced by their SEA-FMM counterparts, from whom they in fact go to great lengths to distance themselves. Typical in this regard is the following comment made by Ting-hui, a Chinese FMM living in Taipei:

I feel that the adjustment of the Mainland brides should be fine. The real problem is when the bride comes from Vietnam. I feel they are much worse than us! I read in the newspaper that [the children of SEA-FMM say such things as] “My mother does not talk,” because their Vietnamese mothers do not speak Chinese, and therefore are being discriminated against.

Another C-FMM, Han-yu, was even more blatant in her attempt to set up a rigorously us-versus-them dichotomy:

We are not exactly “foreign brides” – we are all Chinese! You [the researchers] should give more concern to the SEA-FMMs. They face great challenges and are a huge problem to our society. They are different – different bloodline, different culture. Their adjustment will be difficult. How can they educate their children, if they don’t even speak Chinese? We should give them more attention. Our society should focus on them.

Thus, whereas mainstream Taiwanese society and its media categorize the FMM within a single social grouping, most of the C-FMM I got to know while doing my research quite insistently depicted themselves as being part of mainstream Chinese culture, with Taiwan and China sharing “the same culture and the same bloodline.” This means, by reverse implication, that in their eyes it is the SEA-FMM who are the “real” outsiders. This subtle form of social closure allows the C-FMM to band together with the host Taiwanese, even if only within the confines of their own minds, to make common cause against the SEA-FMM, thereby boosting the C-FMMs’ sense of confidence. The sense of sameness also leads those women to hold high expectations with respect to quality of life, treatment by host families, and professional opportunities, but all too often those initially high hopes end up betraying these women into sheer disappointment. Nonetheless my fieldwork revealed, time and again, that an FMM’s positive perception of her own capital is itself, in many if not all cases, a great help to her as she struggles to

adapt to the new culture. This is very much true of Chinese FMMs like Shu-shu, Ting-hui, and Su-rong, for my interviews with and observations of them led me to believe that their high regard for their own cultural heritage translates into a positive perception of their own ability to do meaningful work and to educate their children.

I also soon saw the other side of this coin, however, in the form of women like Si-wei. Her fluent Chinese and her high-school diploma have not brought her the life she had hoped for. When she first thought of marrying into Taiwan she envisioned “a prosperous life and a happy family, just like the ones seen on Taiwanese soap operas [the shows she watched back in Mainland China],” and making money, but instead she has ended up “trapped” in the small rural community where there are only a few factory jobs, not the service job she still hopes to find. Worse yet, her controlling in-laws don’t allow her to go to Taipei to work, demand that she give birth to a lot of children, and take over her job as a mother. This is how she vented her anger to me:

I am all stuck here, there is nothing I can do! . . . My husband and his family treat me badly. I told them, “You should have married a Vietnamese bride! You should not have married me!”

It is understandable that Si-wei tries to cope with her unhappiness by implicitly stereotyping “Vietnamese brides” as being better able to endure bad treatment from their receiving families. Indeed, many of the people I met with during my fieldwork, and especially those living in Taiwan’s rural areas where people seem to feel freer to openly reveal their prejudices, suggested that the Southeast Asian brides are incapable and docile whereas the Mainland brides are capable and aggressive.

Unfortunately, such outlooks tend to play right into the hands of the C-FMMs’ implicit strategy of envisioning a two-tier society, with those “of the Chinese bloodline and culture” being perched securely on the top tier while the “foreigners” are stowed away down below. For in essence the SEA-FMM are assigned two negatives – “docile and incapable” – whereas the C-FMM are given only one – “capable” – with their supposed “aggressiveness” amounting to little more than forgivable bad manners, in the minds of native Taiwanese like that high-school principal we listened to earlier, lauding the C-FMM for being the best mothers.

Usurpatory Closure

We have seen how the C-FMMs’ initial sense of pride in being ethnic Chinese and in speaking good Mandarin can lead first to high expectations and then to great disappointment. Some of the FMM in my study found themselves married into a family that “does not look like what we thought [saw] on TV [Taiwanese soap opera] at our place,” as Tian-xin put it in our conversation. Especially in Taiwan’s rural areas, where there are far fewer job opportunities and the FMM have far less access to formal societal resources of the kind provided by organizations such as the government’s Immigration Hall and various NGOs, the dearth of fiscal, social, and personal (self-development)

opportunities leads many C-FMMs to feel severely constrained, in the sense of their having few real life-options. Thus one can readily understand why these FMMs so often adopt an additional stance of “usurpatory closure” – conceiving of themselves as living within a bubble of cultural superiority – as they seek to make sense of their disappointment and to deal with their sadness. This is what is Su-rong, denizen of a small village in southern Taiwan, once told me:

Indeed, the material life here is better . . . but there is no culture. In our place [her hometown in Mainland China], even though the material aspect is not as good, all of the people are cultured.

In other words, the C-FMM arrive at a sense of social closure essentially by vaunting themselves as being members of a superior culture. This mindset, while widespread among all the C-FMM I studied, tends to be held most tenaciously by those living in rural areas. The following comments which were shared with me by Su-rong and Si-wei, both of them denizens of a small village in the countryside, virtually equate the region’s conservative values with a lack of culture. Si-wei had this to say:

Taiwan is very chaotic. There’s a huge disparity with regard to its living standard. Taipei’s living standard is high, but it’s tough to live in the southern part of Taiwan. There is much more disappointment than opportunity here. People here also are very different [from the people in Taipei]. . . . Here [in rural Taiwan] is very conservative. People are mean, uncultured, and you can’t really reason with them. You can’t say many things to them. The best way is to keep silent.

Now here’s Su-rong again:

I came here hoping to have better opportunities, to make more money to help my family back home, only to find out that the life here in the countryside is not at all what I had imagined and had seen on Taiwanese TV. The environment here is not much better than it is back home [in China] . . . It is so conservative here! I feel that two children are more than enough, but my in-laws think, “The more, the better!” No one is like that in my place [home country].

What such comments make clear to us is that this kind of usurpatory closure – envisioning one’s group as being unfairly disadvantaged in its relation to the higher social strata – is a strategy employed by immigrants whose hope of coming to a place of possible social advancement has been shattered upon its impact with rural Taiwanese culture. As is attested to by the firsthand experience of my fieldwork, the culture is indeed conservative and explicitly patrilineal, and its members do really harbor the usual suspicions about “those Mainlanders.” Many of the local people I encountered and talked with in the rural areas seemed eager to share with me, many times right in front of an FMM, such “digs” about the C-FMM as a group as this one, which was said in a tone full of mocking malice: “She [the FMM] came from ‘that side.’” Similarly, Si-wei’s mother-in-law once explained to me that a particular kind of vegetable is called “mainland girl”

“because it is [very common and therefore] so cheap!” Given such none-too-secret, society-wide discrimination, even C-FMMs who also experience mistreatment at the hands of their husbands and in-laws do not interpret it as a form of discrimination against them; rather, they come up with creative ways of reinventing their social categories and even Taiwan’s social hierarchy itself.

Although the women I met with during my fieldwork in a small village in rural Taiwan were consistently being confronted by social hierarchization and upfront discrimination, I never once heard any woman describe her situation by using *qishi*, the Chinese word for “discrimination.” As the comments made by Si-wei and Su-rong make clear, all of the ill-speaking and mean-acting that these women encounter is taken by them, who feel trapped and cut off from all hope in this small place, as simply bespeaking the vulgarity of the local people. Si-wei once spoke of being “amazed by the low quality and the stupidity of these rural people,” and another C-FMM, Su-rong, had so taken on the mentality that she feared for the downward assimilation of her children with the native Taiwanese!

We have seen how the “dual closure” strategy employed by the C-FMM helps these women to deal with the discrimination and hardship they encounter in their everyday lives. The exclusionary mode can be seen at work in the way they psychologically position themselves as being culturally superior to the SEA-FMM. Conversely, the usurpatory mode allows them to subvert the existing social hierarchy by implying that they are culturally superior to a Taiwanese culture which, especially in the rural areas, is still tied to outmoded patrilineal values.

SEA-FMM’s Self-exclusionary Transgressions in Social Stratification

The SEA-FMMs’ utilization of social closure is notably different from that of their Chinese counterparts. My interviews with and observations of some of Taiwan’s FMM have led me to see that as compared to their C-FMM counterparts, it is the SEA-FMM who more readily buy into the ideology of inferiority that is being purveyed to them via both the media and their daily interactions with the receiving society. While the assimilationists in Taiwan would be likely to pounce on the language difference as supposedly the chief factor in this regard, I have known too many SEA-FMM who have mastered Mandarin with relative ease and yet have maintained a belief in the social inferiority of their group. Regardless, they view themselves as outsiders to start with, and thus are more compliant with the stereotypes imposed upon them.

Many SEA-FMM told me they felt different from or even inferior to the Taiwanese, especially when they first came to Taiwan. Tuti, for example, said this:

I was very very nervous when I first married here, [because] I heard it is very different and modern here in Taiwan. And after I came here, I thought the people were very different from our place [town in Vietnam]. [For example,] in our place we do not have so many cars on the street. It feels very different. People [the Taiwanese] are very different, too. They all look like beautiful people on TV. [Shyly smiles.] I feel very different [from them].

On many occasions during my fieldwork, I heard from SEA-FMM such responses to my queries as “I don’t have the answer for you – I am Southeast Asian,” and “I am only a foreign bride.” Such comments cropped up all the more frequently in the relatively remote countryside I visited, where patrilocal residence is the norm, and where most FMM enjoy less freedom in their everyday lives than do their urban counterparts. What I soon came to understand is that the real issue for most of those devoted mothers is not their own anxiety but rather their concern that their children will experience a sense of inferiority much like their own. Siti, for instance, talked about not wanting her child to be seen by others as the “son of a foreign bride,” for that might “do him harm.”

I was struck during my observations by the way women like Siti and Tri consciously seek to distance themselves from their children. Siti told me she does this “so that he [my son] won’t be seen [by his family members] as being closer to me.” On another occasion she told me how lucky she is to have been able to marry into Taiwan, and as I watched and listened I discerned that she really does believe what her family members have told her, about her not having the ability to educate the children. Many SEA-FMM like Siti had deeply bought into the ideology of their inferiority in relation to the mainstream society.

Indeed, as one listens more closely one begins to understand what great lengths most, if not all, of these women go to, in order to distinguish themselves as individuals from the group to which they belong. I have dubbed this seemingly unique form of social closure “self-exclusionary” because it entails a FMM consciously distancing herself from her own group, a group often perceived as being at the bottom of the stratification, without have to challenge that social hierarchy. In this study we have learned by listening into Tuti and Siti’s remarks, how readily the SEA-FMMs’ accept their low social ranking as newcomers, with consequent complete lack of interest in taking a usurpationary stance in the C-FMM manner. Whereas both the exclusionary and the usurpationary modes of social closure have long been seen as intrinsically serving to move the group as a whole higher up the social hierarchy, in this self-exclusionary case we have a number of individual SEA-FMM distinguishing themselves from their own group in order to enable their own social advancement.

These women have developed various social-grouping strategies to help them break out of the vicious stereotyping based on their unique differences, whether that means their morality, personality, or stocks of capital. All of which puts them ahead of their FMM peers in their struggle of adaptation, at least in their own eyes, and distances them from the rest of the group, the “inferior group” in the eyes of Taiwanese and now the SEA-FMM themselves. Some women put down the other members of their ethnic group by comparing their own high morale and work ethic, with supposedly lazy and immoral habits of all the other SEA-FMM, some paint themselves as being more proactive and fearless, their peers as passive and defeatist, and some readily admit that they have simply “lucked out,” often with the help of unusually supportive husbands and in-laws.

Morality

The initial feeling of difference from Taiwanese society is often compounded for the SEA-FMM by the women's own internalization of the stereotypes fostered by the local people, especially in the rural areas where traditional values and stereotypes are more strongly held. Thus I found that the rural SEA-FMM are the ones that who take the strongest stand in distinguishing themselves from other SEA-FMM. One common strategy, as seen in Sinta and Sari, is to cite their higher morale in comparison with the other SEA-FMM. Sinta had this to say when we first met:

Most of my friends are Taiwanese. I don't hang out with the Indonesians. Many of them [in my village] are bad . . . they sleep around.

Sari had this to say:

Those foreign brides are really bad. They run away. They can't endure hardship, they just want to live a good life, very lazy. Did you know what happened here [in our village] not long ago? This one ran away, and now she's living with a man in our village, the same village!! Her husband spent 200,000 NT [6000 USD] to marry her, and after a few months she ran away. They only think about themselves, and that's not even the worst. Some women have children, and run away. They abandon their children. . . . They can't take [the hardship] here. Only think about themselves. Those foreign brides have no heart!

Both Sinta and Sari identify themselves with the Taiwanese by saying that "most of my friends are Taiwanese, I don't hang out with Indonesians," and in Sari's case by demonizing foreign brides as "those" people who "just want to live a good life" and "have no heart." By doing so, Sinta and Sari put themselves as members of the native Taiwanese. Sinta goes even farther by continually making comments about her fellow SEA-FMM who "sleep around," "are lazy," and "only think about themselves." It is by adopting such morally superior stances that Sinta and Sri are able to envision themselves being different from "those Southeast Asians."

Personality

In some cases and situations, SEA-FMM approach this "us vs. them" distinction by noting their own unique temperaments and personalities. Tasanee is typical of one such approach, that of emphasizing her own intensely proactive attitude:

All the Southeast Asians are very isolated and docile. I am probably the only exception [laughs loudly and mischievously]. My husband is really lucky [jokingly]. You know, most of the Southeast Asians come here and they really don't know their rights. Their lives are very very different from me. They look down upon other foreign brides, but they would not dare to look down upon me. I am mean! [Laughs]. I would fight for my rights!

Tuti is a good representative of another approach these women take, one in which they openly express both their gratitude to the native Taiwanese who have helped them to become socially integrated and their hope that their fellow SEA-FMM will be given similar guidance:

I was very unhappy when I first came [to Taiwan]. My Chinese was bad, and I stayed home all day. It was very boring. After a while my Chinese became better, and I started to go out and work at the breakfast shop. That's when I met a lot of Taiwanese who are really really really nice to me! They treat me like their daughter. . . . I did not know there were so many nice people! After I met them I became very happy and optimistic. It is really important to learn Chinese, so one can work and make money, make friends, and have confidence and happiness . . . I hope the other foreign brides can all become [empowered] like me. . . . They just don't make the effort.

We note here that Tuti and Tasanee implicitly point out the perceived gap between themselves and the other SEA-FMM. AS opposed to Sinta and Sari's moralistic stance, Tuti and Tasanee lay the stress on their own personality and strength, and even their sheer good fortune. Above all, it is their proactive stance of "going out" and "making a difference" which they are proud of. Indeed, Tasanee's newfound confidence has come her way largely via an empowerment group that was put together by some Taiwanese sociologists and professors, even though she herself interprets her sense of confidence as coming from her nature of being a "born fighter" whereas her fellow SEA-FMM are (as we heard her say earlier) "isolated and docile." For Tuti, on the other hand, it is her diligence that causes her to stand out and to be able to adapt to life in Taiwan whereas other SEA-FMM just "don't make the effort." Here is her take on why there is such a big difference between her and the other SEA-FMM:

Learning Chinese is not easy. It is very, very painful. . . I tell other Southeast Asian that you have to make the effort. Sacrifice, because it is very important to go out, to meet people! You have got to be able to speak Chinese. They can't. Too difficult! Not everyone can learn a different language. They are lazier! I am different. I've always been a hard worker. I am not afraid of making painful efforts. I've been like this since I was little in school.

Such comments are typical of many of the SEA-FMM in my study who, like Tuti, not only interpret their fellow SEA-FMMs' behavior as "docility" but imply that it has come into being not owing to the oppression they suffer at the hands of the receiving families, or simply a lack of the resources, and especially the social capital, that Tasanee can boast of possessing, but out of a natural inclination to be docile or to simply not want to change.

Higher Stocks of Capital

Although I am using the term “self-exclusionary closure” to describe this adoptive effort made by SEA-FMM, in fact some C-FMM also employ this strategy and do so by speaking of their higher-than-average stocks of capital. Ting-hui, for example, a C-FMM who landed a job at ING as an insurance agent, talked to me about the confidence, and the feeling of difference from other Chinese FMM, she has obtained through her job:

Working at this kind of firm gives me more confidence. You know our countrymen [from China], everyone is busy. Their jobs are more lower-class [*embarrassed*], and everyone’s life is hard. There are not many people that are well off, because most of the people [FMM] who marry into Taiwan don’t come from high status [back home] and don’t marry into a high-status family [in Taiwan]. I feel that I am lucky, that I am different from them [other Chinese FMM]. I am more in line with mainstream Taiwanese life. This job brings me into the circle and gives me more confidence.

Tri, an Indonesian FMM, had this to say, when we were chatting about her daily life:

I mostly hang out with my friends in the City Government [where she work]. My friends are those I know from work. I don’t really hang out with other Indonesians. My husband’s sisters and his mother [who live with me] know that my friends are all educated and have good [white-collar] jobs in the government. I am no ordinary foreign bride! They know I can’t be treated like other foreign brides!

It is clear from Tri’s comments that while it does matter who she hangs out with, the more important fact for her is that she is “no ordinary foreign bride” but rather someone who works for the government and socializes exclusively with her white-collar friends.

We have learned how both SEA-FMM and C-FMM reveal, through their comments their adaptive stance of implicitly complying with the existing social hierarchy even while withdrawing themselves, in various ways, from the “inferior” status group. Some of the women transgress against the existing social stratification drawing from their own morality (Sinta and Sari), some by priding themselves on their proactive personalities (Tasanee and Tuti), some by pointing to their extensive social networks (Sinta and Tasanee), and by essentially equating her white-collar-job with high social status (Siti and Ting-hui).

Conclusion

This study has attempted to show how Taiwan’s female marriage migrants employ social closure – albeit in different ways, depending on whether they have come from Mainland China or Southeast Asia – to help them adapt to the receiving society. We have found that by creating, and in some cases transforming, social closure, FMM are able to reshape their group identity, and to reposition themselves within the social stratification, at least

within the parameters of their own minds, thereby coping with the discriminatory environment and unfavorable social hierarchy of Taiwanese society.

Various forms of social closure have here been identified as adaptation strategies. Exclusionary closure is the first type employed by most of the C-FMM, who generally refuse to be categorized along with their SEA counterparts. By rejecting the low social status assigned by the host society to the FMM social group, by continually asserting their belief in a “bloodline” and a cultural-linguistic tradition that they supposedly share with the Taiwanese, and by drawing a rigid line between “us” and “them” (the SEA-FMM), the C-FMM at least psychologically upgrade their social position within the stratification through their discourses and dealings with the others who comprise Taiwan’s society.

The C-FMMs’ differentiation of “us” and “them” often is supplemented by the opposite mode of usurpatory closure to help them cope with the hostility and mistreatment which are directed at them on a daily basis. In this second form of social closure, the C-FMM defend their status by putting down the culture of the native Taiwanese, implicitly trying to subvert the stratification. “Culture,” and the lack thereof, becomes for these women the factor which distinguishes “us Chinese-FMM,” who have less money but high culture, from “them”: Taiwanese who have money, but are vulgar.

Whereas most of the C-FMM in my study employ a dual technique of both exclusionary and usurpatory closure – on the one hand excluding the SEA-FMM from their social identifications, on the other hand challenging the validity of the current status-quo stratification in Taiwan – the SEA-FMM seem to have no interest in challenging, or more accurately feel they have no right to challenge, the social hierarchy. I have called this kind of social closure which the SEA-FMM employ “self-exclusionary,” for while as a group these women have no real quarrel with Taiwan’s hierarchical social order, as individuals many of them have made the implicit decision that social advancement is best achieved by strategically distancing themselves from their own social group (“those Southeast Asians”), doing that by demonstrating their unique morale, work ethic, personality, or social network. Ironically enough, most such distancing boils down to little more than socializing strictly with Taiwanese. The SEA-FMMs’ stance of self-exclusionary closure enables them to envision themselves as full-fledged members of the mainstream culture, even as they keep their psychological distance from other SEA-FMM by fully disassociating themselves from their group’s position of social inferiority.

Social groups employ closure to generate, maintain, or transform inequality, mobilizing power so as to defend a group’s share of resources, rewards, or opportunities. After having identified these various forms of social closure, this study has found that they yield very different meanings, both for the C-FMM and the SEA-FMM as groups and for various individual women. The common denominator, however, is that all of the FMM employ their unique forms of social closure as adaptation strategies helping them to cope with the hardships they encounter as female migrants striving to adapt to their host family and society.

I hope that the present study can be seen as providing an extension, however modest, to the theory of social closure. Traditionally social closure refers to the process by which a social group seeks to maximize its rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities. This study, however, views social closure not as a means to ensure monopolization but rather as a coping strategy, especially one that allows an individual to deal with a discriminatory environment s/he finds herself in. More specifically, social closure can be seen as a technique immigrants creatively use to transform their precarious status within the new society. In such cases, the closure itself is the rather intangible reward, one that provides these migrant women with at least a psychological sense of group membership, even if that sense often is gained by distancing themselves from other groups, other individuals within their own group, or both. The gaining of that sense, particularly when it is taken in tandem with “good motherhood,” seems to represent a vital first step on these’ women’s path to a full-fledged membership in the new society. Even if that particular step is being taken only by female marriage migrants, I would suggest that in the coming years, in our increasingly globalized world where many people at least feel themselves to have been socially excluded on the basis of race, gender, or social class, more psychological forms of social closure will be appearing and being analyzed by researchers.

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