

Media Representation of Taiwan’s New Female Immigrants in Documentaries

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Abstract

Today the new female immigrants mainly from China and ASEAN countries have become large ethnic groups in Taiwan, accompanied by the negative labels and stereotypes of “money marriage”, “commoditized female” and “mercenary marriage” reproduced by the media. Above all, the rhetoric of “foreign bride” hinted that the underprivileged “Others” are hard to integrate into the Taiwan society. To explore the image of these immigrants, this article aims to discuss about the meaning of the media representation of Taiwan’s new female immigrants in documentaries. It takes two documentaries as the main texts to be discussed and by interpretation of shots, language and political/social implications used in these documentaries to produce representation and reflection on these immigrants, it analyzes how these documentaries present the various issues of Taiwan’s new female immigrants and the implication for multiculturalism and the transforming process of these new female immigrants’ position from “outsiders” to “insiders” in the Taiwan society.

Keywords: *media representation, Taiwan's new female immigrants, documentaries, community empowerment*

JEL classification: *F22, I31, J15, L82*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary information society, the public recognize attributes of the other ethnic groups from the media such as TV news, newspapers, journals, movies, TV series and network so as to construct the image and rough sketch of these other ethnic groups. Today the new female immigrants mainly from China and ASEAN countries have become large ethnic groups in Taiwan, accompanied by the negative labels and stereotypes of “money marriage”, “commoditized female” and “mercenary marriage” reproduced by the media. Above all, the rhetoric of “foreign bride” hinted that the underprivileged “Others” are hard to integrate into the Taiwan society.

Among the diversified media, the documentaries are different from feature films at the groundwork of real figures and plots striving to represent the objective atmosphere and lifestyles of Taiwan's new female immigrants. To explore the image of these immigrants, this article aims to discuss about the meaning of the media representation of Taiwan's new female immigrants in documentaries during 1996-2012 and takes two documentaries as the main texts to be discussed. Moreover, it analyzes how these documentaries present the various issues of Taiwan's new female immigrants like housework, lineage, ancestry and civic rights and the immigrant's multiple roles such as daughters-in-law and wives, etc. By interpretation of shots, language and political/social implications used in these documentaries to produce representation and reflection on these immigrants, we can arouse the respect and tolerance

for the multicultural phenomenon of Taiwan's new immigrants and promote the transforming process of their position from "outsiders" to "insiders" in the Taiwan society.

2. Representation, Media Representation and the "Construction of Reality" about Taiwan's New Female Immigrants

S. Hall notes that representation means structuration, molding and meaningful praxis and production.¹ Besides, the process of "representation" are often circumscribed to culture, institution, society, language, norms and consensus.² Therefore, to realize representation is to realize the choice of the masses from the dimension of mass media. Since it is impossible to describe each detail of anybody, the characteristics and appearance must be highlighted or even exaggerated in pictures or feature films.³

"Representation" is a cyclic triangle process composed of three fixed points. No matter whichever factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity or social class, are taken into consideration, "representation as process" consists of three cyclic steps: (1) Reference: what sort of realities are depicted? (2) Production: what part do these factors play in text production? (3) Reception: what influence do these factors have on interpreters?⁴ This process involves the interactive influence of subject and object (media and audience) and the producing step of representation.

As to the definition, "media representation" implies "media that portrays the particular group, community, experience, ideas and themes in special ideology and value perspectives."⁵ To explore this meaning we cannot initiate simply from considering it as the reflection of reality or the mirror of reality. On the contrary, we should inspect to the extent that how the representation authentically makes a real new reality.

For instance, the advertisements of beer and perfume all create idealized experiences to make “representation” closely linked to the use of these products and cannot be substituted with the other vacillating images. This can also be exemplified by the giant global entrepreneur that bears ingrained perspectives for the White, the West and middle class image in fairy tales. By way of Disney World or Disneyland, it creates “artificial realities” through the shaping of paradises that can idealize and purify the discrepancies among diversified political and cultural ideologies in different countries.⁶

The representation of the new female immigrants in the Taiwan media can be observed from TV news, articles in magazines and journals, website, feature film, textbooks and publications which all pilot the public to recognize in the new female immigrants. As mentioned above, representation is inevitably optional – it can conceal some aspects while spotlighting the other aspects. Therefore, representation involves our modality of interpretation and judgment on things. No matter how realistic, all of the contents of texts still need to construct representations rather than just represent as reflections, records, transcriptions or reproductions of “pre-existing reality”.⁷

With comprehension of this prerequisite, most of the media representations of Taiwan’s new female immigrants were accompanied by description of negative label effects such as “money marriage”, “commoditized female” and “mercenary marriage”; it exaggerates the incapable, economically dependent, knowledge-deficit and second-class citizen signs or signals and conceals some real aspects so that the “construction of reality” may leave gaps to our apprehension. Therefore, this article will analyze the text of the documentaries on Taiwan’s new immigrants and how they construct the reality. This article aims to explore the meaning of the documentaries during 1996-2012 on

Taiwan's new female immigrants and take two documentaries for their main texts to be discussed.

3. Form, Spirit and Factor of Documentaries

Bill Nichols (2001) classifies documentaries into six forms: (1) the observational mode; (2) the participatory mode; (3) the reflexive mode; (4) the performative mode; (5) the poetic mode; (6) the expository mode,⁸ and these forms may blend or integrate to shape the unique style of each documentary. For example, the reflexive mode and the performative mode could be compatible in the same film, such as the documentary film *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (2012) which used the reflexive mode and the performative mode at the same time.⁹

The evolution of documentaries makes it difficult to distinguish them precisely from the feature film. As A. Rosenthal (1988) mentions in the "Introduction" of *New challenges for documentary*, the viewpoints about documentaries have transformed from emphasizing on reality into focusing on their forms and languages. Besides, Rosenthal also points out that in the signal system which documentaries used was "language" that makes it approximate to the feature film.¹⁰

Besides, Paula Rabinowitz takes a point of view from the politics of documentary to position it as both a creation of esthetics and information, half real and half fictional, demonstrating among the public, private and political spheres. In addition, one can view it as basically a creature of economics and culture. Precisely because of this trans-boundary characteristics, he persists that "gender" is also one important rhetoric in documentaries while it was always neglected and repressed.¹¹

In addition, one of the factors in documentary or art is "exchange". Likewise, social photographer Dorothea Lange describes one of the conditions of composition in her *Migrant Mother* photography series as

“exchange”. She said, “... she (the actor) knew maybe I will do something for her and she will do something for me in return, too”. This is the economics of documentaries. Furthermore, Paula Rabinowitz indicates that the most sensitive factors are position, meaning, interpretation and narratives. Documentaries need to be narrated no matter what it contains in reports, static image or dynamic image. The presentation of subjects, section-cuttings and subtitles were all narrating. The photography may be mute but the documentary is always talking to express the value of specific topic.¹²

4. An Overview of Characteristics of Documentary Films about Taiwan’s New Female Immigrants

4.1. Factors Contributing to the Sudden Increase of Documentaries about Taiwan’s New Female Immigrants

There are several factors that contributed to the sudden increase of documentaries about Taiwan’s new female immigrants in the late 1990s: the emergence of immigrant marriage, the enlargement of channels and organizations for immigrants to engage in the Taiwan society and that the filmmakers were deeply interested in the related subjects. For example, *The Bride from the Opposite Site* (1996) delineated exogamy of the case of a Kinmen and Xiamen couple that brought massive conflicts and arguments. All of the documentaries (and feature films) about immigrants and immigrant labor had broad subjects and contents and most of the films illustrated in the next section are documentaries (while a few of them were feature films) to present a macroscopic view. The characteristics of these documentaries during 1996-2012 can be summarized as in the following subsection.

4.2. Characteristics and Subjects of the Documentaries

Firstly, we can see the breadth and depth of the subjects of the films: the theme of immigrant labor and their circumstances (*Homesick Eyes* (1997), *Exiling from Asia* (1999), *Thai Workers in Taiwan: A Lottery for Lifelong Debt?* (Thai Labor Campaign) (2006)), illegal immigrant labor (*The Floating Ball* (2000), *Chronicle of the Sea* (2004)), female immigrant and the prostitution industry in Taiwan (*Durian Durian* (2000) (feature film), *To See or Not To See ?* (2003)), female immigrant diverting themselves from loneliness in life (*County Road 184* (2001)), interviews with female immigrant about their marriage and life/accompanying them to return to their mother countries (*Foreign Brides In Meinung* (2003), *A-Tsao Go Go Go* (2006)), record of “mercenary marriage” (*Imported Wife* (2003), *My Rehearsing Marriage* (2003)), abject status of Mainland China spouses (*Marriages on the Borders* (2003)), female immigrant integrating into the Taiwan society successfully (*Shei-Ting and Her Song* (2003)), policy-based issues of foreign labor in Taiwan (*Shattered Dreams* (2003)), complicated mood of housemaid (*Yuning's Return* (2004), *Nyonya's Taste of Life* (2007)), founding and summary of the new immigrant organization, the Trans-Asia Sisterhood (*They Came from Overseas To Make a Home* (2005)), children's diasporas under parents of Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriage (*Taiwan Children on Mekong River* (2005)), human rights and income equality of immigrant labor (*International Migrant in Taiwan (Gao-Jie Thai Workers' Diaries)* (in Thai language) (2006)), new immigrants striving for the education rights of their children (*Immigrants Paradise* (2007) (feature film on TV)), challenges and tenacity of new female immigrants (*Voyage to Happiness* (2007) (documentary on TV)), vivid life portrait of foreign nursing workers (*Hospital Wing 8 East* (2008), *Money and Honey* (2011)), self-identity issues resulted from foreign marriage (*A+B=?* (2009) (animation)), bumpy road of female

immigrants in the Taiwan New Immigrants Association (*The Power of Women* (2009), *Out/Marriage* (2012)), political praxis process of the Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association in Taiwan (*Let's Not Be Afraid!* (2010)).

Secondly, it is noteworthy that the volume of documentaries overwhelmed feature films in this period. Documentaries are more adept in interpretations of culture politics and in the field of struggle. Furthermore, these new immigrant films are sharply critical of the manipulation of representation in meaning, identity, values, signature, memory, desire and horror and some are involved in the arguments of power operating and resource distributing.¹³

Thirdly, the establishment of the new immigrant organization, Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association, which did push the wave for the development of documentaries of Taiwan's new female immigrants. Activities of Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association bridged the stages and social/political channels in Taiwan's society. Precisely, the documentaries produced by the organization did not only seek collective identities and destigmatization of new immigrants but were also used to be an empowerment instrument¹⁴ for reshaping their identities and status.

5. Documentaries as Main Texts To Be Discussed:

(1) *My Imported Wife*, (2) *Let's Not Be Afraid!*

5.1. *My Imported Wife*

From the beginning the title, "My Imported Wife", revealed the satirical meaning of this film and it described the story of a Taiwanese male suffering from cerebral palsy who married a Cambodian bride and explored whether such marriage is a kind of "mercenary marriage". The main filming techniques were mixtures of the observational mode and

participatory mode.¹⁵ In the performance of observational mode, lots of off-screen penetrated the whole film. Although guided by observational views, it is undoubtedly permeated with the director's subjective judgment about immigrant marriage.¹⁶ The other technique for representation of observational mode would be the insert of the conversations between the photographer and Huang (the Taiwanese male suffering from cerebral palsy) which was mentioned lightly and less subjective in the process of a trip of accompanying the "Imported Wife" to visit her country and relatives.

Moreover, the director and photographer of this film were all males so as to represent less philanthropy for new female immigrants and less feminism. They interviewed one lady working at a night club who had a more positive view on Huang; however, the bureaucracies and scholars showed more negative views and tagged the label of "commoditized marriage" on Huang and his wife.¹⁷ The mode of antithesis was so unambivalent that it consists of several sets of factors for sharp contrast: the disabled and the normal, poverty and wealth, the age gaps of this couple, Taiwanese culture and Cambodian culture¹⁸ – to highlight the core of "commoditized marriage".

Furthermore, this film went along the narrative axis of "commoditized marriage" by describing two accidents: the first one is when Huang brought his wife back to the Cambodian village, the villagers cast contemptuous vision on Huang; however, Huang's mother-in-law anticipated much about the material capacity Huang would bring and which Huang was also deeply proud of himself. The second event was the visit of Huang's mother-in-law to Taiwan, accompanying murmurs of discontent resulted from the couple's life and economic situation. This made Huang, his mother-in-law and his wife falling into continuously furious quarrel so as to omit the existence of cine camera and this was similar to the "scenario" of "performative mode" of

documentaries. Indeed, there were some implications that they desired the camera to record and witness.¹⁹ Hence, these two events present that the standing of new female immigrants was so humble, servile and abject that equates trade-off in money. The possibility to escape from poverty formed the basis of this foreign marriage and the trip of visiting the wife's mother country further proved this argument.

5.2. Let's Not Be Afraid!

The subject of this film was the history of Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association (TASA) and its social praxis process. The most important feature of this film was that the filmmakers and the actors are from the same group. According to Wei-Hsuan Chou, the social praxis process of TASA can be divided into three periods: (1) period of initiation (1995-2003); (2) period of transformation (2003-2007); (3) period of political involvement (2007-).²⁰ In the period of transformation, TASA turned into a non-profit organization (NPO) from "The Literacy Program for Foreign Brides in Mei-Lung" (美濃新娘識字班) period of initiation and began to enlarge its social involvement. As to period of political involvement, these new female immigrants went beyond the previous experience to practice their public engagement with strategies of protest, demonstration, public hearing, symposium and urged the government to revise the related law to enhance their social positions and protective mechanism of human rights.

The techniques of this film also corresponded to the above three-stage process of enhancing their social positions and human rights. The English title of this film "Let's Not Be Afraid!" (in the Thai language, (*mai tong ghua*)) and the scene of releasing sky lanterns which pointed out their belief that "sky lanterns signify the hope"²¹ all encouraged the new immigrants to going forward without fear. The other

techniques of such belief can be traced with, for example, the following sections²²:

“The government set up National Immigration Agency without discussing publicly and 75% of the human resource deployment were policemen who obviously regarded immigrants and immigrant labors as potential criminals. Besides, there’s no human rights protective mechanism that could help to bring about this protest.” (action drama on the street that protested the coercion of the Taiwan Garrison Command)

“We didn’t have maternal home in Taiwan and the Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association (TASA) is our maternal home.” (the dining together of new female immigrants in Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association (TASA))

“This was a good chance to vocalize for ourselves. I was tramped accidentally on action drama and nevertheless was stepped on in real life more seriously.” (action drama and protest on the street)

“We need to engage in international activities of immigrants and immigrant labors.” “Migration in society is like a mirror which reflects pre-existing values and advocates the real democracy, human rights and multiculturalism; everyone should take part in the human right movements of immigrants.” (subtitles at the ending of this film)

Besides, this documentary aims to construct social positions and try to confront the cultural hegemony of mainstream viewpoints. The specialty in this film still included the insert of folk songs to represent the essence of “multiculturalism”.²³ The folk songs of their countries

were not representation of exotic savor anymore but the constructive display of cultural values about their mother countries. Actually, since *Let's Not Be Afraid!* (2010) was released, there had been an incremental focus on this type of films directed by immigrants themselves although there was no high volume of production. They can be exemplified by the subsequent documentaries *Out/Marriage* (2012) and *The Dancing Children* (2012).

Owing to the fact that the filmmakers are also the photographed people, the narrative language and view points were polarized and sequential with singular logics that often centered around the appeal of the character of “Others”. This filmmaking and film-editing by immigrants themselves sharply exposed the neglect and stigmatization that immigrants have been treated with and what they strive for. This also broke through the statement by Laura Mulvey that females are always “Others” on the film from the angle of “male gaze”.²⁴ The new female immigrants had embarrassing circumstances of “Double Others” but the director turned this adverse circumstance into a positive action of community empowerment.

6. Conclusion

Owing to the unique narrative language that documentaries bear, combinations of subjects on immigrants and immigrant labor attracted the filmmakers so much. How to elaborate the “reality” and speak with a special story had become challenges in documentaries of new female immigrants since the late 1990s in Taiwan. The themes of human rights became the core concept of this type of films. For instance, in *My Imported Wife* (2003) the director dealt the “commoditized marriage” with subjective and plain language and shots.

Another film, *Let's Not Be Afraid!* (2010), that this article analyzed had provided an angle of view based on the concept of “empowerment”. The documentaries gave the new female immigrants a more active role that can handle the power of telling stories and reshape their perspectives about working rights, education rights of their children and the other human rights, etc. The process of “empowerment” cannot be separated from the process of their establishment of NPO and social/political praxis. Thus, the combination of Trans-Asia Sisterhood Association (TASA) and *Let's Not be Afraid!* (2010) could be a fine example. To sum up, in retrospect and from reviewing those documentaries we can observe that what the new immigrants require was not just to be treated equally with multiculturalism but also what they are appealing most for will be the complete civic rights and human rights.

Notes

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23. In Wan-Ching Ke's Ph.D. thesis, she described about the film that in the ending part the song was sung in turn in several languages like Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian language, Filipino language, Cambodian language and Chinese. The texts of the song revealed their decision to go forward and fight for the dreams of tomorrow. (影片最後結束的歌曲以越語、泰語、印尼語、菲律賓語、柬埔寨語、及中文輪流演唱：「每一個天燈都帶著祝福與希望往上飛，姊妹賣冬瓜，姊妹不要怕，天燈飛得越高，越遠，我們越接近夢想。」影片在充滿街頭戰鬥力的音樂、歌曲：「起來，堅強勇敢的姊妹，越語：起來，全世界受苦的人，泰語：滿腔的熱血已經沸騰，印尼語：要為真理為鬥爭，菲律賓語：舊世界打得落花流水，英語：姊妹們起來，起來。柬埔寨語：不要說我們一無所有，中文：我們要做天下的主人，這是最後的鬥爭，團結起來到明天，Internationale 就一定要實現，這是最後的鬥爭，團結起來到明天，Internationale 就一定要實現。」) Ke, Wan-Ching (柯妤青) (2013). <南洋新移民女性錄影自拍學習歷程及其影音再現之研究> [research on self-filming by female immigrants from South East Asia: learning process and self-representation], Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Graduate Institute of Adult Education at the National Kaohsiung Normal University (國立高雄師範大學成人教育研究所博士論文), July 2013. <<https://www.gender.edu.tw/upload/Academy/Thesis/%E6%9F%AF%E5%A6%A7%E9%9D%92%E8%AB%96%E6%96%87.pdf>>
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