

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Gender and Power Dynamics in Transnational Marriage Brokerage: The Ban on Commercial Matchmaking in Taiwan Reconsidered**

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#### **Abstract**

Taiwan attracted a considerable number of marriage migrants from Southeast Asia and China through brokers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. With widely circulated, sensational news stories about foreign spouses being abused and advertisements of foreign brides as objects for sale, women involved in the business were gradually seen by the public as victims of transnational marriage brokerage. Under pressure from some women's groups in Taiwan and the anti-trafficking campaign in the international community, the Taiwanese government eventually banned transnational commercial matchmaking in 2008. This article examines the gender politics behind the ban by reviewing the debate over this policy. It also provides an ethnographic study of women's power relationships with other parties involved in the marriage business. By exposing the market and cultural logic that made this business blossom, this article challenges the binaries of perpetrator/victim and exploitation/freedom in the dominant representations of the transnational marriage market. It calls for a transnational and transclass perspective to understand these women's "active submission" to the market and concludes that, without this consideration, the enforcement of the 2008 ban ends up serving only to save the international reputation of the host country and fulfill the liberal middle-class imaginary of moral order of the host society, rather than solving women's problems per se.

Keywords: marriage brokerage, transnational migration, women's agency, Taiwan, Vietnam

#### **Introduction**

After the government of Taiwan opened up foreign investment and labor importation from Southeast Asia in the late 1980s, Taiwan started to establish close economic relationships with China and certain Southeast Asian countries. In tandem with the circulation of capital came the flow of marriage migration from these countries, as women sought a better life through marriage to Taiwanese men. In 2003, the rate of transnational marriage in Taiwan hit a historic high, with almost one out of three marriages involving a foreign spouse, due in large part to the

transnational marriage brokering companies that have mushroomed in the past few decades (table 1).

Table 1. Estimated Number of Transnational Marriages by Nationality of Spouses, 1994–2009

Year	Total no. of foreign spouses*	As % of total marriages	Nationality of Foreign Spouses			Sex		Total no. of registered
			China	SE Asia	Other areas	Male	Female	
1994	12,784	NA	7,885		4,899	NA	NA	NA
1995	16,754	NA	9,180		6,574	NA	NA	NA
1996	20,561	NA	9,349		11,212	NA	NA	NA
1997	24,960	NA	8,951		16,009	NA	NA	NA
1998	22,905	15.7	12,451		10,454	NA	NA	145,976
1999	32,263	18.6	17,589		14,674	NA	NA	173,209
2000	44,966	24.8	23,628		21,338	NA	NA	181,642
2001	46,202	27.10	26,797	17,512	1,893	3,400	42,802	170,515
2002	49,013	28.39	28,906	18,037	2,070	4,366	44,647	172,655
2003	54,634	31.86	35,473	17,351	2,292	6,001	48,633	171,483
2004	31,310	23.82	10,972	18,103	2,235	3,176	28,134	131,453
2005	28,427	20.14	14,258	11,454	2,354	3,139	25,288	141,140
2006	23,930	16.77	14,619	6,950	2,574	3,214	20,716	142,669
2007	24,700	18.29	15,146	6,952	2,602	3,141	21,559	135,041
2008	21,729	14.03	12,772	6,009	2,948	3,516	18,213	154,866
2009	21,914	18.71	13,294	5,696	2,924	3,673	18,241	117,099
	476,386		261,270		215,116			

\*These figures include spouses from China, Hong Kong, and Macao.

*Source:* Compiled by the author from various sources (1994–2000: Wang and Chang 2002, Tsay 2004; Hugo and Nguyen 2007. 2001–2009: Department of Statistics, Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan. <http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat/>, accessed October 10, 2011).

The considerable number of foreign spouses in Taiwan drew the public's attention to the increasing social problems perceived to be associated with this migrant inflow, such as prostitution and domestic violence involving foreign spouses as perpetrators or victims. International organizations like the United Nations and many domestic non-profit organizations rapidly linked these problems to trafficking in women, jeopardizing Taiwan's reputation for human rights protection in the international community.<sup>1</sup> Facing pressure from both the domestic and international communities, the Taiwanese government took a series of measures. First, in 2004, it subsumed marriage brokerage into its business registration management system. Yet the policy's orientation toward regulating, rather than banning, the business of commercial matchmaking brought challenges from women's groups, who advocated putting an end to the

business altogether due to its profit-oriented nature, which devalues women as objects for selling and involves marriage brokers playing the role of chief instigator in the “bride trade.” As a result of their efforts, and with confirmation from Premier Su Tseng-chang that “marriage is originally a good thing and should not be commercialized,” the government changed its policy direction from recognition and regulation to denial and, ultimately, to a ban. In 2006, it annulled the business registration of marriage brokerage, and then, in 2007, it passed an immigration law amendment that prohibited commercial marriage brokerage and the advertisement of foreign brides. According to the amended immigration law, only individuals and nonprofit organizations can provide matchmaking services, and no advertising of such services in the mass media is allowed.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the existing marriage brokerage companies had to transform their businesses into nonprofit ventures within one year to avoid being shut down. In 2008, a year after the sunset clause expired, commercial marriage brokerage was officially an illicit business in Taiwan.

During the period when this policy was under consideration, a debate was sparked over whether or not the profit-oriented brokerages needed to be completely banned. Some scholars doubted the wisdom of banning the commercial matchmaking business while nonprofit-oriented services were still encouraged, while some women’s groups led the effort to push the government to impose the ban. The arguments of the debate centered around concerns about women’s exploitation and the possible worsening of gender inequality in society as a result of the commodification of women by commercial brokerages.

The view that such commodification deprives women of autonomy and agency is widely accepted in the Taiwanese mainstream understanding of “foreign brides” in the marriage-brokering business. For many women’s groups who favored the ban, only when the commercial matchmaking business was banned could women be rescued from being objectified in the market. Such a rescue would fulfill the groups’ feminist agenda of empowering women and eliminating the causes of women’s exploitation. For the Taiwanese government, to “rescue” women from commodification was to rescue Taiwan’s reputation in international society, especially after Taiwan was blamed by the 2006 American Trafficking in Persons Report for not making enough of an effort to stop trafficking in women through transnational marriage. As a result, Taiwan’s “face” is tightly linked with these women’s fates in the era of the global anti-trafficking

campaign. Banning, instead of regulating, commercial matchmaking businesses became the only morally and politically correct option for the state, not only to demonstrate its capability in governing its people's intimate lives but also to participate in international activities as an independent sovereign state. Through the joint efforts of the women's groups to achieve their political agenda of protecting women from exploitation and the government to declare its determination to maintain the moral order and join international society, the ban became a common goal for the two often conflicting parties to pursue.

By providing a detailed picture of the complicated gender and power dynamics in the marriage brokerage business in Taiwan, this article attempts to add to the above debate and, more broadly, to contribute in new ways to the existing scholarship on intimate industries in Asia (see Parreñas, forthcoming). I challenge the mainstream idea that, because the objectification and commodification of women and marriage in the transnational marriage-brokering market derogate the value of women and obstruct the realization of gender equality, all profit-oriented business should be banned. I argue that although this discourse serves to promote the ideology of gender equality in society, it cannot solve the problems women encounter or decrease the demand for matchmaking services. Furthermore, it risks conflating all women looking for foreign husbands as victims of the business.

Even though some research on sex work has been concerned with the power dynamics between employers and employees inside the industry (Chen 2010, 2008; Zheng 2009; Parreñas 2011), little research on transnational marriage has dealt with the dynamics between women and brokers. The two domains can be juxtaposed, as women's motivation and exploitation have been the foci of scholars' research (Constable 2006). In earlier studies, women were often described as victims, brokers as perpetrators, and the business as prostitution under the guise of marriage (Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Meng 1994). Only recently has women's agency started to be recognized positively (Freeman 2011; Constable 2003, 2005; Thai 2008; Lu 2008). Nevertheless, the power dynamics within the industry have still not received enough attention. This article seeks to bridge this gap.

My effort to enrich the existing scholarship on women's exploitation, commodification, and liberation in transnational marriage brokerage is informed by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's study of Muslim women's veiling (2002) and many other feminist scholars' research

on sex work. The former challenges the Western idea of liberation that is assumed to be a goal for all women or people to strive for; the latter criticizes the view that regards commodification of women in the sex industry as women's victimhood and ignores women's agency. (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik 2005; Allison 1994; Zheng 2009; Parreñas 2011; Chen 2008). I call for a transnational perspective to understand these women's decision-making processes in forming their marriages through brokers—that is, to complicate our understanding of the commodification, exploitation, and agency of these foreign brides-to-be by contextualizing these concepts in the local life worlds of these women. We need to be respectful of the strategies they adopt to pursue better lives, even if these strategies contradict our own values and ideas of morality.

### **The Operation of Matchmaking**

To understand how marriage brokerage operated differently among transnational markets and was governed by the states during the period from 2004 to 2006, I followed several matchmaking groups from Taiwan to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, Fuzhou in China, and Kiev in the Ukraine, respectively, to engage in participant observation. During these trips, I found a variety of power dynamics at work between the brokers and the male and female clients.<sup>3</sup> For example, Ukrainian bride candidates had more bargaining power than Asian bride candidates, and, among the latter, Chinese bride candidates had more leverage than their Vietnamese counterparts. I chose to conduct additional ethnographic research on the Vietnamese case because Vietnamese women are widely perceived to be the most vulnerable group among the women from the three regions because of their relatively poor economic status and lack of cultural capital. I attempt to use this case to show that, despite having the least bargaining power in the face of male power in the transnational marriage market, these Vietnamese women are still capable of negotiating difficulties, sometimes even through cooperation with brokers, to survive in the competitive market.

In order to broadly understand how different social forces shape the public's perception of this industry, I also interviewed several groups of people, including five marriage brokers in Taiwan, four local matchmakers in the bride-sending countries, three visa consulate officials based in Vietnam and China, fourteen male clients and their wives, and several scholars and

women's groups involved in the debate or concerned about this issue. I also attended official meetings regarding foreign spouse issues at the National Immigration Agency in Taiwan, as well as workshops, conferences, and other events organized by women's groups throughout the island. Finally, I sat in on two language and life adjustment classes for foreign spouses at a community college in Taipei.

In this article, I first briefly introduce the operation of the matchmaking business. Taking the matchmaking trips to Vietnam that I participated in as an example, a matchmaking group usually consisted of three to five male clients, sometimes with their friends or relatives coming along. After the Taiwanese broker brought the group to the bride-sending country, the local matchmaker took over the job of arranging everything for the group during their stay and, most importantly, scheduled matchmaking meetings, which usually took place at a hotel room or a rented private local house. Women were brought to the matchmaking venue, three to five coming to the room and standing in a row in front of male clients for them to select. When the business flourished in the early years of the twenty-first century, a matchmaker could provide as many as two hundred potential brides for a matchmaking group at a time; they were able to keep bringing more, until each group member found a satisfactory bride.

What distinguishes this Asian model of transnational matchmaking from the practice of "mail-order marriage" in the West is that it required no correspondence or online catalog search before the male clients set off to meet their potential brides. Correspondence creates temporal and monetary costs for the brokers, men, and women involved in the business, and is therefore discouraged.<sup>4</sup> Due to their lack of language ability to communicate with potential husbands and easy access to the Internet, women in rural areas relied heavily on physically contactable matchmakers in their hometowns; for the men, correspondence increased their costs, because they had to spend money on letter translation and time waiting for a result. Finally, for brokers, correspondence made the business inefficient, because they could not set up all of the group members at the same time, but had to spend time taking care of each one individually.

With regard to information sharing, even though the brokers provided women's photos and online catalogs, the men just used them to show the "quality" of women they had. There was no guarantee that the women in the photos would still be available when the database was accessed. Yet it was guaranteed that each of the clients could obtain a wife after joining the

matchmaking trip. Some brokering companies even offered a free replacement if the bride ran away within the first year of marriage. Information about the men was provided to the interested women and circulated among them beforehand, regardless of its accuracy. In fact, even if the broker provided complete information, very often it did not make complete sense to the women, because most did not have the sufficient cultural and economic background knowledge to judge the nature of the man's job, the value of his property, and his social status. Without using correspondence, the procedure of getting married—matchmaking, wedding ceremony, marriage registration with the local authority—could be completed within several weeks. However, the “efficiency” of this type of marriage, the feature that the brokers advertised to attract clients, was the very issue that women's groups perceived as the core cause of the negative consequences of marriage and social problems that undermine gender equality and social morality.

### **A Review of the Transnational Marriage Brokerage Policy Debate**

Even though the transnational marriage brokerage policy debate in Taiwan evoked relatively little attention from the public compared to other social events that had a more direct impact on them, it did provide a forum for different viewpoints that is helpful for understanding the operation of the business, the state's role in it, and the needs and motivations of Taiwanese men and foreign women seeking marriage brokers' assistance. The debate initially took place between a professor of sociology, who contributed an article to a newspaper, and the women's group who wrote responses to it; both sides were invited by the National Immigration Agency to participate in policy drafting at an early stage. The articles were later posted on an online forum, which attracted more readers to join the debate.

People who opposed the ban doubted the legitimacy of the state's intervention in individuals' intimate lives, which limits the individual's choice of different types of marriage. They argued that, first of all, the saying that “matchmaking is sacred and cannot be commercialized” reflects the middle class's desire to regulate the marriages of the lower class with its romantic imaginings of what marriage ought to be (Wang 2007). Transnational brokered marriage should not be equated with human trafficking. Instead, it can be read as “the weak supporting the weak” transnationally.<sup>5</sup> Second, the problem of women's commodification in the advertisements, which provoked serious criticism from women's groups, lay in the loose

regulation of the representation of foreign brides, rather than in the brokering practice per se. Therefore, only when marriage brokerage is recognized as a legal business will the government be able to supervise and administer it. Third, very often the relationship between the broker and the women is not as simple as the perceived relationship between exploiter and victims. Instead, in many cases, the broker even serves as a consultant to the newlywed couple and provides the foreign spouse with needed assistance upon her arrival. Lastly, it is doubtful that nonprofit organizations would be able to take over the enormous volume of demand for the matchmaking service left behind by the previous brokering companies in the market, as the business requires certain “professional skills,” such as being able to easily gain access to local resources and establishing far-flung interpersonal networks in both societies.

Advocates of the ban responded to these points as follows: First, marriage is not a “money game,” and women should not be treated as objects for sale. Objectification by anyone other than the women themselves should be considered exploitation and needs to be condemned.<sup>6</sup> They argued that what they opposed was not the matchmaking service per se but the commercial way in which the broker pursued profit at the expense of women’s dignity and interests. For example, the broker charged the male client a considerable amount of money, but only a very small amount of this fee went to the bride’s family in the name of bride-price. Second, Taiwan’s loose administration of the foreign labor brokerage, which has caused a lot of problems regarding labor exploitation, was a vivid example disproving the government’s capability to regulate marriage brokerage efficiently, as claimed. Third, although some marriage brokers built good relationships with the women they served and provided needed assistance, this function could be, and should be, replaced by nonprofit organizations and experts in marriage consultation.

The core of the polemic lay in people’s consideration of the state’s governance of the market; opportunities and vulnerabilities the marriage brokerage would bring to women; and the influence of the matchmaking practices on the given gender (in)equality in society. The discursive competition over these terms revealed people’s standpoints regarding the value of the state and the market. It was widely wondered if the overall replacement of the commercial business with nonprofit service would mitigate or aggravate women’s exploitation. People who believed that banning the business would mitigate the problems actually placed their hope on the

efficiency of the state's law enforcement system to ferret out and shut down illicit activities, yet this hope unfortunately contradicted their criticism regarding the state's failure to deal with foreign labor brokerages, mentioned earlier. Their anti-market position was evident in their emphasis on the connection between the market and the exploitation of women, since the businesses profited at the expense of women. For people opposing the ban, the ban would aggravate women's vulnerability if the businesses were forced to turn invisible in the underground market. Unless the state efficiently governed marriage-brokering activities, a better way to eliminate unsuitable brokers would be to appeal to the market, in which commercial businesses had to compete with nonprofit services. It was believed that commercial companies would eventually bow out of the market due to their high service charges, which could not compete with the free services provided by nonprofit organizations in attracting clients and would therefore lead to the end of their businesses.

### **Market Competition and State Regulation**

Would the market mechanism always benefit brokers' profit-making incentive and damage women's interests and opportunities, whereas the state would always function as it ought to in order to remedy injustice? To make a valid argument against the commercial practice, I will carefully consider, first, to what extent the broker's profit could be regarded as reasonable, and second, what women's rights and interests were in the transnational context, and whether the protection of these rights and interests meets the women's needs. Next, I will provide an analysis of some empirical data to elaborate that, in fact, in this transnational case, market competition of the business did not damage the interests of women as extensively as the ban supporters assumed. Instead, when more service providers entered the market, women benefited from the blossoming of the business, since more opportunities for successful matchmaking were provided.

Let's take a look at the effect of the market mechanism from the late 1990s to around 2005, the period of time when transnational marriage was surging. The demand for foreign wives stimulated a mushrooming of transnational brokerage companies, which further resulted in a slash in brokerage prices in the competitive market. Taking Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriage brokerage as an example, the average price for marrying a Vietnamese woman dropped from US\$12,000 in the late 1990s to less than US\$7,000 by 2005 (Chang Y. 2004). Assuming that the

cost of brokering a marriage cost about US\$6,000 (Wang and Chang 2002), the broker's profit thereby dropped sharply from US\$5,000–6,000 to US\$900–1,200. If one takes into consideration that the profit must be further distributed to the local matchmaker and used to reimburse invisible expenses like bribes to local authorities, it is hard to call the profit that brokers made around 2005 extravagant.<sup>7</sup> If it is extravagant, how much would be considered reasonable?<sup>8</sup>

Another concern for the ban's supporters was women's exploitation in the business. One representative of a women's group stated at a conference: "You don't know how much we foreign spouses hate marriage brokers. They deceive us into the marriage and take most of the money that should go to us." It is true that women were excluded from all kinds of negotiations in the business, and their interests were frequently determined by the brokers and the market. For example, bride-price, which is supposed to be given to the bride's family by the groom, was included in the service fee charged by the broker.<sup>9</sup> It goes without saying that brokers would squeeze the amount as much as possible to minimize their costs and maximize their profits. Due to market competition, the average bride-price shrank from US\$1,000–2,000 in the late 1990s to less than US\$300 around 2005, in tandem with the drop of the average market price of matchmaking. These numbers clearly show that women received more benefit before the market boom, the period of time when the market was monopolized by several brokering companies and a higher matchmaking service charge was acceptable. Interpreting the situation in this way risks leading readers to the conclusion that it was market competition, rather than the business per se, that needed to be restricted. Obviously, this is not what the women's group meant to advocate. Moreover, I argue, attributing women's exploitation solely to market competition fails to spell out the power dynamics and women's relational agency in the business.

By pointing out the misreading of the market impact on the women and overestimating the state's capability to govern the market, I argue that hinging an argument for the ban on the assumption that women are being exploited by the brokers and the market is insufficient and oversimplified. We need to admit to the double character of the market mechanism, which subjects women to vulnerability and exploitation while at the same time providing them with opportunities. Although there are, indeed, foreign women who are deceived into marriage or even sold into prostitution, we should not treat potential brides as a whole as victims-to-be who have no ability to calculate risk beforehand. While I avoid labeling this group of women, I do not

intend to romanticize and generalize their agency either. What I try to do here, rather, is explore the dynamics between women's agency and structural limitations and between the broker and the women in marriage brokerage, hoping to complicate the idea of women's exploitation in the commercial matchmaking business.

### **Active Submission as Agency: Hong's Story**

The story of Hong, a Vietnamese woman who married a Taiwanese man, exemplifies how these women struggle to enter the transnational marriage market by actively submitting to the patriarchal roles of the business through the act of "performing docile," which I conceptualize as "active submission as agency." Her story also shows what the opportunities and vulnerabilities of the transnational marriage market mean to the women who enter into it. As with sex work for women engaging in it (Constable 2006; Parreñas 2011; Zheng 2003; Chin and Finckenauer 2012), these meanings do not irrevocably point to the conclusion that these women need to be saved.

Hong's story takes place on a matchmaking trip from Taiwan to a remote village in the north of Vietnam that I joined in 2004. Hong married her Taiwanese husband, Ching, through a matchmaker, Dung.<sup>10</sup> She was eighteen years old when she came to the matchmaking meeting and was selected by Ching at first glance. The day after the meeting, Dung took Hong and Ching, along with other newly matched couples, to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office to submit papers for a visa interview appointment. The young brides were in an elated mood, romping about on the street as we traveled. Hong held my hand, leaned against my shoulder, and laughed loudly at jokes told by others in the group; it was a beautiful day for these girls. However, after returning to our hotel that evening, Ching came to me, expressing concerns about Hong. According to his observations, he felt that the way Hong interacted with me did not show respect to me as an elder sister, and that her ways of walking and talking to people were not decent. His fear was that Hong was not as cultivated, tender, and feminine as he thought an ideal wife ought to be, and that she would therefore not be respectful of and considerate to his parents. Because of these concerns, he was considering changing to a different wife. Despite my disapproval of his complaint, I suggested that he bring this issue to Dung and Hong directly before the marriage was registered.

That night, Dung held a meeting at which Hong was told about Ching's complaint. Without listening to the whole story, Hong burst into tears and ran out of the room. I ran after her, trying to comfort her while she was crying severely. As a researcher, I should have avoided intervening in their marital business. Yet as a woman, I could not help but hint to her to carefully reconsider the marriage. I simply couldn't imagine how their marriage could be maintained if she continued to be treated like this. To my mind, she had a good chance of meeting a more suitable man in her life, since she was only eighteen. After spending a couple of hours calming down, Hong surprisingly went back to Ching and expressed her strong desire to marry him. She said she was willing to adjust her behavior to meet his expectations. From the next day on, I observed that Hong intentionally changed her behavioral patterns in Ching's presence and tenderly served him when we had meals. Ching accepted Hong again. Three months later, he came back to Vietnam to hold a wedding ceremony in Hong's village. One month after the wedding, Hong got a visa and migrated to Taiwan, where she currently resides.

Hong's active submission shocked me greatly, as it was my first time going to Vietnam with a matchmaking group. Yet, having encountered many women looking for foreign husbands in rural Vietnam and China since then, I discovered that Hong was not unique at all. In Hong's village, many young women sneaked to matchmaking meetings without consulting their parents in advance and watched their friends and neighbors attend such meetings many times before attending themselves. They also learned what their marital lives would look like in Taiwan from return visitors to the village. Learning from their peers and following their lead to go abroad—maybe this was why these young women knew so well how to act docile and feminine to make a good impression on men at the meetings. For example, they all answered “yes” to all requests from the male clients, no matter how unreasonable these requests were—just as one might do in a job interview. Sometimes parents brought their daughters to Dung and me, begging us to find a good man for them. These scenes suggest that, unlike mail-order brides in the West, who according to some studies were deceived into marriage (Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Meng 1994; Villapando 1989), these women apparently knew what was going on at the meetings and what they were going for. Thus, we may want to ask what triggered these young women to actively submit themselves to the patriarchal marriage market, like Hong did, with the huge risk of marrying the wrong person.

According to Hong's explanation afterward, she made the decision first for her family and second for herself. She wanted to share her parents' financial burden; they were farmers with five children to take care of, with the youngest still needing to go to school. Furthermore, she wanted to leave the countryside with her good friends and neighbors, who also went to the matchmaking meeting, to live a new life where they no longer needed to get up in the dark, walk an hour or so to the beach to pick up clams, and walk for another hour to sell them at a market. With land to farm and despite living poor, these women were not afraid of starvation. Life in the village was simple and relaxed, but very boring. Compared to the stories they had heard from return migrants who had worked in Hanoi and other cities, living in a rural village like this for one's entire life seemed like a "dead end" for young people. Thus, young people struggled to leave "the spectralized rural" (Yan 2003). Also, it is easier for women than men to find a way out, because women carry the value of reproductive labor that patriarchal transnational marriage markets are looking for. Women's reproductive ability becomes their ticket to enter the dreamed-of, cosmopolitan world.

Viewed in this way, the meaning of "survival" for Hong went beyond just aiming to have the bare essentials. For many young rural women, foreign marriage offered a chance to become a "modern subject"; they wanted to cultivate not just monetary wealth but cultural tastes as well. Hong's desire to marry abroad, like that of many other young women in the village, was created and reinforced by the impressions they had of return migrants, who always came home with luxurious goods and nice-looking outfits.<sup>11</sup> "One day, I will bring something for my parents too," Hong said.

Although marital life adjustment was difficult for Hong, she did eventually realize her dream. Like many of her friends who had also married Taiwanese husbands, she was able to return home with luxurious goods and nice-looking outfits and to support her family by sending remittances periodically. Looking back at her insistence on marrying Ching on that night ten years ago, it seems she made the right decision to try her luck. Borrowing from philosophers Catriona MacKenzie and Natalie Stoljar (2000), I regard Hong's decision as an exercise of "relational autonomy," an idea that reflects on the suspicious ideals of radical independence and self-reliance and reconceptualizes autonomy as one's ability to make a decision not based on the decision-maker's single view but on a loosely related collection of views that emphasize the

social embedding of the self (Westlund 2009).<sup>12</sup> Viewed in this light, no one can make a decision independent of social references. Hong's decision could be seen as the outcome of referring to a collection of views from her surroundings that were shaped within a larger social context, like the community of the village she grew up in, where rumors, gossip, and stories about the transnational marriages of neighbors' daughters were circulated easily and widely. They served as her references when she considered marrying foreigners, for better or for worse.

However, although the numerous pieces of sensational news about Vietnamese women being mistreated in foreign countries would thus be expected to produce a great negative effect on young women like Hong, they did not necessarily have that effect. These stories lost their roots of authenticity traveling through different storytellers and hearers and were perceived as mere rumor and gossip in the village. Without confirmed acts of domestic violence or other unfortunate events happening in their surroundings to prove the truth of the circulated narratives, for the young women, the stories were just stories. Hong's friend Ngan, for example, made an interesting comment: "Oh, I heard about that. It would really be horrible if those stories were real.... Yet I don't think that will happen to me if I find a good matchmaker." Instead of thinking of the various possible risks that might be beyond the control of the matchmakers, these women anchored their hopes on matchmakers to find them good mates. Ngan continued: "Therefore, we need to carefully choose a reliable matchmaker to arrange our marriages.... Look at my neighbor's daughter's marriage. She lives a happy life now because her mom introduced her to a trustworthy matchmaker." In rural areas like Hong's village, where people had limited access to the Internet and did not speak foreign languages, the online dating services that Constable (2003) considers a convenient way for women to look for potential mates by themselves is unrealistic for these young women. As a result, the connection between the local matchmaker and the women in his or her area was usually formed tightly and closely.

### **Gender and Power Dynamics in Marriage Brokerage**

My research revealed the relationship between marriage brokers and women to be various and dynamic, ranging from exploitation to conspiracy. A marriage broker could serve as both an exploiter and a lifesaver for a woman, which to a high degree depended on how the woman experienced her marital life after migrating to Taiwan. She might feel exploited by the broker in

the process of matchmaking but become grateful to him or her afterward if she was satisfied with her marriage.

Women were vulnerable to exploitation because they were excluded from contract negotiation, which took place between the broker and the male clients, from beginning to end. Also, because most local matchmakers in Vietnam and marriage-brokering companies in Taiwan were illegal, these women had difficulty claiming their legal rights or appealing to authorities. For example, in China and north of Vietnam, the local matchmaker commonly asked the bride's family to pay with a "red envelope," a money gift in appreciation of successful matchmaking. This practice sometimes ended up as extortion. In China, Mei, a bride selected by a Taiwanese man, told me that her local matchmaker asked her for a red envelope of US\$3,000 and threatened not to return her passport if she did not pay the money. Despite my efforts to convince her that she could apply for a replacement and arrange the rest on her own, she was too frightened to take my suggestions. Likewise, brides in north of Vietnam were also commonly asked by their local matchmakers to provide a red envelope in the amount of US\$500–1,000.<sup>13</sup> In most cases, local matchmakers asked for a red envelope under the table as extra income, in addition to the portion of profit from their Taiwanese business partners.

However, not all local matchmakers pursued profits by foul means. The reason for them to "be nice" was simple: to develop their business, they needed to maintain a good reputation and build a close connection with the locals; if one was found to play tricks, he would lose clients' trust and thus lose other business opportunities. It is not uncommon to find that, despite having relatives and friends who might provide assistance in the country of destination, women in rural areas still resort to professional matchmakers to maximize the chance of marrying a foreign man (Freeman 2011). For example, two sisters of Nang, another Vietnamese bride staying at Dung's place while waiting to go to Taiwan, also married Taiwanese men through Dung's introduction.. Nang told me that their parents trusted Dung because he had taught her sisters so much before their departure and was still responsive even after they left for Taiwan. "He behaves like a big brother and almost knows every household in the village," said Nang.

I spent some time during my fieldwork living at Dung's place, following him around to see how he ran his business. During my stay, his house accommodated an average of five to seven brides waiting for visas to go to Taiwan. These young women helped Dung's family with

housework and studied Chinese at a language school, which Dung had arranged. The expenses would, of course, be charged to their future husbands. They started each day with floor cleaning and then helped Dung's wife prepare breakfast. Afterward, they went to school and came back for lunch. After school they stayed at home to study, prepare dinner, or do laundry. Sometimes they went to a traditional market nearby with Dung's wife. Dung did not allow them to go out alone after it got dark for safety reasons, so whenever they wanted to enjoy their time at night, they dragged me out with them. When Dung was home, he frequently practiced Chinese with them and answered their questions about life in Taiwan; interestingly, his answers were based on what he had heard from return migrants and his Taiwanese business partner, since he had never been to Taiwan himself. He hung a big blackboard on the wall in the living room and gave the brides-to-be Chinese language review lessons from time to time. In addition, he helped them call, or answered calls from, their husbands-to-be in Taiwan, providing Vietnamese-Chinese translation (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Dung taught Chinese to the brides-to-be in the mornings, 2004. Photo taken by the author.

According to Dung, strict collective discipline was necessary for three reasons:

First, these women are at the age of being curious about the world. You never know if they will be allured to other young men or bad things during this period of time. I have heard of many runaway cases in which the woman falls in love with another man before moving to Taiwan and runs back to Vietnam to unite with her boyfriend. I have to make sure this will not happen to my brides. Second, it's my task to take care of them and secure their safety. I have to know where they are when their husbands call me. Here is Vietnam, not Taiwan. I have the responsibility to make sure they are good when their husbands come to pick them up. Third, they need to study Chinese. Their husbands pay for their tuition already. But you know they are very young and think of going out to have fun all the time. I have to watch their schedule closely to make sure they study for some time every day. I do it all for their own good! If they do not study language and learn some Taiwanese living habits, they will suffer and I will not be able to save them at that time! They will regret a lot!"

Dung often shared with me his observations of these young brides and conjectured about the future of their marriages based on their daily performance: for example, someone's marriage "would encounter problems, because she likes to play around and is lazy studying and doing housework." At the same time, he often mocked his male clients, who just wanted to marry pretty women without considering if they had the ability to "handle" them. In his eyes, it was predictable that these men would have unfortunate marriages, yet they deserved the result since he had given them advice but they refused to take it. Indeed, from Dung's perspective, the effort he made to find husbands for these young women and to take good care of them, like a parent, was for their own good. His strict disciplining and efforts to train them to behave like ideal wives was something that was going to benefit their futures. Yet he seemed to forget that he did so also for his own good—he acted as an agent of the market mechanism that forces women into cheap reproductive labor and made his fortune from it accordingly. It should be noted that the success of his business depended largely on the number of successful marriages he brokered. This was why he judged these young women based on patriarchal criteria of what a good wife ought to be and tried to turn them into domestic and docile subjects—to satisfy his clients' expectations so as to accumulate his business reputation.<sup>14</sup>

Dung's interaction with the young brides exemplifies the complicated power dynamics that existed between the matchmaker and the women, in which a semi-kinship gradually came into being. I observed similar relationships in the homes of other local matchmakers who served

as foster families, like Dung. Despite the local matchmaker's exploitation of the surplus value of these young brides, he or she would still be seen as a "lifesaver" for those women who had a happy marital life after moving to Taiwan. For example, in the eyes of these women, Dung was the kind of person who had professional skills that they could rely on: he helped new migrants prepare for the trip to Taiwan and formed networks for them there. He also served as an information center—offering assistance in shipping goods, delivering messages for those whose natal families lacked modern communication equipment, and circulating gossip and updates about their fellow villagers and other overseas migrants.

In some extreme cases, women were even invited to engage in "conspiracy" with matchmakers to cheat male clients, such as playing "fake virgin," in order to meet the demands of the male-dominated marriage market. Ironically, the virgin bride-making project, which originally represented the patriarchal oppression of women, became something that women could take advantage of to maximize their chances of being selected. In these fraudulent cases, the power dynamics were reversed; the men became "victims" to be sympathized with (or mocked), and the women and brokers became the perpetrators. One broker stated that he decided to start his own matchmaking business after meeting too many bad brokers. "The virgin guarantee is ridiculous nonsense," he said. "Everyone in this business knows that in Vietnam, it is very easy to make a fake virgin, even to get a certificate from the hospital—as long as you have money to bribe." His words reveal how men's virgin complex contributes to brokers' facilitation of making "ideal wives" in the marriage market: red ink becomes the alibi of the wife's "fakeness," and her image as an "ideal wife" gets approved immediately. It is this fetishization of "realness" and fear of "fakeness" that compel the government to produce knowledge about the distinction between real and fake marriage and make efforts to normalize the distinction.

Between Dung's example and what I heard from Mr. Wang, I hope it is clear how the commodity and gift relations became intertwined between the broker and the women, why the relationships could not be spelled out simply by the binary concept of exploitation (which implies a perpetrator) versus victimization, and why it was wrong to assume that the women could be saved once marriage brokerage was removed. I argue that these diverse relationships can be further understood in the context of the unequal global economy, in which what is considered exploitation from the perspective of many First World women would ironically be

perceived as benevolence by many Third World women. There is no single woman's view, and the situation could be experienced and perceived totally differently if class differences among women are taken into consideration. The idea of intersectionality has been discussed many times by feminists who work on transnational and black feminism and are concerned about the politics of difference and representation (Mohanty 1991; Sandoval 2000; McCall 2001, 2005; Collins 1991, 1998; Abu-Lughod 2002, 1991; Mahmood 2001). Their scholarship carefully reminds us not to read women as an entity that can be universally united to struggle for liberation from the world of male domination. Instead, we should consider women in their local contexts in order to understand how their gender intersects with class or other categories of social identity and how their lives are influenced accordingly. Looked at from this angle, we may find that, in many cases, brown women may feel more of an affinity with brown men than with white women. This accounts for the dynamic relationships among brokers, women involved in the business, and women's groups who advocated the ban on marriage brokerage in Taiwan as a way to liberate women from the brokers' exploitation. As I have shown in this article, the women involved in the business did not need saving by the government of Taiwan by means of a ban on commercial matchmaking. On the contrary, what the women needed was in fact a more transparent system of business operation in this transnational context, whether the service is for profit or not, and a more complete institution of the state's regulations of the business that allows the women to claim the client's legal rights as their male counterparts did in Taiwan, when needed.

## **Conclusion**

The desire to marry abroad is not rooted in the individual minds of women looking for foreign husbands, but it speaks through them. We must turn our attention to the motivation of women like Hong to marry a foreign husband and what desire and choice mean for other marriage migrant women like her. We have seen how her vision of the future was shaped by an awareness of what other migrants have gained through marriage, in economic and cultural terms. As humans and social beings, these women's logic has also been shaped in specific social and historical contexts and by the particular communities to which they belong. The point, then, is that we must understand their cultural logic from their standpoint, as the women who are eager to marry abroad may not perceive "exploitation" in the same way as the women's groups expect

them to experience it. Moreover, even though these women are vulnerable to exploitation by matchmakers, the risk may seem worth taking in light of the “profit” they would get from finding a good husband and being forged into good wives by the brokers.

The ban on transnational marriage brokerage in 2008 shut down more than four hundred registered brokering companies. Now the government of Taiwan allows only forty-one nonprofit organizations throughout the island to engage in transnational matchmaking. Yet many of these are actually previous commercial brokers who just changed the names of their businesses from “company” to “association” and retained their earlier business model of cooperating with local matchmakers. They also changed their way of charging fees in order to avoid the accusation of charging for services in advance. For example, brokers routinely ask clients to pay their local matchmaker for some expenses after the marriage group arrives in the bride-sending country, a context in which the clients would never know if the prices they pay are reasonable or not. In short, no package service exists any longer, but the total amount of the fee for a client to marry a foreign bride is not that different from the past.

Admittedly, Taiwanese marriage brokers do play a part in the unfair treatment of the women in their home countries. Yet seeking to fix the problems derived from the inequality between the male clients and the bride candidates with a ban on the business was misleading and of little use in improving women’s status in the transnational marriage market. As I have explained, the limitations of the women’s living conditions and language ability contributed to their heavy dependence on local matchmakers. Moreover, to widen their chances at a successful match, many are willing to try multiple channels without regard for how they might be commodified or whether the channels are legal or not. Therefore, unless the governments of the bride-sending countries take over the role of these existing local matchmakers by providing free matchmaking services and making them easily accessible to interested women in the rural areas, the tight connection between women looking for foreign husbands and local matchmakers will seemingly never be broken. It is an axiom here that whenever there are women seeking foreign husbands, there is a business opportunity for matchmakers. A ban will not stop a business from continuing somewhere else or in another form. It has been seen, for example, that the ban on transnational marriage brokerage in Taiwan has curbed the number of women from Southeast Asia migrating to Taiwan through marriage but cannot prevent them from going to other

countries, like South Korea, where the state's regulation is relatively loose.

When marriage brokerage is illegal, I argue, the women involved in the business are made even more vulnerable due to a lack of legal grounding. Furthermore, those who look for local matchmakers on their own consider themselves “conspirators” instead of “victims” in the business, and their fear of being treated as criminals only encourages them to stay away from legal authorities. As a result, the ban protects not those foreign women who desire to migrate through marriage but the reputation of Taiwan in the international community and the moral order built on an imagination of gender equality in Taiwan's society. We need a transnational and transclass perspective to help us expand our empathy map beyond the boundaries of countries and societies when thinking about other women's suffering. Without such a perspective, we risk using middle-class moral values to judge the needs of lower-class women from less developed countries, despite our best intentions.<sup>15</sup>

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### *Notes*

- 1 For example, the 2006 American Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report put Taiwan on the second-tier watch list, which shamed the government of Taiwan and forced it to pass relevant laws like the Anti-Trafficking Act efficiently.
- 2 As a nonprofit service, service providers are by law not allowed to demand a service fee from clients; only money given as a gift at the clients' own initiative is legally acceptable.
- 3 For more details on how matchmaking is practiced differently in these countries, please see Tseng (forthcoming).
- 4 Correspondence is not required until matchmaking is successful and the couple proceeds to prepare for a visa interview, for which a record of regular communication with each other is one of the required documents.
- 5 “The weak” refers to socially marginalized men in Taiwan and women in the bride-sending country. This expression implies the potential for solidarity formation among these men and women (Chang R. 2006).
- 6 Viewed in this way, prostitution could be exempted from their criticism if sex workers are allowed to manage their own bodies.
- 7 In the south of Vietnam, big matchmakers need to provide potential brides with accommodations and meals before they are selected and leave the country. Therefore, they are also called *yang ma* (foster mothers). If a bride candidate has failed to be

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- selected for months, the matchmaker would lose money on her. So usually local matchmakers pick women who they think have more “potential” to be married off. It is not uncommon for matchmakers to ask the women who have stayed for a long time to leave as a way of cutting their losses.
- 8 This issue was discussed at an official meeting concerning nonprofit matchmaking regulation. Some representatives of women’s groups proposed that the government set up a fee standard ask matchmaking service providers to adhere to it. However, the idea was rejected at the meeting for violating the fair trade law. The idea was also not considered feasible because the service provider could conspire with travel agencies to arrange matchmaking trips. The cooperative travel agency can claim that they provide different levels of service for customers and then charge different prices accordingly. The government cannot limit their ability to profit. As a result, a matchmaker can still charge a high fee under the guise of the travel arrangements they provide for their clients.
- 9 Today it is the client who is responsible for arranging bride-price, because the nonprofit matchmaking service provider is only allowed to charge the client administrative fees.
- 10 All names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect people’s privacy.
- 11 Similar discussions on rural women’s desire to become cosmopolitan subjects through migration can be seen in many studies. For example, see Hairong Yan’s (2003) research on *baomu* (babysitters), Pun Ngai’s (2005) on *dagongmei* (female factory workers), and Lieba Faier’s (2009) research on Filipino entertainers in Japan. I need not repeat these discussions here; however, it is important to point out that migration through marriage is very different from migration through employment, since marriage is considered a one-way ticket for women. It is hard to return after departure. Therefore, women who choose to marry abroad have to calculate risks and benefits carefully before making their decision.
- 12 A number of feminist scholars have provided insightful perspectives to criticize the liberal notion of autonomy that assumes an autonomic subject to be atomistic, rationalist, and transcendental. See Christman (2009), Benhabib (1992), and Friedman (2003). This liberal assumption totally ignores the fact that human beings are social beings, and no one can make any decision outside of the influence of his or her interactions with others in a human community. Many studies in recent years on marriage migrant women’s and sex workers’ agency have reflected on the binary of subordination and resistance, looking into how women negotiate difficulties and make their decisions with the limited resources accessible to them. See Agustín (2003), Aradau (2008), Cheng (2010), Constable (2003), Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik (2005), Parreñas (2011), and Zheng (2009).
- 13 This business convention was not practiced in South Vietnam. So far there has been no clear explanation regarding what causes the difference in business operation between the north and the south.
- 14 Kung I-Chun’s research (2011) deals with how women are shaped to be subordinate subjects by matchmaking operations. She argues that women’s subordination lies not only in monetary exchange in the market but also in body discipline by matchmakers, who train rural women to be “eligible wives.” My observations are similar, yet I focus more on the power dynamics between the women and the matchmakers.

- 15 My fieldwork led me to this conclusion, which echoes Hong-zen Wang's (2007) statement about the ban on transnational marriage brokerage as a mirror of the "middle-class romantic imaginary" of what a marriage ought to be.

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