



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

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SYNOPSIS

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The vocational training of immigrant women in Taiwan

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

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

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