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Gender and transnational migration: Vietnamese women workers and negotiation of self-identity in multicultural Taiwan

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Abstract:

The process of globalization has led to the creation of many international networks of migrants. Thus, international migration has emerged as a critical issue throughout the world in the past few decades. In Taiwan, the government legally opened the gate for migrants in 1989. The new wave of immigrants over the past decade has caused the landscape of Taiwan society to change rapidly, and move towards a more multicultural society. As a result, this paper focuses on migrant women from Vietnam who have come to Taiwan as workers and aims to identify how these women (re)configure their identities under conditions of diaspora. The focus will then shift to a study of the strategies which these women employed to transnationally maintain their links to “home” (social, financial, emotional, etc.) . Inhabiting transnational social spaces, migrants attempt to create a social inclusion in their everyday urban contexts. The paper argues that notions of gender differences affect migrant women’s negotiations of self-identity and the way these women connect to “ home ” . The paper uses a case study of temporary transnational women workers in Tainan city.

Key words: Vietnamese, gender, migration, identity

Introduction

The literature covering migration is routinely classified according to particular theoretical models. In the broader historical perspective of migration theory, there are three main approaches used: neo-classical economic equilibrium theory, the historical-structural approach and migration systems theory (Hugo 1993:7-12). Additionally,

migration theory also touches on world systems (Wallerstein 1976) and dual labor market theory (Piore 1979), where the structuralist locates international migration within the evolving world economic and political order (Grieco & Boyd 1998). More recently, theoretical treatments of international migration within the context of global capitalist change have been inspired by poststructuralist ideas (Brennda 2000:423). Moreover, several of these works have focused on the construction of subjectivity. In fact, the notion of diaspora identity provides a central concept for understanding deterritorialization, the growth of complex trans-national and multiple forms of identification and trans-border cultural production (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1992).

In this context, this paper focuses on Vietnamese trans-migrant women who have traveled to Taiwan for work. The main aim is to not only understand how these women (re)configure their identities under conditions of diaspora, but also identify the strategies these women employ to negotiate their identities in navigating the space between “home” and “host”. This paper argues that notions of gender differences affect migrant women’s negotiations of self-identity and the way these women connect to “ home” .

Negotiation of identity and trans-migrant women

Migrations, understood as dynamic processes, offer ideal conditions to analyze the construction and transformation of social identities in the globalized world. Migration and identity negotiation have a close relationship. In fact, migration processes directly affect an immigrant’s identity.

Concept of identity: First, we should define the concept of identity. The concept of self and identity has an extensive background in the social sciences and their parent discipline philosophy, representing an important concern for philosophers as well as psychologists and sociologists. The growing literature on self and identity also reflects the increasing significance of its role in current time (Calhoun 1994; Dunn 1998; Gleason 1983; Gubrium & Holstein 2001). So, what is “identity”? How can we define it?

Stets & Burke (2000, 2003) formulate the general theory of identity, synthesizing the identity theory and social identity theory in social psychology. Identity theory looks at

self as occupying a role. Identity is derived from the internalization of role expectations and the performance of that role. According to Hogg, Terry, and White (1995), identity theory sets out to explain individuals' role-related behaviors' (p. 255). In particular, it explains social behavior in terms of the reciprocal relations between self and society. In identity theory, the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications (Stets, J.E & Burke, P.J 2000:224). The core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Burke and Tully 1997). This process is called identification (McCall and Simmons 1978). Through the process of identification, an identity is formed. Additionally, as understood in the theory of essentialism, the concept of identity is inherent and immutable.

In social identity theory, a social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg and Abrams 1988). A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. People are usually members of many different groups, for example, groupings based on gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, etc. Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the values and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1978: 63). As Hogg and Abrams (1988) make clear, the social categories in which individuals place themselves are parts of a structured society and exist only in relation to other contrasting categories. The social categories precede individuals, individuals are born into an already structured society. Once in society, people derive their identity or sense of self largely from the social categories to which they belong.

Concept of identity negotiation: Symbolic interactionist theory postulates that people look to the reactions they receive from others to help them define their identity (Charon 1998). The process of identity formation and identity negotiation unfolds as we interact in social situations. This negotiation process involves a person doing two things simultaneously: (1) continuously labeling others and attributing identities to them, and (2)

continuously announcing to others the identity that they think they are (Charon 1998: 163). Who people are depends on interaction, definition, and redefinition, what refer to as a negotiation process.

Anti-essentialism argues that identities are negotiated. The idea that identities are negotiated originated in the sociological literature during the middle of the 20th century. A leading figure in this movement was Goffman (1959, 1961), who asserted that the first order of business in social interaction is establishing a “working consensus” or agreement regarding the roles each person will assume in the interaction. Weinstein and Deutschberger (1964) built on this work by elaborating the interpersonal processes that unfold after interaction partners reach an initial working consensus. Later scholars further expanded the formulation, emphasizing the tendency for people to maximize interpersonal harmony by gravitating toward social settings that seem likely to offer support for their identities or self-views (McCall & Simmons 1966) (all in Swann Jr., E. Johnson & K. Bosson 2009). Within psychology, these ideas were elaborated by Secord and Backman (1965) and Schlenker (1985).

Swann has been working to develop the concept of “identity negotiation” (1987). Swann emphasized the tension between two competing processes in social interaction, behavioral confirmation and self-verification. Behavioural confirmation occurs when one person (the “perceiver”) encourages another person (the “target”) to behave in ways that confirm the expectancies of the perceiver (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Snyder & Klein 2005; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid 1977) (All in Swann Jr, E. Johnson & K. Bosson 2009). Self-verification occurs when the “target” persuades the “perceiver” to behave in a manner that verifies the target’s firmly held self-views or identities (Swann 1983). Identity negotiation refers to the processes through which people reach agreements regarding “who is who” in their relationships. The identity negotiation formulation can be traced to the notion that people derive self-knowledge from social interaction. The process of identity negotiation thus establishes what people can expect of one another. Identity negotiation thus provides the interpersonal “glue” that holds relationships together.

Migrations, understood as dynamic processes, offer the ideal conditions to analyze the construction and transformation of social identities in the globalized world. Migration and identity negotiation have a close relationship. Migration processes effect immigrant's identity. The concept of identity negotiation can be applied to understand the migration process. It is clear that in cross-border journeys, migrants not only maintain connections with their homelands but also "create fluid and multiple identities grounded both in their society of origin and in the host society" (Glick Schiller, Basch & Szanton Blanc 1992: 11). Migrants do not simply abandon their homeland identity. They use a wide range of strategies to reaffirm elements of their cultural identities to maintain links to their roots while negotiating the values and norms of their host societies in rewriting their identities (Shirlenan Huang, Peggy Teo, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh 2000: 391). Much of the work on the negotiations of diasporic identities have focused on "racial", "ethnic", "cultural", or "national" identities (Nonini & Ong 1997; van der Veer 1995). However, there is also now increasing recognition that identity negotiation processes need to avoid gender-blindness and instead pay heed to the fact that the diasporic experiences of men and women are different and are shaped by gender politics (Alicea 1997; Nagar 1998; Westwood 1995) (all in Brenda, 2000). Scholars argue that women's experiences are particularly relevant in revealing the (in) ability of trans-migrants to contest and shape new identities for themselves in diaspora. Migrant women actively (re)negotiate their identities in the context of their positionality within the family, the home-nation, the host-society, and the larger global space. For instance, we can find several examples of the identity negotiation experiences of Filipino women in studies by Barber (2000), Suzuki (2000) and Yeoh and Huang (2000). In Dwyer's (2000), Loyd Evans and Bowlby's (2000), Dwyer's (2000) and Elmhirst (2000)'s papers, in varying degrees, scholars continually reference a version of femininity tied to the women's religion, ethnic group, and natal land. In studying about international marriage, scholars have also focused on the identity negotiation of Asia immigrant brides in relation to their host society (Qiu, Jiao Wen 2005; Ho, Kit Mui 2006).

Identity negotiations in the migration process are complex, especially for women. Applying the concept of identity negotiation, this paper examines the way Vietnamese women workers construct their identities under conditions of diaspora.

Migration policy of the Taiwan Government

By the end of 1980's Taiwan's industrial development gradually underwent a structural adjustment by giving priority to industries with less technology, which in turn required a great number of low-skilled workers. However, Taiwan's domestic human resources failed to meet such a requirement, and thus many illegal workers coming from Southeast Asia, mainly from the Philippines, started to fill in the gap. In fact, Chinese brokers in the Philippines played a crucial role in bringing workers to Taiwan without the sanction of the government (Yuan 1991).

In 1989, Taiwan's government opened the gate for the short-term employment of foreign workers with the development of the "14 critical construction items" (十四項重大建設). Among other things, this policy focused on the need for a great quantity of workers. Thus, in order to meet the demand for the labour market, the Government also issued the "Specialized Method" 「專案方式」 that officially allowed low-skilled foreign workers from Southeast Asia to come to Taiwan to work. In 1992, the Legislative Yuan of Republic of China (Taiwan) passed the "Employment Service Law" (就業服務法), which included a chapter that allowed Taiwan factories to receive foreign workers (Lie 2002). These actions may all be seen as responses to the growing need for low-wage labour-intensive industries that have lost their competitive advantage in the global market (Lan 2000).

The legalization of migrant workers started with particular industries, including construction and labour-intensive manufacturing. Later, a larger variety of industries were allowed to hire migrants, and the number of working permits issued has grown gradually. Most job offers for foreign workers in Taiwan are concentrated in low-skilled positions, or the so-called "three D jobs" (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) (Lan 2000). Taiwanese policy for receiving foreign workers is mainly based on four principles: (1) Foreign workers should address the deficiency in the number of domestic workers but should not affect the employment interests of native workers; (2) Foreign workers may work in Taiwan but should not be able to immigrate to Taiwan; (3), Foreign workers should not affect social order and security; (4) Foreign workers should not hinder

Taiwan's economic and industrial development (Tang 2003). Moreover, in order to better control and manage the time that foreign workers spend in Taiwan, the Government stipulated that each foreign worker is only entitled to work in Taiwan for three years. After these three years, if permitted by the employer, the labor time may be extended for another three years. After six years, the workers must return to their country and cannot extend their working time. In 2008, the government extended the overall labor time for foreign workers to nine years.

The method that the Taiwanese government employs to select foreign workers not only includes factors like geographical distance and cultural affinity, but also incorporates political concerns and economic interests. Taiwan's government has developed an "economic diplomatic policy" that centers bilateral relations on increasing international trade and promotes foreign investment grounded on the island's economic power (Lan 2000). In 1994 Taiwan's president, Lee Teng-Huei, formally announced a "Going South" policy that encouraged direct foreign investment in Southeast Asia. As a result of the "Going South" policy, great numbers of migrant workers from Southeast Asia have come to Taiwan to work. Initially, from 1994 to 2006, most of the workers who came to Taiwan were from the Philippines and Thailand. Thereafter, due to changes in the policy for receiving workers, Indonesian and Vietnamese workers now occupy the dominant position in the foreign labor market in Taiwan. According to statistics by Taiwan's Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training in July 2009, at present, Taiwan has about 343,228 foreign workers, mainly from Southeast Asia. Among them, Indonesian workers occupy the greatest quantity: 135,408 people, followed by Vietnam: 77,534 people, Philippines: 68,171 people and ending with Thailand: 62,102 people (Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training 2009).

Although the Taiwanese government's policy for attracting foreign workers began in the early 1990s, it was not until May 1999 that the governments of Taiwan and Vietnam officially concluded the bilateral "Agreement on Mobilizing and Receiving Vietnamese workers" (派遣及接納越南勞工協定) (Tang 2003). In November 1999, the first group of Vietnamese migrant workers, 131 in all, arrived in Taiwan. At the end of 2000, there were 7,746 Vietnamese workers, in total, in Taiwan. The number of

Vietnamese workers in Taiwan has continued to grow. By the end of 2006, the number of Vietnamese workers in Taiwan was 81,060 people, but by July 2009, the number of Vietnamese workers in Taiwan had dipped to 77,534 people.

The new wave of foreign workers over the past decade has caused the landscape of Taiwan society to change rapidly, and move towards a more multicultural picture. Thus, this paper focuses on Vietnamese women workers in Taiwan and aims to examine their identity negotiation processes between “host” and “home”.

Method of research:

To support the main arguments of this study, extensive fieldwork was undertaken in Tainan, Taiwan. This paper is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews collected between September 2010 and December 2011. I frequented many of the gathering spaces of Vietnamese, such as Tainan Park, restaurants, karaoke parlors, bars, pubs, etc. on Sundays. I also went to their workplaces as well as their dormitories. I observed and even participated in the daily lives of the Vietnamese women workers, including activities such as working at home, shopping, going to gatherings, visiting friends, attending Mandarin language course, etc. These above activities allowed me to get a broad picture of the women’s life, as well as understand their goals, motives, and strategies. To set up networks for these Vietnamese immigrants, the method of “snowball-sampling” has been utilized.

I conducted interviews with 34 Vietnamese women workers (including 10 domestic workers and 24 factory workers). The interviews ranged from 1 hour to 3 hours in length. In general, most of the workers were between the ages of 20 and 35, and married rather than single. During these in-depth interviews, the women workers were asked about their life histories and migration experiences, reasons for seeking work abroad, their work experiences, and their contact with their homeland and with relatives. In addition, information from the mass media of Vietnamese in Taiwan, such as the “Sifangbao newspaper” (四方報) and RTI (Radio Taiwan International), as well as the Taiwanese Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, Taiwan Council of Labour

Affairs, has also been utilized in order to assist in the analysis of the women workers.

Identity negotiation of Vietnamese women workers

Negotiating identity in host society

The feminization of migration has accelerated worldwide since the 1980s as more women have joined the global labour force. In particular, Asia's labour migration has been increasingly feminized (Yamanaka, K and Piper N 2005). Women are on the move in all parts of the world. They make the decision to move abroad because of a host of "push" factors in their countries of origin, which include: family obligations, unemployment, low wages, poverty, limited social and economic opportunities and the desire to expand their horizons. In Vietnam, migration is not a recent phenomenon. Vietnamese have moved across borders for economic and political reasons for decades. In fact, international migration in the form of labour export is becoming increasingly important in Vietnam. The largest markets for Vietnamese workers so far have been South Korea, Japan, Laos, the Czech Republic, Russia, Taiwan and Kuwait. It was estimated that around 500,000 Vietnamese migrant workers were working abroad by early 2008. Moreover, the number of female migrant workers almost doubled within the period 1992-2004, accounting for 54 percent of the total number of migrant workers overseas (VASS 2005). For several reasons Taiwan has become the most important destination for these women. This may be because in Taiwan, Vietnam female migrants have been largely concentrated in jobs as domestic workers, nurse's aides, and industrial workers, etc. Many rural women leave their poor villages to migrate to other places to take advantage of the global labour market. In diaspora journeys, new environments and different life conditions in their host societies have great influence on their identities.

From poor farmer to debtor

In Vietnam, many poor women farmers leave their villages, their parents, their husbands and even their children to follow their dreams and change their lives. However, the decision to leave is not to be taken lightly. Not only are their feelings of guilt and other emotions about being far away but also there is the risk of debt. In order to

successfully expedite the necessary paperwork and documentation to go to Taiwan for work, laborers must pay a brokerage company between \$4000 - 6000 USD, which includes fees for learning a foreign language, air tickets, brokerage fees and other related costs. This amount of money for poor farmers is really too great. Thus, in order to get this amount of money, the workers are forced to take out loans to cover their costs.

Hoa (27 years old, from Bac Giang - North of Vietnam) has a husband and a daughter. Before coming to Taiwan, Hoa went to Ho Chi Minh City to work as sales clerk at a supermarket. While there, Hoa met and married her husband. After marriage, they moved back to Bac Giang. However, after Hoa gave birth to a baby girl, Hoa decided to go to Taiwan to work, due to the difficult economic circumstances of the family:

“After giving birth to a baby, there were suddenly many things we needed to buy, and life became more and more difficult; therefore, I decided to go to Taiwan. When I came to this country, the money I had to give to the broker was approximately \$5000 USD. My family had to mortgage their certificate of land use right in order to borrow money from the bank. After I was gone for several months, my husband decided to come to Taiwan too, so he left our daughter at home under the care of her grandparents. Therefore, my husband and I actually borrowed approximately \$10,000 USD. When I first came here, I was very worried. In the first year, I did not dare to have breakfast because I regretted the cost. All the money I earned was used to pay back the debt. At lunch, the Company gave us something to eat for free. But, I only ate half of it and saved the other half for dinner. If anyone could not eat all their food and there was a chicken leg left, I begged them to give it to me for my dinner. Sometimes I had to work until 10 pm. I was very tired but I did not dare to have a meal at night. Every month, I only spent \$3000NT (100 USD). In the first two years, I always thought about the debt I had to pay. During the day, I tried to work hard to pay back the debt, and at night, the debt was still pursued consistently and eagerly. I am only afraid that one day I will no longer be able to work and I will be sent back to my home country before I can pay back the debt”.

Most of the workers who come to Taiwan to work share the common worry about the debt they have to pay monthly. This debt governs and affects their lives and work. Hanh (26 years old, single) came to Taiwan with the simple idea of earning money to send to her parents. Hanh said:

“I have been here for 4 years. Before I came, the broker said that the working salary in Taiwan was high, and the working environment was good. After 3 years, I could save a large amount of money to send to my family. Therefore, I decided to ask my father to allow me to go abroad to work. When I left, I had to borrow \$2000 USD from the broker. My father also borrowed an additional \$4000 USD for me to cover my expenses. In the first two years, I only worked to pay back the debt to the broker while also sending money to my father to pay his debt. In the first year, I had to pay the broker \$1800 NT (\$62 USD) every month, in the second year, it was \$1700 NT (\$58 USD) and in the third year, it was \$1500 NT (\$51USD). My monthly salary was 17800 NT (608US). This meant that every month I paid the broker \$1700 - 1800 NT, sent to my father \$8000 - 10000 NT to pay his debt, and still needed \$4000 - 5000 NT for phone cards and monthly spending money. This meant I couldn't save any money in the first two years; it meant I worked without a wage. By the third year, I did not have to pay back debts anymore, so I could save a little. In the three years since that time, I could save only about \$3000 - 4000 USD. Many friends of mine also came here, but the work was not stable, or the monthly salary was insufficient. Others were sent back home in the middle of their working term; therefore, many people thought that they would change their life by coming here, but it turned out that they returned home with bare hands and, in some cases, a big debt”.

Many poor rural women (income \$50 - 100 USD a month) are attracted by the high income level in a foreign country (\$600 - 800 USD). Because they want to change their lives, they agree to borrow money in order to go to work in Taiwan. But the harsh brokerage regime makes their 3-year working term in the foreign country into a period of time where they have to exchange their working strength in order to pay back the debt that brought them to that foreign country. After 3 years, some lucky people can save

some money to bring home, and for some people, due to unstable work, their desire to change their life cannot be implemented. Instead, they become debtors, and return home country empty-handed.

The fate of living in exile in a foreign country

Taiwan is a country with a harsh management regime regarding foreign laborers. Apart from the limit on labour time in Taiwan (as mentioned previously), the government of Taiwan also allows both the employer and brokerage company to actively manage and supervise the personal freedom, movement, and labour of foreign workers. For instance, the employees have to live together at crowded hostels near the factory or at the employer's house (for domestic help). In addition, the Taiwanese government has set up severe regulations to manage the movement of foreign workers. Thus, foreign workers may not change employers or change their workplace. Only in the event that the employer goes bankrupt, has no ability to pay employee's salary, dies, immigrates to another country, ill-treats or illegally moves foreign workers to another employer may workers legally change employers. Besides, the change process must be supervised and agreed upon by the labor broker. These severe regulations directly protect the interests of the employer, and raise the inequality in the relationship between the employer and employee. At times, foreign laborers meet with unreasonable working conditions, and they have no choice but to try to escape. These workers thus become people living outside the law, in exile outside the society of Taiwan.

An anonymous female laborer wrote to the advice column in the Bon Phuong newspaper (17-2008) and narrated her fate of living exile:

“In March 2002, I went to Taiwan to work as home help. In the employer's house, there were two people who had mental disease, and had lost their minds. I was always beaten by the woman, and threatened that I would be sent back to my country before my employment term was finished. I had to stand this for 3 years before I was able to return to Vietnam. While there, I warily prepared to go back to this house, but unfortunately, their youngest son divorced and came to live with them. He was regularly drunk and beat his father and me. I could not stand it

anymore and I called the policemen to come, but the son assaulted the policemen too. I could not stand it, I asked to change employers, but the family did not agree. They said I could return to Vietnam, but I had only completed one year of my second stage in Taiwan. At that time, my husband phoned me from Vietnam. He said that my house had been damaged due to road widening at my native village. If I returned home then, I would not have enough money to repair the house or to pay to educate my children. I asked the broker to help me change employers, but they did not agree. So I escaped. After escaping, I understood thoroughly the life in exile, life outside the law. I always have to run away and worry about imprisonment”.

The government of Taiwan has severe penalties for escaping laborers. If they are caught, they will be deported and pay a steep fine. Furthermore, the employer who hired the escaped laborers will also be assessed with fines as well. As escapees in a foreign country, the workers are not entitled to any unemployment benefits. Furthermore, they have to live in fear and exile. Once I met a laborer in the park. After talking with her, I knew that she had been pursued by policemen and that she had to run to the park to escape.

“Yesterday, we were pursued by policemen. Each person ran in a different direction. I am acquainted with a woman who married a Taiwanese man, so I phoned her and asked her to help me to find a place to stay overnight. She told me to sleep in her basement, but in the morning, I had to leave her house because she was afraid that her husband’s family would find out. I have lived in exile for half a year. I am always afraid of being pursued by policemen. I steal away. My daily life is hard, and my main food is instant noodles. Last month, I worked at a restaurant in Guanmiao. I was paid a little bit of money, but before I could send the money back to my family, I discovered one day on my way to work that, because of my carelessness, I had lost the money. Two months’ salary!!

[Author asks: “Why did you escape?” She answered:]

“What would have happened to me if I didn’t escape? In my native village, most of the people have marine careers. My family is now in a very difficult situation. I have just left school. After me, there are two siblings more. Because my locality has a policy concerning labor export for hunger elimination and poverty reduction, I registered to go to work abroad. When I went to the brokerage company, they said I had to pay \$7000 USD. They also told me that when I went to Taiwan, the monthly salary would be \$700 USD. I thought that while the payment amount was not small, the salary was high. I thought that after working for several years, I could pay back the debt and save some money for my family. When I came to Taiwan, my actual monthly salary was only \$ 3,500 NT (\$119 USD). When I queried, they said they deducted money for meals, accommodation, etc. Therefore, I had to escape to the outside to work. If I didn’t, when I returned to Vietnam, the debt would be left unpaid. My family is poor, and it would be poorer with all that debt. I intend to give myself up to the police when I earn enough money. My life in exile is very miserable. When I was ill, I did not dare to go to the hospital for an examination because an escaped person like me does not have health insurance. I have to pay a lot of money to see a doctor. Sometimes, I only wish to be peaceful like I was in the days being at home. Every day, I would just go to buy fish fresh off the ship and take them to the market for selling”.

The strict regulations and close labor management policy of the government of Taiwan have pushed many women workers to commit crimes while living in exile in Taiwan. Ms. Huyen (35 years old, married) narrated her life in exile:

In the early summer, in May, while working in Taichung, because of difficulties with my employer concerning my salary, I escaped. I did construction work with 5 other Vietnamese. Everybody sprayed concrete and mixed iron, and I welded the iron - the work of a man which I have ever done. After working for 2-3 days, my eyes turned red and swollen, but I still did the work because there would be nothing to eat if I did not do this. After working for a short period of time, the police started to come and rummage around the site, and the master was so frightened that he did not keep us anymore. Through the introduction of one

person, I met Ms. T, another escaped Vietnamese worker, and she helped me apply for a job at the factory where she worked. In total, this factory had 3 escaped Vietnamese working there. One day as she was working, unfortunately, Ms. T got her hand caught in a plastic pressing machine and her hand was crushed. The boss brought her to the hospital, and all the expenses were paid by the boss. But, due to this hazardous work, I moved to another place. A month later, I knew that Ms. T had been caught by the police. The police demanded that she tell them about the other two Vietnamese who worked with her. The police came to my residence place. Fortunately, I went to work that day. I rode my bike home to wash some clothes, but when I came to the entrance of the lane, some people informed me that the police were upstairs. I was too frightened and did not know where to go, I wandered at the supermarket. In the evening, I found an unoccupied house full of crushed wood and quite dirty. All night, mosquitoes bit me and it was hot. This, combined with the worry that police would pursue me, meant that I could not sleep. At that time, I just wished it was light so I could go to look for the brokers to find another job”.

Again, the harsh conditions in Taiwan have pushed many workers into a life in exile. For objective and subjective reasons, they have become criminals in society. From farmers who go abroad with the wish of getting rich and changing their lives, many women have chosen the path to escape, and live outside the law, due to pressures from the circumstances in a foreign country . The working life in Taiwan for many people has become a prison life. For them, ending the three-year labor contract to return to their country also means that they are released from prison.

Victims of sexual assault

Foreign women workers, apart from being exploited for their labor like men, also face a high risk of sexual assault. There are many stories of sexual assault that have occurred involving Vietnamese women laborers, especially for those who do housework.

Huong was a 3rd year student at Hanoi Medical University, but due to a difficult family situation because of her father’s sudden death, Huong had to leave school. At that

time, to help her mother and siblings, Huong followed the advice of a friend to apply for labor export to Taiwan. Huong worked as domestic help. Huong's boss is an official; he is divorced and lives with a 5 year old child. Huong said:

At first the work was very light. Monthly, the boss paid my salary on time. The boss was also enthusiastic and kind, so I felt secure. I thought all things would go smoothly, but then something happened that I really did not expect. On a Friday, around 9 pm when his son was asleep, the boss suddenly came home in wet clothes, and he was full of the smell of alcohol. I brought him to his room. I did not know if I should ask him to help change his clothes. If I changed his clothes for him by myself, I would feel uneasy and be ashamed, but if I let him wear wet clothes to bed while being drunk, I was afraid that he would be ill. After thinking for a long time, I decided to help him change clothes because I thought he was too drunk to know what was happening. But when I took off his wet clothes, intending to replace them with some dry clothes, he suddenly hugged me tight. I rose up, screamed, even scolded but he did not give up. It was extremely painful. So the innocent virginity which I had preserved for a long time was robbed by him. Following this incident, he apologized, using many sweet words. He also gave me some money. At that time, I only wanted to kill myself, but I thought of my mother, my siblings and especially my boyfriend, so I did not do so. In the days after this event the boss demanded that I continue to obey him, but I was too frightened, I had to escape to the outside for work.”

[Author asks: “Why didn’t you sue the boss?” She answered:]

“I am an escaped person now, so if I speak out to sue him, the police will send me back home before I can win. I am so afraid of being caught; if I am caught, I won’t have money to pay my debts or to take care of my mother and my siblings”.

Thus, from the peaceful life of a student, Huong went to a foreign country to work as a domestic worker and then became a victim of sexual assault and eventually became an escaped person, living outside the law. Sadly, in addition to Huong, many other

women are also the victims of rape by Taiwanese bosses. Ms. Hong (30 years old) is also a similar case:

"In the past, I worked in Taichung, but because the brokers did not pay my wages, I protested, and was then beaten and taken to Taipei. There, my new boss was no better; they did not give me enough food. Most days I had to hide food in a waste package and take a chance while taking out the trash to eat the food. Because of constant hunger and cold, I had to change jobs again. The next boss was a 37-38 year old man. He is married, but his wife does not live with him. He lives with his 60 year old father. One day, his father went out, and I was left home alone with the boss. He invited me to drink, but I did not want to. So he forced me to drink something and I did not dare to refuse. I drank a gulp and then did not know anything. When I woke up, I found that I was lying in my room and was shocked and frightened to see that the old man was sleeping beside me. It turned out they put anesthetic into my wine and when I passed out, they both forced themselves on me. At that time, I only wanted to run fast but I was exhausted. After that, I was so afraid that I looked for the broker to find yet another new boss".

Women are a vulnerable group. In patriarchal society, they are the group sustaining more disadvantages, inequality, and family violence. As for going out into society, they are often victims of sexual assault. Life in a foreign country puts foreign women workers in a low position. Furthermore, the language discrepancy may push some women into paradoxical situations. If they refuse the boss, they will be threatened with dismissal and deportation. Thus, some women actually decide to accept the advances of a boss because they believe it will all be for the best. However, in the end, many women still lose out in this exchange. Once, on a flight from Taipei to Vietnam, I met Ms. Loan (36 years old). She had just completed her contract and was returning home. After asking her about her situation, she started to cry and told me:

"I came here to work as domestic help. I looked after a 90 year old woman who was paralyzed and sat in a wheelchair. There were only her and me in the house. But from the first day when I came to do her housework, I found that she had a

nephew about 50 years old who often came to visit her and treated her as his adoptive mother. Every day, he passed through several times. Sometimes he brought fruit, and other times he brought food for her and me. After a while, I discovered his intention. One day, when I was at home, he broke into my room, and then raped me. At first I protested, he told me not to cry because nobody could hear; the old woman was deaf. Then he used sweet words and told me he would give me \$100 USD. At that time, I thought I could make the best of the awful thing that had happened, so then I agreed to take his money. I also told him that he could only be with me for that one time, but he continued to force himself on me. He eventually started coming 2 -3 times per week. Each time he promised to give me \$100 USD. When he did not pay me, I asked him about the money. He told me to keep track of the money he owed me and told me he would give it to me before I returned to Vietnam. Several times, after pressing him for the money, he would beat me and threatened that he would not pay me the money at all. Because I worried that I would not get any money, I continued to accept his advances and waited for him to keep his promise to me. As the date of my departure for Vietnam approached, he suddenly stopped visiting. When I asked the old woman about him, she said he also borrowed some money from her and then suddenly disappeared. Now when I think back, I feel so foolish. Because I was so greedy for money, I was abused by this man and whored without wages from him for nearly 2 years.”

In contrast, Ms. Lan (25 years old, worker at garment factory) is more rigid. Once, as usual, I went to Lan’s garment factory to talk to people in the group. After seeing Lan talking angrily with some Vietnamese people, I spoke to Lan and she said:

Lan: In the factory, there is a person as old as my father who approached me and demanded that I go to bed with him. He told me he would give me \$20,000NT (\$683US). I scolded him directly to his face and said, “I came here to work, not to take your dirty money. Do you think that just because we are Vietnamese that we are so cheap? I can earn what you are offering me through honest work in only one month”. He told me that I was insolent, and that he would send me back home before my contract was up. I said “Do you have any power to dismiss me? I come

here to work, so there is no reason for the Director to dismiss me. Besides, even if I am dismissed, I have only some months left. I do not need your dirty money”.

[Author: Did you report this to the manager to make him aware of this matter?]

Lan: I reported it to my team leader and I told the team leader not to let this situation happen again. He too disregards the Vietnamese people. He thinks that everyone comes here for money, and will do anything to make money. In the past, my elder sister came here, and that old man pressured me to allow him to sleep with my elder sister, and this time, he pressured me. I am very angry; I will inform the team leader again.

The number of foreign women workers who are sexually assaulted is not few. Taiwan's government has enacted several regulations and law to protect the rights of women workers who are sexually harassed. But mostly, these women have not been advised about Taiwan's laws. Furthermore, there is a language discrepancy and a lack of understanding. Many women are afraid of being dismissed by the boss, so most of them have chosen the silent way. Others seek ways to escape.

The foreign women workers accept all the unhappiness of working in a foreign country in the hope that life will be better tomorrow. They have left their poor villages, where they undertook the role of mother or wife in their family to go to a foreign country in order to do all kinds of different jobs. New social environments, new jobs, and new people have all changed their lives and their destinies. As pointed out repeatedly in this article, faced with the new conditions of Taiwan society, the vulnerable and disadvantaged women have changed and adjusted themselves, and have discovered new features.

Strengthening ties to their homeland

Transnational motherhood

Vietnamese women workers work in Taiwan while their children are left behind with grandmothers, with other female kin, or with the children's fathers. How do

women transform the meaning of motherhood to fit migration and employment, and how are the meanings of motherhood rearranged to accommodate these spatial and temporal separations? As Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997:552) observe, transnational mothers who perform child rearing and domestic duties for others in a distant land “do not necessarily divert their mothering to the children and homes of their employers but instead reformulate their own mothering to accommodate spatial and temporal gulfs”.

I went to interview workers at a garment workshop in Taiwan. 48 Vietnamese female workers were working there. Most of them are married and have small children; the remaining people are still single. After being asked about their contact with their families, most of the young mothers confided that while they are away from home, the people whom they most often contacted and whom they were worried about the most were the children they had left behind in Vietnam.

Ms. Le (31 years old) also has a husband and is working in Taiwan. Le’s husband and his family also face a difficult situation. Her husband’s parents have a small house, but since they have three sons, they cannot give the house to any individual son. Le and her husband want to buy a house to make a separate home. Therefore, she was determined to go to Taiwan.

Le: At first, when I came here, I thought I was really brave. I did not have to worry about anything. I was only afraid that when I came to this country, I would not have a job, so I could not earn money. Meanwhile, my debt was great, that’s all. But after being away for only 2-3 days, I felt homesick and missed my husband and my child very much. When I first came here, I calculated that I would be here for 1095 days, then I deducted gradually. We all cried and cried. We cried for about 1 month. I came here at the end of the year, near the New Year. I felt homesick, and full of self-pity. I cried and cried. And I missed my child; my child and I cried and cried

[Author: Has your child grown up in the time you have been away?]

Le: When I left, my child could speak a bit, and say "Mama," but at that time, the baby was still being weaned. Therefore, whenever milk flowed out from my breast, I missed and loved my child very much. My child had to drink formula milk, and my child cried. It pained me because I loved my child so much. When I left, my child was still very small. Now my child can phone me and ask me to return home. My child said: "Please come home, I only want you to take me to school, spoon-feed me, hold in your arms before bed, and lull me to sleep... I miss you very much". I said "I also miss you very much, but please let me earn money for you to go to school and build a house for you". My child said: "Yes" and smiled...

Sharing the same circumstance as Ms. Le, Huong (26 years old) also left a child who was under 2 years old with her parents and husband. However, her husband chose to indulge in pleasures, and did not care about their child. Therefore, the sad situation at home made her love her child more.

My child is still very small. I phone home once every 2 days to ask about my child. Here, I economize in spending. Every month, I spend only \$3000 NT (\$100US) but my telephone costs are often higher than my subsistence expenses. When I came here, I knew I could economize on everything, but I cannot economize in phoning my child. My child is very miserable. She always asks where her mother named Huong is. Sometimes, when I phone my child, she asks innocent questions that touch my heart. My child is always so excited to tell her "Mommy" about everything. She told me that she was given a "good child note." She also put up all of her photos and my photos in the hope that, in the future, I would reward her with 10 cars. She loves her mother very much. When her grandmother had stomachache, she stood at the window and said: Grandfather, please save my grandmother. After that, my child phoned me and said that: "Mommy, yesterday, I called my grandfather to save my grandmother." I love my child very much. I cannot believe that when I left, my child could speak very little, and now my child can speak clearly. She also sings. My child always sings songs for adults and she also said "I will sing for you. Are you cold, mommy?" I tell her I am very cold and that I have only recently recovered from illness. She asks, "Have you stopped

sneezing?” My child’s questions sometimes make me very sad. My child said “You have not been at home for my two birthdays”. I have missed two of her birthdays. My child is now 4 years old, but when I left, she was only 2 years old. My child said “Mommy, next year, when you return, you will buy 10 birthday cakes for me”. I hang my child’s photograph on the wall. Each morning, when I open my eyes, I see my child’s photograph on the wall. My keeps telling me that my child has grown up, and that she is big enough to wear my shirt. I love my child”.

The life far from the home prevents these women from carrying out their duties as mothers. Transnational mothers seek to mesh caregiving and guidance with breadwinning. While breadwinning may require their long-term and long-distance separations from their children, they attempt to sustain family connections by showing emotional ties through phone calls, gifts, and cash (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997:564). They maintain their mothering responsibilities by not only earning money for their children’s livelihood, but also by communicating and advising across national borders. Once, after hearing that I was going to return to Vietnam for the summer holiday, Ms. Nga (from my native village in Vietnam) asked me to forward some clothes to her daughter. She was moved to tell me: *“I do not know whether the clothes will fit my daughter because I have been gone for a long time. I can only buy clothes on the basis of her father’s description”.*

Remittances to home

Much is also invested in the idea that the journey is transitory, to be endured because there is an end in sight and because it serves as an economic passport to better things (Brenda 2000:422). The women accept 3 years of working in a foreign country. They face every hardship and sacrifice so much in exchange for a better life for their family and children. They acknowledge themselves as heroes, and in the war against hunger and poverty, they torment themselves with the determination of gaining final victory. The money sent to their families will help them to improve their lives as well as to help their children have a chance to go to school. More especially, it presents the vital

role, responsibility and inherent position of the women in the family, though they are far away.

Ms. Nga (30 years old) comes from a poor area where many have marine careers. . Before going to Taiwan, she opened a shop for making curtains. However, due to the economically depressed nature of marine industries in Vietnam, her business did succeed. She ended up in debt. Therefore, she was determined to go to Taiwan.

“At first, my husband did not allow me to go to Taiwan. He said although we were poor, a husband and wife could live together happily. But I thought if I did not go, my life would be miserable and my children would not have a good future. I do not want them to grow up and end up working in a marine career like their father. I want my children to study at the university. After coming here, I send money to my family every month. A part of the money is for my husband to pay debts, and the other part is for buying food and for schooling our children. I think that after 3 years of working, I can save a large amount of money to prepare for my children to study at the university”.

There are many reasons that force women to leave the home in order to work abroad. However, they have a common purpose, which is to take advantage of their time abroad and to work with all their might in order to send money to their families. Some send money to pay debts, some send money to build a house, and others send money to feed their children and pay for schooling.

“Before going to Taiwan, I used to go to Malaysia for work. But after going to Malaysia for over 1 year, I returned home because the salary was low, and soon there was no more money. After returning home for a period of time, I decided to go to Taiwan. No member in the family wanted me to go. They said that it was not certain that going to Taiwan would be better than Malaysia. But if I did not go, I could not have money to pay debts. I know that building a house, opening a shop, and operating a shop all costs a lot of money. But in rural areas, people often purchase on credit. When I could no longer make ends meet, I had to close the shop. My husband also opened a shop that specialized in aluminum glass frames,

but the business failed. Furthermore, since I was not at home to watch him, he spent all money he earned. Now his debt is greater. I save money and send it to my home once every two months, asking him to pay my debts. I also told him that I only have enough money to pay the debts we had before I left, but I do not have money to pay your new debts. I said that when someone goes abroad to earn money, those at home must spend money moderately and must work. I am just one woman. I cannot see to everything”.

(Hien 35 years old)

In Taiwan, they are factory workers or domestic help, but for their families, they are wives, mothers and children. While these women have to adjust themselves and adapt themselves to a new social circumstance, they also have to protect themselves and undertake their inherent role and position back home. Due to the distance as well as the long periods of time that they are away, the women must make good use of telecommunication systems, funds sent back home and sentiment to develop and maintain that relationship.

Homecoming: for better or for worse

Leaving home also means change. In deciding to leave, the women also need to accept change. Many stories that these women tell focus on change. This change may come from the women themselves. New circumstances and new environments make them lose their identity (self-identity). However, that change may start at home before leaving, and come from husbands or children. Before going abroad, everybody wants to come back in happiness. However, in ending their journeys, each woman will face a different scenario. This ending, whether it is good or bad, reflects the result of the process when the women continuously adjust themselves between “host” and “home”.

Son: When other people return, their happiness is unchanged, but as I return, I find all my hard work and desire for happiness has come to nothing.

Phuong: By coming home, it is sure that you will be happy.

Son: Yesterday, my mother-in-law said that after being away for three years, I should stay at home and not return to Taiwan. I said "I will not stay at home. I will go again. If I don't, in the future, I will have no money for Khanh to go to school". My mother in law said very gently "If you are not at home to keep your husband, he will marry a new wife, and I will have new daughter-in-law, and you will have to go back to your mother's house". I said "When I come to the airport, if he treats me badly, I will go immediately. I am very noble". I am very sad. I have not contacted my husband for 6 months.

The author: Why?

Son: My husband is busy with playing. He does not want to work. He leaves home for a long time. I often phone him and cry a lot. He often apologizes and promises again and again to change. I am very bored with this. Now I have to accept this fate. It is all because of money. In the past, when we were angry at each other, I did not phone him and he also did not phone me. Two days ago, he phoned me in the middle of night. He told me to come back to him because he felt very cold. I told him to go to sleep. I know that I will go home next year. I will stay at home and I will not go abroad any more. My husband said: "That is what you say. Please come in and wear your jacket and then go out to talk to me. I am very sad. I am very lonely." Listening to him say this, I realize how much I love him. I said that I was angry at him, but at the same I still love him.

(Son - 25 years old)

The long period of time spent apart makes husbands and wives split easily. The women leave home in the hope of a better economic life for the family, but many people cannot reach that happy shore. A ruined family is the ending which may often be seen in the stories of these women. Ms. Thuan (35 years old) has a husband and 2 children. Also because of economic reasons, she went to Taiwan to work. Monthly, she sends money to her husband. They both agreed beforehand the money she earned would be used for the construction of a small house. The reality she faced when she returned home did not meet with her expectations:

“When my contract expired, I was very happy because I thought that I was going to be near my relatives. Coming home, and looking at the unfinished small house, I was confused. Yet, some days later, somebody came to recover money that was owed. It turned out that while I was away from home, my husband used the money I sent home to gamble. Even worse, he often left my 2 children alone to fend for themselves while he went off with another woman, He did not come back home for several days after I returned. My children did not dare to tell me because they were afraid of being beaten by their father. But every time he talked to me via the phone, he told me set my mind at rest”.

Due to the effects of the globalization process, rural women have left the fields in order to go to industrial cities all over the world. They escaped from the life in tiny villages, giving up the work that was originally considered as the sole responsibility of a woman, in order to participate in the worldwide migratory labour network. This change strongly affected each nuclear family. In the past, the wife undertook the housework. However, as seen in the cases of these women, the responsibilities of the wife and mother have now been given entirely to the father. The husband plays the role of both the father and the mother. Traditionally, the family’s well-being depended on the men, but now the main source of income comes from the women. The money sent from a foreign country makes the family’s economic life change. However, this change sometimes has an adverse effect on the family’s happiness. Ms. Hoi (34 years old) confided:

“In my village, for every 10 households where people went to work in Taiwan, 6-7 family households are unhappy. In some families, the children are corrupted. Some are opium addicts. They are spoiled by all the spending money which their mother sends and they are corrupted. In other families, because the wife is gone for a long time, the husband has extramarital relations with another woman and spends all his time gambling. Sometimes, the women themselves find that after going abroad for a long period of time, her feelings have changed”.

Many people cannot find peace at the end of the journey. Coming back sometimes has no significance because of the losses they have to sustain. Although the scenario of

each fate is different, the women find that at the end of their journey, they are not the same as they were before they left.

Conclusion

“We are heroes”

The dreams and aspirations for a good future will often make a woman go far away from her home. The experience of living abroad helps foreign women workers grow and become strong, while helping them realize firsthand the ups and downs of life. Starting as poor farmers, they soon consider themselves as new heroes, who work continuously day and night in Taiwan. This article both analyzed and identified the process that women undertake to adapt and adjust themselves in the relation between their “host society” and “homeland”. Obviously, when migrants change their inherent environment, it puts them into new circumstances and living conditions, and makes them have new identity. However, in these new circumstances, the women still maintain and consolidate the role of mother, wife and child while living far away from the family. This article also points out the separate ways and specific characteristics of migrant women, in contrast to migrant men, in adjusting themselves in accordance with their current conditions. Through the process of identity adjustment of Vietnamese migrant women, we can see the dynamic nature of the identity concept. Obviously, identity is an unfixed concept. It fluctuates and changes depending on the dynamics of the subject.

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