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A socio-cultural approach to understanding the learning experiences of vocational training among Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan



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SYNOPSIS

Based on a socio-cultural approach to adult learning, this study draws on interviews with 19 married Vietnamese women to explore the learning experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in vocational training in Taiwan. With permission from their families, the women participated in culinary training to develop the human and cultural capital necessary to fulfil their expected responsibilities. Despite remaining silent and marginalised during the Taiwanese-centred training, the women exercised their agency to complete the training and obtain cooking certificates. The completion of the training and the acquisition of the certificate empowered these women through their labour market participation by giving them a greater voice in their families, facilitating their integration into Taiwanese society, and advancing the pursuit of their life goals. For these immigrant women, their early socialisation in Vietnam and socio-cultural experiences in Taiwan affected their learning of vocational training, which was intertwined with issues of gender, ethnicity, and marriage immigrant status.

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Introduction

Many East Asian countries have experienced a massive increase in immigration through marriage over the past two decades. Socioeconomically disadvantaged men in wealthier Asian countries often seek spouses overseas, whereas women in less economically developed countries often move abroad in pursuit of a better life (Bélangier et al., 2010). Since the 1990s, a rapidly increasing number of immigrant women have moved to Taiwan from Vietnam through commercially arranged marriages. The more than 87,000 Vietnamese women who were married to Taiwanese men before 2013 constitute an important part of the marriage migration flows in East Asia (Ministry of the Interior, 2013: 6). These women also compose a sizable portion of the marginalised population in Taiwan because they are confronted with challenges from both marriage and immigration and they have a complicated status owing to their gender, ethnicity, and class (Tsaia, Chen, & Huang, 2011).

Because of racism and sexism in their host countries, financial needs, and a lack of marketable skills, immigrant women have historically represented a disadvantaged group

(Wong, Duff, & Early, 2001). In host countries, however, differences in human capital between the native-born population and immigrants typically decrease over time as immigrants learn the language of the receiving country, gain knowledge of the local labour market, and acquire local training (Cuban & Stromquist, 2009). Participation in vocational training in host countries – which provides opportunities for empowerment, upward social mobility and economic advancement through labour market participation – is particularly important for the career development of immigrant women. Thus, the inclusion of immigrant women in vocational training programmes has become a primary concern of policies in host countries (Wong et al., 2001).

Despite the volume of scholarship on immigrant women, only a small number of recent studies have explored vocational training among immigrant women. These investigations, which have examined vocational training among female immigrants in Canada and Australia, have demonstrated that the critical objectives for immigrant women undertaking vocational training are to improve their job performance and to obtain better-paying jobs. The barriers to attending training programmes for these

women include deficiencies in host-country language skills, financial constraints, and family responsibilities (Shan, 2009; Stephens & Bertone, 1995; Wong et al., 2001). Although the existing studies have provided important findings, they have focused on the decontextualised aspects of immigrant women's training (such as the amount of immigrant women participating in training and their incomes after training) rather than their contextualised learning experiences which are essential for their vocational training outcomes. Additionally, existing studies have focused on vocational training only for immigrant women in Canada and Australia and have not considered vocational training among Asian women who migrate to other Asian countries through cross-border marriages (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008). This neglect may result from the relatively limited national interventions of vocational training and employment among immigrant women in most of the Asian host countries as well as the fact that in these Asian countries, women who immigrate through marriage often become housewives rather than labour market participants (Tang & Wang, 2011). Thus, a contextualised analysis of the vocational training experiences of Vietnamese women who have immigrated to Taiwan through cross-border marriage is necessary.

There is substantial research on the experiences of immigrant women as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law in patriarchal Taiwanese families (e.g., Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008; Tang & Wang, 2011; Tsaia et al., 2011). However, research that focuses on the gendered roles of women in their families assumes the domestication of these women and neglects to consider potential aspects of their experiences outside the home in Taiwanese society. In fact, in Taiwan, there has been gradual growth in the number of immigrant women who participate in employment and in all types of formal and informal learning activities, particularly vocational training programmes (Cheng & Gao, 2010). Learning is the key to empowering and improving the status of immigrant women, both in society and in domestic life (Alfred, 2003). Thus, it is necessary to explore the experiences of immigrant women as learners in vocational training to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of their lives in their host countries.

Previous efforts to understand adult learning have often devoted considerable attention to the individual learner. In fact, social and cultural factors permeate every aspect of the learning experiences of adults (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, behaviours and language use within a group. The culture of a group is the process by which group members are socialised and acquire the resources and tools that are necessary to participate in their daily lives. Culture is omnipresent and essential to the social life and learning of individuals (Billson, 1995; Guy, 1999). Thus, a socio-cultural approach to adult learning, which is derived from Vygotskian theories of learning and combines individual and contextual perspectives, emphasises that learning is a personal process that interacts with the society and culture in which an individual lives (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). This approach is based on the understanding that human beliefs and behaviours interact with and are shaped by social, cultural, structural, and personal factors and are mediated by symbolic systems. The interaction among these factors is critical to learning (Rogoff, 1995). The social dimension of learning emphasises that interactions with others can influence the learning of individual adults, and this dimension expands the concept of learning to include

interactions in a community of learners. From a cultural-structural perspective, this approach emphasises that adult learners interact with and within contexts that involve physical space, structures, and institutional cultures. The socio-cultural framework also considers the personal factors, such as gender, class, and early socialisation, which influence how and what adult learners learn (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; Rogoff, 1995). A socio-cultural approach to adult learning also assumes that all adult learners who are members of multiple defined cultures bring myriad socio-cultural values to learning environments. Thus, when learning, adults construct their learning according to what they already know within learning contexts, and all of the experiences and tools that they use are integrated into their learning (Alfred, 2003).

Vietnamese immigrant women experienced early socialisation in Vietnam and their participation in vocational training as adult learners in Taiwan crosses social, cultural, and national boundaries. Therefore, drawing on a socio-cultural approach to adult learning, this study aims to understand the learning experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in vocational training in Taiwan and the meanings that they construct with respect to these experiences.

By the end of 2012, 8702 (about 2.0%) of immigrant wives in Taiwan had participated in vocational training programmes across all types of training institutions (Council of Labour Affairs, 2013: 102). Thus, this study does not intend to generalise the findings to all immigrant wives in Taiwan. Women of different cultural and social backgrounds may have different responses to occupational training in Taiwan. Although the learning experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women cannot be generalised to all immigrant women, some of the socio-cultural contexts that Vietnamese immigrant women encounter may be common to all female immigrants (Tang & Wang, 2011).

The vocational training of immigrant women in Taiwan

In 2012, the 439,500 immigrant women in Taiwan represented approximately 2.0% of the total Taiwanese population. Of these women, 299,376 (68.1%) were from Mainland China, 87,012 (19.8%) were from Vietnam, 27,218 (6.3%) were from Indonesia, and 25,894 (5.8%) were from other countries. Most of the Taiwanese spouses of these women are socio-economically disadvantaged (Ministry of the Interior, 2013: 6–7). Promoting vocational training among immigrant women has been considered a possible solution to the socioeconomic problems of these families (Ministry of the Interior, 2013: 51). The Taiwanese government provides pre-employment vocational training programmes especially for immigrant women (VTPEIW); these programmes are offered by certain public and private vocational training institutions with funding from the government. The goals of VTPEIW are to equip immigrant women with basic employment skills, to assist them in the labour market, to increase their incomes and to help them sustain their family life (Ministry of the Interior, 2004: 93).

On average, approximately 22 VTPEIWs, which recruit approximately 660 trainees, have been implemented each year since 2005. Of the existing VTPEIWs, the limited programme types provide training in personal services (e.g., hairdressing and care giving), basic computer skills, and meal preparation (e.g., Taiwanese cuisine). Of the training programmes,

approximately 64% involve training in Chinese and/or Taiwanese cooking. The duration of the VTPEIW is typically between 560 and 720 h, and the programmes generally encompass three aspects: training the professional skills of the participants, teaching the participants professional knowledge, and preparing the participants for professional certification exams (Ministry of the Interior, 2013: 104). Compared with other types of training programmes, Chinese and/or Taiwanese cooking training programmes tend to more strongly emphasise the training of professional skills and provide fewer textbooks, which are in basic Chinese (Cheng & Gao, 2010).

To encourage immigrant women to participate in VTPEIW, the government provides these women with free tuition, monthly living allowances, child nursing subsidies, and subsidies for attending professional certification examinations after their training is complete. After passing an exam that assesses basic reading and writing proficiency in Chinese and participating in an interview that assesses their motivation for receiving vocational training and seeking employment, unemployed female immigrant applicants are permitted to enrol in the training programmes (Ministry of the Interior, 2013: 104–106). However, the Chinese proficiency exam is often criticised as the primary obstacle to vocational training for immigrant women with poor Chinese language ability (Sia, 2009).

Methods

At the end of 2012, 1736 (71.1%) of Vietnamese female immigrant trainees, 3122 (62.4%) of Chinese female immigrant trainees, and 449 (55.2%) of Indonesian female immigrant trainees had participated in Chinese and/or Taiwanese cuisine training programmes (Council of Labour Affairs, 2013: 211–214). Compared with immigrant wives from other countries, Vietnamese women were more likely to enrol in cuisine training. The participants in this study were 19 female Vietnamese immigrants residing in southern Taiwan who had successfully completed Chinese and/or Taiwanese cuisine training in VTPEIW over a period from six months to one year. Thus, these immigrants had training experiences upon

which they could reflect. The women were invited to participate in the study by social workers in female immigrant settlement agencies using a snowball method.

Table 1 summarises the backgrounds of the participants. The average age of the informants was 31.3 years. At the time of the interviews (2011), the interviewees had lived in Taiwan for an average of 5.3 years. Twelve of the participants had Vietnamese junior high school diplomas. Seventeen of the women had met their husbands through commercial marriage brokers. Only one participant, Nina, had divorced her husband. All of the participants spoke fluent Chinese. After completing the training, all of the women obtained a professional certificate in basic Chinese cuisine by passing a professional examination.

The data were collected through life history interviews, which provided the women with ample opportunities to reconstruct their personal stories with respect to their socio-cultural contexts (Cole & Knowles, 2001: 79–81). The women were encouraged to discuss the following topics: their early learning and life experiences prior to immigration; the events facilitating their immigration to Taiwan and their early adaptation in Taiwan; their learnings during their vocational training in Taiwan; and their reflections on their personal growth. The participants were invited to contextualise their stories with respect to socio-cultural conditions. All of the participants were interviewed twice. The first interviews typically lasted between two and three hours, and the subsequent interviews, which addressed any deficiencies in the initial data, lasted between 30 min and one hour. All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese, voice recorded, and subsequently transcribed. The excerpts that are cited in this paper have been translated into English by the researcher.

The interview transcripts were then analysed using within- and cross- case analyses (Patton, 1990). First, an assistant and I separately read and coded each participant's interviews as a single case. We then compared and discussed our coding of the transcripts and generated emerging categories and properties. Second, the cross-case analysis was conducted using a constant comparative analysis to search for or validate patterns that emerged in the within-case analysis and to identify common

Table 1
The backgrounds of the participants.

Name (Age)	Years in Taiwan	Children	Education in Vietnam	Vocational training programmes	Current job
Ann (31)	6	2	Senior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Helps her husband manage a garage
Betty (27)	3	1	Undergraduate (year 2)	Taiwanese cooking	Helps her husband raise pigs
Cindy (31)	4	1	Senior high school (year 2)	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Cooks at a food stand
Dora (28)	6	0	Junior high school	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Assistant cook at a Chinese restaurant
Ella (33)	4	2	Junior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Attendant at a fast food restaurant
Fay (29)	5	1	Senior high school (Year 1)	Taiwanese cooking	Worker in a food factory
Gill (25)	2	0	Junior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Assistant cook at a restaurant
Hilda (38)	8	2	Junior high school	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Attendant at a spa
Iris (29)	2	1	Senior high school (Year 2)	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Assistant cook at a Chinese restaurant
Jane (26)	4	1	Junior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Assistant cook at a Chinese restaurant
Kay (37)	7	1	Senior high school (Year 2)	Taiwanese cooking	Assistant cook at a lunchbox shop
Lee (34)	6	1	Junior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Assistant cook at a food stand
May (31)	5	2	Junior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Cook at a food stand
Nina (28)	8	1	Junior high school	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Owner of a Vietnamese food stand
Olga (32)	5	1	Senior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Cook at a food stand
Pearl (40)	8	1	Elementary school	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Attendant in a Chinese restaurant
Queena (35)	7	2	Senior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Assistant at an immigrant women's agency
Rita (30)	5	1	Junior high school	Taiwanese cooking	Attendant at a Chinese restaurant
Sara (30)	6	2	Elementary school	Chinese & Taiwanese cooking	Cook at a food stand

patterns across the cases. To guarantee the trustworthiness of the research analysis, the process of member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) was used. During each phase of the analysis, the researcher and the assistant first worked independently and then collaboratively refined the individual analyses and interpretations until a consensus was achieved.

Results

The study addressed the following specific questions: Why do Vietnamese immigrant women participate in vocational training? How do immigrant women learn during the training? And how does vocational training affect immigrant women? As shown below, the study revealed that with their families' permission, the immigrant women undertook culinary training to improve their human and cultural capital to fulfil their expected responsibilities. Despite being silent and marginalised in the Taiwanese-centred training, the women exercised their agency to complete their training. Completing the training empowered these women through their labour market participation by gaining a voice in the family, promoting their settlement into Taiwanese society, and furthering their life goals.

Vocational training as human and cultural capital

With permission from their husbands or in-laws, these immigrant women participated in culinary trainings to develop the human and cultural capital necessary to fulfil their expected responsibilities both in their home and in their host societies and to combat discrimination.

Aspirations for obtaining employment and gaining skills in caring for their immediate families

The participants believed that within Vietnamese families, men and women receive the same encouragement to pursue employment to support the household economy. The participants also felt that, because of the socio-culturally defined domestic role of women in Vietnam, they had the lifelong duty of caring for their natal family (Tang & Wang, 2011). Moreover, most of the women were concerned about the poor economic situations of both their natal and immediate families. These socio-cultural expectations and economic factors motivated these women, who lacked marketable skills, to acquire professional skills by participating in free, short-term vocational training and to subsequently enter the labour market to earn money. As Dora noted:

In Vietnam, I grew up with eight siblings in a poor family. Since I was young, I have learned to work and struggle with the family's economic difficulties.... My sisters and I, as Vietnamese women, were asked to make money for the family.... Now, in Taiwan, my handicapped husband doesn't have a stable income to meet the family's needs. Therefore, I must learn a skill through vocational training to get work to support my Taiwanese family and to send money back to my parents.

In both Vietnamese and Taiwanese societies, married women are expected to care for their family as their main responsibility. According to Betty, in the Taiwanese patriarchal family system, "married women are expected to be good

at maintaining the household, especially taking daily care of the family.... This is particularly true for immigrant women in commercially arranged marriages."

Most of the interviewees believed that cooking is one of the basic abilities needed to care for a family. The consumption of meals is a daily ritual that maintains family ties. Meal preparation involves not only purchasing food but also understanding the tastes and nutritional needs of family members, and it facilitates family cohesion (DeVault, 1991). However, "there are great differences regarding meals and eating habits between Taiwan and Vietnam. Hence, for preparing food that fit my Taiwanese families' taste, I received Taiwanese cooking training," Gill noted. Therefore, family-related responsibilities led these women to choose Chinese and/or Taiwanese cuisine training among the available training programmes.

Combating Taiwanese discrimination against immigrant women

Most of the participants experienced discrimination related to their cross-border marriage, socioeconomic status, and minority background. "Some Taiwanese think that we (immigrant women) are illiterate from poor countries without cultures and that we come to Taiwan just for our husband's money," noted Queena. Indeed, not all immigrants share the same status in the receiving country. Rather, the degree to which they are accepted in the receiving country depends on the status of their home country in the world economy (Swaminathan, 2004). To avoid being targets of discrimination, the female immigrants chose to attend vocational training programmes to acquire professional skills and obtain professional certificates that demonstrate their professional potential and hardworking character.

Permission from husbands and in-laws

In the Taiwanese patriarchal family, a married woman's role includes being a subservient wife and servile daughter-in-law (Tsaia et al., 2011). Because of the low family status of the participants and the lack of trust in their marital relationships due to their commercially arranged marriages, they were particularly subject to having to comply with the expectations of their husbands and/or in-laws. Olga noted:

Many Taiwanese husbands and parents-in-law hold the ultimate decision-making power in the family, and they usually force immigrant women into behaviours within a limited set of normative expectations and social contacts and discourage these women from obtaining learning outside the home, lest they acquire some bad habits.

Therefore, like most of the participants, Ann emphasised, "Although I had aspired to receive vocational training for a long time, I was finally able to receive the training because my husband gave me permission." According to Ann, her husband even told her, "Learning cooking would benefit your performing housework. Furthermore, women who like cooking are more likely to take care of the family. Thus, you would be less likely to learn bad behaviours while getting cuisine training with women who like cooking."

The need for these immigrant women to receive permission from their husbands or in-laws in order to participate in culinary training reveals the influence of the Taiwanese patriarchal family culture and their status as immigrant

women who were married through commercially arranged marriages on their family situations.

Learning by perseverance at the margins

In the Taiwanese-centred training programmes, the immigrant wives typically remained silent and marginalised in their classes. They experienced both sisterhood and discrimination from the other female immigrant trainees, but they persisted in completing their training.

Being silent and marginalised learners in the Taiwanese-centred training programmes

Although they received training in programmes that were especially offered for immigrant women, the participants felt that few of their instructors were familiar with their particular living experiences and that the delivery of the training did not consider their specific cultural backgrounds. In the training process, these women received little special assistance, except for verbal encouragement from the instructors. Professional skills and knowledge are important parts of the vocational training and professional certification exam. In the Taiwanese vocational training programmes, instructors focus on explaining and demonstrating professional skills, but trainees must learn most of the professional knowledge by independently studying their textbooks. Accordingly, the VTPEIW training centres asked these female immigrant trainees to conform to expectations for Taiwanese trainees by studying a Chinese-edited cuisine textbook independently to gain the required knowledge about cuisine without additional support. Thus, the delivery of the VTPEIWs was similar to that of training programmes for general Taiwanese trainees.

However, nearly all of the participants accepted the Taiwanese-centred delivery of training and did not think that cultural diversity should be necessarily recognised in the training classroom. As Hilda emphasised:

Life in Taiwan is more modern than life in Vietnam. I live in Taiwan, so I just want to get training as Taiwanese trainees do.... I don't think hiring qualified immigrant instructors to teach us is appropriate because they may not speak Chinese well and may not provide excellent training in Chinese cuisine, compared with Taiwanese instructors, even though immigrant instructors would understand our learning experiences and needs more.

While the immigrant women expected the Taiwanese instructors to understand their culture, which would facilitate trainer–trainee interactions and make the women feel respected during the training, the instructors were not sensitive to the cultural needs of these immigrant women. For example, Fay noted, “These Taiwanese instructors did not understand our Vietnamese cultures. Some of them even expressed disgust at some Vietnamese foods which are not popular in Taiwan.” Thus, although these women were eager to assimilate into Taiwanese society, they felt that they were not appreciated as full members of the class during the vocational training.

Their feelings of marginalisation were compounded by their lack of fluency in the Chinese language. Although the participants could speak and read basic Chinese, the intense

curriculum, rapid instruction, and extensive culinary terminology made it difficult for them to initially understand the instruction and diminished their self-confidence. “Compared with the talkative immigrant women from Mainland China who were proficient in Chinese, we (the Vietnamese women) felt greater stress regarding speaking in public in the classroom,” Ann noted.

As a result of their experiences studying in Vietnamese schools, the participants were accustomed to listening attentively and passively absorbing knowledge as teachers delivered lessons. Because of this early schooling experience, most of the Vietnamese women felt that asking questions in the classroom would reveal their ignorance and that voicing their opinions would constitute a challenge to the instructor's authority. Owing to their low self-confidence and early socialisation as silent learners, the participants acted as silent trainees during the vocational training, and their silence further marginalised them in the programmes. As Sara noted, “While the instructors almost always interacted with talkative Chinese immigrant wives, we quiet Vietnamese trainees usually practised silently in the corner of the classroom.”

Learning by perseverance

During the culinary training, the female immigrant trainees were typically divided into groups according to their nationalities to learn and practise. The Vietnamese women formed strong bonds of sisterhood with one another. However, most of them also experienced discrimination from the Chinese female immigrant trainees. As Cindy noted:

Although almost all of the trainees in VTPEIWs were immigrant women, the women from China usually explicitly or implicitly showed off their higher socioeconomic status and better Chinese language ability compared with those of us from Southeast Asia. Several Chinese immigrant women even liked to pick on us.

Most participants tended to endure and ignore the discrimination because “as vocational trainees, we had to focus on the goals of acquiring professional cooking skills and then getting the professional cooking certificate and did not pay attention to issues that were irrelevant to the goals,” Ella explained.

Furthermore, their lack of proficiency in advanced Chinese and the considerable differences between Taiwanese and Vietnamese cuisine made it difficult for most of the participants to achieve the expected course progress. As Rita explained:

In the beginning, I didn't even know the Chinese characters of certain terms related to Chinese cuisine. Moreover, many Chinese ingredients and cooking techniques, such as 燉 (*wei*; to simmer something slowly) and 爇 (*bian*; to stir-fry something in hot oil), which are not common techniques in Vietnamese cooking, always confused me, so I could not master Chinese cooking.

Although the women initially felt frustrated, the immigrants continued to strive to learn professional Chinese and/or Taiwanese cuisine. This perseverance primarily originated from the women's struggles against their early living difficulties in Vietnam. As Nina stated, “I have learned from my parents how to survive by struggling hard against a bad family situation

since childhood. This helped me develop the perseverance to face hardships. Despite much difficulty at the beginning of the training and no support from my ex-husband, I persisted in completing the training due to my perseverance.”

Specifically, with regard to learning Chinese cuisine skills, the participants concentrated on the instructors' demonstrations and on taking notes and practised the cooking skills diligently in groups in the training centres. After class, they repeatedly reviewed and memorised the course notes, went to traditional markets to identify and purchase Chinese ingredients, and practised cooking. The women also sought the advice of their husbands and in-laws regarding their cooking. Regarding professional cuisine knowledge, their lack of proficiency in reading Chinese made it extremely difficult for the immigrant women to study the textbook independently. However, as Lee stated, “I requested my husband's assistance in explaining the Chinese characters of the cuisine terms or consulted a Chinese dictionary. Additionally, I made efforts to study the previous exams and even to memorise some items with answers that I did not understand.”

During the training, some of the immigrant women experienced tensions between their family responsibilities and their pursuit of vocational training. However, most of these women proactively sought support to overcome their challenges. To allow them to concentrate on the daytime training, some of the women brought their children to a nursery or asked for help from their in-laws or neighbours with childcare duties. The women still had to complete all of the housework, however, with some assistance from their husbands or in-laws. May noted:

“During the training, I felt exhausted after a full day of hard work at the training centre, at my part-time job at the factory, and at home. Fortunately, my husband, who is not like Vietnamese men, was willing to share some of my family responsibilities. My mother-in-law also took care of the children when I was not at home.”

The findings indicate that when the participants encountered difficulties during training, most of them requested assistance and advice from their husbands or in-laws. The support from their Taiwanese families was an essential factor in helping these Vietnamese immigrant women to complete their vocational training. Furthermore, the initial life experiences of these women in Taiwan, such as their basic adult education experiences and work histories, also helped them in their vocational training. As Ella explained, “My basic adult education improved my fluency in Chinese, which increased my confidence in interacting with other trainees and my understanding of the training instruction.” The working experiences of several participants in Chinese restaurants also increased their familiarity with the Chinese cuisine techniques and ingredients and assisted them in rapidly mastering professional cooking skills.

Gaining empowerment

All of the participants passed the exams and obtained professional cuisine technological certificates after completing the training. Most of these women believed that finishing the vocational training and obtaining a professional certificate

empowered them to achieve certain control over their lives as women who immigrated through marriage, by giving them a greater voice in their families, facilitating their integration into Taiwanese society, and advancing the pursuit of their life goals.

Becoming “somebody”: enhancing self-confidence and gaining a voice in the family

Successfully completing the training programme and obtaining a professional certificate, which required the women to achieve a certain level of literacy, Chinese language proficiency, and professional competency, were significant achievements for the Vietnamese women. Additionally, completing the training and receiving the certificate made it much easier for most of these immigrant women to obtain jobs, which increased their income and improved the household finances of their families. These achievements contributed to the participants' positive feelings of self-worth and economic independence and assisted them in developing a strong voice that encouraged their husbands and in-laws to listen to them in family affairs. As Kay noted:

Before, as an immigrant woman, I usually felt that I was a nobody in the family. However, after completing the training and then getting a professional certificate, my husband often asks for my opinions about family affairs. He even often shows off my professional certificate to his friends.... My children also compliment me on my cooking skills and on getting a certificate, which could set a good example for them. I feel more confident in my ability to raise children. Now, besides my ID card, I always bring my cooking certificate with me when I go out.

Similarly, Iris shared that:

Before receiving training, employers generally rejected my employment applications just because I was from Vietnam. However, after the training, employers of cooking businesses have been more willing to hire me because of my professional cooking certificate. In Taiwan, only a small number of people obtain professional certificates. Now, the salary of my full-time job supports my child's educational expenses and allows me to send money to my natal family. I am more financially independent from my husband and have more control over my life in Taiwan.

Notably, although most of the participants who originally had good relationships with their Taiwanese families gained a greater voice and acquired an improved status in their families after the training, a small number of them who had initially experienced many family tensions and who insisted on remitting money to their Vietnamese families despite the strong opposition of their husbands began to quarrel with their husbands and in-laws more often than they did prior to the training.

After obtaining employment, most of the immigrant women expected to remit money to their birth parents. Some of the husbands supported their wives sending money to their Vietnamese families, but some of the husbands considered such an act as a betrayal of their Taiwanese families (see also [Tang & Wang, 2011](#)). Of the women whose husbands did not support them in sending money to their

Vietnamese families, some sent money secretly to avoid offending their Taiwanese family, whereas some remitted money with the knowledge of their husbands, which caused fierce and frequent conflicts among their Taiwanese family members. As Cindy noted, “My husband always asks me to contribute all of my earning to the household expenditures. However, I earn the money through my own work. Why can't I send some of my earnings to my parents?”

Becoming more like the native Taiwanese: increased integration into Taiwanese society

Completing the training and obtaining a professional certificate also contributed to the immigrant women's familial, social, and economic integration into Taiwanese society. Specifically, completing the cuisine training improved the participants' relationships with their family members. In addition to gaining a greater voice in their families, these women become more competent in caring for their families, by gaining knowledge of professional cuisine and nutrition. As Pearl noted, “The relationship between my mother-in-law and me is better now. She usually talks to me about cooking. My children also like my yummy cooking. They always say, ‘Mommy, you are so great!’”

Most participants also mentioned that they expanded their social network through the training by acquiring friends from different racial backgrounds. As noted above, completing the training and receiving a certificate helped most of these women obtain employment and provided better fringe benefits which facilitated their economic integration into Taiwanese society. Jane noted, “Before, even if I was worked more than most of the Taiwanese cooks, I got a lower salary just because I was not Taiwanese. However, after obtaining my certificate, I now finally receive the same wage, fringe benefits, and job security as Taiwanese workers in the restaurant. I am more like a native Taiwanese person.”

Having the courage to pursue life goals

Completing the vocational training and then receiving more income by obtaining employment significantly encouraged the immigrant women to achieve their life goals, such as purchasing a house, owning a restaurant, or continuing their education. Similar to most of the other Vietnamese wives, Iris had a life goal, but she never believed that she would realise it until she received greater income after the cuisine training. Iris noted:

In Taiwan, there are many cooking-related jobs. Although it is easier for me to get jobs in the cooking sector after obtaining a cooking certificate, most of these jobs are in low positions, such as assistant cooks and restaurant attendants, which are in poor working conditions and lack job security. Because I only acquired basic cooking skills through the cooking training, it is difficult for me to get a job as a professional cook in certain Taiwanese or Chinese restaurants that have good benefits. Hence, I hope to own a Vietnamese restaurant, which would be different from Chinese or Taiwanese restaurants; then, I could have more control over my work.... Now, I can gradually save money to pursue my goal of owning a Vietnamese restaurant on the basis of my cooking certificate.¹

After receiving training and then obtaining a job, several immigrant women also planned to purchase their own homes

to achieve a more stable and independent life rather than living with their in-laws or renting a home. Several immigrant women even dreamed of continuing to pursue their educational aspirations. As Fay, who had a Vietnamese junior high school diploma, stated, “Because of my low-level education, I was usually teased by some in-laws. Obtaining the professional certificate proved my studying potential, increased my confidence, and encouraged me to go to senior high school. Now, I'm preparing to apply for admission to the school.”

It is noteworthy that while the training resulted in the immigrant women feeling more empowered in certain ways, the effects of vocational training on the women were not all positive. The issue is further discussed in the next section.

Discussion

Cuisine, which is one of the most essential components of culture, reflects the specific cultural characteristics of a country (Wahlqvist & Lee, 2007). Therefore, it is a particularly significant challenge for immigrants to master the cuisine of their host country. Although the cuisine training programmes that the female immigrants in this study attended were offered specifically for immigrant women, the training programmes were Taiwanese-centred. While the lack of culturally sensitive instructors in these programmes may have led to an unintentional neglect of the complex needs and interests of these immigrant women, the vocational training programmes nevertheless helped assimilate the women into Taiwanese society and develop their vocational skills in the Taiwanese market place – an essential goal of adult education (Cuban & Stromquist, 2009) – rather than facilitate their autonomy.

These Taiwanese-centred training programmes, however, may limit the capabilities of female immigrant trainees, marginalise them, inhibit their engagement in full citizenship in Taiwan, and reinforce existing inequalities among different immigrants. During the vocational training, Chinese immigrant women were members of the participants' learning community. The immigrant women in this study reported experiencing nationality-based antagonism toward immigrant women from Southeast Asian by Chinese immigrant women in the training programmes. The antagonism may result from racialised boundaries among immigrant women of different nationalities that commercial marriage brokers create (Lan, 2006: 90). Additionally, Chinese language proficiency may be a marker used by female Chinese immigrant trainees to denote stratified differences between immigrant women in Taiwan. The nationality-based antagonism among Chinese immigrant women may create self-racialisation that harms not only Southeast Asian immigrant women but also the Chinese women themselves. Self-racialisation occurs when a minority group reproduces dominant stereotypes to marginalise other minority groups, ultimately subjugating themselves to the same normative control of racialisation (Lan, 2006: 91–92).

The results of this study reveal that the professional certificates gave increased meaning to the interviewees' lives in Taiwan because the professional certificates may provide the immigrant women with a socially acceptable status that may obscure their lower education level and even their original nationality. Certification may also legitimise them in the eyes of their families, employers, and the broader society

in the host country; and reduce their feelings of inadequacy (Flannery, 2000: 72). The significance that the participants attached to the certificates may have been influenced by the prevalence of professional certification in Taiwan, which overemphasises professional certificates in employment. Although professional certificates have been found to have an independent influence on people's labour market outcomes, they have also acquired cultural value, crystallised market value, and objective social status in Taiwan (Chu & Lu, 2005). Immigrant women, especially those with low educational or social status, may be ideal customers for this training market. However, it is notable that together with gender, class, and ethnicity, certification may contribute to producing structural segregation.

Based on the permission and assistance from their Taiwanese families, these immigrant women participated in and completed the cuisine training in order to develop human and cultural capital with which they could fulfil their socio-culturally expected roles and to prevent from being discriminated against in Taiwanese society. This finding indicates that gendered roles and the status of marriage immigrants in combination with support from husbands and in-laws were central to these women's complicated learning experiences of cuisine training. Specifically, both in the Taiwanese patriarchal family system and in Vietnamese culture, the multiple expected roles of Vietnamese immigrant women as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, daughters, and working women imply their domestication within the household. Domesticity tends to preserve the traditional roles of these female immigrants as nurturers, caregivers, and subordinates, while their natal and immediate families benefit from the involvement of these women in cuisine training and subsequently in the labour market (Skelton, 1993). Therefore, participation in the cuisine training, which is one dimension of domesticity, may further reinforce the positions of these Vietnamese immigrant women in their families as subordinate to their husbands, in-laws, and natal parents—as “good women” or “perfect wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and daughters” (Sadeghi, 2008).

Additionally, because of their status as marriage immigrants, these Vietnamese women are perceived as inferior by their Taiwanese families and in society, thus causing them to be vulnerable to discrimination from the Taiwanese public and under their Taiwanese family's control over their roles in the home (Tsaia et al., 2011). Because of this, many of the women pursued vocational training as a means to lessen such discrimination. The findings reveal that husbands and in-laws play an essential role in the learning experiences of the immigrant women's vocational training. From one perspective, it may be argued that the support from the women's Taiwanese families regarding their participation in cuisine training, which may originate from the patriarchal family culture, simply reinforces their traditional roles (Sia, 2009). However, it may also be argued that such support from their husbands and in-laws contributes to the ability of the women to learn outside the home, which in turn empowers them in specific ways (Cuban & Stromquist, 2009).

Although the family status of several of the immigrant women began to improve after the vocational training, some of the women experienced more conflict with their husbands or in-laws. This result suggests that tensions, conflicts, and even violence may increase within a family when women immigrants

receive training and procure employment in a host country. The explanations for this phenomenon may be that conflict exists between the expected responsibilities of married women in Vietnam and in Taiwan and that the new identities and bargaining power of these women immigrants, owing to their learning or financial independence, could threaten patriarchal conventions and the original roles of these women within their families (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002).

This study found that while most of these women used Taiwanese or Chinese cooking training to improve their employment prospects, the jobs that these women obtained were in low-paying, female-dominated, entry-level positions in the Taiwanese labour market. Additionally, limited types of vocational training programmes are offered to immigrant women and, as noted above, more than 60% of the training programmes provide training in Chinese and/or Taiwanese cuisine. Thus, although completing Chinese and/or Taiwanese cuisine training may help orient immigrant women toward a Taiwanese workplace, these women were still conforming to oppressive conditions in the labour market, and this bias may even make the Chinese and/or Taiwanese cooking training programmes instrumental in racialising, feminising, and narrowing the labour of immigrant women (Sia, 2009). One of the purposes of this study is to explore the effects of vocational training on immigrant women rather than exactly assessing the extent to which vocational training optimises immigrant women's employment prospects. However, the result suggests that vocational training may not necessarily contribute to the immigrant women's empowerment in labour market participation.

Notably, even as a disadvantaged group that is vulnerable to discrimination related to their gender, ethnicity, and status as marriage immigrants in the host country, these Vietnamese immigrant women were not merely passive victims of the social, economic, and familial cultures in the host society. In fact, they exercised their agency to achieve different meanings for their lives. The women attended vocational training to support their families and to overcome discrimination. Confronted with numerous barriers, these women persisted in completing the training by procuring various types of resources. By attending the cooking training, they became empowered through their labour market participation, even though they might be further exposed to reinforced gendered roles. Thus, these findings may expand the feminist perspective from focusing on the negative aspects of commercially arranged cross-border marriages (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008: 25–28) toward focusing on the autonomy of immigrant women in improving their lives by attending vocational training in their host countries.

Conclusions and implications

In this study, Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan undertook cuisine training, with their Taiwanese family's permission, to develop the human and cultural capital necessary to fulfil their expected socio-cultural responsibilities and to overcome discrimination. Despite remaining silent and marginalised while receiving the Taiwanese-centred training, the women exercised their agency by persisting in completing their training. Their perseverance primarily originated from their previous struggles in their early living situations and from

the assistance that they received from their Taiwanese families. Completing the training and obtaining a cuisine certificate empowered the women through their labour market participation by granting them self-confidence and a voice in their families, facilitating their integration into Taiwanese society, and advancing the pursuit of their life goals. Clearly, their culture and early socialisation in their home country and their socio-cultural life experiences in Taiwan all influenced these immigrant women's learning and meaning-making in vocational training, which were intertwined with issues of gender, ethnicity, and marriage immigrant status.

Vocational training, as one type of adult education, aims to equalise the wrongs of society and to empower disadvantaged adult trainees (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). Therefore, female immigrant trainees should be provided with a greater variety of culturally responsive vocational training programmes. Specifically, cultural competency interventions are needed to educate training instructors regarding the value of vocational training for female immigrant trainees and to facilitate training instructors' understanding of the trainees' cultures. Instructors should also be capable of delivering training in ways that recognise and utilise the cultures and identities of immigrant trainees. It is necessary to create supportive training environments to encourage female immigrant trainees to voice their opinions and to interact with training community members to understand and capitalise on one another's social and cultural capital (Alfred, 2003). Additionally, multiple types of vocational training programmes, such as training in cooking from immigrants' home countries, and intervention mechanisms are needed to develop the human capital of immigrant women.

Although the Vietnamese immigrant women in this study were empowered in their lives after completing the vocational training, their futures remain unclear. Thus, further longitudinal research is necessary to explore the lives of immigrant women after the completion of vocational training programmes.

Endnote

¹ Regulations in Taiwan state that a proportion of the cooking staff in certain legally registered restaurants must have a cuisine certificate (Executive Yuan, 2013).

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