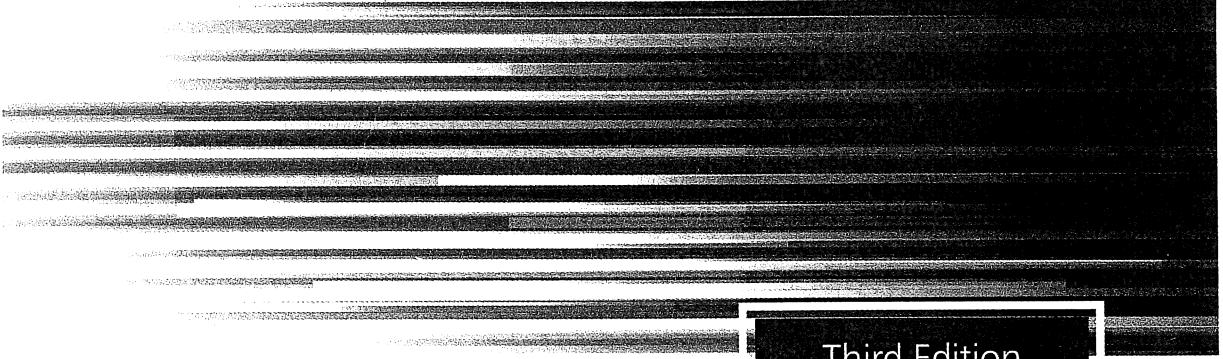


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Action Research with Marginalized Immigrants' Coming to Voice: Twenty Years of Social Movement Support in Taiwan and Still Going

Hsiao-Chuan Hsia

This chapter illustrates a twenty-year-long action research, which aims to empower so-called 'foreign brides' who find themselves stigmatized in Taiwan. Our aim was to support these women in speaking for themselves and transforming their conditions. In the following, I will describe how this long-term action research has been carried out along with its major results. The process of what I have come to call subjectivation is not linear and smooth. When encountering obstacles, methods to facilitate 'breakthrough' and leap to a higher level of understanding and praxis are necessary. The account that follows describes work that has been unfolding for over twenty years as emergent stages towards a social movement.

ORIGIN OF OUR ACTION RESEARCH

The word 'foreign bride' is common parlance in Taiwan since the late 1980s to refer to women from Southeast Asia and Mainland

China who migrate to Taiwan through marrying Taiwanese men. Taiwan has become a host country for many migrants from the neighboring countries, as it moved from the 'periphery' to the 'semi-periphery' in the world system (Wallerstein, 1974) in the mid-1980s. As a result, an increasing number of women from Mainland China and Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Cambodia, immigrate to Taiwan through transnational marriages. Most women decide to marry Taiwanese men because they hope to escape poverty and turbulence in their home countries. However, their Taiwanese husbands are mostly small farmers and working class, who are also marginalized in Taiwanese society (Hsia, 2004). When these women began to catch media attention in the late 1980s, they were called 'foreign brides', which reflects the discrimination they face as women from outside, from the poorer countries. The Taiwanese media construct the 'foreign brides' phenomenon as a social problem and the brides are portrayed either as passive

victims and/or materialist gold-diggers, who are prone to committing crimes (Hsia, 2007). In addition to social discrimination revealed in the media, these women are constrained by stressed economic conditions, lack of social networks and support, and discriminatory practices in everyday life, policies, and laws (Hsia, 2009; Hsia and Huang, 2010).

The following will describe how our action research helped change the conditions for these women involved in cross-border marriages. A key change was challenging the discriminatory term itself of 'foreign brides' and introducing an alternative term 'marriage migrants' to combat discrimination.

I started to work with the marriage migrants in May 1994 at Meinung, a rural town in southern Taiwan, where a grassroots anti-dam movement had been developed under the leadership of a community organization, Meinung Peoples' Association (MPA). While being involved in the MPA, I noticed the increasing popularity of 'marriage migrants' in rural communities. After discussion with my colleagues, I decided to work on this research, since it was essential to include the voices of the marginalized.

Since my colleagues had developed trust with the local people through long-term interaction and participation in the anti-dam movement, I had little difficulty in getting to know the marriage migrants and their Taiwanese families. Many had accepted me through MPA, and those who did not know me quickly accepted me once I was introduced as a member of MPA.

BASIC NEEDS ARTICULATED

As the research began, I learned that not being able to write Chinese or speak Mandarin was a primary barrier in the everyday lives of the marriage migrants from the Southeast Asian countries. Thus, I started to offer free Chinese classes to a few marriage migrants I knew. After a few classes, my MPA colleagues discussed the significance of the classes as part

of community activism and decided to expand it to all the marriage migrant women in the town of Meinung. On July 30, 1995 we started the 'Foreign Brides Chinese Literacy Program', the first in Taiwan.

From my field work, I learned that many of the marriage migrants from Southeast Asian countries were confined at home because of the language barriers, so by learning Chinese, my MPA colleagues and I believed that the marriage migrants could be freer from constraints, and even enabled to form a mutual help network and communicate with the society. In essence, the objective of the 'Foreign Brides Chinese Literacy Programs' aims, via learning Chinese, to empower marriage migrant women to speak for themselves and to form an organization to fight for their rights.

When we initiated the programs, we always put the name of the program in quotes to remind Taiwanese people of the ideology embedded in our common parlance. First of all, marriage migrants were not illiterate. Rather, the problem was that their native languages and capacities are deemed useless in Taiwan. This language program is thus titled 'Literacy Program' to stress the difficulty the marriage migrants face in Chinese-dominant Taiwan. Second, the term 'foreign brides' reveals discrimination implying that the marriage migrants are not only seen as foreigners forever but also as Taiwanese men's subordinates. While we were always aware of the ideology behind the common parlance, we did not invent a new term as a replacement, because we believe that naming itself reflects power relations and we did not want to speak on behalf of these women. It was only in 2003, when these women were empowered to speak up for themselves that they collectively decided on a new term, which will be explained in the following.

SELF-NAMING/RECLAIMING/ EXPANDING OUR SCOPE

The teaching team of the Chinese classes included community volunteers and me.

While we successfully attracted many marriage migrants to attend the classes, it was very difficult to come up with teaching methods to realize our goals of empowering these women. After many trials and errors, we eventually incorporated the principles and methods of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) and the *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979) to facilitate the Chinese programs (for details, see Hsia, 2006). See also Streck and Holiday, Chapter 46, this volume for discussion of these Latin American influences, as well as Guhathagurta, Chapter 10, this volume, on theatre of the oppressed as practice.

The program matured. Every session has a theme relevant to the needs and concerns of the marriage migrants; each session is composed of three components, warm-up exercise leading to the theme discussion, and finally, the Chinese key words arisen from the discussion. As the 'Meinung Foreign Brides Chinese Literacy Programs' developed a more systematic curriculum, it started to offer various training workshops for volunteer teachers and work with other community organizations. From September, 2002, we expanded the Chinese programs to several communities in Taipei County, which became other bases for grassroots organizing for marriage migrant women. For all the programs, the facilitators are local volunteers who will be given orientation and trainings about the principles and methods of the programs and then participate in the collective work on designing and implementing the programs.

As the marriage migrants became more familiar with the Chinese language, learning Chinese alone could not attract much of their interest, so we started to offer classes about parenting in 2002, since most of the marriage migrants who arrived in Taiwan earlier had had children and they became anxious about how to educate their children properly. Their anxiety was caused by the prevalent media reports about their children's propensity to 'delayed development' and consequently would deteriorate the 'quality of the population', despite their being little evidence and

more likely a reflection of stereotypes and discrimination against marriage migrants (Hsia, 2007). These parenting classes became an opportunity to empower marriage migrants inviting discussion of their concerns about parenting and other issues of multiculturalism in educating children of multicultural families.

FORMATION OF AN ORGANIZATION

After years of empowerment, several goals have been achieved. The marriage migrant women from Meinung and Taipei County were no longer silent. They were willing and able to speak out their opinions in the Chinese and parenting classes. A sense of community, or transnational sisterhood among the marriage migrant women, was gradually formed. However, another goal of establishing an independent organization to voice out collectively was still far from realization. In several instances where marriage migrants in the classes discussed about their resentment against unfair treatment, the facilitators' proposals of organizing some collective action for their rights and benefits were failed, or only remained as plans, never action, because most marriage migrants were only interested in social activities. With the firm belief that the organization should be formed from the marriage migrant women's own initiatives, we did not rush them to do so when they did not see the necessity of forming a formal organization.

After many discussions and reflections, the volunteers and I in Meinung realized that the Chinese program itself was not enough for marriage migrant women to accumulate their collective strength because they still had to face various daily problems at home after their heated discussions in the classes. We decided to organize a 'Hope Workshop' in 2001, aiming at uniting the marriage migrant women's strength by having intensive discussions for four days in two weekends.

With various dynamic methods including painting and Forum Theater (Boal, 1979), the 'Hope Workshop' outlined the marriage migrant women's common problems and discussed the possible solutions one by one. In the end, it was decided that everyone contributed to the fund to rent a meeting place where everyone could get together and organize activities. Because of this collective action, the marriage migrant women in Meinung had their own space for the very first time, so their energy and strength began to be accumulated to build what they called their 'New Home'. Since then, they actively started many training programs, which inspired them to be independent and eager to help other underprivileged women.

Meanwhile, I was approached by the officials from the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Committee, Ministry of Interior, to resolve concerns about those marriage migrants threatened by domestic violence. I suggested to them that a hotline with the trained marriage migrants as interpreters would be crucial; they were convinced and agreed that the marriage migrants from Meinung's Chinese programs would be qualified to implement the project. However, after a series of trainings and more than three years' discussion and negotiation, the Committee transferred the project to a Foundation with the reason that these organizers and marriage migrant women in Meinung are not professional social workers and may not understand the procedure for handling hotlines. While devastated and disappointed, the Chinese program organizers and marriage migrants collectively discussed and analyzed why we were not granted the project. Eventually, the marriage migrants realized that they could only make their voice heard when they form an organization, and consequently the process of preparing for establishing a formal organizing began. Our goal of empowering marriage migrant women to initiate their own organization was thus achieved.

The marriage migrants organized in Taipei County later also joined the preparation of the founding assembly of the organization,

since we decided the organization should be national. Finally, after eight years of empowering marriage migrants in Meinung and Taipei County, with the marriage migrant women's efforts and active participation, 'TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan' (TASAT) was officially established on December 7, 2003, the first organization in Taiwan initiated and run by marriage migrant women themselves. The principle of ensuring the leadership of marriage migrants in TASAT reflects in its Constitution, which stipulates that migrants from the Southeast Asian countries should occupy more than two-thirds of the elected board members. Until the present, all the programs and projects are collectively discussed, decided, and implemented with active participation of marriage migrants.

FORMATION OF THE ALLIANCE TO TRANSFORM STATE POLICIES

In the same year of its formal establishment, TASAT networked with other organizations concerned with the rights and welfare of migrant workers and marriage migrants to form the Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHRLIM) to advance the movement for immigrants' rights in Taiwan (Hsia, 2008). AHRLIM is Taiwan's first alliance specifically campaigning for the rights and welfare of immigrants. After years of AHRLIM's struggles, several significant policy changes have been achieved, including the amendments of the Immigration Act on November 30, 2007 and the Statute Governing the Relations between the peoples of the Taiwan area and the Mainland China area on June 9, 2009, the two most crucial laws affecting marriage migrants in Taiwan. Important reforms in the amendment of the Immigration Act include anti-discrimination regulations, allowing marriage migrants who have been the victims of domestic violence to stay in Taiwan even if they are divorced, and ensuring the rights for assembly and rally for immigrants (Hsia, 2008, 2009).

In every campaign launched by AHRLIM, marriage migrants organized by TASAT play significant roles. At the first protest initiated by AHRLIM, they were at the front line voicing their dissent by performing a short play in front of the Legislative Yuan. Since then, their presence at various protest actions not only catches public attention but also establishes the legitimacy of immigrant movement spearheaded by AHRLIM. One historic rally organized by AHRLIM was on September 9, 2007 when hundreds of marriage migrants from Southeast Asia and Mainland China joined hands in a protest rally in Taipei against the financial requirement for naturalization, which required marriage migrants to submit proof of financial security under strict guidelines, including a bank statement or official receipts for income tax wherein the amount should be at least equal to 24 times the minimum wage. Many marriage migrants could not apply for citizenship because of this strict regulation. This rally assembled in front of the Executive Yuan (the executive body of the central government), marched to the Presidential Office Building, and ended with another picket in front of the National Immigration Agency. This protest action was historic because it was the first time that marriage migrants from all over Taiwan took to the street to oppose policies violating their rights. As the results of AHRLIM's continuous campaigns, Mainland Chinese spouses were made exempt from the financial requirement in 2009, and other foreign spouses are now only required to submit a statement declaring that they can make a living. However, this latter requirement has only been written into the implementation guidelines of the Nationality Act and not into the body of the law itself. AHRLIM has now focused on campaigning for the amendment of the Nationality Act.

TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC IMAGES

TASAT has also endeavored to change the public perceptions of marriage migrant

women. First of all, marriage migrants organized by TASAT have become significantly more active after their first protest, often participating in AHRLIM activities, speaking at protests or press conferences, and sharing their experiences and opinions at various activities. The voices of marriage migrants help subvert the public image of them as submissive, problematic, and incompetent.

Secondly, via theater, paintings, writings, film showings, and other types of sharing at various forums and activities, marriage migrants organized by TASAT have changed many Taiwanese's stereotypes. Beginning in 2004, TASAT trained the marriage migrants as teachers of their home country's languages and cultures, and issues of immigrants. They have been invited to share their knowledge about Southeast Asia and immigration all over Taiwan. From being a 'learner' to becoming a 'teacher' the marriage migrant women not only become more confident but also transform the stereotypes and discriminations against them.

To gain the power of naming for the marriage migrants, before TASAT was formally established, we collaborated with the Awakening Foundation, the leading feminist organization in Taiwan, in organizing 'Let New Immigrant Women Speak for Themselves Writing Contest', where marriage migrants were requested to express how they felt to be called the 'foreign brides', and how they would name themselves if they did not like the term. Several marriage migrants from the Chinese programs in Meinung and Taipei County participated in the competition and won awards. They were invited to recite their compositions in front of the public on March 16, 2003, at the awarding ceremony. After the writing competition, marriage migrants were requested to vote on the suggested names based on the entries, and 'New Immigrant Women' received the highest votes. Since then, 'foreign brides' have been seriously criticized and 'new immigrant women' (in Chinese) has become more popularized. In addition to re-naming in Chinese, TASAT also introduced the alternative term,

marriage migrants, in the international arena, via the co-organized International Conference on Border Control and Empowerment of Immigrant Brides (see Introduction, Hsia, 2010b).

To further campaign for public awareness of the discrimination embedded in the term 'foreign brides' and make the marriage migrants' voices heard by the public, I edited a book titled *Don't Call Me a Foreign Bride!*, the first book of a collection of writings (including those awarded in the writing contest), paintings, and pictures of immigrant women published in September 2005. This book caught much public attention and the first print was sold out in less than a month. As the editor of this book, I noticed that one of the most common responses from readers has been amazement over how talented marriage migrants are, and how the book has made many readers so much more appreciative of multiculturalism and aware of their own prejudices.

From these aforementioned practices, the marriage migrants develop stronger beliefs in themselves and in collective action. Moreover, by expanding interaction with the general public, they are much more aware of their situations in Taiwan and inspired to think what they can do to improve the situation collectively. In October 2008, after the victory of passing the amendment of the Immigration Act, in the annual retreat of TASAT officers and active members, we

assessed what we had done previously and planned for the following year. Several marriage migrants raised concerns that most marriage migrants outside of TASAT thought the policies were changed by the government's good will rather than by the struggles of marriage migrants themselves, because they did not believe that marriage migrants had the capacities. Collectively, we decided to establish a theater group and make a documentary film about how marriage migrants organized by TASAT broke their silence and became activists for immigrants' rights. Both projects were accomplished collectively by TASAT members and aim to reach out to more marriage migrants and the general public via cultural forms. The documentary film titled *Let's Not Be Afraid!* was selected in the Taiwan Feminist Film Festival in 2011 and has been invited for film showing all over Taiwan. TASAT Theater Troup's first presentation was selected by POTs, the famous alternative media in Taiwan, as the Top Ten News on Performing Arts in 2009, and has been invited to tour all over Taiwan.

In sum, the beginning and core of the process is to empower the marriage migrants to become vocal subjects, who can speak for themselves. Moreover, this subjectivity of marriage migrants is the basis of the formation of immigrant movement. The process and impacts of this long-term action research are illustrated in Figure 30.1. After years of empowerment, TASAT began to work with

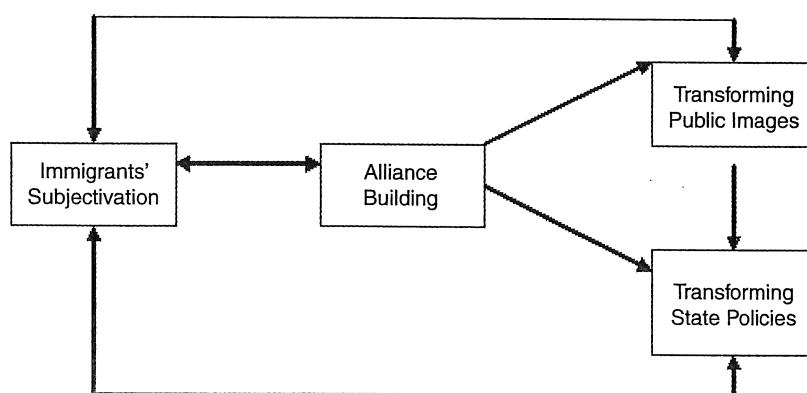


Figure 30.1 Process and impacts of the long-term action research

other organizations to establish AHRLIM to transform policies and laws. With the active participation of immigrant women, the legitimacy of immigrant movement initiated by AHRLIM has been established. AHRLIM aims at changing the public perception of marriage migrants, and immigration laws and policies. By actively participating in the alliance for movement and being able to transform public images and state policies, marriage migrants are further encouraged and their sense of historical subject is strengthened.

SUBJECTIVATION: TRANSFORMATION OF THE STIGMATIZED TO ACTIVE SUBJECTS

One major impact of this long-term action research is that the marriage migrants have experienced transformation from being stigmatized and silent to becoming a collective force to speak for themselves and change the status quo. This process of empowering marriage migrants can be illustrated by Figure 30.2 (see Hsia, 2010a for more details).

It starts from fulfilling marriage migrants' practical needs of learning Chinese, and

gradually moves towards meeting their strategic gender needs, which involves transforming oppressive structure (Moser, 1989). Via fulfilling their needs of learning Chinese, the literacy program aims at creating a space for group dialogue by encouraging immigrant women to share experiences. From this space of group dialogue, marriage migrants gradually transform from 'personal subject', then 'communal subject', and further become 'historical subject', actively participating in public issues and in being involved in immigrant movement, which meets their strategic needs. This subjectivation process is dialectical, rather than a linear process. At every bottleneck and crisis encountered, various methods are used to create 'mirroring' effects where marriage migrant women can look at the situations from a distance and reflect on themselves, which then leads to discussion, adding necessary input, and collectively finding resolutions and further action. Moreover, the contents of strategic gender needs are not predetermined. Rather, it is developed in the empowering process where new needs are developed as we continuously strive to break away obstacles.

I adopt the concept of *subjectivation* from Alain Touraine (1988). In his theory of 'societal movement' (rather than social movement), Touraine is concerned about the

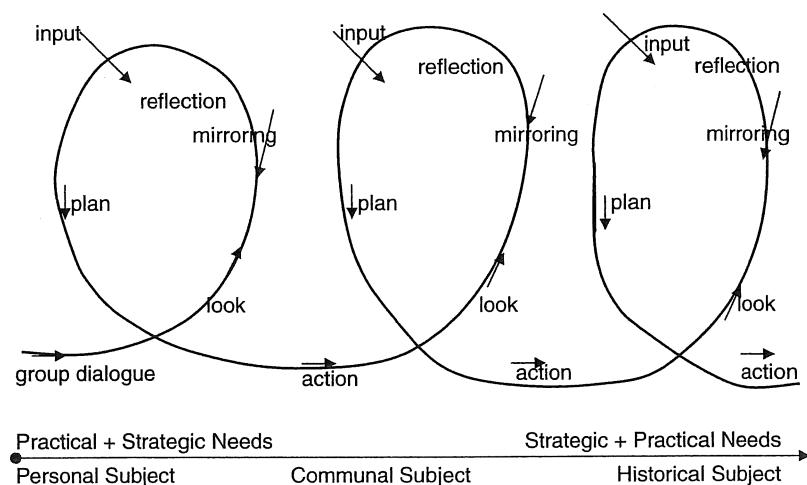


Figure 30.2 Subjectivation process of marriage migrant women

struggles of social actors (subjects) over historicity, that is, over who controls the terms of the cultural model upon which action is based. For Touraine, the development of a societal movement is a process of transforming the 'personal subject' to the 'historical subject', who make their mark on history by remaking the social relations and the cultural model that determine our identity. This process of subjectivation is the social action that challenges the existing social orders (Beckford, 1998).

The process of my long-term action research echoes Touraine's concept of subjectivation. However, I argue that in between the 'personal subject' and 'historical subject', a 'communal subject' needs to be developed in the process of subjectivation.

As the result of their social, economic, cultural, and political disadvantages, 'foreign brides' are isolated and silenced. By providing a venue for the marriage migrants to learn Chinese collectively, the literacy program serves to help them break away from isolation, build self-confidence, and become a 'subject', which is achieved through 'an individual's will to act and to be recognized as an actor' (Touraine, 1995: 207).

However, the personal subject will not automatically transform itself into the historical subject. Despite common issues, these marriage migrants did not immediately develop a sense of 'community', due to the barriers of differences in personalities, countries of origins, class, ethnicity, educational levels, etc. These barriers often result in tension and conflicts, which hinders them from working collectively.

Since the beginning of the Chinese program, we have emphasized the importance of dialogue and encourage marriage migrants to express their subjectivity. When encountering conflicts among individuals, we uphold this principle and create a space (usually a workshop using methods of the *Theater of the Oppressed*) to help reflect on themselves, and collectively come up with resolution, and move further from personal subjectivity to a sense of community – communal subjectivity.

Without the sense of community, they cannot work collectively towards advancing their welfare and rights.

After years of empowerment, these marriage migrants were no longer silent and a strong sense of community was formed, but as mentioned previously, these marriage migrants did not think of forming an organization to fight for their rights. It took a process of continuing action (such as the Hope Workshop and preparing for the hotline project), reflection (such as after the failure of the hotline project), planning, and further action, to eventually form the TASAT with active participation of the marriage migrants.

As TASAT becomes more established, marriage migrants develop a stronger identity with TASAT. However, we observed that some members (locals and marriage migrants) fell into the trap of identity politics, which Touraine (1988) criticized for not being able to transform the historicity. For instance, some members felt that other migrant workers should be blamed for the social stigma against the marriage migrants because the former misbehave and only come to Taiwan to make money.

To transcend the politics of identity, TASAT have made efforts to help marriage migrants see the link between themselves and the so-called 'other'. Two crucial methods of moving towards the 'other' include the creation of an environment where marriage migrants develop empathy with others with disadvantages, and building alliances with these disadvantaged groups. For instance, when interpreters are needed to help cases of migrant workers, TASAT arranges marriage migrants for translation. TASAT organizers help explain the conditions of migrant workers and the marriage migrants can develop empathy with the migrant workers. Moreover, since AHRLIM is composed of organizations from different sectors, including those of migrant workers, TASAT members can also learn about issues that migrant workers face. After developing empathy with migrant workers, TASAT members decided to join several rallies for their issues.

Moreover, the experiences of TASAT have attracted many organizations in Taiwan to visit and share. The media and related organizations from other countries, including South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Australia, the UK, and the US, are also interested in learning from TASAT. By sharing experiences with groups from Taiwan and other countries, TASAT has gradually broadened their perspectives and expanded international networking. In September 2007, TASAT co-organized the International Conference on Border Control and Empowerment of Immigrant Brides, which led to the formation of the Action Network for Marriage Migrants' Rights and Empowerment (AMM[♀]RE) in 2008. AMM[♀]RE's first action was the international campaign against state violence on marriage migrants: *unveil*, and has initiated several projects to campaign for rights and welfare of marriage migrants at the regional and international levels, via organizing forums, conferences, protest actions, trainings, publications, etc. Additionally, TASAT is also an active member of the International Migrants Alliance (IMA), the first global alliance of grassroots migrant organizations. Through increasing networking with organizations from other countries through these regional and international platforms, marriage migrant women of TASAT have begun to understand capitalist globalization as a root cause of their escape from their home countries, and see the importance of transnational collaboration (Hsia, 2009). They also expressed their appreciation of learning from and working in solidarity with the grassroots migrant organizations in different countries, began to see themselves and TASAT as part of the broader, global movement of im/migrants, and realized the importance of linking to the social movements in the home countries of im/migrants.

In sum, despite harsh structural constraints, the marriage migrant women organized by TASAT have been gradually empowered and have significantly increased their participation in public issues and international

advocacy, not only for their own immediate welfare and rights, but also for the justice for other marginalized people and the betterment of the world, that is, becoming the 'historical subjects' who collectively struggle to transform the 'historicity'.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Any action research towards a social movement that aims to fundamentally transform the dominant social relations must be a long-term, even life-long, commitment, or interlinked series of projects, rather than short-term or discrete projects (see also Gustavsen and Pålshaugen on the importance of linking projects, Chapter 39, this volume). This long-term process involves the empowerment of the oppressed peoples, where frustration and bottlenecks occur over and over again, far beyond one's ability to continue alone. Therefore, action researchers interested in doing this kind of work have to see oneself as part of a team and be linked to social movements.

Moreover, to empower the oppressed peoples, an important mechanism to propel transformation to a higher level of subjectivation is to help them temporarily distance themselves and observe their experiences and practices more objectively. However, it is not to 'teach' them how to understand things, but rather, to develop 'mirroring' effects by which they can see themselves, identify the problems and find solutions. Some methods for creating such 'mirroring' effects include: forum theater (Boal, 1979); actual practices of taking up tasks, and sharing responsibilities and emotions to break dependence on the organizers (including the action researchers) and becoming genuine teammates; and moving towards the 'other' to broaden perspectives of their conditions and action (see Hsia, 2010a for more details).

Finally, some liberatory education theories assume to know the form of social action

and participation which is most desirable, as Schapiro (1995) criticized, and which would make the educators the ultimate owners of the resulting movement's truth and knowledge. My experience of action research shows that instead of assuming a predetermined path of development (or empowerment), we perceive every bottleneck and crisis as a great opportunity to collectively reflect and decide the next step of development. What is crucial in this process is the demystification of knowledge and the roles of researchers. As a researcher, I constantly offer various forms of training for the marriage migrants and local volunteers so that they can join the collective efforts of organizing and advancing immigrant movement. The themes of training include: analyses of different issues and methods of making analyses, and methods of organizing and conducting training workshops of various topics. Moreover, I purposely involve myself in TASAT's organizational structure, instead of being only a supporter, so that I am held responsible to the organization (currently serving as the elected officer and the head of organizing committee), and become genuine teammates with other members of the organization.

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