

Commercially arranged marriage and the negotiation of citizenship rights among Vietnamese marriage migrants in multiracial Singapore

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Globalization and increased mobilities have multiplied cross-border transactions not only in the economic sphere but have also a major impact on human relationships of intimacy. This can be seen in the increased volume of differently mediated forms of international marriage, not just straddling ‘east’ and ‘west’, but within Asia and across different ethnicities and nationalities. International marriage raises a host of social issues for countries of origin and destination, including challenges relating to the citizenship status and rights of the marriage migrant. This paper examines the negotiation of citizenship rights in the case of commercially matched marriage migrants – namely Vietnamese women who marry Singaporean men and migrate to Singapore as ‘foreign brides’. While they are folded into the ‘family’ – what is often thought of as the basic building block of the nation in Asian societies – they are not necessarily accorded full incorporation into the ‘nation’ despite Singapore’s claims to multiculturalism. This is particularly salient at a point when cross-nationality, cross-ethnicity marriages between Singapore citizens and non-citizens are on the increase, accounting for over a third of marriages registered in Singapore in recent years. Vietnamese women who marry Singaporeans are positioned within the nation-state’s citizenship regime as *dependents* of Singaporean men, having to rely on the legitimacy of the marriage relationship as well as the whims of their husbands in negotiating their rights *vis-à-vis* the Singapore state. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic work with 20 Vietnamese women who are commercially matched marriage migrants, the paper first focuses on the vulnerable positions these women find themselves, particularly given difficulties in forging their own support networks as well as weaknesses of the civil society sector in what has been called an ‘illiberal democracy’ characterized by a political culture of ‘non-resistance’. The paper then goes on to examine the way they negotiate rights to residency/citizenship, work and children within webs of asymmetrical power relations within the family and the nation-state. We draw on our findings to show that citizenship is ‘a terrain of struggle’ within a multicultural nation-state shaped by social ideologies of gender, race and class and negotiated on an everyday basis within spheres of family intimacy.

Keywords: marriage migration; citizenship; multiculturalism; family; nation-state; civil society

International marriage and citizenship frameworks

Within a world which is persistently framed by the discourses and practices of nation-states, globalization and increased mobilities have multiplied cross-border

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transactions not only in the economic sphere but also have a major impact on human relationships of intimacy. This can be seen in the increased volume of differently mediated international, transnational and cross-border forms of marriage, not just straddling 'east' and 'west', but within Asia and between nation-states occupying different positions in the global socio-economic league table. As Toyota notes, the term 'international marriage' is itself a product of the modern twentieth century as cross-border and often cross-ethnic marriages come under the monitoring and categorization by nation-states, as exemplified by 'the introduction of passports as a method of surveillance and regulation'.¹ She goes on to observe that while scholars of cross-border marriages have argued for the importance of recognizing the transnational nature of such unions,² there is a need to emphasize the role of nation-state boundaries and the 'international' nature of these marriages because:

Regardless of how 'transnational' an individual's lifestyle can be, it is only through the law of a territorialized state that such unions can be legally authorized and legitimized and that the citizenship requirements, categories and process are framed. Host countries locate and identify foreign spouses in relation to a specific socio-political context, following the ideology and policies on the family and the application of nationality/citizenship law. Whether one likes it or not, individuals belong to specific legal categories based on ethnicity, gender, religion, and class. Citizenship can be only attributed to the spouse or children through the state and the legal restrictions imposed by states can prevent them from becoming its 'citizens'.³

In other words, while it has been argued that transnational migration is a transgressive force eroding the boundaries of the nation-state, there is little evidence (at least in Asia) to support Soysal's argument that national citizenship has given way to postnational citizenship, where immigrant groups without formal citizenship status are able to mobilize around claims for particularistic identities by appealing to universalistic principles of human rights and connecting themselves to the wider public sphere.⁴ Such interpretations ignore the rigidity and resilience of state-imposed disciplinary categories and their continuing effects in structuring social and political life.

Inasmuch as there is a need to understand the growing phenomenon of international marriage migration within existing citizenship frameworks (if we are to more fully comprehend the real world issues and situations faced by marriage migrants), it is also important to ask ourselves how a fuller explication of the relationship between citizenship, marriage and family in transnational contexts can help us rethink existing theorizations of citizenship.⁵ Scholars working along these lines observe that the existing framework of citizenship 'does not appear to be a legal framework that is fashioned to deal with international marriage and the offspring of such unions'.⁶ Instead they argue that citizenship should not be viewed as a 'linear, static, thing-like status' bestowed by a single state on an individual but conceptualized 'as a set of processes' which is both inclusionary (involving reallocation of resources) and exclusionary (involving building of identities on the basis of an imagined common solidarity).⁷ Rather than a static framework of rights and obligations, citizenship is better understood as 'a terrain of struggle',⁸ shaped by state-led as well as socially embedded ideologies of gender, race and class, and negotiated on an everyday basis, including within spheres of family intimacy.

In this vein, focusing their work on the incorporation of marriage immigrants in Taiwan, Wang and Bélanger draw on Aihwa Ong's concept of 'partial citizenship' to

show 'how the operation of differential legal and social citizenship justifies the perpetuation of a hierarchy of immigrants and serves to prop up the notion of a superior national Taiwanese identity'.⁹ While the immigrant wives are theoretically folded into the nation-state as 'new citizens', they are 'set in relationships with the state, family and community, which together constitute their identities, and at the same time produce and reproduce a racialized and genderized society in Taiwan'.¹⁰ For example, cast in the role of 'a good wife, a good mother and a good daughter-in-law',¹¹ female marriage immigrants are expected to be only interested in integration courses that tie them to their families and which help them improve their roles as carers of 'their husbands (cooking, hairstyling), children (parenthood, health care, women and children safety) and the elderly (medical care training). There are no choices like political participation, Southeast Asian language media offering, local community facilities information, and so on.'¹² The links between marriage migration and citizenship are thus not only based on but constrained by notions of the patriarchal family, and of women as domestic caregivers and biological and social reproducers.¹³

Taking a more optimistic perspective, Hsia draws on her work on emerging social movements among marriage immigrants in Taiwan to think through how citizenship notions may be reformulated to transcend its close association with the nation-state.¹⁴ More specifically, she illustrates how 'multicultural citizenship' can be used as a 'narrative strategy to render exclusionary models of citizenship more inclusive', and to pave the way towards 'the ideal of a more inclusive multiple citizenship [that allows for overlapping membership across several nation-states]'.¹⁵ While the model of multicultural citizenship is a double-edged sword – as Werbner and Yuval-Davis point out, the rhetoric of multiculturalism can be co-opted without changing the substantive rights or even formal rights of citizenship for the immigrants¹⁶ – Hsia shows that activist groups among immigrant wives have been successful in radicalizing politically correct conceptions of multiculturalism. Despite the exclusionary and patriarchal model of incorporation underlying Taiwan's 'multicultural' immigration policy (which only allow wives and children of Taiwan citizens to be naturalized), Southeast Asian marriage immigrants have capitalized on the multicultural ideal (that the nation-state contains a degree of plurality that opens up space for migrants to retain their cultural identity provided they adhere to the state's political norms) to challenge the long tradition of citizenship based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*. By drawing on their status as mothers of Taiwanese citizens, they also have a base from which to fight for various rights (such as the right to teach their children 'mother-tongues'). Hsia concludes that

compared to migrant workers, marriage migrants are in a more advantaged position to challenge Taiwan's exclusionary model of citizenship because the nature of transnational marriages involves citizens from different nation-states and their children are the direct result of cross-border migration.¹⁷

Echoing this same sense of optimism about women's collective agency, Suzuki shows that non-Japanese Asian wives of Japanese men are 'becoming increasingly active in civic groups, negotiating and asserting their rights themselves' and that this has triggered 'civic engagement, if not activism, among concerned Japanese citizens' and advanced 'demands for citizenship and the improvement of immigration procedures... albeit in a piecemeal way'.¹⁸

While there may be different understandings of the spaces of agency immigrant wives can afford in different citizenship regimes and social contexts, it is important to note that citizenship matters precisely because ‘traveling subjects always carry their nation-state with them’.¹⁹ Of significance too in the analysis of migrants and citizenship are the ‘strategies of simultaneity’ that migrants exercise in the way migrants make and project plans for their everyday lives across transnational fields.²⁰ We turn our attention in this paper to the place of international marriage migrants in Singapore where, unlike in the case of Taiwan or Japan described above, the discourses and practices of multiracialism and multiculturalism are *already* firmly embedded into the fabric of the nation-state. We order the rest of our discussion by focusing in turn on the way the international marriage migrant features at three scales – within discourses of state multiracialism, civil society agendas and action, and the family mode of (non)-incorporation.

Multiracialism and the conceptual (non-)incorporation of immigrant wives

Singapore is well known as a nation-state founded on the logic of ‘separate-but-equal’ multiracialism and built upon an economically driven migration policy linked to an aggressive-but-selective talent and labor augmentation policy. The distinctive elements of Singapore’s ideological context will help us frame our study of the negotiation of citizenship rights in the case of commercially matched marriage migrants, namely Vietnamese women who marry Singaporean men and migrate to Singapore as ‘foreign brides’. First, we focus on the conceptual level in asking the question whether ideologies of multiracialism in the context of a liberal (but selectively calibrated) migration regime provide a favourable environment for the incorporation of marriage migrants (more specifically immigrant wives) into the nation-state.

In the immediate postcolonial nation-building phase and against the backdrop of a plural society with racialized categories hardened by colonial policy, Singapore’s national leaders advocated the welding of heterogeneous groups into ‘one people’ on the premise of an ideology of a ‘separate but equal’ multiracialism.²¹ Nation-building in the early decades of independence in the 1960s and 1970s placed primary emphasis on economic nationalism as well as a preoccupation with the management of race within the strictures of Singapore’s founding philosophy – the logic of the 4Ms + M (Multiracialism, Multiculturalism, Multilingualism, Multireligiosity plus Meritocracy). Government formulations of the Singapore nation right up to the close of the twentieth century continue to invoke a multiethnicity based on the four ‘founding races’ – i.e. the so-called Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) model – as the stuff from which nations are made. Singapore-style multiracialism is hence based on the arithmetic formula of four ‘separate’ but ‘equal’ races in a nation of ‘one people’. The philosophy propounds the need to submerge ethnic identity to the larger purposes of nation-building and national identity construction while at the same time provides space for each of the four founding ethnic groups to promote, valorize and reclaim ethnic links and identity. CMIO-multiracialism also provides the key template for policy-making and the distribution of resources pertaining to major spheres of social, political and economic life in Singapore, including education, housing, language, political representation, the formation of self-help groups and even the designation of historic conservation districts.

Global-city ambitions and the competition for flows of international talent and labor in the recent two decades have meant that the nation-state is now faced with the need to fold into its social and demographic fabric a rapid influx as well as a diverse range of immigrant others. Growing the population to attain global-city goals cannot simply depend on the indigenous citizenry since the number of citizen births was only 32,423 in 2008, producing a growth rate of only 1 percent.²² As is the case in several rapidly developing or developed countries in East and Southeast Asia, fertility rates have declined rapidly in the post-independence decades, plummeting to below-replacement levels in a much shorter time period than in most Western countries. Figure 1 shows the declining total fertility rate (by race) in Singapore since 1975. Measures implemented by the Singapore government in recent years to boost fertility have met with limited success thus far.²³ Given the difficulties in reversing very low fertility rates among the citizenry, the state has since turned to other strategies – specifically attracting ‘foreign manpower,’ regardless of nationality – to augment its population size.²⁴ This strategy has proven much more immediately effective: the increases in Singapore’s population and its labor workforce in recent decades are largely accounted for by the burgeoning pool of permanent residents (PRs) and non-residents which grew by some 6% and 19% respectively between 2007 and 2008. Foreign manpower enters Singapore through different immigrant channels and in different categories,²⁵ including ‘foreign talents’ (skilled labor or employees holding positions at the professional and managerial levels); ‘foreign workers’ (unskilled/low skilled labor in the construction, manual labor, and domestic industries); workers with mid-level skills (such as technicians and chefs);

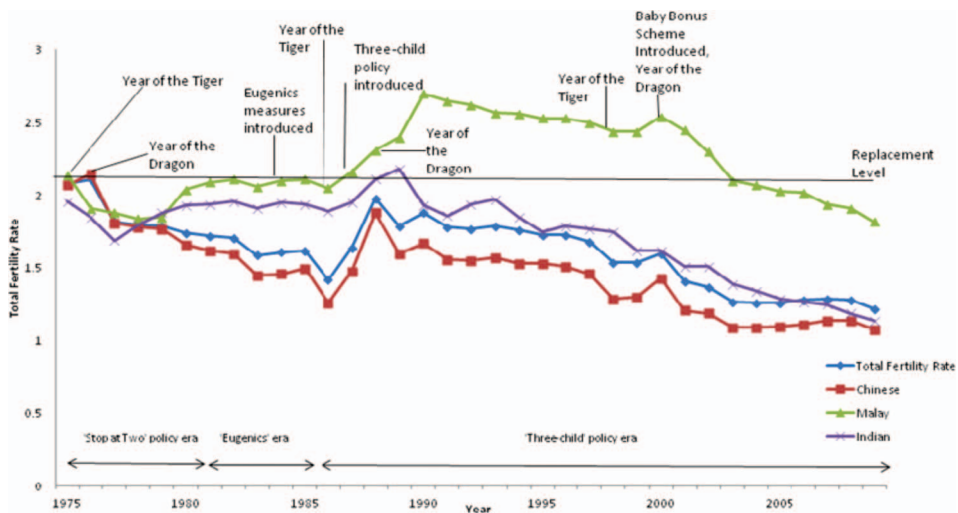


Figure 1. Rapid fertility decline. Singapore’s Baby Blues ‘The stork hasn’t been doing its job; the population isn’t replacing itself.’ (*Business Times*, October 1999).

Sources: Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population Trends 2009*; Saw, *The Population of Singapore*.

Notes: Figures from 2000 are derived from the Singapore Department of Statistics’ *Population Trends 2009*, which defines total population as encompassing Singapore citizens and permanent residents. Figures prior to 2000 are taken from Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, where total population includes Singapore citizens, permanent residents, and non-residents.

international students (from the primary to tertiary levels); and entrepreneurs; trainees; confinement nannies; athletes and sporting talent. According to reports from the Ministry of Manpower, the breakdown of these foreigners by categories in 2008 was 870,000 unskilled work permit holders (foreign workers), 188,000 employment (foreign talents) and S-pass⁵ holders (catering to those with mid-level skills), and 97,000 foreign students.²⁶

While there is no official data available of a breakdown of these foreigners by nationality and ethnicity, it is clear that the (hyper-)diversity that rapid immigration has brought in train can no longer be meaningfully contained within the straitjackets of CMIO-multiracialism. Intense transnational flows into the nation-state, however, have not led to the official abandonment of CMIO-multiracialism. In fact, there is little to suggest that the framework of state nationalism-cum-multiracial citizenship will wither away, or that transmigrant groups – especially those regarded as unskilled foreign/ethnic others – will be given the space for engaging in new forms of claims-making in the nation-state. The situation in Singapore is more akin to Sassen's view that 'the national is highly institutionalized and is marked by socio-cultural thickness',²⁷ where the denationalization of the economic sphere is coupled with a renationalization of immigrant policies. Nevertheless, there has been at least two significant ideological shifts in relation to the incorporation of migrant others in Singapore. The first is reflected in the state's increasing pleas for the citizenry to be more tolerant of foreign others in our midst, often basing the argument on economic need (i.e. the 'necessary evil' argument) and on appreciating Singaporeans' own immigrant past (i.e. 'we' were once in 'their' shoes argument). The following extract from the former Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng's speech of 4 March 2010 is typical:

Singaporeans, however, need to be realistic and fair-minded. While we want foreign workers to do the less pleasant jobs and contribute to our economy, we cannot also expect them to stay away, during their off days, from public places and shopping malls where we frequent, or not to take the public transport to work. On our part, Singaporeans need to be more tolerant and understanding of the different habits and practices of workers from different backgrounds and cultures. Some of us would recall that 40–50 years ago, we shared the same habits. In the coffee shops, you would see spittoons under the tables.²⁸

The second maneuver is the (cautious) opening of conceptual space for the recognition of more complex forms of identifications such as hyphenated identities than possible within the strictures of CMIO-multiracialism. The complexities of social identification was overtly recognized (possibly for the first time in a national speech) in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2006 National Day Rally Speech where in his appeal to Singaporeans to welcome 'new immigrants', he not only argued for a recognition of difference ('A Chinese-Chinese is different from a Singapore-Chinese. An Indian-Indian is different from a Singapore Indian'), but proposed that this can be done by allowing for 'hyphenated' national-racial identities at least for the first few generations:

we will hyphenate, Australian-Singaporean, Chinese-Singaporeans, Chinese-Chinese Singaporeans. But make them one of us and if we meet one of them, let's be friendly, let's go out of our way to show them around, help them, make them feel at home... So even if the first generation is not completely Singaporean, the second generation growing up here will be and will contribute to Singapore.²⁹

In the context of these shifts for greater tolerance if not discursive inclusion of foreign others, we would like to focus on the role of marriage migrants in particular and the extent to which their increasing presence challenges more exclusionary models of residency and citizenship (as Hsia has argued in the case of Taiwan)³⁰ based, in Singapore's case, on what has been a rather formulaic multiracial logic. In short, to what extent is the immigrant wife a key player in unscrambling the CMIO template that has formed the basis of the imagined community of Singaporeans since independence?

There is no doubt that in Singapore, an important (if less frequently acknowledged) facet of increased immigration which bears upon the multiracial complexion of the nation-state is associated with the rapid increase in cross-nationality (Figure 2) and inter-ethnicity marriages (Table 1) in recent years: in 2009, cross-nationality marriages involving a citizen spouse and a foreign spouse³¹ accounted for 40.8% of all marriages registered in Singapore; while marriages across ethnic categories made up 18.3% of all marriages (15.7% under Women's Charter and 32.8% under Muslim Law Act).³² Of a total of 8,501 marriages between residents and non-residents in 2009, 6,624 male Singaporeans and permanent residents wedded foreign brides, while 1,877 of their female counterparts married foreign men.³³ This reflects the dominant pattern of male Singapore citizens and permanent residents marrying foreigners (rising from 19.1% in 1999 to 25.4% of total number of marriages in 2009) compared to female Singaporeans and permanent residents marrying foreign men (which also rose from 5.3% in 1999 to 7.2% of total number of marriages in 2009).³⁴ Foreign wives and husbands have also contributed to the significantly to boosting the nation-state's ultra-low fertility rate: in 2008, 9,870 babies had a foreign parent, accounting for 30% of the babies born as citizens.³⁵ The increasing proportion of Singaporean men seeking 'foreign brides' from the Asian region reflects the growing mismatch in marriage expectations between the two largest groups of singles: on the one hand, independent-minded, financially well-resourced graduate women with sophisticated expectations of marriage partners, and on the other, Chinese-speaking blue-collar male workers with low levels of education with a preference for women willing to uphold traditional gender roles and values.

The influx of foreign spouses affects CMIO arithmetic in at least two ways. First, foreign spouses are bearers of a wide array of ethnicities (for example, 'foreign brides' tend to be Chinese, Vietnamese, or from South and Southeast Asia) and

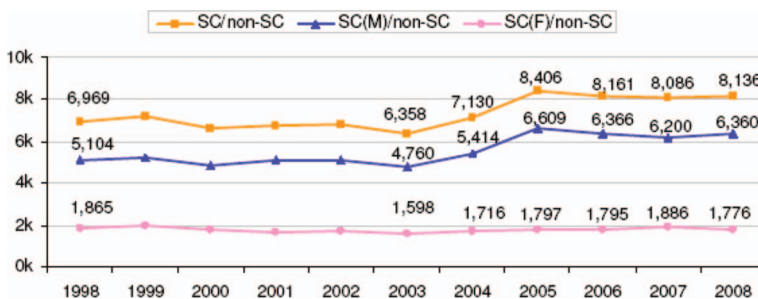


Figure 2. Marriages of Singapore citizens to non-Singaporean spouses by gender ('000). Source: National Population Secretariat 2009.

Note: Parentheses refer to gender of SC spouses—'M' for males and 'F' for females.

Table 1. Inter-ethnic group marriages.

Description	Percentage		
	2008	2005	2000
<i>Women's Charter</i>			
Chinese grooms with brides of 'Other' ethnic group	49.6	41.6	35.5
Caucasian grooms with Chinese brides	11.0	14.6	15.8
Grooms of 'Other' ethnic group with Chinese brides	7.5	7.3	6.7
Caucasian grooms with brides of 'Other' ethnic groups	5.8	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>
Chinese grooms with Malay brides	<i>na</i>	6.4	9.0
Indian grooms with Chinese brides	4.5	5.5	6.9
Other combinations	21.5	24.5	26.1
<i>Muslim Law Act</i>			
Malay grooms with brides of 'Other' ethnic group	24.7	<i>na</i>	8.5
Grooms of 'Other' ethnic group with Malay brides	19.7	15.2	<i>na</i>
Indian grooms with Malay brides	14.2	19.7	24.7
Malay grooms with Indian brides	10.7	17.8	19.3
Malay grooms with Chinese brides	6.3	14.6	9.6
Chinese grooms with Malay brides	<i>na</i>	8.2	11.1
Other combinations	24.4	24.6	26.8

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000, 2005 and 2008.

Note: 'Other' refers to all ethnic groups excluding Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, Caucasian and Malay.

though they initially enter Singapore under the non-resident category, they may eventually make the transition to PR status before becoming new citizens.³⁶ Second, cross-nationality marriages which are also cross-ethnicity may produce children of mixed ethnicity. Up to recently, Singapore law requires these children to automatically adopt their father's ethnicity at birth.³⁷ These children may also not fit easily into any of the CMIO categories including the catch-all 'Others'. As a disgruntled new citizen – a Caucasian man with a Malaysian wife of Indian heritage and three children (two from a previous marriage to a Chinese woman and one from this marriage) – who was unable to purchase public housing due to racial quotas laments, 'We don't fit a cookie-cutter definition of race and to simply categorize us as "Other" overlooks our unique blend of race and culture'.³⁸ A recent controversial innovation – spurred by the rapid increase in mixed marriages – allows children of mixed marriages to choose between adopting the race of either the father or the mother,³⁹ or to use double barreled race classifications in official documents such as identity cards. In announcing this change, PM Lee clearly based the rationale on the 'significant number of Singaporeans marrying across racial lines', making special mention of 'Vietnamese spouses':

the couple has to consider carefully how their kids will be brought up and what the kids' identity will be: Will they be a Chinese kid, an Indian kid, maybe European, maybe Japanese, maybe Vietnamese – there are many Singaporeans here who have married Vietnamese spouses, . . . We think it's best to leave it to the parents to say how they want to describe their kids' ethnicity.⁴⁰

The seeming flexibility of choice, and the integrative possibilities of the hyphen, is however limited to the realm of identity politics, and has no major consequences for ethnic-based policies structured around the CMIO model. The policy change

continues to require identification with a dominant ‘race’ (which must be placed first, i.e. before the hyphen) and used for all ‘administrative’ purposes; hence stultifying any impact on policies such as ethnic quotas in housing estates or the requirement for minority representation in Group Representation Constituencies. As the Prime Minister explains, the move towards hyphenation is a form of ‘liberalization’, not a ‘revolution’; it was put in place to ‘simply give people greater choice in identifying or describing themselves’, not impact entrenched policy, as ‘the majority of the population will still comprise the major racial groups – Chinese, Malays and Indians . . . and the number affected by the shift “will remain small for some time to come, and maybe for a very long time”’.⁴¹ In short, while the rapid increase in international marriages has been an important catalyst to unbinding ‘identity’ and allowing for a few more degrees of freedom (for the children of these marriages) when it comes to self-description,⁴² it has hitherto not posed any significant challenge to the CMIO gridlock or led to more inclusive policies for marriage migrants in the social, political or economic spheres. Ironically, in contrast to originally homogeneous Asian countries like South Korea where marriage migrants have been a significant diversifying force producing at least a rhetoric of ‘multiculturalism’ (even as the reality forged by state policies and civil society groups have tended to expect female marriage migrants to be assimilated into the norms and forms of Korean society so as to secure the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation), the existence of a multiracial/multicultural framework in Singapore has not made it any easier for immigrant wives to advantageously position themselves to make claims on cultural rights such as language support for themselves and their children.

Civil society action and the (non-)incorporation of immigrant wives

The previous section argues that the increasing presence of marriage migrants in Singapore led to a limited (and essentially stymied) identity politics, resulting in few material gains in terms the way immigrant wives can be included in policy frameworks based on CMIO-multiracialism. Identity politics is however not the only dynamic at work; Hsia’s work on Taiwan shows that emergent social movements and civil society action were key in translating multicultural conceptions of incorporation – once radicalized – into opportunities for pushing for significant gains for immigrant wives.⁴³ We will now turn to an examination of Singapore’s civil society landscape and the priorities accorded to migrant rights and welfare in order to discern the place of the marriage migrant.

Operating within a context characterized by what has been called a ‘strong state’, an ‘authoritarian regime’ and an ‘illiberal democracy’, Singaporean civil society in the post-independence era has seldom challenged the ‘fundamental premise of the regime’ and is instead constrained to seek incremental benefits by promoting ‘reformist causes that are circumscribed by the discourses and practices of the existing ideological framework’.⁴⁴ Labor activism in relation to migrant workers is circumscribed by legal constraints on civil society organizations⁴⁵ as well as ‘co-optive mechanisms to defuse political challenges through state-led organs’.⁴⁶ In this context, it is interesting to note that in recent years, the rights and welfare of migrant workers have been one of the leading edges in progressive developments within the civil society landscape in Singapore. Where the state has systematically focused on migrant labor as an economic resource subject to the logics of demand and supply,

civil society groups in recent years have been active in humanizing migrant worker issues and rendering migrant workers more visible.

Of catalytic effect was the growing sense of dismay and outrage – starting with those within the women’s movement who were already concerned about violence against women – at what appeared to be inadequate state action and public apathy in the face of an increasing incidence of ‘maid abuse’ in recent years.⁴⁷ A broad range of NGOs focusing on migrant labor has since emerged, including mainly service-oriented groups (of which a number grew out of faith-based organizations) such as the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrant and Itinerant People (ACMI), An-Nisa (started by the women’s committee of the Sultan Mosque), HEALTHSERVE (a Christian group), Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) along with skills training centers and women’s shelters; and a smaller number of advocacy-oriented groups, of which the most significant is Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). While service-oriented groups primarily focus on providing ‘ambulance services’ to address the plight of the disadvantaged, advocacy-oriented groups are more likely to engage with a human rights agenda and take active steps in stimulating public debate, and campaigning for migrant rights such as ‘Sundays Off’ and a standard employment contract with rights to privacy and a minimum period of continuous rest for foreign domestic workers.

While migrant workers’ causes have become the leading edge in civil society activism in recent years, the plight of marriage migrants has been given far less attention and attracted little organizational support. This cannot be attributed to the lack of difficult circumstances confronting immigrant wives. As in many developed countries in Asia, immigrant women from less developed countries who marry Singapore citizens are positioned within the nation-state’s immigration-citizenship regime not as potential labor but as *dependents* – i.e. non-working wives – of Singaporean men who rely on the legitimacy of the marriage relationship as well as the resources (and whims) of their husbands in negotiating their rights to residency, work and children *vis-à-vis* the Singapore state.⁴⁸ Their position as dependents of Singaporean men often renders these women highly vulnerable, particularly given communication difficulties (in the case of many Southeast Asian brides) with host society, the lack of social support networks, economic dependence and the fear of deportation (in fact, many issues which they share in common with foreign domestic workers). Instead, the lack of active civil society concern lies at least in part with the moral stigma attached to ‘foreign brides’ either as women who lure away Singapore men into marriages of ‘convenience’ for the sake of residency papers, or who stoop so low as to ‘sell’ themselves on the market.⁴⁹

While ‘foreign brides’ in Singapore face many similar situations compared to their counterparts in Taiwan and South Korea, civil society concern in Singapore has been much slower in taking up the cause. One of the earliest concerted efforts by an NGO to come to grips with the ‘foreign brides’ phenomenon in Singapore was a position paper put out by Singapore’s leading feminist organization, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) entitled “Beyond ‘Happily Ever After’: Making a Match Between Singapore Grooms and Foreign Brides”.⁵⁰ Through an investigation of the practices of the ‘foreign bride’ commercial matchmaking agencies, the report advocated improvements in the governance of the industry through legislation and regulation in order to secure more safeguards for the migrant women involved. Other organizations such as ACMI and the Singapore Council of Women’s Organizations (SCWO) are also beginning to

become more aware of the growing issue of marriage migrants, partly because of the increasing presence of ‘foreign brides’ seeking refuge at women’s shelters associated with these organizations. While rising, these emergent concerns have yet to coalesce into more strategic discourses or action plans as seen in the case of migrant labor. There is thus a lack of collective action either on behalf of, or organized by, the immigrant wives in Singapore, resulting in few bases from which to mobilize pressure groups on questions such as the classification of their children’s identity in racialized schemes, or advance claims for stronger citizenship rights for marriage migrants.

The ‘family’ mode of (non-)incorporation and the rights of immigrant wives

We turn to a third set of concerns which affect the fraught process of negotiating for citizenship rights for immigrant wives in Singapore. The key issue here relates to the contradictions engendered by the fact that immigrant wives are incorporated into the nation-state via their incorporation into the Singapore family. As a result, the politics of inclusion/exclusion at the family/household level impinges directly on their (weak) positioning within the nation-state. Unlike migrant workers who are differentially incorporated into the nation-state via their position in the labor market,⁵¹ immigrant wives are inserted into the geobody of the nation-state as dependents of their husbands, and can only be legitimately incorporated into the nation-state via their roles and identities within the ‘family’ (as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law). While the state has been proactive in constantly elaborating and updating policies towards different segments of the foreign labor force to suit changing economic circumstances, it appears to have been more conservative in dealing with the import of ‘foreign brides’,⁵² possibly because marriage is perceived as a privatized affair and marriage migration seen quite separately from labor immigration policies and hence not subject to similar economic imperatives. We draw selectively on interview materials⁵³ reflecting the lived experiences of Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore to illustrate the terrain of struggle over rights to residency and citizenship.

For Vietnamese wives whose entry into Singapore is currently dependent on a social visit pass, securing PR status is a pressing concern as residency rights represent a major pathway to paid work, possible healthcare benefits and an independence source of income. However, the conditions governing the granting of PR appear to the women to be impossibly opaque, and the only clue they have in navigating in the dark relates to their husbands’ level of income and the extent to which these husbands are willing to push their cases on their behalf. The rights to residency papers are hence perceived to be inextricably tied to, and completely dependent on, their husbands, as the following account shows.

Twenty-year-old Thach has been married to a 55-year-old widowed truck driver (earning a monthly salary of S\$2,000) for 10 months. She has a serious ‘eye problem’ (glaucoma) and thinks she is in need of surgery if she is not to become blind. She has been told that the Singapore healthcare system does not subsidize or cover foreigners and is hence dependent on her husband’s health insurance for coverage. However, according to her account, her husband is very tight-fisted (‘he loves money more than he loves me’) and has refused three times to take her for an eye examination, giving the excuse that he ‘doesn’t see any problem with her eye’. Thach is very anxious to secure PR status and is full of plans as to what she can do once she has residency rights: she will be able to look for a job, perhaps at the cake shop where

Bich (another Vietnamese marriage migrant) works; she will be able to send money home to her parents in Vietnam and ease their suffering, substituting for her good-for-nothing, usually drunk, elder brother who is not doing anything to help her parents; she will no longer need to ask her husband for money to pay for the 'eye treatment' and 'expensive medicines'; and she will be able to 'flee from her husband' if she no longer can bear her husband's 'constant scolding about money'. These dreams are, however, predicated on her husband's willingness to support her PR application. Unfortunately, unlike Tien's husband ('Tien [another Vietnamese marriage migrant] is lucky... Her husband takes good care of her and applied for her PR...') and Bich's husband (who 'contributes constantly to CPF, enough to get Bich her PR'), Thach says that her husband 'is not active in getting PR' for her. She has mentioned this to him 'many times' but he 'doesn't want to'. (According to the agent responsible for the match who we interviewed separately, Thach's husband does not have 'a serious attitude' to Thach and 'has no long term plans' for the marriage, and is in fact dating another woman even after marrying Thach.) Recently, Thach has finally managed to submit her application for PR to the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) but her husband has been told by ICA that her documents have missing information. In turn, Thach made a trip back to Vietnam to make the necessarily rectifications to her documents, re-submitted them, and is now awaiting the results of her application.

Thach's account is demonstrative of the significance of PR status to Vietnamese marriage migrants – PR not only signals access to paid work and a source of income to meet one's immediate needs, but also the freedom to become like other working women, the capacity to take up the role of a filial daughter who contributes to her parents' welfare, and the independence and bargaining power to leave one's husband, should he become unreasonable. For Vietnamese wives caught in webs of asymmetrical power relations within the family, however, securing PR status, depends very much on their relationship with their husbands and the role the latter is willing to play in advancing their applications. While what Rattana and Thompson calls the 'transnational patriarchal bargain'⁵⁴ characterizing international marriage of this sort is heavily weighted in the husband's favor, it is also clear that women such as Thach are active in negotiating for their rights within the privatized sphere of the family/household – refusing to take repeated rebuffs for an answer, Thach has finally managed to persuade her husband to act as guarantor for her PR application. Should this be denied, Thach remains unfazed, saying that 'if they rejected it, I will just apply again'. For the Vietnamese marriage migrants, these privatized strategies enacted in the realm of the family to create a pathway to secure residency rights (which opens up the possibility to claims other rights such as the right to work) are essential in redefining the marriage migrants' foothold in the nation-state.

It should however be noted that being able to legitimately engage in paid work when PR status has been secured does not necessarily signify the conclusion of all negotiations, or fuller incorporation into the nation-state. In some instances such as in the case of 22-year-old Tho who has been a PR for two years and who is in the process of divorcing her husband (in his 50s; Tho was 17 when she married him), residency papers have freed her 'to be independent' and to seek paid work (this was a hard earned form of liberation as her husband 'didn't like her to work and scolded her a lot') but only as an hourly rated canteen helper. Without the requisite qualifications and working experience, and faced with insurmountable language barriers, canteen work is all Tho has been able to secure. Not only is the work

low-paid, she does not enjoy any form of health insurance or other benefits and is hence unable to pay for specialist help for her depressive condition. Neither is she able to perform the role of filial daughter and sacrificial sister to her family members in Vietnam: although she ‘tries to be independent and work’, she has not been able to repay the debts her father owed as a result of a bout of hospitalization, relieve her mother of the burden of being the family’s breadwinner (her mother sells fruits in the market), support her younger sister through school (she has quit school at Grade 10) or enable her brother to further his studies in the field of tourism. Tho is also determined to gain custody of her son after the divorce and has ‘made up her mind’ that she would raise her son on her own, but is anxious that she may not have the resources to keep up with the case, especially when her husband is trying to ‘make the divorce [proceedings] too long and tiring’. Interestingly, in this difficult time, she has no recourse to any family- or community-based help in Singapore, apart from her agent who introduced her to ‘a good lawyer’. In short, while residency papers allow the marriage migrant to gain a certain freedom and access to other rights (particularly the claims to paid work), PR status alone, bereft of other supportive mechanisms and without a pipeline of resources to tap on in trying circumstances, has meant that marriage migrants’ grip on these rights continue to be rather tenuous.

The fragile nature of the marriage migrant’s hold on partial or graduated citizenship rights provides the key to explaining the ambivalence, on the part of some of the Vietnamese wives, towards making a move from PR status to acquiring Singapore citizenship. Tho, for example, while aware of the benefits of citizenship, categorically does not want to apply for Singapore citizenship as she ‘is afraid of losing her Vietnamese nationality’ and continues to feel emotionally bound to her family in Vietnam, which she considers to be ‘a great mental support’ in her times of need. In the case of Giang (23 years old, married to Ben, in his 40s, works in advertising) who has obtained PR status and is working as a cashier in a supermarket, her refusal to apply for Singapore citizenship in order to retain Vietnamese citizenship was motivated in part by family considerations (she maintains a strong relationship with her sister in Vietnam) but also by her plans to invest in Vietnam and carve out a future business in that country. Retaining her Vietnamese papers made it ‘easier’ for her to purchase land ‘in an area about to become a town’ (she persuaded Ben to fork out the funds to purchase the land at a good rate under her name some three years ago) and to build and open a boarding house when she has enough savings. In both the cases of Tho and Giang, the tenuous nature of their hold on citizenship rights in the country where their marital home is located has encouraged them to simultaneously maintain strong linkages with their natal homeland.

Conclusion

As seen, strategies of simultaneity (often harnessed to transnational family linkages) that marriage migrants exhibit signify an act of resilience in the face of weak and partial incorporation into host nation-states. As Glick-Schiller et al. and Yeoh have argued, understanding the pathways to incorporation of transnational migrants into nation-states must also take into account the ‘patterns’ and ‘politics’ of ‘simultaneity’ involving these migrants, where their everyday practices often reflect ‘the complex interplay of being part of different local and social settings in different political and geographical locations’.⁵⁵ While ‘conceptions of pathways to incorporation and simultaneity’⁵⁶ would apply in one way or another to

transnational migrants of different stripes, we argue that using these conceptions in the case of marriage migrants poses interesting challenges as ‘incorporation and simultaneity’ need to be understood in terms of the nexus between two scales: while they are often ‘strongly’ linked to and folded into the ‘family’, they are often only weakly incorporated into the ‘nation-state’. In this light, an understanding of the negotiation of citizenship rights among marriage migrants must engage the nation-state framework *and* also take into account the uneven contours of the transnational stage, precisely because these rights, as well as the strategies to access these rights, are inextricably bound not only to the marriage migrant’s ‘weak’ positioning in both sending and receiving nation-states, but their negotiated placing in both natal and marital families.

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Notes

1. Toyota, “Editorial Introduction,” 2.
2. Constable, *Cross-border Marriages*.
3. Toyota, “Editorial Introduction,” 2.
4. Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship*.
5. Turner, “Citizenship.”
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 48.

8. Stasiulis and Bakan, "Negotiating Citizenship."
9. Wang and Bélanger, "Taiwanizing Female Immigrant Spouses," 92.
10. Ibid., 92–3.
11. Wang, "Hidden Spaces."
12. Wang and Bélanger, "Taiwanizing Female Immigrant Spouses," 98.
13. Turner's ("Citizenship," 49) more optimistic reading of this same point suggests that reclaiming the nexus between citizenship and marriage/family will bring into sharper focus migrant women's voices in debates about citizenship such that their rights and claims can no longer be dismissed in existing frameworks of citizenship.
14. Hsia, "Foreign Brides."
15. Ibid, 17.
16. Werbner and Yuval-Davis, "Introduction."
17. Hsia, "Foreign Brides," 41.
18. Suzuki, "Between Two Shores," 465.
19. Shen, "Crossing the Taiwan Strait," 22.
20. Levitt and Glick-Schiller, "Conceptualising Simultaneity," 595–629.
21. Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's Multiculturalism;" Siddique, "Singaporean Identity."
22. National Population Secretariat, *Population in Brief 2009*.
23. See Straughan, Chan, and Jones, "From Population Control to Fertility Promotion."
24. Koh, "Global Flows of Foreign Talents."
25. See Yeoh, "Bifurcated Labor."
26. See Toh, "Helpline Getting More Calls." According to Ngoo, there were 1.25 million transient workers as at June 2009, out of a total population of about five million in Singapore.
27. Sassen, "Globalization or Denationalization?" 12.
28. See Wong, "Written Answer to Parliamentary Question" and Wong, "DPM's Speech."
29. Lee, "PM Lee's National Day Rally Speech."
30. Hsia, "Foreign Brides."
31. Foreign spouses tend to be mainly from Asia: in 2009, 97% of non-citizen brides and 66.7% of non-citizen grooms were of Asian origin (National Population Secretariat, *Population in Brief 2010*).
32. National Population Secretariat, *Population in Brief 2010*, <http://www.nps.gov.sg/files/news/Population%20in%20Brief%202010.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2010).
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Hussain, "More Older Men Seeking Foreign Brides."
36. An average of about 8,500 Singapore PRs became Singapore citizens annually over the past 10 years (Wong, "Written Answer to Parliamentary Question").
37. Chua, "Multiculturalism in Singapore."
38. Lackey, "Door Shuts on Flat Applicant of 'Other' Race."
39. Kor, "Double-barrelled Race Option."
40. Quoted in "Little Impact on Ethnic-based Policies: PM Lee; New Move is 'a liberalisation, not a revolution,'" *The Straits Times*, 16 January 2010.
41. Hussain, "Ethnic-based Policies."
42. There are as yet no official figures showing how many people have changed their race as a result of this new policy. In terms of newborns, Singapore's Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) revealed that some 16% mixed-heritage babies had double-barreled races on their official documents between January 2011 and June 2012 ("No Need to Amend IC, Say Some Mixed-Race S'poreans," *The Straits Times*, 4 September 2012).
43. Hsia, "Foreign Brides."
44. Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, 205–209.
45. There are strict rules governing the registration and activities of migrant labor organizations. All registered organizations are expressly prohibited from engaging in 'political activities.' In addition, foreign-based NGOs face considerable difficulties becoming formally registered in Singapore while formal organizations run by migrant workers themselves do not exist (Piper, "Migrant Worker Activism," 10–11).

46. Piper, "Migrant Worker Activism," 365.
47. Yeoh and Annadurai, "Civil Society Action."
48. In a diametrically opposite direction, migrant women from the Asian region admitted into the nation as work permit holders (i.e. as foreign domestic workers) are prohibited under the marriage restriction policy from becoming wives of Singaporean men.
49. Yeoh and Huang, "Foreign Domestic Workers."
50. AWARE, "Beyond 'Happily Ever After'."
51. Yeoh, "Bifurcated Labor."
52. In contrast, Tan ("A Union of Gender Equality," 74) has argued that relatively smaller proportion of international marriages involving Singaporean women and foreign husbands has galvanized significant policy changes: 'pragmatic considerations of demographic necessity, the political economy of international migration, talent augmentation, the growing popularity of international marriages, and the larger political and economic realities of a globalizing world' have led the way in the shedding of patriarchal assumptions and the adoption of a more gender-neutral citizenship regime.
53. We draw upon findings from our project entitled 'State boundaries, cultural politics and gender negotiations in international marriages in Malaysia and Singapore.' A major component of this study focuses on Vietnamese women who married Singaporean men through commercial matchmaking agencies. Study participants were identified in various ways. We met some of the couples through commercial matchmaking agencies, the owners of which had granted us interviews and were amenable to us meeting with some of their clients, but attempts to snowball from these initial leads were unsuccessful most of the time. We found that the social stigma attached to commercial matchmaking contributed greatly to the difficulties in snowballing. The primary route by which we were able to get to know Vietnamese marriage migrants was through thrice-weekly English classes that we conducted for 11 months, from December 2008 through October 2009. The English classes were specifically designed for Vietnamese women who have had only primary education, and very little prior exposure to English. The classes drew participants through word of mouth among the social networks of Vietnamese marriage migrants; but because they were held in the afternoons, those who could not attend due to work, childcare, or other commitments were systematically excluded. Individual attendance was generally irregular, and some of those whose afternoons were tied up with other commitments managed to attend on the odd days when they were relieved of their duties. The classes offered a platform for the Vietnamese marriage migrants to meet and socialize, and we were also able to reach out to a wider network of Vietnamese marriage migrants through picnics, barbecues and other social events which the class participants organized. The class attendees were informed of our research project, but we made it clear that class attendance does not necessarily mean that they have to participate in the project (indeed, there were many class attendees who were not project participants). Detailed notes were made from interviews or prolonged chats with individuals who consented to participating in the research project, while general observational notes were made from the classes and various social interactions that we had with the women.
54. Rattana and Thompson, "Thai Wives."
55. Glick-Schiller et al., "Pathways of Migrant Incorporation in Germany;" Yeoh, "Observations on Transnational Urbanism."
56. Glick-Schiller et al., "Pathways of Migrant Incorporation in Germany."

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