

8 Politics of negotiation between Vietnamese wives and Taiwanese husbands

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Lan found her husband through a marriage broker in Ho Chi Minh City when she was 19 years old. As a dutiful Vietnamese daughter, one of her priorities in life was to help her natal parents. 'Although my husband and I were thirty four years apart, I did not mind too much,' she said. She added, 'My father works extremely hard but my family is still very poor. I really wanted to help my parents.'

When Lan first arrived in Taiwan, she could not speak Mandarin at all. 'I could not even say one word,' she said. After Lan gave birth to a baby girl in her first year of marriage, she did not want to have another child, but her husband asked her to give him a boy. Because Lan refused a second pregnancy, he suspected her of hiding a sexually transmitted disease that prevented her from having more children. Lan said, 'One night, my husband forced me to be examined in the hospital. He wanted to know if I had a sexually transmitted disease. Because I felt so embarrassed and I could not express myself, all I could do was to cry.' Lan's husband was unemployed at the time, and Lan had decided to work at a nearby seafood restaurant as a waitress to make some money. She complained that her husband controlled the money she made. She said, 'One day I asked my husband, "Why can't I keep the money I make?" I was paid on the twelfth of every month and I didn't want him to know how much I made every month. On pay day, I didn't even know how much I made but my husband already knew because he had information about my bank account and he could check it right away.'

When we interviewed Lan, she had been in Taiwan for six years but she had not dared to apply for her identification card because of her husband's insistence that she not apply. She (wrongly) assumed that the application for an identification card, just as in the case of the certification of permanent residency, required the husband's signature. Lan's husband used the identification card application to threaten her: 'He said that if I applied for my ID, he would find out immediately. He said that he could check and find out very quickly.' During this time, she told us that her husband abused her psychologically and physically with increasing frequency. After some time, Lan could no longer stand being abused by her husband, so she finally reported the domestic violence to the police and decided to seek a divorce.

'One day, I told him I wanted to divorce and he said, "I do not even beat you anymore and you still want to get divorced from me."' She replied, 'You think

saying sorry will make me forgive you? No way!' When Lan saw a social worker to discuss her intention to apply for a protection order, the social worker warned her that her husband could find out and beat her even more severely. Lan responded: 'I am not afraid of his violence. I am ready to file for a divorce.'

Lan's husband, A-fa, used to work on a commercial ship before he married Lan. He was the youngest and only unmarried child in his family. Six years ago, his father's health started to decline. To dispel his father's worry about his son's future, A-fa decided to find a wife through a marriage broker. Soon, he married a young beautiful woman from Vietnam: Lan. During the interview, A-fa narrated how he found his new wife. He was quite excited about how many choices had been available to him and he was quite satisfied with his choice. But, soon after they married, he and his wife began to experience problems. Not only did his wife report his abuse to the police, but she also decided to leave him with their son and daughter.

Throughout our study, A-fa was unemployed. He complained about Lan's financial and social problems. He mentioned that Lan devoted herself to work outside the home at the expense of taking care of his family and their children. A-fa said, 'Lan borrowed money from everywhere and sent it back to Vietnam. She even gambled; no wonder she had a large debt!' When the creditors came to the door, A-fa had no choice but to pay her debt back.

According to A-fa, Lan insisted on working outside the home and often told him that she had to work overtime. A-fa told us that he checked with her boss and found out that she did not work overtime at all. Instead, A-fa believed that she secretly dated other men at night. When they had an argument, Lan would run away from him. A-fa complained that Lan did not act like a mother.

After leaving A-fa, Lan often visited her children at their kindergarten classroom. She even told the school principal that she wanted to reunite with her husband. The school principal passed her message to A-fa, but he had already made up his mind that he did not want her back. When we asked A-fa what would happen if Lan really wanted to come back, he replied, 'If she ever comes back, my life will become more miserable! I will kill myself in front of her and I am serious!' He believed that divorcing Lan and marrying another woman was the only solution. He also insisted that Lan be immediately deported to Vietnam after the divorce, because he feared that she might take their children from him without his permission were she to remain in Taiwan.

When talking about the fact that Lan reported him to the police, A-fa said, 'I just yelled at her and I did not hit her. She must have said I would kill her.' Regarding Lan's concern over his drinking problem and his impulsive and aggressive personality that made him lose his job, he said, 'I don't use any drugs and I just drink a little bit from time to time.' When talking about Lan's desire to apply for an identification card, he said 'If I had let her get the ID card, she would have run away.'

Lan and A-fa's story captures in a nutshell the experiences of cross-border marriages we analyse in this chapter. Like most of the Vietnamese spouses we interviewed for our study, Lan came from a rural family that was relatively poor. Following the steps of many other young women from her community, she

eventually married internationally to a Taiwanese husband. In rural Vietnam, international marriages are perceptually associated with hopes of social and economic mobility, and marriage brokers aggressively recruit eager women to enter these marriages. Lan never imagined that she might face marriage failure. To have separated from her husband made her feel ashamed for disappointing her parents. Lan's expectations were similar to those of other women in her position: because she was chosen from many candidates for marriage, she felt confident that she had a happy future waiting for her in Taiwan. Enthusiastic accounts by already married Vietnamese women living in Taiwan who were on holiday also contributed to Lan's romantic vision of her future marriage to a Taiwanese man.

Similarly, A-fa's story illustrates the situation of many Taiwanese men who enter international marriages. For him, the ability to pick his own Vietnamese bride held two important meanings. First, it compensated for his weak marriage prospects in Taiwan as a result of his socioeconomic disadvantage. Second, it allowed him to affirm and secure his masculinity. When choosing a future wife from hundreds of young girls, he listened to the marriage broker's advice: 'the poorer the family, the more docile the girl'. At the time, A-fa strongly believed that he had found the 'perfect woman' who would give him a happy life. He never expected that his 'perfect girl-like woman' would one day become a strong and determined woman who would want to work and earn her own income.

The accounts related by Lan and A-fa illustrate a key finding of this chapter, namely that conflicts arise among some Taiwanese-Vietnamese couples because of mismatched expectations of a married woman's role in family and society. In both cases, these expectations existed prior to marriage. These diverging visions come from culturally and socially constructed expectations of the roles a daughter-in-law, wife and mother should play in a household, towards their natal family and in society. The Vietnamese wives we interviewed were primarily constructed by their Taiwanese in-laws and husband as a 'wife', 'mother' and 'daughter-in-law', and thus were expected to stay at home, raise their children, perform domestic work and provide care to all family members, including the elderly and other family members' children. In contrast, Vietnamese women migrated to Taiwan with the expectation of quickly finding work outside the home in order to help support their family in Taiwan, and their parents and other relatives in Vietnam. Our interview data document how these conflicts are far from strictly being located in the conjugal relationship but often also involve the husband's family members, such as his mother, father, siblings and in-laws. In addition to women's desire to work outside the home and send money to family in Vietnam, conflict also arose because of men's substance abuse (alcohol and drugs) and men's frustration with their precarious employment status.

In this chapter, we explore the cases of cross-border marriages in which family conflict involved domestic violence perpetrated by the husband and/or the mother-in-law and other family members. Our analysis shows that conflict emerged primarily because of diverging visions of gender role expectations that existed prior to the marriage. The high number of cross-border marriages between Taiwanese men and foreign women has had a significant impact on Taiwanese families and

society. Studies have highlighted women's vulnerable position in their new families, due to imbalance in power relations and poor legal protection and limited rights (Wang & Bélanger 2008). Alongside these results, women's agency and resourcefulness also emerged from research examining immigrant spouses' lives and experiences in Taiwan (Wang 2007).

Vietnamese-Taiwanese cross-border marriages

Since the 1990s, large numbers of female marriage migrants have come from Vietnam to Taiwan. At the end of 2008, an estimated 100,000 Vietnamese women had married a Taiwanese man and migrated to Taiwan. A common explanation why some men seek overseas brides is that their disadvantaged socioeconomic status lowers their desirability in the domestic marriage market (Wang & Chang 2002). Some men who marry Vietnamese women look for a submissive wife in a marriage that will allow them to express their Taiwanese masculinity. These men thus believe that a cross-border marriage with a non-Taiwanese wife will provide them with a relationship in which they will have power and supremacy (Tien & Wang 2006).

The patriarchal Taiwanese family system puts emphasis on the parent-son relationship instead of the husband-wife relationship. Married women in this gender culture system play the triple roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law. They are expected to be obedient and deferential in all family relations. According to Baker (1979: 42), in Chinese culture, there are three great events in a man's life – specifically birth, death and marriage – but only one important event for a woman: her wedding. A woman who marries a man in this culture essentially marries into his family. One of her first responsibilities is to learn how to serve her parents-in-law, a part of the Chinese tradition of filial piety (Wolf 1972). It is commonly believed that once a daughter is married she becomes 'poured out water' because she cannot give anything back to her natal family. Her natal family is expected not to interfere with her new family's affairs. In this context, a newly wed woman in Taiwan needs to learn how to negotiate with multiple and complicated patriarchal family relations.

Although this Taiwanese family system is not completely inflexible, few married women can actually escape its patriarchal norms. Currently, daughters-in-law have two ways of coping with this system: either resignation or hopeless resistance. Women who do not accept their subordinate status might fight, but they have very few options (Li 1999). Divorce is one option, but many women fear losing contact with their children. When Vietnamese women come to Taiwan, they are expected to follow the norms deeply rooted in this patriarchal system. Because they come from a different gender culture, some unknowingly challenge this system in their daily life and impede its reproduction.

There is one common explanation why Vietnamese women marry internationally: global hypergamy (i.e. people from poor Third World countries who wish to marry up the socioeconomic ladder – to marry richer people in the First World countries). However, as Constable (2005) argues, this explanation raises

questions more than it truly addresses them. Female cross-border marriage migration is the outcome of mixed motivations embedded in very different social structures, which are not reducible to economic factors only. Vietnamese spouses often say, 'I want to work in Taiwan and send money to my parents.' Their intention should be understood in the social and cultural contexts of Vietnamese culture.

Vietnamese kinship differs from the prescribed Confucian structure. This alternative model defines the *ho* in broad terms to include bilateral and distant kin, and is in general less rigid and male-dominated than the Confucian model. For example, in contrast to what one might expect given the official Confucian ideology, in reality Vietnamese women still maintain connections with their natal *ho* after marriage, and participate in its rituals and activities (Kibria 1993: 44). The complexity and diversity of kinship traditions in Vietnam have sometimes been taken as evidence of the relative equality of men and women in traditional Vietnamese society. It is true that the position of women in Vietnam has a somewhat distinctive cast, particularly since Vietnamese women clearly have more options and resources than Chinese women, a group to whom they are often compared (Kibria 1993: 45). Historically, the legal rights of Vietnamese women to a share of the paternal inheritance (unlike in China) perhaps strengthened the bonds and influence of women with their families of origin after marriage (Kibria 1993: 48).

The lesser influence of Confucian beliefs in the south meant that the status and activities of women in that region were less rigid and asymmetrical than in the north (Bélanger & Barbieri 2009). With respect to the kinship system, the south of Vietnam is characterized by a bilateral kinship system that values both maternal and paternal sides. Daughters inherit from parents (although females generally receive less than sons) and a large proportion of young married couples move in with the woman's parents after marriage. It is expected that married daughters will help their parents if it is in their capacity.

Also, for the poorer social strata in Vietnam, the ability to put Confucian ideals into practice was limited by economic circumstances. The behaviour of our female informants – mostly from the lower classes of southern Vietnamese society – deviates from the ideal Chinese Confucian model of a good woman. Women's involvement in trade and business was common in the past¹ and continues to be in the present. Vietnamese women are considered to be good at business, and a significant portion of small trade throughout Vietnam is run by women. A married woman who earns an income outside the household is usually praised by her in-laws. The female labour participation rate is 73 per cent, much higher than the corresponding Taiwanese rate of 49.4 per cent (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting & Statistics, Executive Yuan 2008). Given the norm of married women's employment in Vietnam, it is not surprising that Vietnamese women want to go to work as soon as they come to Taiwan. Rural Vietnamese women normally carry out seasonal work or sell agricultural products in local markets. Their income is an important part of their family income, though culturally regarded as supplementary compared to husband's income (Kibria 1993: 57–9). Such a working culture is brought to Taiwan by these female immigrants and, compared

to other immigrant females from other countries, we notice that there are many Vietnamese restaurants opened by these immigrants all over Taiwan.

According to Taiwanese custom, it is appropriate for unmarried daughters to work and send money home to help their natal families, but remittance is considered unacceptable after marriage, unless a mutual understanding is reached before marriage. Some women save money secretly and remit money stealthily. This can cause serious disputes if the husband's family finds out. These conflicts are exacerbated in transnational families where the husband and his family and the Vietnamese wife have different expectations of how to dispose of income earned by the wife and whether or not a married woman with children should work. Work is the only way to earn money to send to her natal family without her husband's interference, but these Vietnamese women often face a language barrier. Most of them are not ethnic Chinese and typically cannot speak either Mandarin or Hokkien, the two most commonly spoken languages in Taiwan. While the majority speak basic Taiwanese after one year, most of them are pregnant by then. After they have a baby, they are expected by the husband's family to look after their child at home. Even if they can find a job, the monthly income is normally less than NT\$20,000 (US\$600). Because full-time daycare costs around NT\$15,000 (US\$450), the returns on the woman's work are too low to make it worthwhile, at least from the in-laws' and husband's perspectives. Besides, many Vietnamese women live with their in-laws and are expected to look after sick elderly family members and perform domestic work. With this amount of work at home, it is very difficult to get a job outside the family.

Despite these obstacles, we will argue that getting a job is the most important strategy for women to negotiate their self-perceived gendered role in their new families. It is also a way to escape from domestic violence and build non-kin connections. Using interview data, we shed light on how Vietnamese women married in Taiwan negotiate their position within the traditional Taiwanese family, and how, in some cases, they ultimately manage to escape its patriarchal grasp.

Methodology

The analysis in this chapter comes from interviews with 18 Vietnamese abused wives and 4 husbands. Some interviews were conducted in interviewees' homes but most in the Prevention Center for Domestic Violence of a local city government in Taiwan, where abused women – Taiwanese and foreign – seek counselling and, in some cases, a protection order.² We also interviewed four men who were married to Vietnamese women. In two cases, we interviewed their wives as well. In the other two cases, we could not because one was back in Vietnam and the other one had run away from home and even her husband could not find her. We conducted the in-depth interviews between May and November 2008 and January to June 2009, having obtained permission from the head of the centre. In addition to in-depth interviews, we also used participant observation methods, entailing observation of the work of social workers at the centre or other places. In some

cases, we simply observed and recorded the interviews between the social workers and the women, while, in other cases, we also interviewed the victim ourselves. Interviews typically lasted between 90 minutes and two hours, although some lasted nearly three hours.

The average age of our informants was 25 years old, with the oldest being 33 and the youngest 22. At the time of the interviews, the average number of years they had been living in Taiwan was 5.3, with the longest being 10 years, and the shortest 2. Of the 15 Vietnamese migrant women interviewed, only two of them had a Taiwanese identity card and only one held a permanent residency card.³ Four of them were in the process of applying for their identity card and one was waiting for her identity card to be issued by the government. Six of them had no idea about the importance of and rights attached to having an identity card, and also knew nothing about the application process involved in getting such a card.

All the informants lived with in-laws except for one. Eight of them not only lived with parents-in-law but also with other family members (e.g. sister-in-law or brother-in-law and their children). All interviewees had a relative or friend who had married a Taiwanese man either before or after the interviewees' own cross-border marriage. Fourteen women met their husbands through marriage brokers and one was introduced to her husband by her sister's Taiwanese husband. Of the 16 interviewees, 9 had either one son or one son and one daughter, and 6 had one or two daughters. Only one informant was childless because her husband, 34 years her senior, did not want any children. This woman had been pregnant once, but when her husband found out, he forced her to have an abortion against her will.

All of our female interviewees faced psychological or physical abuse at home. The abusers included the husband, mother-in-law, sister- or brother-in-law, or the husband's children from a previous marriage. Five of the women's husbands were unemployed, while six other women's husbands had an unstable income. Seven women declared that their husbands had a serious drinking problem while one other said that her husband had a drug addiction.

All interviews were audio- or videotaped with the consent of the interviewees. The researchers ensured the interviewees both anonymity and confidentiality. Because the interviewees believed that social workers and researchers could help them, they were very willing to talk about their life experiences and stories.

It is very important to stress that not all migrant Vietnamese wives in Taiwan experience intense family conflict and/or domestic violence. According to Wang (2001), at least 90 per cent of Vietnamese wives who married Taiwanese men were satisfied with their marriage. Our focus on conflict does not mean that all Vietnamese-Taiwanese marriages are problematic. Some scholars point out that because many Vietnamese women married Taiwanese men through marriage brokers, they are at a higher risk of being trafficked. Because most marriage brokers are profit-driven, they may deceive both grooms and brides (Yeh 2006). But, among our interviewees, most wives decided by themselves to come to Taiwan. Some even made the decision without telling their parents, and thus expressed agency in the decision-making process that led to their marriage.

In Taiwan, there is a common perception that Vietnamese women use interna-

tional marriage solely as a tool to improve their family's poor economic situation. We argue that this perception is largely an interpretation from the dominant class and ethnic ideology that fails to capture the complexity of women's motives and life experiences. It is true that, among our interviewees, women wanted to help their parents and improve the livelihood of their family by marrying and migrating internationally. Nevertheless, we believe that the experiences of Vietnamese women are embedded in both Vietnamese and Taiwanese societal and cultural backgrounds, and cannot be reduced to solely economic considerations. If we ignore how these two countries' cultural and societal backgrounds are intertwined in the context of marriage, we cannot fully understand Vietnamese women's thought processes and behaviour in Taiwan.

Daily life in a Taiwanese patriarchal family

We begin our analysis with the main themes that emerged from women's and men's descriptions of the circumstances that led to conflict in their families. We elaborate on women's daily experiences in families, and discuss the expectations placed upon them by their husbands and in-laws.

Foreign wife or domestic worker?

Although A-luan got pregnant soon after she arrived in Taiwan, her Taiwanese family expected her to carry out all domestic work and also to look after her ill father-in-law. In the first year of her marriage, her husband and mother-in-law abused her physically. Once, during a fight with her husband's family about her workload and the family's unreasonable expectations concerning her role in the household, she asked her brother-in-law to act as a mediator. When he came and argued with the mother-in-law, he teased her and said 'My dear mother-in-law, did you find a daughter-in-law, or did you hire a foreign domestic worker?' The mother-in-law replied calmly, 'Both.' The mother-in-law's reply vividly portrays the various roles immigrant wives are expected to perform in many Taiwanese families.

Very much like A-luan, A-chuang married a man co-residing with many of his family members. She lived with a family of ten: her husband, parents-in-law, and sisters- and brothers-in-law. A-chuang had to perform all the domestic chores for all of them. Once she told her sister-in-law, 'I can wash your blouse, but can you wash your own underwear?' Her request was dismissed and the whole family, including her husband, commented that she was lazy and unworthy. Everyone took it for granted that A-chuang was responsible for all the household chores.

In addition to heavy domestic chores, child rearing is another challenge faced by young migrant wives. On average, Vietnamese women become pregnant within six months of their arrival in Taiwan. According to a sample survey by Wang (2001), 73 per cent of migrant wives reported holding sole responsibility for child care, while only 9 per cent declared that child-rearing tasks were shared with their husband. Nhan complained, 'When the baby cries, he begins to blame

me for failing to do the job properly. He scolds and beats me.' Another interviewee and her baby were forced from the couple's bedroom by her husband, who made them sleep at the corner of the stairs. The husband simply said, 'You and the baby are too noisy.' Ayu related a similar experience: 'I just arrived in Taiwan. I am not even 20 years old and I have no experience taking care of a child and no one even helps me out. When the child cries, I don't know what to do. I am so tired and my husband does not help me at all and he even hits me!' Aling was in a similar situation. She complained that no one in the family, including her husband, helped her out after she gave birth to her baby. Once her husband did not come back home for two nights. At that time, she was hungry and exhausted, and she did not know how to comfort her crying baby. When Aling went out looking for her husband, she found him in a video arcade where they started an argument. As soon as they got home, her husband beat her.

Mothers and son-bearers

The stories described in the previous section illustrate what some families expect of newly arrived immigrant spouses. In addition to performing domestic work and having children, they are expected to produce a son to continue the patrilineal family line. The desire for a male child causes tension in family relations. A-luan bore two daughters after she got married. In an attempt to have a son, her husband and mother-in-law worshipped God every day. They forced her to drink water with burned paper money or take traditional medicine that was supposed to help her produce a boy. A-luan became frightened by all the pressure. Once, she got into a serious quarrel and physical fight with her mother-in-law over these issues. She then fled to her sister (who had also married a Taiwanese man). A-luan then found a decent job in a restaurant, but she was concerned about her two daughters. She knew that her mother-in-law would do everything to ensure a divorce for her son and to send A-luan back to Vietnam. A-luan wanted to divorce her husband, but also wanted to stay in Taiwan with her daughters. In her opinion, Taiwan could offer her better employment opportunities than Vietnam.

Intergenerational power relations between wives and mothers-in-law

A-luan met her husband through her Taiwanese brother-in-law (her sister's husband), but was not as lucky as her sister. A-luan stated that the most significant difference between her and her sister's lives in Taiwan was freedom of mobility. She said, 'My sister's husband is not rich, but they are happy to be together. She has a lot of freedom and can go wherever she likes. Her husband does not control her. My life is different. After my marriage, I had to stay at home to take care of my sick father-in-law. My mother-in-law demanded that I cook and clean the house, and she did not allow me to go out. She also stopped me from seeing my friends. She did not like my Vietnamese friends. I just stayed home and washed dishes.' At one time, A-luan went to the night market with her two children and forgot to take her watch. By the time she got home, it was very late. Her mother-in-law

opened the door only to let in her grandchildren. A-luan was locked outside for the night. Her brother-in-law, who accompanied A-luan to the Domestic Violence Prevention Center, said 'The neighbour suggested to her to kneel down outside the door to beg forgiveness, but even after two hours of kneeling down, she was not allowed to come in. That's pathetic, too pathetic.'

A-luan could no longer stand being abused by her mother-in-law, so she fled to her brother-in-law's place. A-luan's mother-in-law tried very hard to convince her son to divorce A-luan. She even called A-luan's brother-in-law and asked him to convince A-luan to return to Vietnam. During one phone call with A-luan, her mother-in-law said, 'Your husband and kids neither love you nor miss you. Just get divorced from him. I will give you some money and you can go back to Vietnam. OK? I will ask him to file for a divorce. If you don't agree, we will sue you.'

Many Vietnamese migrant spouses said that when their husbands hit them, other family members simply watched. In some cases, other family members joined in the husband's abuse. One interviewee, Asian, told us: 'When my husband hit me, my mother-in-law would stand beside and say, "Yes, hit her to death!"' Another interviewee said, 'When my husband was mad at me, he would not even communicate with me. Instead, he would talk to his mom first and then she would scold me. Sometimes, my husband said to me, "Now that you are married to me, you are part of my family. You should listen to my mom. Stop thinking about sending money to your parents."'

Some women we interviewed were not abused by their husband but exclusively by other family members. For example, A-chuang's husband has a much older sister who is still single and living at home. A-chuang said, 'My sister-in-law is very fat and lazy. She stays at home and does not do anything. She asked me to do everything. She would not allow me to sleep in. She would wake me up at 6 am and ask me to make breakfast. At that time, my husband was still working in Taipei and he would return home only for the weekend. She would hit me, hold my hair and push me against the fridge and then tell me to leave the house. I said to her that I was my husband's wife and not her servant. Neighbours witnessed this incident and said I should report it to the police, but I was afraid of embarrassing my mother-in-law, so I did not pursue it.'

Under a patriarchal family system, all the members in the husband's family hold the same expectations of the new wife who it is assumed will be a hard-working and docile daughter-in-law. However, from the Vietnamese migrant spouse's point of view, the endless demands of her husband's family, and their disrespectful and prejudiced attitudes towards her, gradually made her life miserable. One interviewee said, 'When I am home, even my husband's children from his ex-wife are nasty to me.' She summed up her situation with the comment that 'everyone in the family treats me badly'.

Control and surveillance

Vietnamese migrant spouses gradually adapt to Taiwan's social environment as years go by. Not only do they improve their language proficiency, but they also

expand their social network. The labour force participation of these interviewed women often triggers a perception of a very negative change in their behaviour in the eyes of their Taiwanese family. From the perspective of the husband's family, the foreign wife is in a position where she is at risk of misbehaviour. The husband's family cannot accept and tolerate the fact that the Vietnamese wife can claim her own rights or challenge family members. For example, A-xian's mother-in-law once said to her, 'When you first arrived, you did everything . . . why did you stop?' The migrant spouses' behavioural changes are often seen as 'deviant' by their husband's families.

There are many reasons why husbands are opposed to their wives' desire to work outside the home. Some think that their wives should stay home and work strictly for the family within the household, while others believe that the wives are obsessed with money and want only to send money home to Vietnam. Their desire to be financially independent is seen as a 'problem' by their husbands and families. Once women have an independent income, it becomes harder for other family members to control them. The potential danger that they might have an affair with another man at work also serves as a source of embarrassment for their husband. Real or imagined infidelity may lead to more severe restrictions being placed on them, and may trigger or aggravate existing domestic violence.

The commonly large age difference between foreign brides and Taiwanese husbands often makes the husbands feel insecure. There is a belief that Taiwanese men, through marriage brokers' dating services, have taken all the beautiful Vietnamese women in Ho Chi Minh City. The men fear that their young, beautiful wives may run away from them. To prevent this from happening, Taiwanese husbands seek to maintain the power balance of their marital relationship (in which they hold the upper hand). Their friends often tease them, saying things like 'Be careful, if the wife you bought runs away, you will be a big loser!'

Some family members suspect Vietnamese migrant spouses who want to work outside the home of having affairs with other men. The family members try their best to discourage the migrant spouse from working outside the home. For example, Mei-zen works 15 hours per day. She starts her day by selling breakfast from 5 to 9.30 am. She goes home to nap and then goes to her second job in a clothing store and works there until 1 pm. Then, she works in a noodle restaurant until the evening. If the restaurant is not too busy in the afternoons, she cleans houses for another two hours. Mei-zen's husband's family accepted the fact that she was a working wife until the third year of the marriage, at which time her husband began to suspect that she was having an affair. Her mother-in-law also believed that Mei-zen was not faithful to her husband and she would tell her son that some strange men called his wife at home. Her husband also checked Mei-zen's cell phone to see if any men sent her voice or text messages. This type of suspicion and surveillance is an experience shared by many Vietnamese migrant spouses. For example, A-xian said 'I don't understand why my husband assumes that I have a boyfriend. When I return from work, he always checks my cell phone and is convinced that someone has sent text messages to me. When he shows them to other people,

everyone says they are just advertisements, but he insists that my boyfriend sent messages to me. I said to him, 'I can't even read Chinese!'

A-minh is 19 years old and her husband is 37 years older than her. This is the second marriage for A-minh's husband, so he has sons and grandchildren living at home already. He does not want to have any more children. As A-minh was expected to stay home all day, she eventually became very bored with her life. Her husband did not want her to work outside the home, but A-minh constantly begged him to allow her to get a job. Finally, he found her work in a nearby salon. After a few months of employment, A-minh's husband started to suspect her of infidelity. Once, he saw her washing a male customer's hair and used this as an excuse to batter her. Because of his interference with her work, she kept changing jobs. To earn more money, she often worked overtime. On such occasions, A-minh's late-night return deepened her husband's doubts about her fidelity. Their marriage went from bad to worse; A-minh's husband abused her even more severely and she eventually ran away. In the end, her husband filed for divorce and, during our study, A-minh was sent back to Vietnam.

A-yu has a similar story. She and her husband often disagreed about whether she should be employed outside the home. Her husband wanted her to be a full-time stay-at-home mother, but she desperately wanted a job. Because of their ongoing disagreement, A-yu's husband often battered her. When we asked her what made her husband unhappy, she said, 'He thinks I am doing some kind of erotic massage.' In fact, A-yu was working in a small food shop and she said, 'I just deliver some food to the Vietnamese-run massage studio. I am totally innocent! No matter how I explain, he does not believe me. I cannot communicate with him anymore.' A-yu decided to leave her husband and stayed with a female Vietnamese colleague at work. A-yu is more fortunate than A-minh, as the former has her Taiwanese ID card, and thus will not be sent back to Vietnam despite being divorced from her Taiwanese husband.

Meanings of gender cultures as terrain for conflict

The preceding stories describe the circumstances of family life that led to conflict, domestic violence and marriage break-up. In this section, we continue our analysis by exploring how cross-border marriages can be fertile ground for disagreement over understandings of the role of women in families and society. Specifically, we discuss different perceptions with respect to foreign wives' 'place' and 'duties'. The core source of conflict here is the woman's determination to work outside the home versus her new family's conviction that her life should be confined to the domestic space. We explore the divergent meanings of married women's paid work in the labour market.

Work as duty for whom?

Work pays off, but for whom? If a wife works and earns money for her husband's family, it is highly praised by Taiwanese society. But if she works for herself and

her Vietnamese natal family, she risks being stigmatized as a 'money girl' as it is not considered her duty to take care of her natal family.

Taiwanese husbands expect their wives to work in two areas: domestic work to take care of family members or to earn money for the husband's family. A-fa says that he is not against his wife working outside, but she has to prioritize taking care of his family members. Another informant complained that in spite of his own family's unfavourable economic situation, his wife always remits what she earns to Vietnam without putting resources into his family. The wife is expected to take on the duty of caring for her new family, not her natal family.

But, for Vietnamese wives, our study and other research indicate that they view helping their natal family in Vietnam as a daughter's duty. Before their marriage, they had known friends or relatives who had married Taiwanese men and successfully supported their natal parents. For example, A-luan's sister, who got married a few years before her, was economically independent thanks to her job. A-luan often expressed frustration at their different outcomes, wondering why she could not have the same life as her sister's in Taiwan. A-luan felt that she had failed because she could not send money to her parents in Vietnam.

Despite the cases reported, research shows that most Vietnamese migrant spouses manage to send remittances back home to help their family (Bélanger & Tran 2008). People in their home village in Vietnam take pride in what the women from their community have accomplished. For example, after A-xian got married in Taiwan, she helped her sister find a job in Taiwan. The sisters paid off their parents' debt, and also helped them build a house and start their own business. The parents' standard of living was significantly improved. In their parents' eyes, they are seen as good daughters who fulfilled their filial duty. For Vietnamese immigrants, they have been socialized in Vietnam to identify with their mothers' role. Many interviewees described their mothers as hard-working women and said that they would emulate the example their mothers set in order to escape poverty. Such a socialization process is different from Taiwanese women whose mothers were mostly housewives, and the ideal image of a woman might be one who stays at home to take care of the family. It is obvious that Vietnamese immigrants and Taiwanese family members hold divergent views about married women and employment.

Young women's strong sense of indebtedness towards their parents is widespread and well documented in Vietnam and other parts of Confucian Asia (Croll 2000). Among young rural women who migrate to urban areas of Vietnam to work in factories, a leading motivating factor is the desire to help their parents financially (Bélanger & Pendakis 2010). In addition to contributing to their parents' livelihood, women in Vietnam are expected to work to provide for their own husband and children. Work and motherhood are not constructed as mutually exclusive (Bélanger & Oudin 2007). Working mothers are encouraged and supported by their family and relatives to facilitate balancing family and work. Young Vietnamese women who migrate to Taiwan as wives carry with them these internalized notions of a married woman's duties.

Work as emancipation or deviance?

A-minh said, 'I am very happy when I work at the store. I told my husband that my boss treats me well and customers like to chat with me too. When I stay home, I cannot make money and I always feel lonely and bored.' Although A-minh's intention behind working outside the home was to alleviate loneliness, she also mentioned that having no personal income puts her in a difficult position. Once her husband scolded her just because she bought a beverage to quench her thirst.

A-jia's case illustrates how work can be self-empowering for migrant spouses. She had also been a victim of domestic violence for years, but when we interviewed her she was working and renting her own place. She said, 'I got used to being abused and I even stopped complaining, but my husband seemed to get worse. He even beat me when my mom was visiting from Vietnam.' Later she found out that 'beating one's wife is quite common, but I know it's not acceptable here because the police will intervene. My female boss told me this and she told me I could go to the police and report him!'

Throughout the adaptation process, migrant wives often become more assertive and aware about their rights in Taiwan. We can see their self-assertiveness developing through their participation in the labour force. Their improved language proficiency also allows them to expand their social network. Having control over their income source also boosts their confidence level. Some of them are no longer trapped in an unpleasant married life. Because they become increasingly familiar with Taiwan's social environment, they are able to seek alternative ways of obtaining assistance. The enforcement of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act in Taiwan also has a positive effect on their lives. Over time, Vietnamese migrant spouses reveal their unique self-empowerment process. Their Taiwanese counterparts, on the other hand, may have to readjust their position in the relationship. For men and their family, simply imposing traditional control mechanisms over their Vietnamese spouse becomes problematic in the long run.

The desire to work outside the home is a dangerous deviant behaviour from the husband's perspective. A working Vietnamese woman could be corrupted by bad company outside the family, and she could easily be lured to work in the prostitution industry. A man regretted allowing his wife to work outside because it resulted in divorce. He said 'I gave her too much freedom, and then she changed. She dressed herself up beautifully and gradually began to come home late. She started to gamble, to have affairs, and no longer cared about family.' For husbands and their families, taking on a foreign wife came with the firm expectation that this woman would belong to the family and would deploy all her energy and time towards her roles as wife, mother and daughter-in-law. Accordingly, paid work outside the home involving interactions with strangers and non-kin is considered dangerous, representing a social space where women can become spoiled or where they engage in delinquent activities.

In our study, women's decisions to work despite family opposition were interpreted by Taiwanese families as proof of the migrant spouse's lack of faithfulness, integrity and devotion towards her husband and her family. Women's defiance in the face of family opposition was taken by family members as evidence that

the women are trying to hide something. As a result of this suspicion, processes of surveillance are put in place to uncover a wife's intention to 'escape' from the household. Due to this tension, many women do, in fact, begin to hide information from as well as lie to their family for fear of being forbidden to leave the house altogether. They fear that their husband or mother-in-law will appear at the workplace and reprimand them for their unacceptable behaviour. Because of the restrictions placed on the women in their desire to work for money, some women resort to secret jobs in the illegal sector. If discovered by their families, such activity further exacerbates the perception of the migrant spouse's deviance.

Some Taiwanese husbands and their families expected that, once married, the foreign wife would not owe anything to her natal family, and thus saw the woman's desire to work to send money home as unacceptable and unjustified. Many Taiwanese men mentioned the cultural differences between Taiwan and Vietnam as the source of conflict, and one said 'I did not know Vietnam is a matrilineal society. Their customs are different from ours. Their women are very strong, work outside to make money, and men are lazy without work. But we Taiwanese are different. Our men work, and women take care of family. I did not know this until I married her. I would say that if they marry Taiwanese, they should follow Taiwanese norms.' Another Taiwanese blames battered Vietnamese women for not performing their gender role well because 'If this female has done nothing wrong, why did her husband batter her?'

Contrary to marriages involving a Taiwanese wife, the Vietnamese wife's natal family is far away and often unknown to the husband's family. This construction of the foreign wife as an individual disconnected from her own family reinforces the Taiwanese family members' sentiment that they have ownership and rights over the woman. These expectations are heightened in the case of Vietnamese women, as this group is assumed to be docile and traditional daughters-in-law that represent a source of domestic labour and that their 'youthful innocence' requires an external locus of control.

Suspicion and lack of trust towards foreign wives also pervade Taiwanese society. Because international marriages are seen as occurring between a foreign woman and a Taiwanese family rather than between two families, the wife's origins and past are thought to be highly suspect. Husbands and families live in fear of having chosen a wife who is using the husband's family as a way to migrate to and work in Taiwan. Given these a priori assumptions, migrant spouses' desire to work outside the home serves to fuel negative views of the women and can contribute to increasingly abusive treatment of them within their new family.

A foreign wife's work outside the home is also considered deviant because it represents a threat to their husband's masculinity. Women's husbands believe that it is the man's responsibility to work outside to support their family. When a woman begins earning money, she is challenging her husband. In our study, threat to the male identity because of their wives' work was particularly acute for families in which the husband was unemployed.

Conclusion

Our research finds that, in families where conflict and violence erupted, the Taiwanese husband and his family's expectations were not met. Because the foreign wives wanted to work and gain independence, including financial autonomy, they were perceived as defying basic gender role expectations. From the interviews analysed in this chapter, we learned that many Taiwanese husbands resent their wives' unavailability to take care of the children because of their job, and they worry about their wives' potential infidelity due to the expansion of their social network. In contrast, Vietnamese wives find their marriage unsatisfying for various reasons, including insufficient access to income, their husband's employment and drinking problems, as well as their psychological and physical abuse. The accumulation of these problems tends to exacerbate a difficult marital relationship. Where such conflicting expectations and growing troubles exist, Vietnamese wives often run away from their husbands, whereas Taiwanese husbands prefer to file for divorce.

Notes

- 1 According to historical records, Vietnamese women have the tradition of conducting business outside the community. For instance, historical records indicate that, in the seventeenth century, there were many women riding horses to do business (Owen & Chandler 2005: 106–16).
- 2 Domestic Violence Prevention, as a result of the women's movement in Taiwan, was legalized in 1998. According to its second article, domestic violence refers to any act of exercising any infringement, mentally or physically, among family members. Psychological abuse which also violates this law is often considered a controversial issue in our study. During our interview, the Vietnamese migrant spouses often accuse their husbands of domestic violence simply because they talk louder than usual. Whether they are granted the protection order depends on the judges' verdict. According to the eighth article, the local government shall: (1) create a 24-hour hotline; (2) offer a 24-hour emergency rescue, medical care, acquisition of a certificate of diagnosis and emergency relocation; (3) offer referral for psychological, economic and legal support, and provide education service, housing support/services to the victims of domestic violence as well as gradual, supportive, and vocational training and employment services for such victims; (4) provide short-, medium- and long-term shelters to the victim and minors. According to the tenth article, an application for a protection order may be filed with the court by a victim. The migrant spouse is allowed to stay in Taiwan after obtaining the protection order, whereas her husband cannot request a divorce or deportation of his wife to Vietnam if she chooses not to live with him. Moreover, this study also finds cases where both parties accuse each other of domestic violence. For many Taiwanese husbands, they find it unacceptable that their spouses often use domestic violence as an excuse to leave home or a reason for having an affair. When both parties have verbal arguments or when disagreement involves physical violence, the husband's family would rely on this law to apply for a protection order and then request a divorce and deportation of his wife.
- 3 Vietnamese wives are required to renew their resident permit annually during their first three years in Taiwan. The application needs the husband's signature. After three years of stay, however, they can apply for an identification card on their own, without their husbands' permission. Once an immigrant woman has her ID card, she has the legal right to permanent residency in Taiwan, even if she divorces her Taiwanese husband.

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