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# Vietnamese immigrant women's learning in Taiwanese higher education

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## Abstract

According to a sociocultural approach to adult learning, this study aims to explore the learning experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwanese higher education. Based on the interviews of 11 married Vietnamese immigrant brides, it was found that all of the immigrant women emphasized the importance of pursuing higher education in Taiwan. With permission from their husbands, these immigrant women participated in higher education to develop the human and cultural capital to fulfill their expected responsibilities both in their homeland and in their host societies and to combat discrimination from Taiwanese. In the Taiwanese-centered higher education, immigrant wives continuously worked hard to prove themselves competent and negotiate their voice and cultural identity. Participating in higher education and even obtaining a Taiwanese master's degree empowered most of these women, gaining self-confidence and a voice in the family and facilitating their settlement into Taiwanese society. For these female immigrants, both their culture and early socialization in Vietnam and sociocultural life experiences in Taiwan affected their learning in their pursuit of Taiwanese higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, socioeconomically disadvantaged men in wealthier Asian countries have sought spouses overseas, whereas women in less economically developed countries have often move abroad

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in pursuit of a better life (Bélanger, Lee, & Wang, 2010). For two decades, a rapidly increasing number of immigrant women have arrived in Taiwan from Vietnam through commercially arranged marriages. (Ministry of the Interior, 2013). For female immigrants, participation in learning and higher education in host countries, which is associated with possibilities for empowerment, upward social mobility, and economic advancement through participation in labor market is particularly important for career development (Ghosh, 2000). Therefore, drawing on a sociocultural approach to adult learning, this study aims to understand the learning experiences among Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwanese higher education.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1 Participants*

Eleven Vietnamese immigrant women were invited to participate in this study using a snowball sampling. All of them migrated to Taiwan through marrying Taiwanese men and had completed or had been enrolled in a formal graduate or undergraduate program in a university for at least two years in Taiwan. The informants ranged in ages from 27 to 48 years, with the length of time residing in Taiwan ranging from 5 to 18 years. They started to pursue Taiwanese higher education after they had moved to Taiwan for an average of 6.2 years. In Taiwan, of them, two had been working on bachelor's degrees for two or three years, six had Taiwanese master's degrees, and four had Taiwanese master's degrees and had been working on doctoral degrees. Of the participants, eight had met their husbands through a marriage broker while four had free-selection marriage. Except for Hilary, who was pregnant, all of them had at least one child.

### *2.2 Data collection and analysis*

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese, voice-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. After the transcription, the interview texts were analyzed using within- and cross-case analyses. The process of member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) was used to guarantee the trustworthiness of the research analysis.

## **3. Results**

### *4.1 Higher education in Taiwan as Human and Cultural Capital*

#### *4.1.1 Embracing the instrumental value of education*

All of these women emphasized the importance of pursuing education within the Vietnamese society and within their families. Learning to value education was rooted in these women's early socialization in their homeland. In the Vietnamese society, because of Confucian culture which has emphasized learning, education has been valued as the key to individuals' upward social mobility and economic stability and symbolized their success and achievement in the society. Additionally, in

1970s, most of the people in Vietnam were economically disadvantaged and had to lift themselves out of poverty only through obtaining education. Therefore, the parents of these Vietnamese women usually held strong aspirations for their children to obtain as much education as possible, sometimes at great sacrifices. However, women's education, while encouraged and emphasized, held a lesser value than men's both in terms of its priority and in the economic support women receive to continue their education within the families because of men's central roles as heads of the family in the Vietnamese patriarchal family system. As Carol noted, "Like most of the Vietnamese, my parents always believed that obtaining education was the only way to find the room at the top of the society. Although my parents encouraged the children to study hard, at first they just supported my brothers to continue the pursuit of education because my family was too poor to afford the educational expense of all the children and because my parents preferred sons to daughters like most of the Vietnamese. However, because my brothers quitted studying, my parents just encouraged me to further the university studying. In order to pay my university tuitions, my father even sold the only valuable asset of my family and his vehicle of work, the motorcycle."

#### 4.1.2 Combating Taiwanese discrimination against immigrant women and obtaining better employment

The participants all felt that in the Taiwanese society, they were materialized and stigmatized because of their transnational marriage and national background. "In Taiwan, the media usually portrays immigrant women as illiterate ones from countries with backward economy, victims of domestic violence, social problem makers, and even the 'runaway brides with husbands' money.' Being a marriage immigrant woman from so-called developing country, my motivation to migrate to Taiwan was stereotyped as similar to that of an Asian mail-order bride or an immigrant labour, who people believe, would be willing to pay any price to make money in Taiwan. Some Taiwanese believed that immigrant women come to Taiwan just for husband's money or for earning money by working on sex trade," Doris said angrily. "Some of my neighbours even forbid their children to play with my daughter. Even the school teacher of my child also looked down on me and thought that I was too illiterate to read the parent-teacher communication note," Flora noted.

Because within Vietnamese families, women received the same encouragement as men to seek employment to support the household economy (Barbieri & Bèlanger, 2009) and because a shortage of income within the Taiwanese family was very stressful for immigrant women, most of the women pursued jobs after migrating to Taiwan. However, most of these women felt marginalized, excluded, and discriminated in the Taiwanese workplaces. Due to social stigmas against marriage immigrants, differences in labour market networks, and the lack of recognition of immigrant women's foreign credentials and work experiences, these highly educated, skilled female immigrants often found low-pay, entry level jobs with poor work environment, discriminatory practices, and exploited benefits, which made it difficult for them to retain the job.

#### 4.1.3 Immediate families' permissions

Because transnational marriages have contributed to the lack of a trusting marital relationship, many Taiwanese husbands tend to force immigrant brides into behaviours within the limited normative expectations and social contacts and disapprove the immigrant brides' furthering new learning lest they get smarter, acquire some "bad habits", and then leave home. However, these women in this study thought that their motivation for enrolling in Taiwanese undergraduate or graduate study primarily originated from their husbands' supports and promise of taking up the household and childcare responsibilities. These participants felt that compared to other Taiwanese men, their husbands appeared less patriarchal and more egalitarian. Most of their husbands respected these immigrant women's decision of furthering learning and expected their wives to be more integrated into Taiwanese society through obtaining advanced education.

## **4.2 Negotiating their space both in Taiwanese higher education**

### *4.2.1 Working much harder to prove themselves competent*

All of these women highlighted that they had been studying much harder than their counterparts to keep up with the peers and to prove themselves competent while being enrolling in higher education in Taiwan. Thus, most of them had been proud of winning scholarship. The intensive advanced curriculum in higher education with extensive terminology made it difficult for the participants with basic Chinese proficiency to initially understand the instruction and meet the professors' requirements for assignments. Thus, most of these women in this study felt that as immigrant women, they had to continually prove themselves competent to survive in the Taiwanese higher education institutions.

Except for one, all of these women in this study felt that few of the faculty were sensitive to their particular living experiences and that the delivery of the instruction did not consider their cultural difference that these women students faced. These women had minimal relationships with and supports from the faculty, except for oral encouragement. However, almost all of the participants did not report feeling marginalized and accepted the nationality-blind instruction and interaction as a given in the higher education classroom because they thought that they were competent to manage their learning and they could have some relief and resilience in the margins.

### *4.2.2 Negotiating voices and identity*

All of the participants agreed that at first, speaking in class was one of the greatest challenges that they confronted in the Taiwanese undergraduate or graduate classrooms because of their different accent, their early schooling, their unfamiliarity with the Taiwanese classroom cultures, and the lack of understanding the professional instruction. Thus, in the beginning, these women were silent learners. However, as these participants improved their Chinese proficiency, gained knowledge about the atmosphere of Taiwanese higher education class, and acquired more professional learning as well as the Taiwanese media began to praise some of these women's pursuit of higher education in Taiwan, their self-confidence and self-identity improved over time. These participants increasingly realized that silence in class often made individuals ignored and marginalized in the learning process.

Because of the power of voice in the demonstration of knowledge and competence, based on their increased self-confidence and self-identity, most of the participants continually drove themselves to negotiate the ideas of voice to improve their visibility in class. Additionally, some of the participants even purposefully took the courses or made the presentation relevant to their cross-border backgrounds and share their experiences in class in order to facilitate the positive visibility of immigrant women and their home country, which in turn would enhance their understanding of their homeland and then enrich their identity . “After getting used to the culture of Taiwanese graduate study, I became more confident. I expected people to understand immigrant women and my homeland more, which was one of my motivations for pursuing Taiwanese higher education. Thus, I attempted to grapple the opportunities to present the reports concerning my transnational immigration experiences or the country of my origin... I also intendedly took the courses in which my background as an immigrant woman could be used as a reference point for discussing.

### **4.3 Getting self-empowerment with ongoing settlement into Taiwanese society**

Persevering with completing the higher education programs, winning a scholarship from the universities, or even obtaining Taiwanese master’s degrees, which required achieving Chinese proficiency, professional competency, and a certain level of critical thinking, and overcoming difficulties, were significant achievements for these Vietnamese women. In addition, completing the Taiwanese higher education and receiving the academic certificates made it much easier for most of these female immigrants to obtain jobs of better salaries than before, which increased their income and benefitted the family finances. Furthermore, most of the women also had more confidence in their parenting ability as they received more higher education in Taiwan with understanding Taiwanese educational system more and developing professional competency. These achievements contributed to the participants’ self-empowerment, including positive feelings of self-worth, self-growth, and economic independence.

Participating in Taiwanese higher education and even obtaining academic degrees also contributed to these immigrant brides’ integration and settlement into Taiwanese society. Most of the women gained a strong voice that encouraged their husbands and in-laws to listen to them in family affairs through their contributing more to the family economics and their Taiwanese higher education experiences. As Jessica noted, “After completing the Taiwanese graduate study and getting a better job of more income, the relationship between my mother-in-law and me improves. My husband and mother-in-law often ask for my opinions about family affairs. They even often show off my master’s diploma to their friends.” Additionally, most of the women had gradually adapted to, understood, appreciated and even identified Taiwanese society and culture more as they participated in Taiwanese higher education even some Taiwanese still had discriminated against marriage immigrant women from south-eastern Asia. Notably, except for Amy, all of the women had never thought about applying for an Taiwanese ID card although they understood the importance of an ID card and they got more integrated into Taiwanese society. As Doris highlighted, “ Even though I like Taiwan very much, but I am still Vietnamese. I have to preserve my original nationality that is my root and pride.”

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on a sociocultural approach to adult learning, this study aims to explore the learning experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwanese higher education. Based on the interviews of 11 married Vietnamese immigrant brides, it was found that all of the immigrant women emphasized the importance of pursuing higher education in Taiwan. With permission from their husbands, these immigrant women participated in higher education to develop the human and cultural capital to fulfill their expected responsibilities both in their homeland and in their host societies and to combat discrimination from Taiwanese. In the nationality-blind higher education, immigrant wives continuously worked hard to prove themselves competent and negotiate their voice and cultural identity. Participating in higher education and even obtaining a Taiwanese master's degree empowered most of these women, gaining self-confidence and a voice in the family and facilitating their settlement into Taiwanese society. For these female immigrants, both their culture and early socialization in Vietnam and sociocultural life experiences in Taiwan affected their learning in their pursuit of Taiwanese higher education.

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