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**The other home: PRC marriage migrants in three
civil society organisations in Taipei**

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Abstract

Most of the literature exploring the phenomenon of marriage migration, especially in East Asia, tends to focus on marriage migrants' activities and practices within the domestic sphere of their home. This is a consequence of their gender and motivation for migrating: as a majority of these migrants are females who move for family reasons, their integration in and contribution to the receiving society often occurs through their role as mothers, wives and daughters in law. More recent accounts depart from marriage migrants' family life and shed light on their experiences in other spheres, such as the the civil society. These accounts, although important to shed light on how marriage migrants are not just reproductive subjects, often neglect how female migrants' participation, responsibilities, opportunities in the civil society may continue to be based on assumption on their identity as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law.

With the aim to contribute to empirical literature on marriage migrants' participation in the civil society, this paper will offer a subjective account of different experiences of civic participation of marriage migrants in Taiwan. In order to achieve this objective, this paper is based on participant observation in three civil society organisations located in Taipei (Taiwan), occurred during summer 2008 and in the period between December 2009 and October 2010. Furthermore, this paper is also based on in-depth interviews with the members, visitors and leaders of these organisations. Thanks to this in-depth analysis, this paper will shed light on how access to decision-making, patterns of participation, assignment of roles as well as understanding of the organisation are shaped by assumptions based on gender and nationality.

Introduction

Contemporary marriage migration is clearly a gendered phenomenon. Especially in Asia, those who are involved in this form of migration are mainly women. Furthermore, this form of migration is related to marriage and family formation and involves activities concerning care and reproduction. For these reasons, marriage migrants' integration into the receiving society is often framed by their identity as mothers, wives and daughters-in-law. Consequently, there is a propensity, in the literature exploring the phenomenon of marriage migration in East Asia and in Taiwan, to focus on marriage migrants' activities and practices within the domestic sphere of their home (i.e. Chai 2004; Jian 2004; Lu 2008; Wang 2004; Momesso 2015b).

More recent accounts depart from marriage migrants' family life and shed light on their experiences in other spheres, such as the the civil society. For instance, in Taiwan, with an increasing visibility of marriage migrants in public spaces, with protests and rallies, the literature has gradually shed light on a previously neglected sphere of action for marriage migrants, namely their participation in grassroots organisations. Hsiao-Chuan Hsia (2005; 2006; 2008), an activist striving for the empowerment of migrant women and the creation of an immigrant movement in Taiwan, has extensively covered the emergence and evolution of one of the most well known organisations for marriage migrants in Taiwan, the TransAsia Sisters Association¹ (Hsia 2004; Hsia 2005; Hsia 2006; Hsia 2008). This organisation has to be contextualised within an unprecedented flow of activism related to immigrants in Taiwan during the first decade of the 21st century. According to Tsai and Hsiao (2006), the Taiwan International Workers' Association (TIWA), founded in 1999, was the first local organization to include both marriage and labour migrants on its agenda (p. 15). In the following years, civil society organizations offering assistance to marriage migrants also blossomed. Government policies did play an important role in facilitating the emergence of civic organisations related to marriage migrants: as part of a multicultural policy package, the Taiwanese government established a Guidance and Care Fund for Foreign Spouses in January 2005. A sum of NT\$ 300 million per year, over a period of ten years, was allocated by this fund to promote activities for marriage migrants (Tsai and Hsiao 2006: 20). Thus, most of the organizations for marriage migrants started to provide their services between 2003 and 2005. These organizations offered a broad variety of support that ranged from advocacy activity to advice services, lectures for marriage migrants to parent and child counselling, financial assistance to providing information and volunteer training, yet the majority of them have been project-oriented and relied primarily on government financial support (Tsai and Hsiao 2006: 27-28). In the early 2000s, service based actions were coupled by advocacy networks. The above-mentioned TransAsia Sisters Association

¹ Website: <http://tasat-e.blogspot.de/> (Chinese name: Nanyang Taiwan Zimeihui, 南洋台灣姊妹會).

and, since 2003, the Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHRLIM), a loose organisation with the aim to promote the rights of all migrants in Taiwan. Most of the literature covering the experiences of marriage migrants as civil society actors is focused on their public and collective actions and recollects the various protests and rallies that have been organised thanks to these civic organisations (i.e., Hsia 2005; Hsian 2006; Hsia 2008; Chao 2006; King 2007; Chang 2004; Momesso and Cheng 2017; Chao 2006; Chang 2004).

This literature reflects traditional approaches on women's civic organising. Earlier accounts on women's collective actions, even when developed by feminists, were mainly focused on actions that reached the public sphere, were based on confrontational strategies and had a direct impact on state's political agenda (Lipschutz 2006; Obershall 1993: 2; Kuumba 2001: 4). These accounts, though, neglected a range of activities that occurred informally or behind the scenes and, above all, those that did not have a clear feminist agenda in their short or long term plan (Beckwith 2007; Padilla 2004).

More recent scholarship on women's civic organisations suggests to apply more inclusive analytical frameworks that allow a degree of flexibility in the way women's actions are identified and analysed. As Davidson (2004) argues, women's actions 'are neither singular nor seamless' rather they 'are multiple and fragmented' (p. 25). In this regard, Jaschok and colleagues (2001) stress the importance to shed light on diversity and heterogeneity whenever exploring women's collective actions. Yet, it is not just a matter of difference in the way women may respond to injustice. It also is a matter of understanding how women understand and experience the actions they are involved in. It is clear that civic organising should not be treated as a practice that is perceived and experienced the same way by all its members. Thus, by changing the unit of analysis from civic organisation to individuals within the organisation, a more nuanced picture may emerge. In this framework, the organization becomes simply a site for exploring individuals' lived experiences and understanding of their environment. An individual oriented approach to civic organising may help to shed light on the different interests and positions that may characterise civic organisations and, eventually, on the persistence of unequal power relations between members, uneven access to decision-making, patterns of exclusion.

These reflections are very important when exploring marriage migrants' civic organising in Taiwan. On a broader perspective, Momesso and Cheng (2017) already suggested the presence of ethnic divisions in Taiwanese civil society focused on migrants, with groups focused on Southeast marriage migrants and groups working for migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC,

China). Shih (1998) also shed light on patterns of exclusion against marriage migrants from the PRC by the feminist and women's movement in the 1990s. To advance this scholarship, this paper will look at civic organisations serving and advocating for marriage migrants from the PRC. By focusing on access to decision-making, patterns of participation, subjective experience of civic organising in the context of three civil society organisations located in Taipei, this paper will shed light on the divide and patterns of exclusion that could also occur from within a group. This paper also aims to contribute to the debate on women's civic engagement, by shedding light on how different positioning in the social hierarchy may not only shape different responses to injustice and discrimination, but it may also foster different perceptions and understandings of civic actions.

PRC marriage migrants' civic organisations: an overview

The literature on marriage migrants' civic participation in Taiwan reflects the above-mentioned divide existing in the civil society between organisations for Southeast Asian spouses and those for migrants from the PRC. Although most civic organisations for marriage migrants in Taiwan do not set any limits in terms of who could take part in activities, it is clear that the interests between Southeast and PRC marriage migrants are very different. This is caused, above all, by a different legal treatment for citizenship eligibility reserved to each group. East Asian spouses are under the Immigration Act and Nationality Act, whereas PRC marriage migrants are regulated by the Act Governing Relations between Peoples of the Taiwan and the Mainland Area (henceforth the Cross-Strait Act) (Cheng and Fell 2014: 17-21). This differentiated legal treatment also shaped different needs, interests, and eventually, individual as well as collective responses to injustice and discrimination (Momesso and Cheng 2017). Along with a differentiated citizenship eligibility system, Southeast Asian and PRC marriage migrants also experienced dissimilar processes of integration. Southeast Asian spouses, often from countries where Mandarin Chinese is not the national language, have to go through a process of acquisition of language skills and gradual understanding of a different culture. Whereas, migrants from the PRC, instead, were born and raised in an environment that shares similar culture and the same language and, therefore, do not experience a series of obstacles related to integration at arrival. On the other hand, PRC marriage migrants may face different problems, such as a more rigid immigration system, a longer process to acquire citizenship, restrictions on their right to work (Friedman 2010; Liao 2007; Momesso and Cheng 2017). Above all, marriage migrants from

the PRC face the challenge of being integrated into Taiwan as political threats. Due to the diplomatic relations between Beijing and Taipei, marriage migrants from the PRC are discriminated on the assumption that, because of their origin, they could be a threat to the national security and spies of the enemy government. These different patterns of integration, also impacted each group's different needs and interests, separated strategies of resistance and negotiation with the Taiwanese society and government, as well as patterns of exclusion and inclusion in the broader civil society. For instance, as Shih (1998) argues, Taiwanese feminists have been reluctant to take up the issue of marriage migrants from the PRC in 1995 when there was a march against teenage prostitution in Taiwan. In this occasion, prostitutes from the PRC, who entered Taiwan mainly through marriage, were not included as an interest group in the agenda of these actions (Shih 1998: 302). Antipathy against marriage migrants from the PRC by various corners of society and civil society in Taiwan is not unknown. For instance, in October 2003 a national newspaper announced that six women's groups had urged the government to restrict the electoral rights of PRC marriage migrants because they were concerned about national security (Wang 2003). Momesso and Cheng (2017) also argue that, although AHRLIM attempted to bridge the gap between marriage migrants from the PRC and from Southeast Asian countries by emphasising the shared interests between the two groups, in the first years the focus of its actions was still on Southeast Asian migrants. Only after 2008, with changed political opportunities with a pro-China government, AHRLIM started to adjust its focus to concretely take up the task of reforming regulations governing marriage migrants coming from the PRC.

PRC marriage migrants' civic initiatives developed in an environment that was not related, at least in the first years, either to the feminist and women's movement, or to foreign migrants' organizations. PRC marriage migrants developed their own narrative against the discriminative and unjust treatment they were subjected to. One civic group became particularly significant in advocating for a better treatment of PRC marriage migrants in Taiwan and for an end to discrimination, the Marriage Association of Two Sides of China (MATSC). MATSC was established in 1998 by a group of Chinese spouses and their husbands. In those years, the government started to tighten the restrictions related to cross-Strait families² and a general discontent emerged. As most PRC marriage migrants had not acquired Taiwanese ID at that time yet, and forbidden from establishing civic organisations without a Taiwanese ID, PRC migrant spouses had to resort to

² The term 'cross-Strait family' refers to families in which one of the member is from the PRC and the other member is from Taiwan.

some locals. They opted to rely on their Taiwanese spouses as a channel through which they could voice their discontent. Thus MATSC emerged more as a family organisation rather than as a migrant women group. And this was clearly explained by the Chair of MATSC Board who explained husbands' contribution by suggesting a shared discrimination: 'If your wife is discriminated, you also are discriminated.'³ MATSC model was applied by several other organisations in Taiwan and remained a peculiarity of PRC marriage migrants' actions, which was not reproduced in Southeast Asian marriage migrants organisations.

There is extensive literature covering the initiatives of this group (i.e. Chao 2006; King 2007; Chang 2004; Momesso and Cheng 2017). The fact that MATSC reached the public sphere, by means of rallies and protests, made this organisation the most well-known group by PRC marriage migrants, Taiwanese scholars, media and general publics.

However, as previously explained, collective action in public spaces is only one specific moment of civic organising, doubtless the most visible, but not always the most significative. Public protests are the outcome of a range of activities that occur informally, often behind the scenes, on a regular basis. Not much is known about the nature of the organisations where these protests were conceived. Above all, not much is known about the many other strategies used by PRC marriage migrants to improve their living conditions, legal treatment and put an end to discrimination.

As a matter of fact, beyond MATSC, other civic organisations also existed in Taiwan which did not focus on advocacy activity but on service and support provision. As previously explained, in Taipei, as well as in other parts of the island, civil society organisations boomed in the 2000s. This should not be solely understood as a response to the availability of funding from the government. Most of the organisations for PRC marriage migrants started as self-financed, informal networks and only in a few cases they officialised their identity as civic organisations and, therefore, could bid for state funding opportunities. These groups should be interpreted in light of an increasing presence of PRC marriage migrants in Taiwan as well as a tightening of the restrictions on their access to citizenship rights, above all the restriction on their right to work: until the Cross-Strait Act was amended in 2009, marriage migrants from the PRC were not entitled to engage in formal occupation if they did

³ Interview with MATSC President, 28 July 2011.

not have permanent residency (a process that could take around 8 years from their first arrival in the island). This limitation contributed to create a crowd of women who were not entitled to work and consequently did not have many chances to engage with the world beyond their family. Networking with other “sisters” who shared similar problems was a first step to put an end to this condition of loneliness, isolation, helplessness and sadness. In response to this issue, most of the organisations that generated in the early 2000s, were seen as spaces where individuals could network with the world beyond their families. In these terms, organisations constituted safe places where marriage migrants could establish relationships of intimacy and friendship with other “sisters” who shared similar experiences, interests and needs.

For instance, the Chinese Association of Ensuing and Relief Service (CARES) was a top-down initiative developed by the Taiwanese government to help marriage migrants from the PRC integrate with the local society, establish a network of confidants and support outside of their family, and, eventually, improve their lives. This organisation was established by the government in 1950, with the purpose of giving assistance and social care to people who came to Taiwan from the PRC. Its original name was the Mainland China Association for the Relief of Calamity Victims.⁴ From 1999, it changed the focus of its services from general Chinese welfare to that of marriage migrants from the PRC, and in 2000, it acquired its current name and it became a self-financed organisation (Tsai and Hsiao 2006: 22). CARES’ target audience was varied: old people, young aborigines and compatriots in northern Thailand. PRC marriage migrants, therefore, were one of the several groups the organization focused its attention on. The dynamics internal to this organisation have been explored by Momesso and Sun (2010) and Momesso (2015a). In both papers it clearly emerges how the hierarchical structure of this organisation contributes to reinforce migrant women's subordinate position in the organisation (Momesso 2010). Yet, the author also suggests that marriage migrants may have their own hidden resistances to the dominant group, made of Taiwanese citizens (Momesso 2015a).

Another organisation is the Taiwan New Inhabitants Association (TNIA). TNIA was established in 2007 as a consequence of an internal rupture in MATSC. This organisation prioritised service and leisure activities rather than advocacy ones. In occasion of the Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival, and on a monthly basis in occasion of the “family day”, participants of this organisation gathered with their families and shared food from their area of origin with the other guests. During the week, migrant women could occasionally visit the organisation to meet with other “sisters” or simply to have a spontaneous chat with the resident. In these occasions, visitors

⁴ In Chinese: Zhonghuo Dalu Zaibao Jiujizonghui, 中國大陸災胞救濟總.

would sit around a table and chat, sipping their tea or coffee. If it was lunchtime or dinnertime, someone would cook some food and the discussion would continue while eating. Furthermore a variety of informal networks as well as local grassroots organisations also existed throughout the whole island, at times created by marriage migrants with the aim to support later arrived 'sisters', other times result of a cooperation of the two partners in the family.

Marriage migrants visited these organisations on a regular basis, several of them participated to the activities of several organisations. As a matter of fact, despite a lack of formal communication between institutions, fluidity of movement of marriage migrants from one organization to another was very common. Some marriage migrants were members of MATSC and/or TNIA and attended (or had attended) classes or activities at CARES. Each place provided something different and spouses picked what they needed the most from each organization. As an informant once stated, 'I come here [CARES] to attend classes. I go to MATSC to take part in all kinds of activities aimed to advocate for the rights of Chinese spouses. So, it is a matter of different purposes.'⁵ In the next sections, by following marriage migrants' movements across these three organisations, and by exploring the use they made of these groups, their involvement in and perception of the organisations, this paper aims to advance our understanding of marriage migrants' civic actions in Taiwan. By achieving this objective, this paper will also shed light on how gender and nationality continue to shape individuals' participation in the organisation, access to decision-making and assignment of roles.

The other home

Most of the literature on PRC marriage migrants' civic organising focuses on the collective actions that were performed in public spaces with the purpose to put an end to the unfair treatment reserved to PRC marriage migrants in Taiwan (i.e. Chao 2006; King 2007; Chang 2004; Momesso and Cheng 2017; Chao 2006; Chang 2004; King 2007). Yet, these collective actions performed in public spaces should be understood in light of migrants' participation in and understanding of the civil society organisations they joined.

Organisations were seen as safe spaces for personal development, where migrant women could find support, advice, protection, especially in the unfortunate case in which they faced problems with the their spouse, in-laws, or with controlling institutions. For my respondents, in a context in which their natal families were too distant to bring any form of practical support, organisations became a surrogate of their natal home (*niangjia*, 娘家). Thus, most informants described the organisation

⁵ Interview with Linuo, 22 June 2011 (carried out in English).

they joined as their “other home”. This concept reached its climax with TNIA. In this case the organisation site and the President's home corresponded. TNIA was located in the President's home, who lived with his mother, an old woman respected as everyone's *ama* (阿嬤, grandmother in Taiwanese). The site consisted of a reception area, with a desk, a computer and a big black sofa, a big common room, with tables and sofas and a television, which also was the President's living room. Here marriage migrants met, chatted, ate together, danced and singed and had the freedom to use the space as they wished.

This could lead to contrasting situations though: on the one hand, the positive feeling of being in a place that is intimate, familiar, safe and warm; on the other hand, this system gave absolute power of control and decision-making to the President, as the owner of the place. The President was the one who sponsored the organization financially and provided the premises for the organization therefore he had the last word on any decisions. He sincerely loved helping other people, yet by boasting his kindness, generosity and philanthropic spirit, he was also able to magnify his sense of power and authority, which could turn into a source of conflict with other members of the organisation. Although none of the other groups had the same degree of power concentrated on a single individual, gender and nationality shaped access to decision-making. For instance, in MATSC, Taiwanese husbands dealt with most of the decision making. In the case of CARES, migrants were only considered as users and therefore they were not entitled to make any decisions and leadership roles were taken by influential Taiwanese men and women. This lack of migrant women in leadership roles was justified in various ways. For instance, the head of MATSC focused on women's roles in the family as the main reason for a lack of participation:

Women are not likely to come here very often. They are busy with their families. If they have problems they come here, but then they are busy with their daily life issues; they have to take care of their children, their husbands and sometimes their in-laws. We males are more into the organization. So, if there are problems, we are the ones who try to solve them.⁶

Mirroring society's and government's assumptions on marriage migrants contribution in Taiwan mainly in reproductive terms, the leaders of civil society organisations encouraged women's participation, but mainly as supporters and helpers, as the idea that migrants' primary responsibilities should be inside their families was rooted in their narratives. Yet, this lack of participation in the decision-making was not only explained in relation to migrant women's family

⁶ Interview with one of MATSC heads, 31 May 2011.

responsibilities, but also as a consequence of their nationality. It was common, amongst Taiwanese nationals in the organisation, to emphasise the fact that PRC marriage migrants were not used to the democratic model of Taiwan, they lacked any interest in promoting their rights as a collective group and were too selfish. Thus, due to their ignorance about the legal system of Taiwan and to their communist background, the general assumption was that they needed support and help to frame their claims and strategies of resistance. For instance, MATSC's Chair of the Board explained that:

Because we are familiar with the legal system of this government, we, Taiwanese husbands, can deal with this legal system more easily by opposing it, for example. Obviously, Chinese spouses can support us and they can gradually begin to understand matters by following us. A person new to a country needs time to understand how a legal system works. But if they come here, we can help them to understand.⁷

Interestingly, several marriage migrants agreed with these points. Several informants believed that women were more suited to performing duties inside the organization, such as preparing the site for events and performing dances, whereas men were more suited to managerial activities and communications with the publics, especially when the matter related to specific legislations and rights.⁸ Framing their roles in Taiwan in terms of family responsibilities, most of my respondents did not show any interest in being too involved in civil society organizations, while still joining them: 'We are here because of our family, we have kids, and we have to look after them. We don't have the time to do what CARES is doing for us,'⁹ and 'Although I think that organizations are helping us, you have to remember that we are here for our families, not for the organizations!'¹⁰ Yet, if family obligations were not perceived as a problem in shaping their subordinate position, their nationality was looked at in a more critical way. Female migrants seemed to be convinced that their inferiority, lack of power, resources and connections, were mainly due to their status as immigrants. As one of my informants argued, when I asked her why female migrants have to rely on their Taiwanese spouses' support:

First of all, we do not have this right. We cannot apply for the creation of a grassroots organization. You need a Taiwanese ID to do so. Those who have an ID could potentially establish an organization. But we do not have the ability to do so; you need time, you need knowledge and a network. How do they find the money? Do you think that their husbands

⁷ Interview with MATSC Chair of the Board, 2 March 2011.

⁸ Interview with Jiaqing, 14 September 2011.

⁹ Interview with Xinbai, 27 June 2008.

¹⁰ Interview with Xinlan, 13 July 2011.

will give them the money to create an organization? It is much better if local people create this organization. We need people that are very powerful to support us! Do you think that there are any women amongst us with this kind of power? If so, we would not really need to create our own organization! It wouldn't change much if we had our own organization! And actually I believe that it is much better to have locals who support us!¹¹

In CARES, the line of division between helpers and helped was reinforced by the hierarchical structure of the organisation. It was not part of CARES' interests to involve marriage migrants in the decision-making process. On the contrary, the two spheres (the spouses on the one side and the leaders on the other) were willing to keep a certain distance from each other, both in terms of space and access to data. Thus marriage migrants could take part as volunteers in community activities and self-organise activities in the organisation. They could also be involved in the six-month paid training available to them. Yet, in none of these cases there was an attempt to allow more participation in the decision-making to female migrants. As one of my respondents commented, 'They treat us as if we are a decoration: they need us but in the meantime they do not let us participate in the decision making.'¹²

This stratification in terms of gender and nationality between members of the organisation could also be noticed when comparing public and private narrative. In the context of public actions, the personal pronoun "we" was generally used by MATSC and TNIA's official spokespersons (but never by CARES' representatives, who always made explicit the division between Taiwanese citizens and marriage migrants, helpers and helped), in order to refer to contributions, achievements and requests. However, in one-to-one conversations, language usage became more nuanced. Thus, "we" could be replaced by "they" depending on the subject of the exchange: for instance, when the topic was cross-Strait family problems, marriage migrants' attitudes or their exchanges with the sending government. During one of the interviews with one of the leaders of MATSC, my respondent, a Taiwanese spouse, kept on changing the personal pronoun depending on the topic: 'We contributed to many changes,' 'So what *we* need now is that the Chinese government also helps *them*, because *they* are also Chinese! So *we* have to make it clear to the Chinese government!' 'We ask the Chinese government to help *them* when *they* have domestic problems, to help *them* economically, to put *them* in contact, to look after *their* families, and to look after *them*.'¹³ In these constant switches, ethnic and gender stratifications peculiar of civil society organisations in which

¹¹ Interview with Liwei, 1 July 2011.

¹²

Interview with Hui, 5 August 2011.

¹³ Interview with one of MATSC heads, 31 May 2011.

men and women, husbands and wives, PRC and Taiwanese citizens cooperated, became apparent. These also reflected internal divisions peculiar of the three selected organisations, definition of roles and responsibilities, access to decision-making.

Initiating change

Definitely, civic organisations played an important role to enact change at the personal as well as broader level of society and politics. Firstly, thanks to civic organisations, migrant women had access to updated and detailed information about laws and policies shaping their rights. Access to information was a first step towards increasing negotiation power, but not the only one. By meeting other migrants with similar problems, through the process of sharing and voicing their experiences, and by learning about the legal system that shaped their lives, participants had a chance to develop their understanding of their rights and, eventually, develop a vocabulary and a narrative of resistance. The different nature of each organisation, as well as the different degree of access to decision-making, also shaped different narratives for their participants.

For instance, MATSC was focused on advocacy activity. Not only this affected the typology of activities that were pursued by this organisation (protests and rallies, informative workshops), but also the themes of discussion that were developed within the organisation. Although different migrants showed dissimilar level of awareness and understanding of cross-Strait family rights, they generally showed a tendency to explain their experiences in terms of injustice, rights, discrimination, power. Above all, they believed that it was important to act collectively in order to enact change. As a participant argued:

The association is important for us. Through the organization we are a group and we can voice our opinions. You know? We arrive in Taiwan and we are completely powerless. We don't know anyone, it is an unfamiliar place for us, and the only place beyond our family is the association. They help us deal with things, otherwise how could we manage on our own? Over there in China, I have friends, I have a family, I have a network, so I can deal with things. [...] And you know, many women from mainland China do not know their rights. They do not know when they are protected by the state. They are just scared that they will be sent home.¹⁴

MATSC was the most active organization in terms of political mobilization and it organized press-releases, public hearings and cross-Strait exchanges. Its focus on legal issues and on public

¹⁴ Interview with Liwei, 1 July 2011.

activities made this group into a means for affecting broader change. The organisational environment reflected the nature of the organisation: signs with messages referring to the rights of Chinese spouses, pictures of rallies and public hearings, and newspaper articles filled the meeting room of the organisation. By being exposed to this environment, objects and narrative, members of this organisation developed a deeper understanding of their rights and a vocabulary to voice their needs and interests. Eventually, they could access the sphere of politics by engaging in collective actions. As Bonifacio (2009) also notes with regard to Filipino marriage migrants' collective actions in Australia, by joining these organizations, participants may have the chance to engage the personal with the public and discuss the different ways they tackle the challenges of their roles as wives, mothers and citizens (p. 149). For instance Linuo, a highly educated woman from Beijing, soon became the representative of PRC marriage migrants in MATSC. As she recollected:

I have attended TV interviews, press conference. They choose me as the major speaker for Chinese spouses. I do not know why, but maybe it is because they knew I was willing to do this kind of thing. [...] I attended some meetings with government officials. I even attended meetings with Mr Ma Ying-jeou and I urged him to open up the right to work for Chinese spouse. At that time, he was a presidential candidate. I attended a lot of press conferences, talking with journalists who were interested in this field. I attended every protest organized by the marriage association, taking my elder daughter with me.¹⁵

For Linuo, the organization was not the solution to her needs nor a place where she could find support and protection. She rather understood it as a means to help the social category she belonged to and a channel for voicing her discontent and the dissatisfaction felt by other spouses, and as a way of claiming their rights. As she put it, "I think this is my obligation because I am one of the mainland spouses, and such a strict and discriminative policy makes me feel horrible, I feel horrible, I do not want to see lots of latecomers suffering in the same way I did!"¹⁶ In this process of abstraction where personal experiences become the basis for claiming collective interests, a broader significance of cross-Strait marriage migrants' organizations emerges.

In CARES, unlike MATSC, marriage migrants seemed to be less interested in addressing the theme of legal and social discrimination. CARES was a space for being together with other "sisters" and learn new skills. The focus of the organisation was personal development, rather than social change. Unquestionably, the fact that CARES worked alongside the government also shaped its internal

¹⁵ Interview with Linuo, 22 June 2011 (carried out in English).

¹⁶ Interview with Linuo, 22 June 2011 (carried out in English).

policies and the typology of activities and discourses that developed within the organization. Social workers and volunteers were trained to comply with the government's regulations, rather than to think of them in critical terms. CARES played a valuable role, especially in the context of social welfare, by providing various opportunities for marriage migrants. However, its users were very clear about the fact that this was a place where they could learn new skills rather than a place where counterdiscourse could emerge. As one spouse once suggested, "I do not think that CARES can change things. They have lessons which can help spouses to find their lives as immigrants easier. They help spouses to learn local policies, life styles. It helps spouses to easily mould into this new society."¹⁷ Although, this shaped a condition by which CARES did not welcome progressive ideas or any forms of mobilization or reaction against the state, on the other hand, it also acted as an intermediary between marriage migrants and the state. The fact that CARES was in direct contact with governmental agencies, especially the Mainland Affairs Committee (MAC), made this organization a preferential channel for the government to collect and spread information relating to cross-Strait marriage migrants. As Hannah (2009) also shows with regard to NGOs which work closely with state agencies in Vietnam, this cooperation allows organizations to spread progressive ideas and lobby the government, therefore contributing to change. Eventually, CARES also acted as a mediator to favour policy change. For instance, it supported the proposal to change the regulation that required marriage migrants to leave Taiwan in cases of a partner's death (Momesso 2010).

Understanding participation

Despite a differentiated access to leadership between PRC/Taiwanese citizens, females/males, as well as different opportunities of enacting change available in each organisational sites, civic organisations constituted an important venue for their members. Yet, perception of the organisation and use of its spaces could vary not only between males and females but also depending on the social positioning of each single individual.

A general belief was that PRC marriage migrants relied on organisation when they needed help. As one of MATSC's heads explained:

Most of the mainland brides are not concerned about their membership. For example, you can check the *xiehui*'s (協會, organization) office. They have a closet with a window and you will find lots of membership cards over there. So, when will they join the organization? When they have got a problem! Because, according to our organization, we should not receive any kind of allowance from the members, this is a rule, but usually these mainland

¹⁷ Interview with Linuo, 22 June 2011 (carried out in English).

spouses will be asked to join the organization. And they will pay the membership fees to the organization and usually they will only pay the fees for the first years. Then, when their cases are closed, they will stop paying.¹⁸

The main problem, according to this respondent, was the fact that the organization was perceived as a service provider rather than as something spouses should get involved in order to affect broader change. Yet, in order to fully understand the significance of civic organisations for female migrants, it is important to refer to their subjective understanding of participation. As the same MATSC's leaders explained, marriage migrants had their own way of understanding and using the organization, and this may have contributed to the creation of an environment that was acceptable for them.¹⁹ For instance, during my fieldworks, I came across a variety of reasons that motivated female migrants to join or leave organizations, such as loyalty, gratitude, sense of obligation and attachment towards other "sisters". Above all, membership to an organisation was perceived as a form of insurance for marriage migrants, especially in the first eight years, when they had not acquired full citizenship rights. For example, Majun, a woman in her sixties from Zhejiang who was married to a veteran who showed his distrust towards her on several occasions, stated that for the first years when she did not have a Taiwanese ID, she viewed the organization as a form of protection in case anything went wrong in her life, for instance, if she faced problems with her husband or with her status as an immigrant in Taiwan. Alone in a strange country, she was completely vulnerable with regard to injustice and abuse.²⁰ In such cases, the organization was understood as a form of support, a sort of investment in case of future problems.

Furthermore, separate spaces, intended only for female migrants, easily developed, regardless of the structure of the organization. Within these spaces, marriage migrants informally carried out several activities without the need to involve or inform the leadership. These activities included exchanging information, offering mutual support, child-care and activities covering various interests, such as dancing, cooking and singing. Yet, it was not just a matter of activities. Especially when Taiwanese people were not around, a whole world made of hidden narratives, acts and practices could disclose. These were not merely complaints; rather they embodied my respondents' anger, frustrations, disappointment and hidden resistances against the discriminations they were subjected in all spheres of their lives. They would speak their dialect and freely complain about any matters related to Taiwan, often stressing the superiority of their homeland in comparison to Taiwan. In another paper I interpret these narratives to hidden transcripts of submerged resistances (Momesso 2015a).

¹⁸ Interview with one of MATSC heads, 7 October 2011 (carried out in English).

¹⁹ Interview with one of MATSC heads, 7 October 2011 (carried out in English).

²⁰ Interview with Majun, 14 September 2011.

These informal and hidden resistances, in some occasions, could turn into formal actions. During my fieldwork, I visited two groups created by marriage migrants for marriage migrants, one in Kaohsiung and one in Hualien. Both were service-oriented organizations and did not engage in advocacy activity. The former was the outcome of a rupture that occurred in a former organization. Interestingly, the Chair of the previous organization was the mother-in-law of a marriage migrants from the PRC whose name was Yuqin. After Yuqin decided to divorce her husband, she was forbidden from joining the organization by her husband and her mother-in-law, who were the leaders of the association and therefore had the power to decide. This did not discourage Yuqin though, who decided to create her own association with other spouses who remained loyal to her. After a few years, she recognized that this idea was even better because it was created by spouses for spouses and not by Taiwanese people.²¹ In addition, as Yuqin asserted, being involved in the creation of a new organization and helping other “sisters” to solve their problems, had a positive effect in helping her get through a difficult moment in her life.

The organization in Hualien was the outcome of a slower process of personal change and growth experienced by Hui, a high educated woman from Sichuan province. Hui, grown as atheist, found refuge in a Christian group when she moved to Taiwan and she felt lonely and isolated. Gradually she became one a volunteer within her Church group. Later on she joined CARES and became the representative of this organisation in Hualien. As one of the representatives of PRC marriage migrants in the Commission for Foreign Spouses Fund, a government funded unit. Eventually, after attending professional training to become an authorized social worker, with the help of other sisters, she set up another local organization that provided help to marriage migrants in her town. This woman, without engaging in any confrontational activity against the government, still had the ability to first empower herself and then initiate change beyond her personal sphere, by helping other spouses and representing them before the government.

Depending on the individual and the surrounding context, the process of change could bring about different outcomes. However, the examples of Yuqin and Hui show that, once given certain inputs and resources, or deprived of certain rights or autonomy, marriage migrants could also decide to act differently and change not only their personal situation but also the environment around them. Another important aspect was that both of these groups were the result of the cooperation between foreign and PRC marriage migrants. Although the relatively small size of some cities, such as Kaohsiung and Hualien when compared to Taipei, could be a reason for uniting, instead of dividing,

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Interview with Yuqin, 25 July 2011.

marriage migrants from different ethnic and national background, in order to accumulate resources, it is important to stress another aspect: the selection of potential allies. Once the exclusive alliance between husbands and wives had broken up, new coalitions could easily emerge and the easiest link to make would be with marriage migrants from other countries, who perhaps shared similar problems and interests.

Concluding remarks

Conceived as spaces where marriage migrants could freely go to and fro, where they could build up a network of confidants, sense of community, get to know Taiwanese society and culture, find an alternative to their family life, find protection and, eventually, have an authoritative channel to voice their claims before the government, civil society organisations have been an important sphere of marriage migrants in Taiwan. The literature has covered the various actions that have been organised by civic organisations in the public sphere, but it has neglected the issue of diversity between organisations and the power relations that could shape internal dynamics and assignment of roles.

Diversity, in terms of strategies, structure, membership, philosophy, objectives, seems to suggest the impossibility to talk of these civic associations as a homogenous phenomenon. Yet, fluidity characterised the way marriage migrants related to civil society organisations, suggesting that for marriage migrants these organisations contributed to sort different aspects of their lives. Each place provided something different and migrants picked what they needed the most from each organization. In this dynamic relation between marriage migrants and civil society organizations, not only is the significance of these associations made explicit, but also the heterogeneity of needs and interests of marriage migrants emerges. If these groups were created with the aim to help migrants who faced difficulties in Taiwan, needed protection and support and were often uneducated and from poorer economic classes, the truth is that they were visited by migrants from any backgrounds.

These venues, whose main purpose was to promote a more just and equal treatment for PRC marriage migrants in Taiwan, though, did not manage to fully depart from the discriminative assumptions framing marriage migrants' inferiority and subordination in Taiwan. The nature of these organisations' membership and participation could be a reasons for this. As this paper showed, a unique feature of PRC marriage migrants civic actions was a cooperation between husbands and wives against what they framed as a shared oppression. Yet, this cooperation also produced often neglected dynamics. In the three organizations under analysis, the majority of the membership was

composed of female migrants from the PRC. However, they were led by Taiwanese citizens, mainly males. A clear divide between the supporters and the supported emerged in several situations, the former, mainly Taiwanese citizens and husbands, and the latter, largely marriage migrants from the PRC and wives. A system that tended to position women below men intersected with nationality, which put PRC citizens in an inferior position to Taiwanese citizens.

Within this analysis, it seemed that female migrants were subjected to their Taiwanese spouses or other Taiwanese citizens. However, rather than looking at gender and nationality simply as oppressive factors that produce unequal power relations, it is important to also consider how different individuals responded to this condition. Although some Taiwanese respondents understood marriage migrants' reliance on locals as a consequence of their lack of knowledge, skills, power or attachment to the domestic sphere, marriage migrants saw it as a consequence of the fact that they had a degree of freedom to develop their own actions within the organization. Furthermore, as soon as the circumstances, needs and expectations changed, marriage migrants showed a certain ability to initiate their own actions. As these accounts illustrate, cross-Strait marriage migrants did not simply surrender to a condition of subordination. Rather, they made use of any source of power that was available to them in order to wield influence and implement change.

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