Virtual Spaces for Imaginable Marriages: A Discursive Analysis of Structured Powers for Foreign Brides in Taiwan

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Abstract

Structuralists argue that women are used as 'exchangeable' objects through the marriage system in order to consolidate inter-tribal relationships. From the viewpoint of historical materialism, Karl Marx also recognized women and children as the exploitable resources in the male-dominated household. As 'commodifiable' resources, women were utilized in pursuing economic and political advantages. Such utilization however, was constrained within limited areas. However, presently, the fast circulation of knowledge/information – fostered by digital business networks of worldwide webs – has accelerated the movement of exotic [foreign] women in the global marriage market.

This study aims to examine how 'transnational brides' have been promoted as exchangeable commodities in Taiwanese websites, and also to explore how globalized economic orientations have constructed their business discourses to influence the unequal operations of production, exchange, and distribution in the marriage system of Taiwanese society. As many social scientists have suggested, the fast spread of information through extensive powers of the Internet has accelerated the mutual connectivity of buyers and sellers. This applies equally for transnational marriages in Taiwan.

Introduction

— How old are you? — My neighbor asked me (the author) such
personal question one day when I regularly went to the place, where
my father lives, once two weeks.
— I am thirty-six years old! — I smilingly answered her.
— Wow! Still single? — She looked at me strangely and then continued
to question me.
— Yes, I am still single. — I felt embarrassed to reply to her inquiry.
— Gosh! Is something wrong in your body, so you are afraid to get
married? Or you are too picky at finding your "Ms. Right"?! — She
seemed to tease my marital status of singleness on purpose.
— Aiyo, I am not picky lah.... — I bitterly explained to her.
— Okay! Okay! But do you consider to get married with foreign girls?
I can introduce you to very nice ones. I promise! You only need to pay
200,000 Taiwanese dollars... — She began to persuade me to consider
the possibility a cross-border marriage....

In Taiwan, dealing with transnational marriages of Taiwanese men
and foreign women has become an extremely competitive business among
travel agencies, personal brokers, match-making corporations and mass
media (for example, newspapers, TV channels, outdoor signboards, and
web pages of internet). Marriage brokers always play a significant role in
negotiating maximum benefits between potential buyers and sellers in the
market of transnational marriages. In order to increase the possibility of
successfully "selling out the available commodities" to bride-buyers in
Taiwan, the brokering companies have to promote their products extensively
and to advertise their professional knowledge in all related subjects such as
governmental regulations and personal profiles of foreign brides. This
interconnected structure among suppliers and consumers of commodities,
and matchmaking intermediaries is recognized as a 'commodity chain' in
the field of cross-border marriages. In order to make the commodity chain
function properly, the intermediaries maintain structural circulations of cross-
border marriage markets by supplying information between buyers and
suppliers.

In the so-called 'information societies,' the functional contribution
of the Internet in the field of communicative technologies is to allow
users to freely deliver 'what they know' to viewers, without the geographic
barriers for accessing the consumption of information. But it is necessary
to scrupulously explore the socio-cultural meanings of powers between
users, viewers, and the referred subjects, if we want to realize why and
how textual and figurative languages are constructed. Therefore, this study
aims to examine how 'transnational brides' have been promoted as
exchangeable commodities in Taiwanese websites. It also explores how
globalized economic interests have constructed their business discourses
to influence the unequal operations of production, exchange, and
distribution in the marriage system of Taiwanese society. In the present
epoch, the fast circulation of knowledge/information – fostered by digital
business networks of worldwide webs – have accelerated the exchangeable
movements of exotic [foreign] women in the marriage market. As many
social scientists have suggested, the fast spread of information through
extensive powers of the Internet has quickened the mutual connectivity
of buyers and sellers, including transnational marriages in Taiwan. How
do the marriage brokers use descriptions of foreign brides in their websites,
in order to promote the opportunities to elicit the interests of potential
buyers? How do the brokers build an imagined/virtual paradise of beauty,
virginity, purity, and virtue in their websites for Taiwanese men to choose
their ideal wives? In approaching these questions, analyzing the constructed
discourses in websites of foreign-bride brokers is the major approach for
this study. This allows us to better understand the relationships between
marriage systems in Taiwan and virtual global culture.

Background

What is the main purpose of getting married? There are undoubtedly
many answers to this question. Most people would agree that marriage is
not only a personal matter but also associated with socio-cultural norms
and values. Most Taiwanese claim that the key purpose of getting married
is to have children in order to continue the patrilineage. In Taiwan there is

a common saying - "there are three unfilial things, no offspring is the first to be criticized". This saying emphasize 'natural' functions of marriage as well as its 'legal' role in society. Although some domestic arrangement are composed of homosexual couples, single parent or unmarried people, the family as constituted by heterosexual couples is recognized as 'natural' and the most valued rationale.

'In the family, the husband has to protect his wife and children," - is seen as an unquestioned social fact in Taiwan. Men possess dominant power in their family because they contribute physical and economic benefits to sustain the requirements of their members, including protection. In this view, the status and role of wives and children are seen as subordinate and exploitable as objects of exchange amongst men. From the perspective of Structuralists, women in traditional societies were treated as the 'exchangeable' objects, through the marriage system, in order to consolidate inter-tribal relationships.[1] Historical materialists such as Karl Marx saw women and children as exploitable resources in the male-dominated household. The fact that women have been historically identified as 'commodifiable' resources for economic and political advantage wa. usually constrained within limited areas in the past. Traditionally in Taiwan, when a couple was ready to marry, their respective families contributed appropriate gifts. For example, the bride's family provided jewelry made of gold (necklace, bracelet, or ring), furniture such as a chest of drawers while the groom arranged the bride-price. These arrangements demonstrate a system of social exchanges that was organized by matchmakers in traditional Taiwanese society.

This view of marriage as a system of strategic exchanges has been challenged and transformed with the onset of a modern economy. This attitudinal change is due to the growing opportunities for Taiwanese women to receive better education and attain economic independence. More and more women favor marriages based on romantic love (this phenomenon is recognized as a "modern actualization"), instead of being based on obligated exchanges. Economic independence and higher educational attainment among Taiwanese women have encouraged them to make more

personal decisions and to escape from traditional marriage obligations. These factors have allowed women a chance to escape from their traditional roles and to participate in the modern labour market.[2] In their study, indicate that outside employment give women the means to escape the controls imposed by marriage. Marriage then loses its attractiveness . Taiwanese women are not simply concerned with establishing a family but are looking for specific traits in their would-be husbands, (such as three high standards: tall, rich, and handsome).[3] Women are more willing to postpone marriage, remain single, or get a divorce.[4] According to the statistics of the Ministry of Interior, the marriage rates in Taiwan from 1990 to 1998 had dropped from 7.1% to 6.7%.[5] According to NPF research, until 2002, one of five Taiwanese men cannot find domestic girls to get married.[6]

In the urban areas where economic revenues do not depend on family-based production, men do not need to eagerly find a woman for marriage, in order to take care of work that 'traditional' women 'naturally' fulfill. In contrast to urban areas, most men in rural regions, where agricultural and fishery lifestyles is labor intensive but the population is receding, men have to face the structural pressures in finding wives to share workloads. At the same time, women are not interested in marrying into rural families. Therefore, rural men turn their attention to foreign wives. As Bauman has stated, under social structures of consumerism, social meanings toward poverty mainly come from "flawed consumers" having no standard capabilities to consume average commodities (Bauman, 2002: 1-2, 52), so that unmarried men always worry to be labeled as 'poor' in finding a wife. Marriages with foreign brides become the strategic means to solve this social issue of poverty as a lack of consumption. However, without any practical opportunities to meet foreign women, men in rural Taiwan increasingly resort to online relationships. Thus, many special-service agencies (such as Human Resource Management Companies and Marriage and Friend Societies), which promote their businesses using new technology – World Wide Web, play important roles in providing introductions for Taiwanese men to meet foreign brides. For example,

there is one website that introduces Vietnamese and Cambodian girls as "pure, healthy, well-educated" characters, with pictures for Taiwanese men to choose.[7] From discursively analyzing how different types of websites have used special terminologies/descriptions to interest potential grooms, this study aims to explore how women from marginal nations/regions become marriageable agents in the new international system of exchange.

Related-literature Reviews

The movements of women from marginal societies being introduced into 'advanced' countries for the purposes of getting married and working as cheap laborers exists in many places and is not limited to Taiwan. This migratory activity reflects the networks of the world economy: the demands of consuming available human capital from the core countries powerfully impacts people in peripheral or semi-peripheral areas, forcing them to seek other marriage possibilities (Wallerstein, 1974) within the global order. Chang (2002: 3-5) suggests that the phenomenon of foreign brides in Taiwan needs to be examined under the developmental trends of globalization. And the term "transnational marriage of commodification" is strategically used to explain commercial meanings and values for foreign brides and mail order brides.

In such structures of matrimonial exchange, relationships of power between grooms and brides are unequally represented, because buyers (grooms) have their 'rights' and 'privileges' to select wives from subordinate countries/regions. In order to compensate for the expenses incurred, foreign brides are often assigned to work in factories or in the fishery sector in addition to housework. These social roles and practices have been transmitted from one generation to another in Taiwanese tradition. In her historical study of structural statuses of female beauty, Wolf points out "because the family was a unit of production, women's works was to assist men". Therefore, as long as not belonging to the nobility or as prostitutes, female values were dependent on their working abilities, economic contributions and reproductive capacity (Wolf, 1992: 9). This is a utilitarian

approach to explain the social value of foreign brides as productive commodities, because they can be treated as a family workforce. As Karl Marx suggests, "They are, however, commodities, only because they are something two-fold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value" (Tucker, 1972: 208-209), so their 'nature-like' bodies contain productive and reproductive functions that men can control and manipulate (Foucault, 1977: 26).

Generally speaking, the structured correlation of female bodies and home-based duties is attributed to the 'natural' properties of physical structures, especially from the dominant standpoint of scientific rationality in the medical world. For example, Schiebinger indicates, "the larger female pelvis was used ... to prove that women were naturally destined for motherhood, the confined sphere of hearth and home" (Schiebinger, 1987: 42-43). This destined inferiority of female physical mechanisms has been historically connected to many 'rational' explanations of female inabilities in other socio-cultural realms: "One important aspect of the definition of women's nature emphasized women's inability to do intellectual work or science of any kind" (Schiebinger, 1987: 70). This view is found in Karl Marx's theoretical assertion: wife and children are the slave of the husband because their contributions to family are established on the natural division of labor (Tucker, 1972: 123). And this natural division of labor clearly acknowledges how socio-cultural structures of production provide influential definitions for the valorization of physical strengths in nature. Just like the hospital and the school, the family is also a social institution that allows men to legitimately display dominant powers within the 'natural' division of labor so that female bodies can be manipulated, shaped, and trained (Foucault, 1977: 136).

If the structural meaning of 'modernity' mainly indicates the ability to control nature under human dominance (Giddens, 1991: 210), then 'modernized' Taiwanese women constitute a problem. Contemporary Taiwanese women increasingly reject these 'traditional and natural' ideologies: "no matter what, women finally need to get married," "women

and children naturally are belongings of men," or "the core of female lives is always on family chores." That is, modern women in Taiwan have escaped traditional moral expectations. They are no longer primarily seen as objects for exchange through marriages. Ironically, these traditional views of women persist or are projected in less economically developed countries in Asia such as Vietnam and Cambodia. Put simply, men in affluent societies have greater power to 'consume' objectified women from poorer societies (Slater, 2003: 175). As Schech and Haggis (2003: 11-13) indicate, 'development' does not only neutrally demonstrate a temporal process of structural transformations (such as from pre-modern to modern), but also could be purposefully attributed with political-economy meanings of dominated discourses. Therefore, the social definition of "nature" is changeable; depending on who has privileged powers to freely exercise this socio-culturally attributed action of definition (Foucault, 1980: 89-90).

In her book, Chang (2002: 93) indicates that the purpose for foreign brides to get married in Taiwan is always for improving their economic status because they suppose Taiwanese men are wealthier. Chiou (2005: 28) also suggests that the reason for most women to move into a relatively affluent culture is to materially and socially improve their own status. From these viewpoints, women from the poorer countries as producers of transnational marriages commodify their bodies to satisfy the needs and socio-cultural demands of consumers in the global market. This phenomenon reflects what Marx has suggested: "production 'produces consumption by creating the specific manner of consumption and, further, by creating the stimulus of consumption, the ability to consume, as a need" (Smart, 2003: 55-56). In order to stimulate the potential needs and demands of marriage consumers, framing dreamlike discursive languages in web pages is always a popular strategy for marriage brokers. As Sidney Mintz points out, "the kind or level of consumption of social groups is not a God-given constant; and certain beliefs about human character and potentiality are open to amendment. Conversely, the spread of internal meanings can be stimulated and manipulated" (Mintz, 1985: 153). The spread of internal meanings about foreign brides has been technologically

manipulated through discursive contexts and images of the Internet. Generally speaking, the influential powers of dreamlike discursive languages do not only uniquely exist in the socio-cultural mechanism of transnational marriages, but are also practiced in other commercial spheres - such as the introductions of foreign workers, short-term nurses, and maidservants whose work belong to the category of subordinate labors - in Taiwan. It is not difficult to find laborer-hunting companies in many related websites.[8] Thus, the socio-culturally subordinate status for people from marginal countries can be recognized as a structured and structuring framework of political-economy systems in contemporary capitalism (See Foucault, 1980: 98).

Benedict Anderson in his book, "*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*," distinctively illustrates the influential powers of print media (such as newspapers, books, and maps) under the development of capitalism to efficiently mold collective imaginations of nationalism, because the discursive texts of constructed languages in print media have disciplinary effects on educating socially structured ideologies of all citizens, even when they have never confronted one another in their lives (Anderson, 1991). While applying Anderson's approach to analyze the similar situations of building imagined marriages for Taiwanese men, it is not difficult to recognize that discursive languages in the Internet can also carry out collective ideologies to interpret the shared values/meanings of foreign brides. As Karl Marx points out, "language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men" (Tucker, 1972: 122). The usages of Internet languages originate from many specific necessities to accelerate the interactive opportunities of web users. On the other hand, the Internet can be identified as an intangible marketplace that involves social processes of commodity exchanges and activities of social institutions (Smart, 2003: 80), because its discursive materials gathers sellers, buyers, and intermediaries to negotiate what they want. "Advertising in particular is able to exploit this and attach images of romance, exotica, desire, beauty, fulfillment, communality, scientific progress and the good life to mundane

consumer goods" (Featherstone, 1991: 14; also see the similar statement in Slater, 2003: 167). This kind of strategic marketing, especially from intentional commercials of Internet, purposefully constructs virtual communicative channels to connect the mutual demands between producers and consumers, because it acceleratively distributes the exchangeable knowledge and information of buyable commodities (Fine and Leopold, 1993: 4-5).

According to Arnold Gehlen, the contribution of technologies in history is to replace and reinforce the functional mechanisms of human organs, and also to improve the work capacity of human beings (Gehlen, 1994: 15-16). For example, the technological creation of automobiles saves a lot of human labor in transporting objects. And undoubtedly, World Wide Web is one of the most significant technologies in information societies, because it has made it possible for people to reduce their time searching updated information/knowledge and impacted on relational interactions of net users within virtual worlds. Therefore, it is not difficult to define the World Wide Web as a scientific technique for interconnecting subjects and their knowledges in corresponding discursive worlds [such as women from marginal countries] (see Foucault, 1977: 24). This kind of knowledge inter-connections through the texts of web pages also accelerates the ratio of market exchanges and capital accumulations, because the Internet offers an efficient means to distribute and redistribute commodity circulations trans-nationally (May, 2004: 45-46). In addition this manipulating knowledge creates the appropriate symbolic codes (Baudrillard, 1975: 121) categorizing what groups of women possess 'better' qualities and characters in taking good care of family and work. That is, the virtual worlds of the Internet create an imaginative realm for potential customers to browse and interpret signs and meanings as bases for intended marriages. The Internet, acting as the most significant creation in the era of the information society, is also the means of accelerating commercial competitions to manipulate discursive and figurative signs of ubordinate ethnic groups.

Decoding the Structured Meanings of
Marriage Discourses in the Virtual World

Modernity is a kind of expert culture, which prevails in all social realms such as medical advices, cosmetic commodities, and industrial managements. Modernity can be seen as the social organization for the consumption of commodities. Thus, in the market mechanism of modernity, every commercial promotion of commodities emphasizes professionalism of sellers and ignorance of buyers (Slater, 2003: 149-150). There is no exception for the 'professional' business of brokering transnational marriages, which guarantees: 'professionalism', 'legality' and 'perpetual service' as shown in the texts of company websites.[9] Accompanying the prevalence of professionalism in contemporary societies is the appropriate structure of trust in specialized fields. This trust constitutes the significant socio-cultural capital for doing matchmaking business in the virtual world.[10] Therefore, the promising statement to obtain virginal foreign brides points out the most important female capital for Taiwanese men. This strategic application of the symbolic capital – female virginity - reflects a moral fetishism of the virginal complex for Taiwanese men. In order to receive the customers' trust in the promised qualities of chosen brides, legitimate contracts guaranteeing official proofs of examining healthy conditions (particularly for sex-related diseases), virginity, and citizenship with good behavioral virtues are provided and signed. These contracts indicate the quality of professional services [also see the TV commercial promising of doing medical checking on foreign brides in Figure 1].[11]

This kind of professionalism emphasizing marriage matching-up companies reflects productive modes of the late capitalism. These modes are founded on structural systems of a "knowledge" economy because this specialized knowledge offers imagined guarantees of obtaining dreamlike and satisfactory wives through transnational marriages. The use of professional discourses and images in the advertisings of virtual websites is a modern approach in producing desirable commodities. This phenomenon indicates that marriage brokers, acting as professional experts

FIGURE 1
(checking health conditions of foreign brides in a TV channel)

in marketing departments, have the practical knowledge of knowing how to promote their 'commodities' by manipulating desirable demands of consumers. In some musical video clips, foreign girls are displayed in profiles of 'available brides' and marketed as commodities for buyers to maximize 'use values' and 'exchange values in a free markets.[12] As Harvey suggests, "the activity of production therefore incorporates a certain knowledge of the world – knowledge that is also a social product" (Harvey, 1989b: 101), looking for buyable wives from World Wide Webs clearly points out current socio-cultural acceptances of cross-national marriage for Taiwanese men in subordinate social classes. Although marriage brokers using the Internet and traditional matchmakers from the past of Taiwan similarly manipulate their professional knowledge to connect their products and customers, these "knowledges" are built on different structures of social feelings (see Williams, 1973: 70). That is, traditional marriage go-betweens engage in their business within the limited and experienced realms based on knowing unmarried men in their social networks. In contrast, Internet marriage brokers operate within a virtual world based on the commercialized values generated by unequal economic conditions. Socio-

cultural constraints and direct experience are not significant variables for
Internet agents in the way that they apply for traditional marriage brokers.

Another common understanding of modernity refers to the temporal
progress and socio-cultural rationalization, in order to differentiate from
'traditional and underdeveloped' habits and values of the past.[13] Therefore,
foreign brides are always demonstrated as 'traditional others' who still
carry 'valuable' attributes of hardworking and moral virtues, as Taiwanese
women did twenty and thirty years ago.[14] Therefore, ethnic traits of
tradition, underdevelopment, and otherness are always cherished as
controllable, exploitable, and usable properties for matchmaking
companies to attract Taiwanese men interested in marrying foreign brides.

David Harvey argues that the mutual interactions of world citizens
have been acceleratively processed under historical conditions of late
capitalism as a consequence of new technologies. These have produced
'time-space compression' resulting in the expansion of knowledge
circulation, human interaction and commodity exchanges all over the world
(Harvey, 1989a). In analyzing socio-cultural phenomena referred to as
Mcdonaldization, Ritzer (2004) points out that the pursuit of doing things
efficiently has become a prevalent social fact in every unit of contemporary
societies. The marriage system in modern Taiwanese society has not been
excluded in this framework of chasing efficiency. This is illustrated in the
title of one web page displaying the way of efficiency involved in
transnational marriages: "Because of cheap charges and simple procedures,
the male Taiwanese likes to marry foreign brides."[15] Undoubtedly, the
growth of the Internet can be explained as knowledge-based products of
communicative technologies in the late capitalism. The World Wide Web
through discursive texts and graphic images compresses time-space that
allow and encourage people to become acquainted with strangers in distant
parts of the world. These strangers become virtual friends and later online
brides. Under the compressing technology of the Internet, any social
activity can be completed instantly, including transnational marriage.
According to its time-costing description, a website shows that departing
for Vietnam to search for an idealistic Vietnamese wife, complete the

marriage procedures and return to Taiwan can take place within a week. On the day after arrival in Vietnam, Taiwanese men can have a romantic affiliation and fall in love with Vietnamese girls (see Figure 2). The next day the man can visit prospective parent-in-laws and other relatives (see Figure 3). A few days later the wedding ceremony and banquet can be completed in Vietnam (see Figure 4 and 5).[16] For men who are in a greater rush, some transnational marriage companies even promise four days to complete a wedding ceremony in foreign countries.[17]

Advertising abundantly uses the images/figures of exoticism, naturalness, surrealism, and sub-consciousness to construct the atmosphere of perfectionism, in order to seduce manufactured desires, perceptions, and eagerness of potential customers (Slater, 2003: 167). Commercials usually deploy many visual props, virtual images and idealistic language/ graphic discourses to "reproduce consumers ever eager to believe that their fantasies can be fulfilled" (Smart, 2003: 158). In the web page of the "Addwe Technology Co., Ltd," there is one commercial description of Vietnamese brides: "women cherish their husbands, with high degrees of obedience and acceptance, just like Taiwanese women with traditional virtues.... and easy to be satisfied."[18] Here, many good traits of Vietnamese women can be de-codified as seductive fantasies for men to believe that they can find tender, tamable, and disciplinable foreign brides as their wives. As Foucault (1970) has suggested, an archaeologically temporal and spatial order is the political-economy result of hegemonic powers to assign desired expectations into 'appropriate' blanks of the social grid. Tender, tamed, disciplinable foreign brides can only keep their silence in front of discursive descriptions of web pages because their seductive virtues are the most valuable assets for marriage brokers to manipulate. This manipulation works on a undefined 'otherness'. In another agency for brokering marriages and friendships, many listed promises are described as agreed upon by foreign women (see Figure 6).[19] As Edmund Husserl argued (Chang, 2004), the existence of the 'other' comes from subjective or objective construction of 'my self'. But the imaginary construction of favorite attributes for marriageable 'others' are controlled by the dominant

Figure 2 (Day 2)   Figure 3 (Day 3)

Figure 4 (Day 7)   Figure 5 (Day 7)

discourses of interest-seeking matchmakers and not self-determinatively
consented to by the described other. Self and other occupy distinct
discursive structures and operate according to non-consensual
understandings and agreements.

As Gehlen (1994) suggests, 'nature' has been continuously
transformed into commodities under the production system of
capitalism".[20] Nature has been recognized as having qualities and values
associated with not-modern, rurality, purity, or tradition. That is, the
terminology 'nature' has been purposefully constructed as a popular
discourse for Taiwanese men to find pure and simpleminded wives in
foreign countries.[21] This discourse also guarantees an experience of 'exotic'
atmospheres and 'happy' adventures in the pilgrimage-like trips to find a

(SURVEY OF DISPOSITIONS)

1   (Are you psychologically ready to marry a Taiwanese)   (yes)
2   (Will you live with parent-in-laws after marriage?)   (yes)
3   (Will you work house chores after marriage?)   (yes)
4   (Will you tenderly take care of your husband?)   (yes)
5   (Will you go to work as long as your husband agrees?)   (yes)
6   (No matter what, will you stay with your husband?)   (yes)
7   (Will you work to sustain living with your husband?)   (yes)
8   (Will you promise all your profiles are correct?)   (yes)
9   (Will you guarantee no telling lies here?)   (yes)
10 (Will you promise you do not have boyfriends now?)   (yes)
11 (Have you ever been pregnant?)   (No)
12 (Do you need to return to your country regularly?)   (Not necessary)
13 (Do you need send money home monthly?)   (Not necessary)
14 (Are any of your family members in debt?)   (No)
15 (If your family members are in debt,
    do you need to help?)   (No)
16 (Have you agreed to pay fees for intermediates?)   (Yes)

FIGURE 6
(my own translation in English)

traditional and simple wife (see Figure 7 and 8).[22] From another standpoint, the term 'nature' (natural) has an alternative meaning: not polluted or exploited. Therefore, all Vietnamese girls are described as 'straight virgins' in order to emphasize the cleanness, freshness, and naturalness of their 'usable bodies.'[23]

Showing pictures of happy and fantastic tour experiences and figures of beautiful/traditional foreign girls in the commercial websites of marriage-broker companies is always an attractive strategy to pull enough attentions from the 'lonely' Taiwanese men. These men are often seen as 'alienated people' unable to experience a 'normal' ritual: to get married and then to have children. 'Loneliness' becomes a social symbol for people who in their 'right' ages cannot normally find right partners to get married. In order to solve this 'alienation from a rite of passage,' many web matchmaking companies introduce transnational marriages as an alternative

FIGURE 7
(an exotic adventure)

FIGURE 8
(a happy ending)

step.[24] The binary system of discursive contrasts (such as loneliness for the single versus happiness for the married, abnormality versus normality, and lower versus higher status) legitimates social distributions of power supporting the collective values of marriage (Foucault, 1990: 83). Applying Bourdieu's concept of taste distinctions among different social classes — "this classificatory system, which is the product of the internalization of the structure of social space" (Bourdieu, 1984: 175) and the emphasis of the binary system of discursive ideologies for marriage in the web pages internalizes socio-cultural values for people to justify their social statuses. This is especially so when websites display pictures to secure the following social 'fact': transnational marriages make everyday life of hitherto lonely men into happy married couples. This binary system of categorical ideologies has a corresponding material base to support and strengthen its internalized effects.[25]

As mentioned above, the idea of 'naturalness' is always a powerful language in brokering foreign girls in marriage markets, especially while this kind of discursive introduction refers to Vietnamese women. This phenomenon reflects that even within the gross category 'foreign bride', there are different ethnic attributes to be intentionally emphasized as marketing segments. For example, girls from Mainland China are defined as mainly interested in obtaining material possessions. Other Asian women

FIGURE 9
(showing similar religious belief and customs in a TV program)

are seen as having physical attributes such as color that will influence the looks of children. Only Vietnamese women have perfect traits in body figures, moral virtues, pretty appearances, and are less materialistic.[26] For this reason, Vietnamese are often introduced as having similar socio-cultural traits as Taiwanese. For example, many websites and even commercial television programs refer to the similarities of the religious belief and folk customs between Vietnam and Taiwan (see Figure 9).[27] No matter whether these ethnic categorizations have an ethnographic basis or are strategically manufactured to stimulate consumption on target markets, they all indicate the hegemonic powers of discursive makers (marriage brokers or matching-up companies) in the use of language (Foucault, 1980: 93).

Conclusion

Chang (2002: 235) has argued that Taiwanese middle-class people believe marriage involves romantic love but is also primarily an arrangement only between husband and wife. On the other hand, the majority of men looking for transnational marriages come from the social lower classes. In their case, such as workers and farmers, to get married is

the concern of the extended family. In their homelands, a similar view of
marriage is also present. It is seen as an opportunity to improve the family's
economic and social status. This common congruence facilitates and
legitimates the view of foreign brides as a source of economic benefits
and hence is open to exploitation. This explains why the web pages of
marriage agencies stress the importance of hard work, reliability, discipline
and loyalty. These virtues are essential for the often arduous tasks of family
care expected of foreign brides in their adopted homeland (see Figure 10
and 11)[28]. As Baudrillard suggests, "information is liberated but only in
order to be better managed and styled by the media" (Baudrillard, 1975:
146). These descriptions all emphasize the beauty, worthiness and happiness
foreign brides are guaranteed to deliver. Moreoever, under the market
mechanism of capitalism, many popular and beautiful girls – as freely
exchanged commodities - in the matchmaking company are even listed in
a ranking system of popularity for consumers (registered as its members)
to compete against one another.[29]

Within most commercial discourses of the Internet, the images of
foreign brides are promoted as consumable objects, and the introduction
of their "purity, virginity, and domesticity" become exploitable symbols.
These traits belong to one of two advertising functions in modern culture:
"to serve as a discourse about objects, symbols and ideas, and as a template
for erecting monuments to consumption and self-indulgence" (Watson and
Kopachevsky, 1994: 649). This manipulative strategy of marriage
advertising in web pages displays that women from marginal countries
can be packaged and designed as marketing commodities appealing for
men. Foreign brides are encapsulated within the discourse of marketing
designed for male consumers.

As Foucault (1970:86-87) points out, to know something (such as
moral virtues and loyalties of foreign brides) is always to speak of some
matters (such as happy marriages and enjoyable lifestyles) correctly. Hence,
foreign brides and their 'commercial values' are described in reliable and
correct language for potential buyers to imagine, plan and dream about

FIGURE 10
(The 'reasonable price' on
this woman?!)

FIGURE 11
(An economic
consideration)

their happy future married lives. Like children being told fairy tales, the happy ending of the prince and princess in such stories can be found in 'your real life,' as demonstrably shown in the web pages.[30] As Bourdieu argues, 'who has power to manipulate discursive texts in the web pages' represents the constructed structure of knowledge dominant in capitalism in order to promote an appropriate niche of transnational marriages in specialized markets' (Bourdieu, 1984: 95-96).

Foreign brides in Taiwan have stirred up many socio-cultural issues such as how to educate the "new" Taiwanese children of foreign brides, how to reduce family violence against foreign brides, and how to control prostitution through 'fake marriages'[31]. These debates have involved Taiwanese with different perspectives about the most appropriate approaches in maintaining socio-cultural harmony and equality. Understanding the sources and solutions of these current socio-cultural issues requires a better appreciation of why some Taiwanese men choose to marry foreign brides. It may be the case that, in addition to the real demographic shifts in rural society, creative marketing strategies favoured

by the virtual worlds of television and the Internet, creates unrealistic
fantasies through seductive discourses and images resulting (see Figure 12
and 13) in the simulacra of marriage among unmarried Taiwanese men.
If this is indeed the case, de-coding the structured meanings of discursive
contexts in matchmaking websites is essential in order to expose the
dominant political-economy powers of knowledge manipulators. This
power transforms the subordinate statuses of silent foreign women into
consumable commodities available through the global market. If
Taiwanese do not decode and expose this internalized ideology for the
exploitation and subordinate of foreign wives, important social issues
mention earlier will never be satisfactorily settled.

FIGURE 12
(Brokering Transnational
Marriages in a television channel)

FIGURE 13
(Brokering Transnational Marriages
in a television channel)

Notes

1   A good example for classic function-structuralism on discussing the social issues of
     marriage or "kinship" is social anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's writing, "The
     Elementary Structures of Kinship," (especially its Part Two: Generalized Exchange).
     Levi-Strauss, Claude (1971) *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston, MA: Beacon
     Press.
2   See: (http://www.npf.org.tw/PUBLICATION/SS/092/SS-R-092-005.htm).
3   See the following web page discussing the factors to influence most women in Taiwan on
     finically selecting their husbands: http://jagoyao.myweb.hinet.net/234.2.htm.
4   See: http://www.webhospital.org.tw/essay/essay.html? and http://hercafe.yam.com/
     hertalk/hercareer/careerwork/11179.html.
5   This date comes from the following website: http://myweb.hinet.net/home5/su5118/
     Writing451.htm.
6   See note 2.
7   See http://home.kimo.com.tw/changchien0108/index.htm (translated into English by
     myself).
8   See the following websites of introducing different kinds of human-resource hunting from
     marginal countries: http://www.a-fa.com.tw, http://www.a-fa.com.tw, http://
     www.housemaid.com.tw.
9   For example, the following web pages state their professional promises of giving legal,
     satisfactory, and professional services for charges, certificates, wedding banquets, or
     language trainings: http://www.m999.com.tw/about.htm, http://www.ut999388.idv.tw/
     two.htm, http://www.blm.com.tw/company.htm, and http://3591373.21tw.net/
     aboutus.htm, http://www.rbmat.com.
10 See the web page: http://www.loveline.com.tw.
11 The professional promise to superior qualities of foreign brides can be clearly browsed in
     web pages of many matchmaking companies: http://www.twlily.com.tw/001.htm, http:/
     /e-marry.21tw.net/profile.htm.
12 See four chips of musical videos introducing Vietnamese girls in the following web page:
     http://vn.idv.tw.
13 The similar phenomenon of treating foreign brides (Philippines) as traditional Japanese
     women during 1990s was also publicly discussed in Japan (Chiou, 2005: 93-94).
14 See the websites: http://www.nice999.com.tw, also http://www.blm.com.tw/lady.htm,
     and http://vntw.my1cc.com/5.htm.
15 See the following web page: http://big5.huaxia.com/tw/sdbd/sh/00097967.html.
16 See the following website: http://www.ut999388.idv.tw/three.htm.
17 See the following web page: http://www.loveline.com.tw.
18 See the original description, from the following website: http://www.addwe.com.tw/
     ?action=marry&?aid=102.
19 The source comes from the following web page: http://www.m999.com.tw/
     cn_girl.php?adr=CA&%20pages=3.

20 (Gehlen, 2004)

21 See the following websites: http://www.ut999388.idv.tw/two.htm, http://home.kimo.com.tw/jenyi888.

22 See: http://www.ut999388.idv.tw/five.htm.

23 As the original text states, In the following web page: http://mywife.24cc.com.

24 See the following web pages which describe loneliness as a seriously social issue and knowing foreign girls is the better way to solve such kind of loneliness: http://home.kimo.com.tw/jenyi888/company.html, http://www.twlily.com.tw.

25 See the following web pages for browsing pictures/video chips of happy marriage lives: http://www.3gpda.com.tw/myweb/3ga10841/¥D¿ï³æ.htm, http://www.chino.com.tw/vnbride/index.htm, http://www.vn-wife.com.tw/marry/life.htm.

26 See the following websites: http://home.kimo.com.tw/jenyi888/company.html, http://vntw.my1cc.com/5.htm, http://www.e-single.org/foreign/intro.php.

27 Also see the following website: http://www.e-single.org/foreign/intro.php.

28 The pictures are copied from the following website: http://www.3624815.idv.tw/two.htm.

29 See the following website: http://www.byte.com.tw/mates.

30 See the following web page in describing the promising marriage of the classic fairy tale for marring Russian girls: http://myweb.hinet.net/home2/fungmin8/main.htm.

31 The events of 'fake marriages but true prostitutions' could be casually reported in newspapers and television news programs. For example, policemen in a Tainan county arrested an illegal agency dealing with introducing more than 100 Vietnamese girls into Taiwan to do fake marriages, but engaging prostituting activities in special stores.

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