

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The globalization phenomenon has created an era in which the movement of people across countries has been made much easier. Marriages between people from different nations have become more common. These relationships, which are often referred to as intercultural marriage, international marriage, mixed marriage or transnational marriage, are an occurrence happening more and more frequently in Taiwan. The last few decades have seen many of these types of marriage especially between Taiwanese men and women from South East Asia and mainland China.

These relationships are increasing in Taiwan and the attention that it is given within Taiwanese society is increasing accordingly. This phenomenon of foreign spouses has promoted research from different avenues. The government has been funding research into these marriages, which have also been investigated by both foreign and Taiwanese scholars. One such local scholar is Professor Hsiao-Chuan Hsia from Shih Hsin University of Taipei who is also actively involved in the research of immigrant movement on the island and has written several works which aim to explain the issue of Southeast Asian spouses in Taiwanese society (Hsia 2004; Hsia 2005; Hsia 2007).

In a country in which just under half of the population is acquainted with someone who is married to a foreign spouse, topics of conversation and concerns have changed. These new issues previously unknown to Taiwanese society of twenty years ago have become part of the everyday discussions amongst its citizens. Terms such as ‘foreign

spouse’ or ‘foreign bride’ have become common in the everyday language used to refer to Asian females married to Taiwanese males.

Several organizations have bloomed in Taiwan, a consequence of the increasing need to provide help and support to these foreign spouses. To help them integrate and adapt into Taiwanese society. Organizations such as The Loving Sisters Association, the Taiwan Nanyang Sisters Association, The Eden Social Welfare Foundation, and the Taipei Women Rescue Foundation have been established between 2003 and 2005 (Tsai and Hsiao, 2006). They are founded with two purposes: firstly to improve their integration and adaptation, and secondly to enhance society’s understanding of this issue and to create an acceptance of diversity.

Amongst all the foreign spouses within Taiwan, a subgroup has evolved – Mainland Chinese women. These women stand out because they have different needs, origins, and have to comply with different legal regulations. These unions involving a Chinese partner are more commonly known as cross-strait marriages. In 2007, amongst a total of 25,050 marriages with foreign spouses, more than half were with a mainland China spouse (Ministry of Interior, 2008).

A few associations have started to provide services to Chinese spouses over the last five years. Amongst these is ‘CARES’, the Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Service (*Zhonghua Jiuzhu Zonghui*, 中華救助總會). Its aim is to help Chinese spouses to get empowered. CARES gives them the opportunity to participate in different

workshops, such as new laws and regulations, lectures on life and culture, language and computer classes, and community activities of various kinds. It also offers integrative services such as hot lines and face-to-face consultations for these spouses that need the help. It encourages women to participate in the creation of media projects. The organization emphasizes the dialogue, exchange of information, assistance and facilitation of expression of individual and group needs within the family and the society as a whole (CARES, 2007). In this way, not only the mediated but also the non mediated (interpersonal) communications become essential in the process of empowerment of the individual.

As it will be demonstrated in this thesis, Chinese spouses constitute a weak category in Taiwan. This is because they are subjected to legal constrictions, family limitations and often society discrimination. CARES was established with two aims, to provide a service and also to raise awareness. Differing from other Taiwanese organizations CARES aims to involve women in its activities and projects with the goal of helping them to get empowered. This participatory orientation and focus on a specific community of interest means that the communication techniques employed by CARES can be traced back to the community communications field. Therefore CARES can be considered as a good example of community communication.

This thesis concentrates on the way in which this organization reaches its community. The various methods and channels it uses are ‘community communication’ and ‘community media’. In opposition to the main stream media (such as television,

newspapers, and radio), these alternative forms of communication concentrate on reaching specific target groups through small scale methods, such as local newsletters, journals or community radio (Vatikiotis, 2004). Besides these methods, there is also a great emphasis placed on interpersonal communication practices. The aim is to involve and empower the individual with the various workshops and media projects that are provided. The significance of these practices lies in the empowerment of the individual through direct involvement and participation within the community that she/he belongs to. This method aims to establish a system of communication and information which is relevant to the group's needs and interests (Vatikiotis, 2004: 12).

I will base my definition of community communication on the two models provided by Jankowski (2002) and Berrigan (1979) (presented in the literature review). I will firstly try to assess how the two models are applicable to the CARES case. Following this, I will try to investigate how the Chinese spouses participate in these media and communications. Then, I will investigate how the process of empowerment (at individual, organizational and community level) is promoted in CARES. The aim of this qualitative study is to understand how Chinese spouses have benefited from the community media promoted in the organization.

In order to investigate this issue, I will first provide an overview of the previous debates on alternative communication, on community communication, and on their applications. After a brief description of the specific case of Chinese spouses in Taiwan

integrated with some governmental data and tables, I will introduce the study methodology and the discussion of the collected findings.

The originality of this study lies not only in the theme (Chinese spouses), but also in its focus of investigation (the significance of community communication for this category of women). Several journal articles have already been published regarding the issue of foreign spouses. However many case studies do not take into consideration Chinese spouses. When Chinese spouses are included they are considered only as a subcategory of the foreign spouses phenomenon. The exception is seen in master and doctoral dissertations, which often concentrate on this minority group and focus on social issues, such as adaptation, marriage problems (Zhu, 2003), political socialization, national identity construction (M. Chen, 2006), and social stigmas (Xu, 2005).

The issue of Chinese spouses, under a communication perspective, has been rarely investigated. One doctoral thesis analyzes the use of a digital platform created specifically for cross strait couples (Zhang, 2004). This study analyses the users' demographic data and their use of the website in order to understand the role of the forum in a social movement protest. However the debate appears to be confined only amongst Chinese scholars and researchers since almost nothing is available or translated into English, thus the international community's insights and reflections are excluded from the debate.

The present study, besides providing an overview of the historical developments and current situation of the Chinese spouses, tries to focus on the communication aspect of this issue. It will also investigate other important topics such as participation and individual empowerment. In this way it will bring into the academic discussion aspects which have rarely been applied to the Chinese spouses issue before. This will be of great importance, not only for the international academic field itself, but also for the Taiwanese government, organizations and associations involved in this field. A third party which may benefit will be CARES as it will open the door to reflections and discussions on the organization's activities and the issue of female empowerment.

Last but not the least, I hope to bring interesting insights to the community of Chinese spouses in Taiwan. This study would like to help them reflect upon their actions both as individuals and as a group. Participants' narratives will inspire proposals not only for CARES members but also for all the spouses in Taiwan.

This study hopes to provide a template for further investigation into this matter. Foreign women marrying into a country is not a peculiarity of Taiwan. This occurs in many other nations all over the world. I would like to bring to international attention all the problems and issues which surround this topic, and to encourage the inter-country dialogue between individual governments and organizations.