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Gender, marriage and migration : contemporary marriages between mainland China and Taiwan

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Citation

Lu, M. C. W. (2008, May 15). *Gender, marriage and migration : contemporary marriages between mainland China and Taiwan*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13001>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Summary

This thesis investigates the highly complex issue of cross-border marriages between Mainland China and Taiwan in the period from early 1990 to 2004. The objectives of this research is to investigate three aspects of cross-border marriage migration: 1) factors and motivations for cross-border marriage, that is, Why do mainland Chinese women choose to leave China and to come to Taiwan and why do Taiwanese men marry mainland Chinese women? 2) formation and justification of borders of exclusion, that is, Why and how are mainland brides constructed as “others”? 3) negotiation of gender and intra-familial relations among members of cross-border families. These questions are answered by looking at the perspectives of different actors and by examining how these perspectives are formed and whether and how they are substantiated. These actors include the state and the media, the marriage brokerage industry, and cross-strait couples and family members. Multiple research methodologies and sources of data are used, including ethnography, discourse analysis of policy and media representation and participant observation.

Chapter 1 discusses the cultural principles and practices of marriage and family in the Chinese society, which serves a reference for studying how cross-strait marriages are similar or deviant from the norms of local marriages. Chinese family is conceptualised as the basis of social organisation in Chinese society. Studying what marriage and related practices mean in this conceptualisation provide the foundation of understanding the responsibilities and obligations of different members of the family, particularly the position of a new bride in her husband’s family. In this chapter I also demonstrate how contemporary developments of marriage and family regimes in China and Taiwan are shaped by political and socio-economic conditions and legal intervention over time. In the last part of this chapter I explore a new conceptual framework in understanding human relatedness within Chinese society that challenges the dominant view that patrilineal characteristics are the fundamental elements in Chinese kinship and society.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of internal and international migration in China and Taiwan from a gender perspective. In conventional migration theory, economic gains are regarded as the primary motivations for cross-border marriages. It is argued that Asian women are socialized to be filial daughters and caring mothers and marriage is a strategy of survival or social mobility for the whole family. Marriage migration is often conflated with women’s labour migration, and more specifically, commercially arranged marriages are compared with sex trafficking. Such scholarship often places women as victims of globalisation process. This chapter sets out to examine whether marriage migration shares the same context of political economy

that causes women's labour migration by analysing the demographic data, migration flows and individual and familial migration motivations. In this chapter I also present demographic profiles of the cross-strait couples in comparison to couples of local marriages and other cross-border marriages in Taiwan.

Chapter 3 studies the political and social citizenship and exclusion of marriage migrants in the context of cross-strait interaction, changing national identity and the influx of migrant workers and wives in Taiwan. I analyse the construction of images of cross-strait marriages and mainland spouses in the media and the political debates during the legislative process as well as positions of various political and non-governmental social actors. The debates before the mid-1990s show that the cultural concept of the family union overrides the concerns for national security and identity. In the later part of the 1990s the dominant concerns are the social integration and social rights of mainland spouses. However, since 2000, the popular images of mainland spouses have taken a negative turn. In the midst of the political hostility against China and growing Taiwanese nationalism, mainland Chinese spouses are not treated as the "enemy others", rather they are increasingly associated with prostitution and bogus marriage. I argue that the criteria of the mainland spouses' citizenship are based on their gender roles as mothers, daughters-in-law and care-givers; hence the image of bad women is used to discredit them. Mainland spouses and cross-strait families also actively adopt these gender roles to win the acceptance of Taiwanese society in their collective action.

As the first ethnographic study on the marriage brokerage operations in cross-border marriages, Chapter 4 looks at the matchmaking practices, mate choice and money transactions of cross-border strait marriages in order to investigate the role of brokers/matchmakers in cross-border marriages and by so doing, questions what commercialisation of marriage means and why is it a less sanctioned form of marriage. Two flows of reasoning are laid out: the first is to examine the similarity and deviation of matchmaking practices and money transactions in cross-border marriages as compared to those of "normal" marriages; the second is to challenge current feminist scholarship, both western and indigenous, the claims of women's movements and established international conventions on trafficking and trade in women, which set the universal moral standard of modern marriage regimes and have profound impacts on how the commercially arranged marriages are understood. I argue that commercially arranged marriage does not necessarily make women traded commodities, yet the departure of commercially arranged marriage from "normal" matchmaking practices indeed alters the meaning and perceptions of economic transaction between brides' and bridegroom's families.

Chapter 5 is an ethnographic account of daily life experiences and the interaction among the members of cross-strait families along the course of marriage life as well as the strategies these members employ to cultivate their relations. Social positioning of and power relations between members of cross-strait families in the migratory process and marriage life course explain not only why these family members opt for cross-strait marriages, they also answer the question why the stream of cross-strait marriage migration is sustained despite exclusion mechanisms and social stigma. I discuss different dimensions of these strategies, includes manoeuvring among different kinship members, the economic and social capital secured outside the kinship network, the meaning of paid work and financial autonomy. The rationales for borders of exclusion based on gender, ethnicity and patrilineal kinship at times provide openings for marriage migrants, who exercise their agency and develop various strategies to win acceptance by fulfilling their gender roles as care-givers. This role is reinforced in the public sphere in policies and labour market.

