Migration to and from Taiwan

Edited by Chiu Kuei-fen, Dafydd Fell and Lin Ping
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11 Tactical resistances in daily politics

How do battered Vietnamese wives negotiate family and state tightropes in Taiwan?

Wang Hong-zen, Chen Po-wei and Anna Tang Wen-hui

Introduction

Existing literature on Vietnamese migrant wives in Taiwan has focused primarily on structural conditions that determine the experiences of immigrant wives in contemporary Taiwanese society (e.g. Hsia 2001). Within this line of reasoning, research has tended to overstate structural constraints and has therefore overlooked the significance of agency of migrant wives, who are often portrayed as docile or victimized rather than as individuals who negotiate and appropriate their limited resources to improve their marginalized positions.

In this chapter we argue that despite unfavourable social conditions, migrant women are able to manoeuvre a way out of family/state constraints. In arguing this, we do not suggest a voluntarism that celebrates ‘freed’ agency without any social constraints; instead, we recognize the importance of some social spaces for individual manoeuvre, even though they are never entirely open-ended and can sometimes be tightly constraining. It is through ‘hidden spaces’ of resistance (Wang 2007) that we are able to decipher how battered Vietnamese wives negotiate both familial and state tightropes in Taiwan.

Based on two of the present authors’ previous research (Tang and Wang 2011a,b), this article seeks to examine the interactions between abused Vietnamese migrant wives and their husbands’ families. Specifically, we explore the structural conditions that enable them to or forbid them from actively negotiating dominant social values in order to further improve their marginalized positions in everyday practices. In so doing, we hope to address a gendered presumption about the ‘passivity’ of Vietnamese migrant wives through examining their situated resistances towards the patrilineal Taiwanese family system.

We must stress that not all migrant Vietnamese wives in Taiwan experience intense family conflict and/or domestic violence. According to Wang (2001), at least 90 per cent of migrant Vietnamese wives in Taiwan are satisfied with their marriage. Thus, in researching Vietnamese wives, we do not want to perpetuate media stigmatizations of cross-border marriages; rather, we seek to provide a critical sociological examination of the interplay between structure and agency by understanding how migration intersects with class, gender and ethnicity.
Social norms in everyday life and the ‘hidden spaces’ of the subordinated

A merit of sociological analysis is to uncover structural determinations that cannot be easily altered by individual free will. Such structural influences become evident through the routinization of everyday practice, or what Erving Goffman described as ‘a consistent and never-to-be-relaxed-monitoring of behaviour’ (cited in Giddens, 1990: 36). Thus we are ‘actors’ who ‘perform’ in accordance with our given scripts to maintain societal harmony.

Yet sociological analysis of this sort is not without criticism. What is often unexplored/unexplained is how exceptions (e.g. criminality, alcoholism, or drug abuse) arise if social structures are so pervasive and deterministic (Wrong 1961; Granovetter 1985). Structural analysis thus tends to overlook the potential of agency to allow people to ‘perform’ differently from their ascribed scripts.

Structure and agency appear to be seemingly irreconcilable paradigms for sociological research. It is particularly important to establish an analytical equilibrium to provide an adequate understanding that neither overlooks the structural constraints nor underplays agency resistances. In past decades, research has increasingly explored the resistance of the subordinated. James Scott (1976), for example, has pointed out that the ‘infrapolitics’ of the subordinated is usually not confrontational. If we want to provide a more complex picture of power relations, we need to understand the ‘hidden transcripts’ of the subordinated.

By ‘hidden transcripts’, Scott refers to discourses and practices occurring ‘back-stage’ (in Goffman’s sense) which are not always congruent with performances on the main stage. Specifically, under an authoritarian regime, dictators may want to maintain the impression of being kind and benevolent, whereas the masses may appear to be obedient and submissive in an orchestrated performance that matches social expectations. Both the power play and intentions of the dominator/subordinated are hidden. For example, land expropriation for economic developments may be used as a euphemism for collusion amongst those in power. By contrast, for the seemingly subordinate, the ‘use of the dominant social order that deflects its power’ allows them to be ‘subverted from within’ in the sense of ‘escaping it without leaving it’, and to tactically ‘poach’ areas of being where imposed power cannot reach (de Certeau 1984: xi–xiii).

As a form of inclusion as well as exclusion, ‘hidden scripts’ are only known by those who share similar interests in order to deceive or hide from their opponents. For Scott, hidden scripts can expose power relations between the dominant and the dominated and reveal a well-camouflaged infrapolitics that explains the dynamics of ‘public’ performances and ‘unspoken’ intentions.

Scott’s notion of infrapolitics has contributed significantly to research on the agency of the subordinated since the 1990s (see Kerkvliet 2005; Lan 2006; Yeh and Huang 1998). Such conceptualization avoids re-stigmatizing or victimizing marginalized subjects. Yet in research of this sort, agency appears to be understood as synonymous with ‘disobedience’. This oppositional logic fails to explain the contradictory social positions that individuals may occupy simultaneously (Wright 1980). It also fails to capture more complex power relations that are
not based on an oppositional logic. The prerequisite structural conditions for the resistance of the subordinated to take place are left unexamined.

Building on Scott’s recognition of agency, this paper explores how contradictory social relations create a ‘hidden space’ for migrant Vietnamese wives to escape from or resist oppressive social structures and cultural norms in Taiwanese society. By ‘hidden spaces’, we refer to social spaces that ‘do not exist in “normal” social relations. This is a space in which the subordinate can hide, escape from norms, or find weapons to resist’ (Wang 2007: 712). It is through contradictory structural conditions or power relations that ‘hidden spaces’ come to exist.

Take Filipina maids as an example. They enjoy more vacation days than other migrant worker groups in both Taiwan and in Singapore. Specifically, their religious norm of going to church on Sundays contradicts the employer’s power to prohibit them from having personal time (Yeoh and Huang 1998: 588). In combination with the state’s (non-compulsory) rule that workers should have one day off every week, a discursive space to successfully negotiate a day off is created by conflictual social relations.

Similarly, Vietnamese migrant wives in Taiwan do not necessarily encounter consistent social forces that inevitably render them subordinate. In particular, not all Taiwanese family members will share the same hostile view of the ‘foreign bride’ (although it is not uncommon that conflicts are often triggered by the migrant wife’s mother-in-law). Even if migrant wives are treated unfairly by their Taiwanese families, the Taiwan Domestic Violence Prevention Law (DVPL) can become a last refuge, alongside help from sympathetic local Taiwanese. It is through such conflictual power relations that domination and emancipation are simultaneously experienced by the subordinated.

Importantly, by agency, we do not suggest that migrant wives with ‘suspicious intentions’ manipulate orders of protection to either negotiate alimony, property and custody or to justify their adultery (Lee et al. 2007). Analysis of this sort risks over-simplifying domestic violence and the multiple structural constraints it implies (Tang and Wang 2011b). Consequently, the subordinated are simply ‘pathologized’ and presumptions based on class inequality, patriotism and gender simply overlooked (Chao 2008; Chen 2003).

In response to such analysis, this chapter aims to posit an alternative socio-logical understanding of agency through exploring the ‘hidden spaces’ of the subordinated. We focus on how migrant women are able to develop survival or resistance strategies in order to secure, or even improve, their marginalized positions. We shall elaborate this stance by focusing on contradictory power relations and structural disjunctions. By exploring the hidden spaces of the subordinated, we seek to identify how the resistances of the subordinated occur, and under what circumstances.

Research methods

This research adopts Institutional Ethnography (IE; Smith 2005) to collect data by using fieldwork observation, interviews and text analysis. The purpose of
this method is to understand the logics behind different ‘local’ narratives and to illustrate ‘relations of ruling’ that impact individuals’ experiences. When domestic violence occurs, IE seeks to discover how different information, events and processes are organized by institutional ideologies. It also enables us to understand how different sub-systems are coordinated and linked, creating a support network for abused women, and (simultaneously) barriers that are hard for them to break.

We have interviewed sixteen Vietnamese immigrant women who sought help from the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence of a local city government in Taiwan, three of their husbands, five family members, four social workers and two judges. We have also obtained some textual information from government bodies to reconstruct the experience of seeking help and to understand the structural factors that hinder the effectiveness of the DVPL. From their own narratives, we sensed the ‘rupture experience’ of Vietnamese immigrant women when they sought help via the DVPL. Their experiences in the legal aid process inform us about how they think, choose and act when facing law enforcement in different sub-systems which are not consistently organized by any one principle.

This chapter is drawn from a research project between May 2008 and the end of 2009. Intensive interviews were conducted with subsequent follow-ups, alongside observation of social workers’ casework interviews. Of the sixteen interviewees, three women agreed to be interviewed by the researchers without social workers present. The authors remained in contact with them mainly by mobile phone, and also by visiting the participants from time to time to help with particular issues (for example by explaining the ID card application process, finding a better childcare centre and listening to their complaints about bureaucracy). Some interviewees also invited the authors to their homes when their husbands were present.

All interviews were voice or video-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and subsequently transcribed. All conversations were in Mandarin, with a few short conversations in Vietnamese, as most interviewees could speak the former fluently. The ability of one of the authors to speak basic Vietnamese helped build trust between the interviewees and researchers.

The average age of our informants was 25 at the time of interview. The oldest was 33 and the youngest 22. At the time of first interviews (2008), they had lived in Taiwan for an average of 5.3 years; the longest period was ten years and the shortest two. Of the interviewees, six had Taiwanese ID cards (i.e. citizenship), while the others had only resident permits; six were applying for Taiwanese IDs, but four had no idea of the importance of an ID card and had not even thought about applying for one. All sixteen interviewees lived with their in-laws and six had other relatives living with them in addition to their in-laws.

All our interviewees had relatives or Vietnamese friends who had married Taiwanese men. All but one (who had been introduced to her future husband by her brother-in-law) had met their husbands through a marriage broker. Only one interviewee was childless. All interviewees had faced psychological or physical abuse at home at the hands of husbands or in-laws, or even the husband’s children from a former marriage. Of the husbands, five were unemployed and six had unstable incomes.
Our research was partially sponsored by the local government, and one of the Centre’s social workers was a member of the research team. Casework records were available for our analysis. The researchers were committee members of the Center for the Prevention of Domestic Violence of the city government, and after conducting our research we recommended policies to streamline the bureaucratic process for immigrant women regarding domestic violence and the granting of citizenship.

**Learning to be a ‘righteous’ migrant wife**

Stigmatization can be synonymously understood as ideological simplification and unfair imaginary classification in the context of cross-border marriages. Vietnamese migrant women are often thought to marry Taiwanese men simply for their money. If they do not live up to the expectations of a ‘foreign bride’ (a caring mother, an obedient wife and a filial daughter-in-law; see Tang and Wang, 2011b), these migrant women are easily classified as ‘bad’ or ‘inappropriate’. Consequently, the domestic violence they suffer becomes socially justified, or even permitted, by nationalistic gendered stereotypes towards the migrant ‘others’. For example, A-Zhong (阿忠), a Taiwanese husband, explained why he needs to teach his Vietnamese wife ‘a lesson’:

> Our customs are different from your Vietnamese ones. In our country, the husband goes out, and the wife stays home. You should follow your husband and blend into society. You should not persist with your own opinions or insist on going out to work. If you do, that is your fault. Your Vietnamese dishes are different from ours, and if you cook in your own way, your mother-in-law will of course be upset. You have to learn how to cook Taiwanese dishes. As a mother of Taiwanese kids, you need to work harder to learn Chinese to help your kids study, or they will degrade our Taiwanese quality, which is very bad!

In A-Zhong’s ‘Taiwanese-centric’ claim, domestic violence was justifiable since his ‘foreign bride’ did not want to follow the gendered expectations of Taiwanese society. In a forceful tone, he explained:

> She does not know anything about how we do things in Taiwan. In Vietnam, women go out to work. In Taiwan going out to work is what men do. Women should just stay at home and take care of the children. You (a wife) can’t just do what you want and forget what you should do. If you only care about what you want to do, why should I be married to you? If you want to stay married to me, you need to learn my culture and understand our values. If you want to stay here rather than go back to Vietnam, you should understand our (Taiwanese) particular way of life.
There is one common explanation why Vietnamese women wish to marry Taiwanese men: to contribute to the financial improvement of their families’ lives in Vietnam. To this end, migrant women are willing to play the roles expected of them. However, if such expectations cannot be met through their husbands, participation in the labour market is one way for these women not only to avoid family conflict (with husbands or mothers-in-law), but also to become financially supportive of their own families. Yet going out to work is hardly straightforward and can further fuel both petty vendettas and domestic violence (Tang et al. 2011).

It is difficult, if not impossible, for migrant women to report their husbands’ domestically violent behaviour, particularly before they have obtained full Taiwanese citizenship. Due to immigration regulations, Vietnamese migrant wives are ‘dependent’ on their husbands in the sense that their yearly renewal of temporary residencies must be approved by their sponsors (i.e. husbands). Thus for a foreign wife, to report domestic violence is to directly challenge her husband, and therefore to risk both her marriage and her residency. In the worst case, the husband could divorce her and thus have her sent back to Vietnam.

Whether or not wives can seek statutory help depends entirely on their citizenship status. Yet, before they obtain full citizenship, Taiwanese cultural values and state policies work hand-in-hand to preclude support. As A-Yao (阿瑶) explains:

He always uses the renewal of my residency visa to control me. For example, he wouldn’t let me go to the police station to apply until the last day and said ‘I won’t let you apply, you f***ing shit’. When I wanted to apply for my Taiwanese ID card, he threatened to divorce me and said ‘I want to divorce you! You will have to leave Taiwan and will never see your son again’.

Alongside the unequal access to citizenship faced by migrant brides, these women also face racial and gendered stigmatization from their in-laws. Husbands in our research usually had limited knowledge of Vietnamese culture. For example, in Vietnam, married women are commonly involved in trade and business (Owen and Chandler 2005), and therefore such efforts by married women are usually praised in Vietnamese culture (Tang et al. 2011).

However, this gendered virtue is looked down upon by some segments of Taiwanese society. As A-Cheng (阿卿), a Taiwanese husband, believed:

I think about eight out of ten Vietnamese wives who go out to work had affairs. Even if they didn’t have affairs, they corrupted each other or learned bad habits such as discussing whose husbands had more money. Eventually they teach each other to go out to work, to earn dirty money to work as whores... She is coming to marry not to make money, but going out to work destroys her family completely. Very bad!

Despite the fact that Vietnamese migrant wives wish to participate in the labour market so that they can be filial daughters who are financially supportive of their parents in Vietnam, this duty is usually not acknowledged by their families in
Taiwan. On one hand, filial piety is indeed a virtue in Taiwanese society, yet on the other, such a virtue needs to be congruent with patrilineal values and gender practices. In other words, to be a filial daughter is not as important or legitimate as it is to be a caring mother or filial daughter-in-law.

It is not uncommon for Taiwanese husbands to be paranoid about the possibility of adultery on the part of their migrant wives. For example, as A-Cheng suggested, food vendor bars that employ migrant Vietnamese wives were often assumed to be a front for illicit activity:

Those food vendor bars are said to help them (Vietnamese wives) not to get homesick. But many of them are not what they appear to be. These shops cause a lot of problems for our society. You (a Vietnamese wife) were a respectable girl who came here to become a dutiful Taiwanese daughter-in-law, but you were tricked into doing something out of line. All you think about is making money and are causing trouble.

As far as Taiwanese husbands are concerned, if Vietnamese migrant wives go out to work, they are likely to be led into temptation or to learn something ‘bad’. This common yet discriminatory view permits husbands to perpetuate domestic abuse with little social censure. As one husband commented, ‘Yes, I did hit her. But this is not the point. She still insists on going out to work (in the sex industry) and earns dirty money’.

Another example that illustrates Taiwanese husbands’ reluctance towards migrant wives going out to work is that of A-minh (阿敏), who married a Taiwanese man thirty-seven years her senior. In the first two years, she was not allowed to go out at all and was especially forbidden from taking work. After two years, A-minh’s husband finally got her a job as an assistant in a nearby salon so that he could keep an eye on her. One day she went to a night-market after work and returned home late. Her husband was very upset about her coming home so late and had a serious argument with her. He claimed that he saw her flirting with a male customer and that she was having an affair. Their argument ended in violence and A-minh was never allowed to go to work again. Finally, A-minh went to report her husband and was so frightened that she decided to run away. Instead of looking for her, A-minh’s husband filed for divorce after she went missing. With no child and no citizenship, A-minh was ultimately deported to Vietnam.

Husbands’ feelings of paranoia are further aggravated by increasing state investigations into phony marriages and the associated media scrutiny that comes with these investigations. Specifically, Vietnamese migrant women who want to be financially independent are often assumed to work in the sex industry. One newspaper even suggested that ‘Vietnamese women could do anything, to strip or to play’. This media discrimination can be so prevalent and influential that even though migrant women go out to work in order to financially support to their families (both in Taiwan and Vietnam), their intentions are called into question by those around them. However, the news never provides a balanced account as to why some women may become sex workers in the first place. Hence, Vietnamese
migrant wives’ occupations are generally assumed (by their husbands and society) to be sex-associated. This assumption is further perpetuated by the state apparatus of border control and rigorous witch-hunts of ‘bad’ migrant women who are prostitutes rather than dutiful wives, caring mothers or filial daughters-in-law (Chen 2010).

**Tactical resistances against family tightropes**

Despite the aforementioned structural constraints, Vietnamese migrant wives use their limited resources to improve upon their disadvantaged positions. On one hand, these women are driven by traditional gendered expectations, to ‘live a life for others’ (by being a caring mother or filial daughter), and on the other by their desire to go out to work (and to ‘have a life of one’s own’). This irreconcilable tension between competing desires can nevertheless be resolved if they can find help from others (usually from that of fellow women).

Take A-Ke (阿珂) as an example. Her mother-in-law had looked after her children and the house while she was working. But following her mother-in-law’s death, A-Ke needed someone else to step in so that she could continue working. She therefore turned to her mother in Vietnam to help her maintain her demanding work–family balance. Yet this was only a temporary solution due to visa regulations. (A dependent’s visiting visa only allows a Vietnamese person to stay in Taiwan for three months.) Unexpectedly, when the visa expired, it was not the husband (A-Fa 阿發) but A-Ke’s mother who presented herself to police officers so that she could be deported back to Vietnam:

I had asked my mom to come to Taiwan and help me, and he (my husband) didn’t want my mom to go back. He wanted her to stay and look after the kids so that I could go out and work in order to earn extra money for the family. He didn’t let her go, and so my mom went to the police station. But she could not speak Chinese... she wanted to leave... I had asked my mom to stay at home while I was working, but when I came back, she had disappeared. I kept looking for her, with the help of my Vietnamese friends. Not until seven in the evening did the police officer bring my mom home. The police officer talked to my husband and told him to let her go home (back to Vietnam), and he said ‘Sure! Sure! Sure!’ but he never did.

In the context of Taiwan, Vietnamese women are expected to be responsible for taking care of the family. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, Taiwanese men like A-Ke’s husband cannot afford domestic help, so he exploited the unpaid labour of his Vietnamese mother-in-law. Nevertheless, there are at least two motivations for Vietnamese mothers who come to Taiwan and help their daughters: first, family bonding and kin support for their Vietnamese daughter; second, as a convenient way to work in Taiwan without going through the associated state bureaucracy (it costs approximately US$5,400 for Vietnamese migrants to work in Taiwan; see Wang and Belanger 2011).
Instead of applying for a work visa, a dependent visiting visa is a cheaper alternative for Vietnamese mothers to work in Taiwan. In so doing, Vietnamese women such as A-Ke’s mother can assist their daughters while simultaneously getting a job without being censored or discriminated against by the state. In comparison to the charges for work visas, the relatively low fine for overstaying also encourages Vietnamese to come to Taiwan via a dependent visa. Thus, the contradictory controls enacted through immigration policies create a potential ‘hidden space’ for Vietnamese migrant wives and an escape from their work–family tensions in Taiwan.

However, the work–family equilibrium was disrupted when A-Ke’s mother went back to Vietnam. Despite the fact that A-Ke’s income was indispensable (since A-Fa had lost his job), he still accused her of earning ‘dirty money’.

She was working in a factory at that time. When she finished work, she didn’t come home straightway, and lied to me that she needed to work extra hours. Later on, I found out that her boss paid her a couple of thousand (NT) dollars to go out with him... I phoned her boss and he said to me, ‘What can you do about it?’ So I stopped her from working there. She then decided to work as a masseuse in a massage spa. I went to have a look at where she worked; I saw there was a man’s name on the shop licence. I then knew that she [had] become his mistress.

When A-Fa discovered how much money his wife earned, he hid her bankbook and ID cards, and seldom let her use her own money:

(A-Fa) will hide my IDs. I work and I earn the money for the kids. Why does he have my bankbook? Today is the twelfth and I get paid, but I don’t know how much money I earned. He knows exactly how much because he has my bankbook.

When A-Ke’s boss found out about the situation, she paid A-Ke in cash so that A-Fa could not take her money. When female migrant women settle down in Taiwan, they begin to develop their own social networks. Through this kind of informal support, migrant women are able to negotiate the demands and controls of their families in Taiwan. This is particularly so when those demands are unreasonable and acknowledged as such by wider society.

Take A-minh as another example. In order to earn more money, A-minh often had to work extra hours. This further jeopardized the couple’s already precarious relationship. When A-minh’s boss realized her situation, she helped A-minh to open another bank account without letting her husband know. When A-minh’s husband realized what had happened, he began to harass A-minh at work and eventually she lost her job.

When A-Yao began to go out to work, her husband also tried to make life difficult:

I really want to work. But he is never happy about it. If he doesn’t give me a hard time at work, he will make a lot of trouble for me when I come home.
Once when I was showering, he did not let me finish, the soap was still all over me... or if I just tidied up the room, he would throw everything on the floor again, saying ‘If you have so much time that you can go out to work, I got jobs for you to do here’.

A-Yao’s husband had caused so many scenes at work that her employer did not want to keep her on. ‘My previous job only lasted for two months... If a potential boss knows that my husband will make his life difficult, they won’t hire me’. Nevertheless, some employers were more sympathetic to Vietnamese migrant wives. For example, A-Xiang was harassed by her husband at work. She had already obtained an order of protection, thus the employer was able call the police, who jailed her husband for one night. Thereafter, he left her in peace at work.

When family conflicts take place, one of the biggest challenges for Vietnamese women is filing for child custody, as these women fear being separated from their children. Thus when migrant wives decide to end their marriages, some of them will take their children back to Vietnam and hope their parents will provide care. They then return to Taiwan and continue to work in order to support the family back home. A social worker who helped A-Ying escape from her domestically violent husband explained:

She (A-Ying) did not let anyone know about her plan (to go back to Vietnam), not even her oldest son. She acted as normal and still took her son to school. As soon as her partner went off to work, she picked up her son from school. The boy by then knew that his mother was going to take him back to Vietnam... She made it very clear that this time she definitely would make it happen. If the plan went wrong again, she said, she would die.

The social relations experienced by migrant women are complex and often contradictory. Although they are expected to be obedient because of traditional gendered expectations, emerging new gender values engendered by feminist movements in Taiwan (e.g. the anti-domestic violence movement and thus the initiation of DVPL) can also be appropriated tactically in order to escape from domestic violence and their husbands' unreasonable controls. In the context of A-Ying, it was the state’s help (through DVPL and the social worker) and her family support back in Vietnam that allowed her to flee from domestic violence. Through the inherent structural contradictions – simultaneously singling out ‘bad’ migrant women and protecting the ‘victims’ of domestic violence – Vietnamese migrant wives are able to appropriate some limited resources to escape the prevailing difficulties.

To summarize, in analysing tactical resistances of Vietnamese migrant wives, we need to situate the interplay between the subordinated in relation to the wider social dimensions they encounter. Moreover, the power relations in which Vietnamese migrant wives are embedded are necessarily uneven and asymmetrical in regards to what they are able to negotiate, with whom, how and under what circumstances. However, help from their personal networks, local employers and some state policies allow them to manoeuvre an escape from
constraining family situations. Thus subordination and potential emancipation can be simultaneously experienced by Vietnamese migrant wives. Without recognition of this, the subordinated can be too easily portrayed as one-dimensional ‘victims’.

**Migrant wives and state tightropes**

Alongside family constraints and gendered expectations towards Vietnamese migrant wives, the state also plays an important role in perpetuating gendered stereotypes of Vietnamese migrant women. For example, the deputy minister of the Ministry of Education once made a discriminative (and almost eugenic) comment that migrant women in Taiwan should avoid having children in order to avoid the growth of an ‘undesirable’ population. He added that female migrant women should integrate into Taiwanese society by learning its customs and values, such as being a ‘dutiful wife, caring mother and filial daughter-in-law’ (also see Tang and Wang 2011b).

When abused migrant women need to seek help, the state or social-work professionals inevitably keep them under surveillance. A-Yu complained: ‘I can’t apply for an order of protection because I don’t know what they (social workers) talk about. They don’t believe me and they only listen to my husband’. Therefore, the possibility of escape from domestic violence often depends upon the judgements of ‘professionals’ (such as judges, police officers, social workers or doctors). However, these judgements cannot be understood independently from the social values and cultural norms they express. Below, we will elaborate this position by focusing on the interactions between social workers and Vietnamese migrant wives.

It is suggested that a middle-class gender regime (as often espoused by social workers) influences how DV (domestic violence) victims are perceived and treated (Tang and Wang 2011b). Hollander (2002) has pointed out that the social construction of traditional gendered roles makes people believe that only when abused women are ‘poor and miserable’ can they be sympathetically acknowledged. If abused women cannot fit such ‘conventional’ images, they are unlikely to obtain help and sympathy.

This stance resonates with our research. As one social worker commented on A-Lich (阿麗): ‘I saw her very young, very beautiful and dressed even better than me. I can’t imagine that she is an abused woman... really not at all!’ A-Lich’s appearance thus conflicted with more conventional images of abused women, making the social worker feel more sympathetic towards ‘poor’ A-Zhao (阿趙, A-Lich’s husband). ‘When I met A-Zhao for the first time, I told myself, “A-Zhao, look at yourself. You are not able to handle A-Lich.”’ Conversely, A-Luan (阿蘭), another Vietnamese abused wife, appeared to better fit the image of a DV victim and therefore found it easier to obtain an order of protection. Recalling Hollander’s findings, it is the ideology of a middle-class gender regime that decides whether one deserves help or not. As professionals comply with such norms, abused migrant women are further regulated by the legal system as well as the
family tightropes of their domestically violent circumstances. In contrast, if social workers can reflexively distance themselves from such preconceptions, then they can become an important means of support.

The judgements of social workers not only decide whether the abused migrant wives deserve protection; they also have a legal impact upon issues such as child custody, as judges often decide child custody based on social work evaluations. If abused migrant women are portrayed as ‘irresponsible’ mothers, it will be difficult for them to be awarded child custody. Take A-Lich as an example. The reason A-Lich left home and went out to work was to escape from her husband’s abuse. In order to support the children by herself, she needed to work, and therefore often relied on her Vietnamese friends to take care of the children. This gave her social worker the impression that A-Lich was not able to raise the children as well as A-Zhao (her husband) could. In fact, A-Zhao convincingly told the judge in the court: ‘I have my whole family and relatives to help me take care of the kids, what does she have?’ Child custody was granted to A-Zhao, and A-Lich was deported.

A-Jiao, who escaped from her husband’s abuse to live alone with her daughter, experienced a similar dilemma. She was considered by her social worker to be an ‘unsuitable’ mother. Specifically, A-Jiao was living with her new boyfriend, though she was not yet divorced, and the social worker considered this ‘adultery’ since A-Jiao was still married. It prevented her from winning custody of her daughter. To be ‘suitable’ is to be recognized by middle-class gender values that decide who can be a good mother. A-Jiao’s already precarious position was further marginalized by both professional discrimination and gendered expectations of ‘migrant others’.

Migrant women’s personal networks (e.g. friends or neighbours) are like a double-edged sword, restraining them from leaving their Taiwanese families as well as providing a way out of domestic violence. For example, neighbours may at first report violent husbands, yet later do not want to testify in court in order to avoid any confrontation with the husband’s family. As A-Luan’s brother-in-law explained:

Interviewee: Two of the witnesses are neighbours. They went to the courthouse, but fled as soon as they saw the husband’s name on the registration book.

Interviewer: Did they say why they were scared?

Interviewee: Both of them had talked to the husband’s mother, and they had heard the horrible things she said to her daughter-in-law. We asked these two to help, to tell the judge how threatening the mother-in-law was. We didn’t know why they ran away as soon as they saw the husband.

Not only neighbourly personal networks can turn into obstacles but also those associated with the husband’s family. For example, applying for an ID card turned out to be very difficult for A-Luan, despite the fact that she had an order of pro-
tection and had stayed in Taiwan for over three years. Specifically, as one social worker commented:

The permission from the husband becomes optional if an abused migrant woman is grounded by an order of protection and wants to apply for an ID card. However, some administrators in local registration offices are extremely cautious about this. They even call the husbands to make sure if it is ok. I have already checked that this is unnecessary. But some of them (administrators) are very, very cautious.

This happened to A-Luan when she was applying for her ID card. This ‘over-cautious’ approach adopted by local officials appears to resonate with how state apparatuses and their censorship keep migrant wives under surveillance. Structural constraints seem to work hand-in-hand with partrilineal values that further restrict the social spaces of resistance.

For migrant wives to escape from domestic violence, becoming financially independent is a prerequisite. For example, A-Luan had to stay with her abusive husband because she could not afford to live by herself and support the children:

Although I have an order of protection, I still have no place to go. And I was not qualified to live in the care centre because I want to take my kids with me and I need to get a job. I am not ready yet to leave my husband and take the kids with me. I have no place to stay and can only sometimes stay at my Vietnamese friend’s place. I have no job and no income to support myself and raise my kids.

If Vietnamese migrant wives want to go out to work, they need to pay for a place in a government-owned nursery to take care of children who are too young for school. Such a pre-condition makes work almost impossible for migrant women with few resources who have left their husbands.

Many interviewees continually reminded us of the primacy of financial independence in escaping domestic violence. Yet teaching a migrant wife to be an obedient and dutiful ‘Taiwanese’ daughter-in-law appears to be the priority in government policy regarding cross-border marriages. Little support in terms of job-seeking and financial independence is available for migrant wives when domestic violence occurs. Paradoxically, DV shelters provided by government can sometimes be restraining instead of liberating. A-Zhuang (阿莊) explained:

Social workers thought my husband was very dangerous and therefore put me into a domestic violence shelter. But it was very inconvenient for me to stay there since I need to work in order to support the kids as I was not permitted to do so if I lived there. I rather went home... Social workers explained that I had to follow the regulations, but I felt that I was put into a prison. I regretted seeking help. I would rather just get a job, work harder and stay with my kids.
But I was told that I needed to take things slowly and be patient. But I don’t know how much longer I should wait.

We need to acknowledge here that it is the government’s responsibility to provide DV shelters for abused women. However, the government only provides these women what they feel they ought to have, rather than what they really need. For these migrant women, DV shelters are like ‘prisons’. No free nursery is provided and there is little financial aid. Additionally, women are not allowed to go out and work and therefore cannot become financially self-sufficient in order to support their children, thus moving one step further from being ‘responsible’ mothers. For many abused migrant wives, going to live in a DV shelter is not the end but a continuation of a challenging life.

**Tactical resistances against state tightropes**

Despite these structural constraints, the women in our research are neither irrational nor naïve in their struggles against the discriminative values of dominant discourses. Instead they logically appropriate limited resources in order to negotiate both pressing social norms and gendered values. For example, a DNA test that can be used by the husband as evidence to prove a migrant wife’s adultery can also be appropriated by her to seek child custody. For example, A-Ding (阿丁) complained how his Vietnamese girlfriend was awarded child custody via a DNA test:

She registered ‘our’ child under the name of her ex-husband. She had not yet divorced her husband at that time, so when we were fighting for child custody, it was granted to her as ‘our’ child of course was not blood-related with her ex-husband. This way, she was eventually granted child custody.

In seeking to obtain child custody, getting Taiwanese residency through DVPL represents a last resort for migrant wives. To simply accuse these women of ‘suspicious intentions’, however, is to deny their tactical appropriation of already limited resources. It also avoids exploring why such a ‘dishonest’ move is one of the few ways available to them to escape domestic violence in the first place. How the violence of the state is operationalized alongside class inequality, ethnic discrimination and gendered hierarchy is often ignored (Tang and Wang, 2011b).

For abused Vietnamese wives in Taiwan, seeking help is seldom straightforward. Although they hope to obtain support from Taiwan’s (discriminatory) bureaucracy, they also need to be financially independent in order to be self-sufficient mothers. These two wishes are often seen as contradictory and are difficult for professionals (e.g. social workers) to acknowledge. For example, A-Ying’s (阿瑩) social worker wanted to arrange for her to stay in a DV shelter since it was cheap and comfortable, but A-Ying did not want to stay there. The social worker thus complained:
If you rent the whole flat, it costs 4500(NT) dollars a month. If you share the flat with someone else, it only costs you about 2000... I took her to the place. She only saw the building, and didn’t even go in and decided already she couldn’t stay there. Of course, she gave some reasons such as she couldn’t go out to work if she stayed there. Actually, she was quite good at doing business, but at the same time, she would also tell you she felt so helpless. This is kind of self-contradictory you know!

What appears to be unreasonable to the social worker can be easily understood if we understand that the priority for A-Ying is not to find a cheap and comfortable shelter, but to start earning money in order to have a new life with her children.

In the end, A-Ying stayed in the assigned shelter, but not for long. As her social worker explained:

She told one of our colleagues to let her go home, so she could take her motorcycle with her. She said the motorcycle was the only valuable possession she had and she was worried that her partner would throw it away. She was so persistent that the social worker gave in and let her go. I remember that this all happened on a Friday. On Saturday, she insisted that she wanted to work and kept asking us, almost becoming annoying. Our colleague could not stand it anymore and called the boss to ask if A-Ying could go out to work. The boss said that she (A-Ying) was already an adult and we should respect her. If she wished to go, we should let her do so.

Despite the fact that one is not allowed to go out and work while staying in a government-owned DV shelter, there are always exceptions depending on how rules are implemented, by whom and under what circumstances. Thus, staying in a ‘prison-like’ DV shelter could also provide a temporary solution for A-Ying to escape from her husband’s abuse. It further provided a pathway towards financial independence for her.

From the social worker’s perspective, A-Ying’s was quite a challenging case, in the sense that she found her to be fickle and dishonest. In 2007, A-Ying went back to Vietnam without telling anyone. When the social worker found out, A-Ying promised to get in touch when she returned to Taiwan. But she never kept her word. As the social worker commented:

I told her (A-Ying) she must call me when she returned. She did tell me the date she was coming back... and she didn’t call me. So I called the school to ask if the kids were back. I was told that they all came back. The teacher also asked about A-Ying, and the kids told us that she was now back with her abusive partner... I called A-Ying and she told me that she was still in Vietnam... Later on she told us that she went back to stay with her partner and told us that everything was fine.
It was eventually revealed that the reason A-Ying went back to her partner was to save some money and to take care of her children. What appeared dishonest to professionals may actually have been the only practical solution available.

In her most recent flight back to Vietnam, A-Ying took the children with her and then returned to Taiwan alone in order to work. This time she did not contact any social workers and did not go back to stay with her partner. We were told that A-Ying was selling clothes to women who worked in an illicit (erotic) karaoke bar (KTV). A-Ying’s social worker suspected, though was not entirely sure, that she also worked there herself:

Last time she moved back to stay with her partner, she was dressing very nicely and looked very attractive... her partner said that she worked in a KTV, but I wanted to know for myself. So I asked her if she worked there. She told me that her friends worked there because they needed to earn a living, to raise the children. There was nothing else they could do. They are not indecent... She told me that she had tried to work there, but she hasn’t done it yet. The money from her clothing business was good enough to support her and her children.

We have no evidence to tell if A-Ying worked in a KTV or not. However, what we are more certain of is that when abused women want to seek help from the state or the legal system, they are likely to ‘perform’ accordingly to the conventional gendered expectations of what a ‘good’ migrant wife should be in order to obtain the help they need. Nevertheless, when earning money becomes a pressing issue, these marginalized women may develop different tactics for survival. Their youth or their capital of beauty and physical appearance may be appropriated as gendered artifices to subvert the structural norms that constrain them. In saying this, we are aware of the potential re-embedding of gendered norms via performing femininities as gendered artifice (see Adkins 2002). Yet denying agency of this sort not only risks only certain privileged voices being heard and taken seriously but also bypasses the structural constraints and the politics of resistance of the subordinated.

To summarize, state regulations (i.e. family court or DVPL) and DV shelters can be both a blessing and a curse for subordinated migrant wives in Taiwan. Through a structural disjuncture between how social policies ought to operate and how they are actually practised, battered Vietnamese wives were sometimes able to negotiate a way past state-imposed discrimination.

Although we have primarily focused on how agency occurs through structural disjunctions, we have also recognized the agency of the subordinated in terms of utilizing limited resources to their advantage. Specifically, migrant wives such as A-Ying may use their femininity to help them flee domestic violence (yet without being able to entirely escape gendered expectations). Rather than simply dismissing agency of this sort, we suggest that it provides an important insight into how genders are enacted on a structural level. Specifically, feminine attributes such as desirability and beauty are forms of regulation rather than domination and thus
need to be analysed in relation to how they are valued through a masculine gaze. Such gendered artifice is central to understanding how gendered power and inequality are operationalized (Skeggs 2004).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has sociologically explored the ‘hidden spaces’ of resistance lived out through subordinated Vietnamese migrant wives in Taiwan. Specifically, we have focused on the structural disjunctions and contradictory powers open for manoeuvring past family/state tightropes. Our findings suggest that: (1) interlinked structural inequalities which work against migrant abused women are dispersed via gendered expectation, classed exclusion and ethnic discrimination; (2) they are further perpetuated by the control of the husband’s family, the attitudes of professionals and the censorship of the state; (3) however, small and medium enterprises in Taiwan, alongside the DVPL and the personal networks of the Vietnamese migrant wives, can become resources for them to escape their marginalized positions (although the outcomes are sometimes ambivalent). Previous research on migrant wives in Taiwan has primarily focused on either structural determinism or on the voluntarism of the subordinated. Our study contributes to the existing literature by identifying the social conditions that allow the migrant ‘others’ to make use of the rules for their own advantages. By understanding agency through conflictual and multi-faceted social structures, we hope to have provided a more complex understanding of the daily politics of subordinated migrant women in Taiwan.

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**Notes**

1. Research data is documented in detail in our previous works. For detailed discussions of our research participants, see Tang and Wang (2011a, b).
2. One of the key features identified by IE is ‘experiences of disjuncture’ in everyday life. By this, it means how individuals feel unjustified or mistreated, yet are not able to speak for themselves.
3. For example, Xu (2009) reported how Vietnamese women were perceived as ‘easy’ and ‘accessible ... They would do anything for money, to strip or to play’. Liberty Times, 3 October 2009. Available online at www.libertytimes.com.tw/2009/new/oct3/today-center1-2htm (accessed 11 November 2010).
4. According to the official website of Ministry of Education, family members in a ‘normal’ Taiwanese family include ‘father/mother-in-law, husband, wife, sons and daughter’; and an important aspect of having a ‘happy marriage’ is ‘when sometimes your husband is in a bad mood, for the family’s sake, you should treat him kindly, to care [for] him and to understand him’. Available online at http://wise.edu.tw/resource/course/foreignbride/index.htm (accessed 13 February 2011).
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