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NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES**



Passive Victims or Active Agents: A

Case Study of Indonesian Female

Marriage Migrants in Singapore

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Abstract

Marriages that cross the borders of nation states have become increasingly common. This trend of cross-border marriages can also be observed in Singapore. This research paper seeks to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of the Indonesian foreign brides in Singapore. In order to do so, this paper adopts an agency approach, and attempts to listen to the stories and experiences of the Indonesian foreign brides in Singapore. This paper will first examine the motivations for marriage migration of the Indonesian foreign brides. It will then discuss the difficulties and challenges faced by the foreign brides in Singapore, and the strategies used by the Indonesian foreign brides to resist, negotiate and challenge their relatively disadvantaged position, both in society and their families. The paper will then conclude with an analysis of the Indonesian female marriage migrants interactions with the legal structures that have been put in place.

Keywords: Marriage migration, Foreign brides, Agency, State structures

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent decades, marriages that cross the borders of nation states have become increasingly common. This phenomenon of cross border marriage reflects the deepening globalization process (Piper and Roces 2003). Similar to other forms of migration, transnational marriage migration do not occur in vacuum, but are instead shaped and limited by “existing and emerging cultural, social, historical and political-economic factors”, as well as “gendered geographies of power” (Constable 2005:4).

Transnational marriage-scapes, have for several decades, reflected a gendered pattern (Constable 2005). A majority of marriage migrants are women, and a large number of these women are from less developed countries who marry and migrate to wealthier and more developed ones for a variety of reasons. This trend of cross border marriages is today no longer only observed between the developing South and the developed North. Within Asia itself, the trend of women from the less developed countries within Asia, marrying and migrating to the more advanced ones, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea is observed. For example, in 2010, 12.8% of all marriages in Taiwan involved a citizen male and a non-citizen spouse (Jones 2012). 97% of all the marriages occurring between a citizen male and a non-citizen spouse in Taiwan, involved a female spouse of Asian origin (Jones 2012). Cross border marriage migration in Asia, like international labour migration, is a crucial part of today’s globalized world (Wang and Chang 2002).

In Singapore, a similar trend can be seen. In 2008, 30.2% of all marriages in Singapore, involved a Singaporean man, and a non Singaporean female, as compared to only 8.4% of marriages involving a Singaporean women and a non Singaporean male (Jones 2012). 97% of the marriages occurring between a Singaporean man and a non Singaporean citizen, involved a female spouse of Asian origin (Jones 2012). Although the breakdown of the figures from each individual country has not been reported, most of the female foreign brides in Singapore are from China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia (Jones 2008). This research paper would focus particularly in Indonesian foreign brides in Singapore.

More often than not, foreign brides from the developing South are not seen in a positive and desirable light (Tsay 2004). Chen (2010) suggests that foreign brides are a population at the bottom of the hierarchy of international marriages. Marriages that involve foreign brides from

the developing South, have often being criticized as being “socially dysfunctional” (Schein 2005:66). The common perception is that foreign brides are denied of any freedom and rights. Women from developing countries involved in transnational marriages are often portrayed “not as making an active choice”, but rather, are seen “as passive pawns in a larger game that denies them agency” (Constable 2003:5). Due to the poverty and oppression that they face in their home country, these women are also said to have no choice, but to choose marriage as the only alternative out of their poverty. Marriages involving brides from the developing South are also not seen in a positive light due to the assumption that monetary transactions are involved.

While there has been a burgeoning literature on cross border marriages, a large number of the early existing literature have been influenced by the writings of radical feminists on the phenomenon of mail-order brides in the 1970s, and have assumed cross border marriages to be synonymous with women’s oppression (Jongwilaiwan 2008). Radical feminists like Glodava and Onizuka (as cited in Jongwilaiwan 2008) argue that transnational migration is a form of oppression for women, as many of the women have been illegally bought and sold. Foreign brides have been constructed by scholars as “commodities which are part of a profitable business strategy” (Llyord 2000:343).

More recent scholarly work in this field has pointed out the lack of representation of the voices of the foreign brides in the earlier scholarly works (Williams 2010; Constable 2003). Foreign brides from the developing South are often spoken for, or about, but their stories and experiences have seldom being told (Williams 2010). This research on Indonesian foreign brides in Singapore therefore seeks to address the gaps in existing literature. This paper deviates from early scholarly works and seeks to adopt what Williams (2010) termed “an agency approach” to study marriage migrants. An agency approach attempts to hear the stories of the actors themselves and situate their stories within certain social, political and historical context (Williams 2010). The aim of the agency approach is to challenge accounts and experiences of female marriage migrants that “assume their vulnerability and which position them as a victim of circumstances, such as poverty, global inequality, criminality or immigration regimes” (Williams 2010:34).

It is suitable to conduct a study on foreign brides in Singapore because nearly 30% of all marriages in this country involve a spouse who is non-citizen (Jones 2012). This research is significant because there has been little scholarly work conducted in this field, and especially

on Indonesian foreign brides. This research is also significant and as it deviates from the common perception of foreign brides as vulnerable victims, or as brides who married purely for monetary gains, and attempts to create a better understanding of the stories and experiences of foreign brides here in Singapore.

This paper argues for foreign brides to be seen as a heterogeneous group of individuals, with differing opinions, motivations and experiences, as well as individuals who are not merely passive victims, but who are active agents in their own ways. In order to do so, this paper will first examine the motivations for marriage migration of the Indonesian foreign brides. It will then discuss the difficulties and challenges faced by the foreign brides in Singapore, and the strategies used by the Indonesian foreign brides to resist, negotiate and challenge their relatively disadvantaged position, both in society and their families. The paper will then conclude with an analysis of the Indonesian female marriage migrants interactions with the legal structures that have been put in place.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The increasing phenomenon of female transnational marriages from developing countries to more advanced and developed ones has attracted much scholarly attention. A variety of perspectives have been used by various scholars for their research on cross border marriages. Although the topic on female transnational migration has been well discussed, scholarly work focusing particularly on the experience of Indonesian foreign brides in Singapore has been relatively few.

In the paragraphs that follow, previous research work conducted in this area would be highlighted. The gaps in the research would also be highlighted and emphasized.

2.1 On Motivations for Marriage Migration

Some scholars in this field are of the opinion that marriage migration for the women of the developing South should not be seen as a conscience choice undertaken by them. In such arguments, women adopt a passive role, and are seen to be forced into marriage migration. Levitt and Jaworsky (2007:133) argue that individuals are “pushed into transnational lifestyles because they are unable to have a secure economic foothold back in their home country”. Lloyd (2000) argues that commercial transnational marriage should be seen as a form of trafficking of women. According to him, “young women from poor families in economically struggling nations are transported from their homes, like products, to male citizens of economically advantaged nations” (2000:341). Such arguments put forth by scholars, construct women as passive victims of the poverty cycle, victims of first world men in the host society, and/or victims of marriage brokerages. The desires and the voices of women are therefore obscured by their victim identity (Wang and Chang 2002).

Recent studies have adopted a different perspective in which female marriage migrants are seen as active agents. Instead of viewing foreign brides as victims of poverty, who turn to transnational migration out of desperation, scholars suggest for the act of migration to be viewed as a strategy undertaken by the female migrants to seek greener pastures (Rosario 2008), escape the oppressive conditions in their home country, and improve their socio-economic positioning (Piper and Roces 2003; Schein 2005; Williams 2010; Jongwilaiwan 2008). Piper and Mix, through their research demonstrated that marriage migration is a road

taken by many Thai women to break away from oppressive local conditions including those caused, or enhanced by globalization processes (Piper and Mix 2003). In her research on Miao women¹ in China, Schein (2005) found that the Miao women had willingly married Han men from the cities in China and Hmong men from the US in an attempt to escape from the difficult conditions back home. Although the men were of a lower status as compared to them, these women willingly married them as a strategy to escape the “bitter labour on the steep terrace slopes” (Schien 2005:59). Influenced by the ideas of these scholars, this research paper seeks to investigate the extent to which the act of migration of Indonesian foreign brides to Singapore should be seen as a carefully crafted strategy undertaken by them to escape the oppressive conditions back in their home country.

Although such studies have focused on the agency on the foreign brides, some scholars (Constable 2003; Freeman 2005) notes that these studies still centre on economic aspects, thereby rendering other factors as invisible. Freeman (2005) points out that although economic factor is an important pull factor, it alone cannot be used to fully explain the incidence of marriage migration. Understanding cross border relationships purely from a materialist viewpoint would be a crude misrepresentation of the motivations of the female migrants from the developing South (Constable 2003).

Extending Piper and Roces’ (2003) argument on marriage migration as a strategy, McKay (2003) argues that female transnational migration should be perceived, as a carefully thought of choice that has been influenced by more than one factor. In his study on Filipino women migrating to Canada, McKay argues that the female migrants’ decision to seek permanent residency is also influenced by personal factors, such as their previous marriage status. Many of the women in his study are widowed or separated and this places them in a vulnerable position in the Philippines.

Constable (2003) argues against perceiving cross-border marriages from a purely pragmatic perspective in which other factors is seen to be absent. She warns against “privileging or prematurely dismissing the notion of romantic love in cross border marriages” (Rosario 2008:85). Constable (2003:116) frames her enquiry on notions of romantic love within a larger political and historical framework, through what she terms as the “cultural logic of desire”.

¹ “Miao” refers to an ethnic group in China.

Both McKay's and Constable's study demonstrates that economic factor alone cannot be used to account for the motivations of marriage migration of the female marriage migrant from the developing South. When discussing the motivations of foreign brides from the developing South, few scholars have focused on factors other than economic ones. This research paper therefore seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature.

2.2 On Agency and Resistance

The general image of foreign brides from the developing South in the host society is that they are leading miserable lives, and deserve the sympathy of others (Tsay 2004). Although cross border marriages open up new opportunities for the foreign brides, the difficulties that they face in the host society is seen to outweigh the opportunities provided to them (Zhou 2008). There has been much research conducted that focuses on the passivity and sufferings of the female marriage migrants in the host societies.

Kim (2004) highlights that foreign brides are often more susceptible to domestic violence from their husbands and their family members. In a research conducted in Korea, it was found that 31% of foreign brides from the developing South reported verbal abuse, 18.4% reported physical abuse, and 23.5% reported sexual abuse from their spouses (Seol et al. 2006). Zhou (2010) suggests that foreign brides from the developing South are suffering in the host society because they often find themselves trapped in patriarchal systems, and are expected to fulfill the roles of traditional and submissive women in their new families. In his research on female marriage migrants in Taiwan, Wang (2007) found that marriage in Chinese societies was not to bind two families together, but rather, to "get" a daughter-in-law for the husband's family. Tsay (2004) focused on the sufferings of the foreign brides from developing countries by highlighting the lack of acceptance of the society at large towards them. In his research, he found that 1 out of 5 Taiwanese respondent denied the need to treat foreign brides fairly.

Although foreign brides from the developing South are seen as being in the bottom of the social hierarchy (Chen 2010), some scholars point out that we should not assume that their lives in the host society is filled with vulnerability and sufferings (Williams 2010; Piper and Roces 2003, Wang 2007). Scott (as cited in Wang 2007) has demonstrated that agency can be achieved even by the most disadvantaged in society.

Jones (2008) argues that even though women from the developing South who enter international marriages are not total free subjects, they are not simply victims either. These female marriage migrants do resist, challenge and negotiate with their husbands, their husbands' families and the host societies within their limited resources (Zhou 2010). This research will move beyond focusing on the sufferings of the foreign brides, and would investigate the agency of the foreign brides.

Tang and Wang (2011), in their research on abused foreign brides from Vietnam, found that the women did not just allow themselves to be abused, but sought ways to negotiate the Taiwanese patriarchal family system and empower themselves. One strategy used was to seek employment. This strategy allowed them to broaden their social networks, and also become financially independent. Wang (2007) highlights the strategies used by foreign brides in Taiwan to escape the patriarchal family system and the social norms imposed upon them. Wang (2007) found that the foreign brides in Taiwan make use of hidden spaces to resist the surveillance of their family. Influenced by the findings of scholars who document how foreign brides from the developing South, have made creative use of their limited resources, I aim to investigate the strategies used by the Indonesian foreign brides in Singapore, as they use their limited resources to challenge, resist and negotiate their relatively disadvantaged position.

2.3 On Female Marriage Migrants and State Structures

International marriages, like other marriages, are often regarded as belonging to the private sphere and may not be seen as a concern of the state (Lee, 2008). However, scholars in this field have pointed that state policies, has a large part to play in shaping and influencing the lives and opportunities of female marriage migrants (Williams 2010; Jongwilaiwan 2008; Piper and Roces 2003). Williams (2010) argues that the opportunities and entitlements of migrants in the host societies are shaped by how they are classified in relation to the citizen population. Jongwilaiwan (2008) points out in her research on Thai female marriage migrants in Singapore that the legal structure is not only employed by the state to facilitate and restrict the influx of foreign brides, it is also used to constrain the practices and experiences of the migrant wives in Singapore.

A large number of scholars researching on the impacts of state policies on the lives and opportunities of female migrants often focuses on the female marriage migrant's negotiations

with the state. For example, Jongwilaiwan (2008) investigated how Thai women who married and migrated to Singapore are able to deal with the legal restrictions that are imposed upon them. She found that her respondents do possess structural resources to negotiate with other actors and to reconstruct the legal structure (2008). Zhou (2010), through his research on China brides in Singapore, shows that female marriage migrants from the developing South are able to negotiate with the state. He found that China brides in Singapore use giving birth as a strategy to maximize their chances of applying for PR or citizenship (2010).

Previous research on foreign brides in Singapore have documented the various ways in which the female marriage migrants are reflexive actors, who have the ability to negotiate and maneuver within the immigration legal structure through the use of their available structural resources (Jongwilaiwan 2008). However, few scholars have researched on how conceptions of citizenship have restricted the opportunities and rights of the female marriage migrants, as well as how legal structures have impeded on the identity of the female marriage migrant. In a research conducted by Lyons and Ford (2008) on Singaporean men with spouses from Indonesia, it was found that the state's legal structures do not seem to affect the daily experiences of the cross-border couple. This research therefore seeks to fill in the gap in existing literature, and investigate whether the legal structures have restricted the experiences of the foreign brides in Singapore.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research focuses on the experience of foreign brides from Indonesia in Singapore. I have chosen to focus on female marriage migrants from Indonesia because there has been little research conducted on this group of migrants.

The primary method of data collection for this research is in-depth interviews. As this research aims to adopt an agency approach, it is therefore important to listen to the experiences of the Indonesia foreign brides. Through the retelling of their experiences, we are able to locate their experiences within broader social, historical and political context, thereby highlighting the agency of the foreign brides. In-depth interview is therefore a suitable method because it enables the researcher to gain a greater understanding of marriage migration from the perspectives of the Indonesian foreign brides.

Altogether, I managed to conduct a total of eleven face to face interviews with the foreign brides from Indonesia. My introduction to the respondents was through a chain of acquaintances. Three of the respondents were introduced by friends and relatives. The other eight respondents were introduced to me by Yong-en Care Centre, which is a voluntary welfare organisation, which provides social and financial support as well as English classes for female marriage migrants.

The interviews with the female marriage migrants from Indonesia were conducted between December 2011 and February 2012, and each interview was about an hour long. The interviews conducted were all recorded with an audio device, with the given permission of the respondents. My respondents were aged between 24 to 40 years old, and their spouses were aged 36 to 69 years old. One of the respondents was divorced, one was widowed, and another respondent was waiting to be reunited with her husband, who was serving his time in prison. The female marriage migrants from Indonesia have been staying in Singapore for a period of 2 to 10 years. Out of the 11 respondents, 2 respondents were on short term social passes, 7 were long term visit pass holders, and 2 were permanent residents.

During the process of data collection, I encountered several difficulties. The first problem encountered was the difficulty in finding willing respondents. When I had first started out on this research project, I had several potential respondents. However, when I approached the

potential respondents, they were unwilling to be interviewed. Some of the respondents told me that they were afraid that their comments might influence their request for permanent residency and/or long term social visit pass applications, while there were also some respondents who assumed that I was a journalist, and were therefore unwilling to grant me an interview.

The second difficulty that I encountered was the language difference. A majority of the respondents spoke a mix of English and Bahasa Indonesian. As I am unable to understand Bahasa Indonesian, language was initially a big challenge. During the initial three interviews, there was no translator present. It was difficult for me to fully comprehend and understand the experience of my respondents. After the experience of the first 3 interviews, a friend agreed to act as a translator. The presence of a translator had definitely contributed to a better understanding of the experience of the female marriage migrants.

In addition, there are also a number of limitations regarding the methodology of this research paper. Due to the limited resources available, only eleven interviews were conducted. The small sample size is not representative of the large number of Indonesian foreign brides here in Singapore. However, this sample size is adequate to reveal clear trends and highlight the agency of the foreign brides. Another limitation of this research is that a majority of the respondents were located through the help of Yong-en Care Centre. Most of the respondents therefore shared similar backgrounds here in Singapore. However, this sample was sufficient to highlight the heterogeneity of the experiences of foreign brides from Indonesia.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Based on the interview data gathered from the 11 respondents, I have found that the female marriage migrants are not simply passive victims. They do exercise their agency, and find ways to resist and challenge the existing power structures. Yet at the same time, I realised that there are certain structures and systems which the female marriage migrants have difficulty negotiating. This points out that the distinction between agents and victims are in fact blurred (Piper and Roces 2003), and we should not view female marriage migrants as completely powerless, or as absolutely empowered.

This section will draw upon my findings and demonstrate the extent to which the Indonesian female marriage migrants can be seen as active agents.

4.1 Motivations for Marriage Migration

Female marriage migrants from Indonesia decide to marry and migrate to Singapore due to a wide variety of reasons. Some of the common reasons cited by the respondents include the search for a better life in order to from escape the oppressive economic circumstance back in their home country, marriage migration due to negative perception of men back in their country of origin, and the desire to search for true love, and marry the 'one'. Each respondent cited different reasons, and the reasons cited are usually based on their cultural and social background. This is in line with Constable's (2003) argument that every female marriage migrant has a story to tell. We therefore should not assume homogeneity in the stories of these foreign brides.

4.1.1 Marriage migration as a strategy to escape oppressive economic conditions

One of the motivating factors for several female marriage migrants is the search for a better life in order to escape from the oppressive economic circumstance back in their home country. One respondent, Madam Kristen², a daughter of a fisherman father, commented on her living conditions back in Indonesia and her difficulties coming from a large family, with six other siblings.

² In order to protect the identity of the respondents, the names of the respondents have been replaced by pseudonyms.

“Life in Indonesia is very difficult. In Indonesia, very difficult to find food. My father is a fisherman, but not every day he goes out to catch fish. Like if he catch 3 kg of fish, then he will sell some, to get other things, then maybe will have only a bit of fish left for all seven of us.”

Madam Kristen goes on further to elaborate on her life back in her country of origin, and her desire for a better life.

“I would not say that I enjoyed my life when I was in Indonesia. In Indonesia, must work very hard. It is important to work so that I can earn some money for my family. Then I thought I come to Singapore, I can improve my life...”

Similarly, Madam Eileen, a 42 year old Indonesian female marriage migrant shared the same consensus as Madam Kristen.

“I chose to marry a Singaporean better because I wanted to search for a better life and have more money! I think it is not me only, many Indonesian women also...The Indonesian women want to marry men with many many money like that, because these men in Indonesia, can buy many land and many house, can take care of their families.”

The responses of Madam Kristen and Madam Eileen highlight the desire of foreign brides to seek a better life. To them, marriage migration is a glimmer of hope, and an opportunity to escape the difficult living conditions back in Indonesia. From the standpoint of the foreign brides, opportunities for social and economic mobility are “conceived of in terms of some type of long-distance strategy”. (Schein 2005:55). The decision to marry and migrate to Singapore should therefore be seen as a creative strategy employed by the foreign brides to negotiate their difficult circumstances back in their home country. This finding is in line with Roces’ and Piper’s (2005) argument that female marriage migrants from the developing South choose to marry and migrate to other countries in order to move away from their difficult economic circumstances.

Marriage migration should therefore be seen as a conscious choice and a strategy undertaken by the foreign brides to negotiate their relatively disadvantage position in society. The

Indonesian foreign brides are key actors in facilitating their own marriage migration (Sassen 2000). They should also therefore be seen as agents, who are “capable in acting in their own interest” (Piper and Roces 2003:9).

4.1.2 Marriage migration due to negative perception of men back in their country of origin

Another motivating factor for several of the female respondents is the negative perception of men back in their country of origin. Almost all of the female marriage migrants interviewed, held a negative impression of the men back in Indonesia.

Madam Kristen commented on her strong dislike toward Indonesian men, due to the fact that a large number of Indonesian men choose to rely on their wives to fend for their families:

“When I was working as an agent in the maid agency, a lot of my maids are from Indonesia... For me, I think this is not fair, not fair. Actually must guy, must man, go and find job for the family. The men in Indonesia are like that, they find job, then after a while never work already...”

Several other respondents also commented on the lack of responsibility of the men from Indonesia. Although the respondents were aware that not all men from Indonesia shared the negative characteristics that they had identified, they were unwilling to marry Indonesian men for fear that the men would be unable to take care of them and their children in future. This fear is resonated in Madam Carol’s response on her impression of men from Indonesia.

“Indonesia, the men good, but very lazy. They don’t want to work hard. Like young young only, but always don’t want to work. Like my boyfriend last time, young young, but don’t want to work...Always want to go dating, but he has no money. He don’t want to work, and sometimes will ask me for money. If next time got children, how to take care?...”

From the findings, it can be seen that their perception of the characteristic of men from Indonesia, and men from other countries greatly influenced their decision to marry and migrate to another country. The findings from this research resonate with McKay’s (2003) findings on female marriage migrants from the Philippines. McKay (2003) argues that besides personal reasons, such as previous failed marriages and fear of social stigma, Filipino

marriage migrants decide to marry and migrate particularly to Canada, because they are influenced by the ideology of Western men as “good providers and romantic lovers, and unlike Filipino men, not given to keeping mistresses” (McKay, 2003:30).

The findings from this research also lead to a similar conclusion. The female respondents’ ideology of Indonesian men as “lazy”, “irresponsible”, and “relying on women for money” is definitely an important factor in fuelling the marriage migration between women from Indonesia and men from Singapore.

Economic and material aspects alone are unable to account for the marriage migration of women from the developing South (Freeman 2005). The cultural background of the female marriage migrant also plays an important part in motivating her towards marriage migration. In cross-border marriages, it is important to note that “desire has its cultural logic” (Stoler as cited by McKay 2003). By understanding that female marriage migrants choose specifically to marry Singaporean men, and then later migrate to Singapore, highlights the agency that the female marriage migrants display. The Indonesian foreign brides do indeed play an active role in deciding their marriage choices (McKay 2003).

4.1.3 Marriage migration for love

The third motivating factor that was identified was the female marriage migrant’s desire to search for true love. When talking about their decision to marry and migrate to a foreign country, respondents usually turned to the notion of love to explain their choice.

When asked what made her decide to marry a man not from her country of origin, Madam Sarah rationalized her decision based on her desire to search for true love.

“I think that marriage is about love, care and trust. From very young, I already did not like the man in Indonesia. It is not all la, but it is very hard to find a good man in Indonesia. From very young, I already decided not to get married... but when I met him [her husband], I feel like he is a good man. When he came back to Singapore, he wrote letters to me. I brought the letters to a teacher to translate to Indonesia. I found that he is a man, who like, love his wife. Because ah, if you want to

married, and if the person don't love you, then how can we find happiness, right? "

Similarly, Madam Abigail, a 24 year old female marriage migrant explained that her decision to marry and migrate to Singapore was because she had a desire to search for love.

"It is not very important whether my husband is from Singapore or any other country. More importantly is whether he loves me. To me that is the most important factor."

The search and desire for true love can be seen to be a relatively important factor in the Indonesian female migrant's decision to marry. This finding highlights that there are indeed limitations if only material and practical factors are considered when understanding the reasons for marriage migration of the Indonesian foreign brides. The notion and desire of love by the female marriage migrants in cross-border marriages should therefore not be automatically assumed as non-existent (Constable 2005; McKay 2003). In fact, from the responses of the respondents, the search for love is quite an important motivating factor.

4.2 Agency and Resistance

My respondents demonstrated that they are not passive victims, but are in fact individuals who actively exercise their agency. This is not to say that they did not meet with difficulties and challenges in Singapore, but rather the Indonesian female marriage migrants demonstrated that they have the ability to challenge, negotiate and resist certain structures and inequalities. My respondents have also demonstrated their agency by actively try to find ways to empower themselves in order to improve their socio-economic positioning.

4.2.1 Hidden Spaces

One of the difficulties faced by the Indonesian marriage migrants is the restriction on their interaction with both their friends, as well as their family members back in Indonesia. Many of the respondents mentioned that their husbands and mothers-in-law are not really in favour of them going out, due to a variety of reasons, such as fear that they would be lost, or the fear that they might be cheated by others.

Madam Carol, recounted her experience, when she first marry and migrated to Singapore, and was unable to leave her house due to the opposition of her husband:

“When I first came to Singapore, my husband never allow me to go out myself. He said, I don’t know here well, very easy get lost. I told him, I can ask what bus to take, but he don’t allow me [to leave the house]. I think I was like going crazy, you know. Then I become very sad and kept crying.”

Several of the respondents also reported facing the same situation as Carol. Due to the opposition of their husbands and family members, the Indonesian marriage migrants seldom leave the house by themselves. However, several of the respondents mentioned that besides their husbands, friends are also an important source of social support to them, and it is therefore important for them to build a strong network with fellow marriage migrants from Indonesia. Although they are restricted by their family members in their ability to connect and develop a social network with other female marriage migrants, my respondents do find some strategies to connect with each other, and create their own private space for their personal enjoyment.

One of the strategies used by the Indonesian female marriage migrant to overcome this difficulty is through the use of a mobile phone. As their family members do restrict their physical interaction with their friends, the respondents use their mobile phones to create a private space of their own. This mobile social space created allows the Indonesian female marriage migrants to interact freely with their friends here in Singapore, as well as their family members back in Indonesia.

Madam Carol expresses the importance of the mobile phone to her:

“A phone is very important to me. Because ah, with the phone, I can contact my family in Indonesia. The phone makes me feel closer to my family. I will call them and ask, how are they, whether they have already eaten, and things like that. Because I cannot go back [to Indonesia] always, the phone helps me feel close to my family.”

Madam Tina, aged 39, agrees with Madam Carol that the mobile phone is very important. Madam Tina is of the opinion that having a mobile phone helps her stay in contact with her friends, and has the ability to strengthen her social network:

“With a handphone right, my friends can contact me. Like when they are happy or sad, they can message me...The same for me also. When I am happy or sad, I can also tell them. It feels better, because there is someone to talk to.”

Mobile phones allow female marriage migrants to have up to date information about each other through the mobile connections. With the mobile phone, a mobile social space, which other family members cannot easily intrude and monitor, is created (Wang 2007). Having a mobile phone allows the Indonesian female marriage migrants to keep in close contact with each other and this ensures that they have a form of social support that is constantly available to them. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) allows foreign brides to create “electronic communities across the globe and to create networks that are of their own making” (Rosario 2008:80). The use of ICTs provide and enhance the “cyberspatial agency” of the foreign brides (2008:80).

In addition to this mobile social space, the Indonesian foreign brides also demonstrated that they are able to make use of physical social spaces to freely congregate and connect with their friends. Foreign brides make use of social spaces, such as English classes, as opportunities to connect with their friends, who are also mostly foreign brides, who share similar experiences as them.

The ability to use hidden spaces demonstrates that the foreign brides are reflexive individuals who are able to use their limited resources to negotiate the challenges faced (Wang 2007).

4.2.2 Redefining how they are presented

Many respondents mentioned that one major difficulty faced by them is the lack of acceptance by Singaporeans. Several respondents commented that they feel some Singaporeans stigmatize them and view female marriage migrants from the developing South in a negative light.

The lack of acceptance by Singaporeans can be seen from Madam Abigail's statement about Singaporeans perceptions on female foreign migrants from Indonesia.

"I don't think Singaporeans have a good impression of us. I know many Singaporeans call us husband-snatchers behind our backs...also many Singaporeans think that we marry because of money."

Another respondent, Madam Eileen, offers a similar explanation for the lack of acceptance by Singaporeans, towards female marriage migrants from Indonesia. She also expresses her displeasure of being seen in a negative light.

"Many Singaporeans think that Indonesia women only want the money of their husbands. Maybe it is true la. I know there are some women who take their husbands CPF, run away and go back to Indonesia to buy house, buy land, but they [Singaporeans] must know not all the women from Indonesia is the same..."

Similar to Madam Eileen, most of the respondents interviewed disagree with the negative portrayal and perceptions of Singaporeans towards female marriage migrants from Indonesia. However, some of my respondents like Madam Eileen, acknowledges the reality that there might have been some foreign brides from Indonesia who have married purely for economic purposes. In order to resist and counter the negative stereotypes, my respondents often turned to the notion of love and desire to counter the social stigma of female marriage migrants from the developing South as gold diggers, "husband-snatchers", or as women marrying purely out of economic reasons. The use of the notion of romantic love, can be seen as an attempt to differentiate themselves from other foreign brides who choose marriage purely out of economic reasons.

My respondents in identifying their reasons for marriage migration do identify a variety of reasons for their choice (See chapter 4.1), including reasons such as marriage as a way to improve their lives, or marriage in order to find someone to take care of them and their families. Although every respondent cited a variety of reasons, most respondents are quick to profess their love for their husbands, and cite love and desire as one of the main reason for their choice of marrying a foreign spouse.

One such respondent is Madam Abigail. Madam Abigail stresses on the notion of love as one of her motivating factors for her choice of marriage migration:

“I wanted to get married because I wanted someone to take care of me and my family in Indonesia. Also, I decided to get married to my husband, even though he is much older than me, because I know that my husband is the one for me.”

Respondents also turn to the notion of romantic love and desire in order to distinguish themselves from the stereotypical imagery of female marriage migrants marrying purely out of economic reasons.

Madam Sarah briefly mentions the story of her courtship, and her decision to marry and migrate to Singapore:

“When he came back to Singapore, he wrote letters to me. I brought the letters to a teacher to translate to Indonesia. I found that he is a man, who like, love his wife...If you ask me why I marry [him], I can tell you it is because of love, because of love. We from the kampong are not like the city girls, or the girls in the newspaper. If there is no love, then marry for what, right? Money is not everything.”

This finding is similar to the argument put forth by Faier (2007). In her research on the marriage migration of the Filipina bar hostesses, Faier (2007) found that her respondents often turned to the notion of love to manage the japayuki stigma³. The Filipina female marriage migrants in her research were “extremely self-conscious of the stigma attached to working as an entertainer” (2007:154) and sought ways to change how they were perceived by others. In order to change the way that they were perceived, the Filipina bar hostesses turned to the notion of romantic love as a strategy to portray themselves, as modern and western, and as “moral women who possessed an emotional interiority” (2007:148).

³ The term “japayuki” was made popular by Yamatani Tetsuo, a Japanese freelance writer and documentary film-maker. Tetsuo, in his works, suggests that all labour migrants from Southeast Asia in Japan, were engaged in sex work.

In the same way, the respondents in this research used the notion of love to counter the negative stereotype of female marriage migrants as being motivated purely by economic purposes. The use of the notion of love can be seen as a strategy used by the Indonesian female marriage migrants to change the way they are perceived and presented.

4.2.3 Empowering themselves

My respondents do recognise their relatively disadvantaged position here in Singapore. In order to pursue a better life and improve their position in society, the Indonesian foreign brides use several strategies and tactics to empower themselves.

The first way is through the learning of the English language. Most of the respondents are not native speakers of English, but have instead started to learn English only after their migration to Singapore. The inability to grasp the language of the host society can be seen as a great barrier faced by foreign brides in their everyday lives (Hsia 2010).

One respondent, Madam Abigail, recalls her initial experience here in Singapore, before she was able to grasp the English language.

“When I first came here, I remember that I kept crying and crying. The language made it so difficult. When I first came here, my husband and I also no talking one... At first, it was really very difficult for me. Because like, when I go to church with my husband, I see people, they read the bible, they talk to each other. But for me, it is very difficult. Like even when we sing the songs, I don't understand the songs at all.”

The respondents who did not have a good grasp of the English language, faced the same situation as Madam Abigail. Madam Zoe, a 34 year old female marriage migrant from Java, told of her dependence on her husband due to her lack of knowledge of the English language. Without her husband, she was unable to leave her home, as she was initially only able to communicate in Bahasa Indonesia.

In order to adapt to the Singapore culture, as well as to improve their position in society, most of the respondents sought ways to improve their knowledge of the English language. For

instance, Madam Jenny, a 38 year old female marriage migrant, also from Java, spoke of how she tried various ways and means to pick up the English language.

“I learned [English] by watching the news and television, and by reading the newspapers...Because sometimes I like to watch the movie and learn from the subtitles right...I learn myself la...that’s why I try to make myself better by watching more television shows...”

Several of the respondents also sought to improve their English by registering for English classes in various voluntary welfare organisations. Having the knowledge of the main language of instruction and administration in Singapore, empowers the Indonesian foreign brides and breaks their “culture of silence” (Hsia 2008:139). Empowered with the knowledge of an important language, the Indonesian foreign brides have the ability to express themselves freely. The knowledge of the English language also allows them to communicate with others with greater ease.

Another tactic used to empower themselves and improve their social position is through the search for employment. Joining the labour market allows foreign brides to gain a greater degree of autonomy and independence, and also allows them to break free from the traditional gender role (Tang and Wang 2011). Improving their economic positioning through job employment is a way in which the agency of the foreign brides is expressed (Piper and Roces 2003).

Madam Jenny, who is currently on short term visa pass, expresses her desire to work in order to be an independent individual and not be “a burden” to her husband.

“I want to work because I like to take care myself. I don’t want to burden others, even my husband, I also don’t like... If I working, I can take care of myself, and be on my own la. I can have my own house, everything la, my own savings, at least I no need to ask money or whatever from my husband, so I can take care of myself...I know he can work, he can manage everything, but if I can also work, that is good.”

Similar to Madam Jenny, Madam Janice, a 31 year old female marriage migrant from , expresses that her desire to work is not only for financial and monetary purposes.

“I want to work because I want to help my husband, because now, not enough money. But I also want to work because it will make me feel helpful. If not, everyday stay at home and face the wall, is very boring.”

The responses gathered from the Indonesian foreign brides, demonstrate that employment does not only provide monetary benefits, but is in fact a “process to self-empowerment” (Tang and Wang 2011: 439). Indonesian foreign brides try various means and ways to seek job employment as they view having a job as a strategy to become independent and autonomous individuals, and therefore less reliant on their husbands and husbands’ family here in Singapore.

4.3 Female Marriage Migrants and State Structures

Adopting an agency approach, and hearing the voices of the female marriage migrants, does not equate to perceiving them only as active agents in every situation. Piper and Roces argue that the “active decision of the foreign bride to migrate can subject them to different types of victimization” (2003:9). It is important to contextualize the specific experiences of the foreign brides, in order to recognise the situations in which foreign brides are active agents, and the situations where they are victims (2003).

Legal structures and exclusionary immigration policy in the host society acts to constrain and restrict the lived experiences and opportunities of the foreign brides (Piper 2010; Hsia 2008), thereby undermining their personal agency (Williams 2010). The state’s intervention and immigration policy matters for the Indonesian foreign brides. Most of my respondents mentioned that the greatest challenge that they face here in Singapore, is the citizenship policy. One of my respondents, Madam Kristen, remarked that although she did enjoy living in Singapore, she does not appreciate having her opportunities and experiences in Singapore being restricted due to her citizenship status. Nine of my respondents do not have permanent residency, and this lack of a citizenship status not only restricts their opportunities and experiences here, it also alters the identity and life-world of the Indonesian foreign brides.

4.3.1 State structure and agency of female marriage migrants

The lack of a permanent residency status⁴ restricts the job employability of the Indonesian foreign brides. Most of the respondents expressed a desire to work, however, are unable to do so due to the legal restrictions imposed by the state.

Madam Carol expresses her desire to work, as a strategy to escape quarrelling with her mother-in-law, and also to gain freedom and autonomy.

“I want to work. I don’t like to stay at home every day, very boring. Staying at home also lead me to quarrel with my mother-in-law. But I have no choice, I do not have PR. Illegally working might get caught.”

Job employment is a strategy used by the foreign bride to empower themselves (see section 4.2.3), and improve their position in society (Tang and Wang 2011). Placing restriction on the employability of the foreign brides is therefore “a significant way in which policy undermines the personal agency of cross-border marriage migrants, and contributes to their vulnerability” (Williams 2010: 179). Such legislations also act to reinforce the dependency of the foreign brides upon their husbands (Piper and Roces 2003).

The lack of a citizenship status also denies the female marriage migrants the several rights that citizens are accorded. Anitha argues that exclusionary immigration policy restricts and constrains the agency of the female marriage migrant (Anitha et al. 2008). In her research on abused female marriage migrants in UK, Anitha (2008) demonstrated that the two-year probation period of residency imposed upon foreign brides before they are allowed independence, forces them to choose between living with violence and abuse, or facing destitution⁵. This agency of the foreign brides are restricted especially in cases where the foreign bride can no longer be dependent on her spouse, such as in the case of a divorce, death, or the desire to escape from a violent spouse.

⁴ Foreign brides on long term visit pass are not allowed to work.

⁵ Foreign brides are faced with the circumstance of becoming destitute if their marriage breaks down within the two-year probation period. The foreign brides are categorized as having “no recourse to public funding”, and are unable to gain access to benefits and public housing.

One respondent, Madam Eileen, mentioned that when she was first divorced from her husband, she was unable to apply for a HDB flat as she was not a permanent resident as yet. As such, she was also unable to find employment. She had no alternative but to seek shelter with her daughter at the Kallang river for about a year. Due to her citizenship status, she was also unable to qualify for financial aid. Madam Eileen mentioned that, during this period of time, she did try various ways and means to gain access to housing, employment and financial aid, but was however rejected due to her citizenship status.

The poverty and difficult circumstances faced by Madam Eileen, and several other respondents is attributed to the immigration policy that has been put in place. Due to the state's immigration policy, the foreign brides are not accorded full rights, and this reduces the choices that are given to them, undermines their personal agency, and contributes to the vulnerability of foreign brides (Williams 2010).

4.3.2 State structure and identity of female marriage migrants

The lack of a citizenship status not only constraints the employability of the female marriage migrant, but it also impedes their identity here in Singapore. For instance, one respondent, Madam Chloe, a holder of the long term social visit pass, held mixed feelings towards identifying Singapore as her home, due to her citizenship status.

Madam Chloe mentioned that she had enjoyed her living experience here in Singapore thus far, and considers Singapore as her first home:

“I like everything about Singapore, all like... Now ah, for me I think that Singapore is my first home, because my friend all Singaporean right? My children and my family also staying here... The Singapore culture and festivals, like the Chinese New Year, I also very happy to adopt and celebrate.”

Although Madam Chloe considered Singapore as her first home, she is unable to identify herself as a citizen, and an individual who is part of the Singapore society:

“I am not Singaporean, because I have not get PR. I don't feel part of Singapore society.”

Similarly, Madam Tina, who has been staying in Singapore for twelve years, is also unable to identify herself as a Singaporean, due to her citizenship status.

“Actually, I want to say Singapore is my first home, because my family, my friends all here. But I don’t have the citizenship, right? So I think Singapore is my second home.”

Another respondent, Madam Sarah, expresses her unhappiness towards the immigration laws in Singapore, and expressed that the laws do affect her identity and role as a wife.

“Because I think, if we are married, and I cannot stay here, then we married for what. It is not easy... The PR status would make me feel more secure. Because I know that I can continue to stay here, and take care of my husband. No need to worry about going back home.”

The responses of the Indonesian foreign brides demonstrate that their own identity is, to a very large extent, shaped by the legal structures that have been put in place. This finding is in line with Habermas’ argument that “institutional order is itself a structural component of the life-world” and should be regarded as a resource which individuals rely on to construct their identity (Baxter 1987: 46). Hence, the findings demonstrate that legal structures impede on, and to a certain extent define the identity and life-world of the female marriage migrants.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research has sought to depart from existing literature which portray foreign brides as victims and demonstrates that they should be seen as agents in certain respects.

This research highlights the multiple motivations that have led to the marriage migration of the foreign brides. The findings depart from previous studies that foreign brides play a passive role in their own marriage migration. I have sought to show that foreign brides marry and migrate for a variety of reasons, including the search for a better life, the negative perception of Indonesian men, and the search for love. Understanding the varied reasons for the motivations of the foreign brides, highlights the agency that they have, and rejects the notion of foreign brides as choosing marriage out of desperation (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), or as seeing foreign brides as trafficked women (Lloyd 2000).

This research also demonstrates the creative strategies undertaken by the foreign brides to challenge, and negotiate the existing power structure. This again highlights the agency of the foreign brides and demonstrates that they are reflexive individuals who are able to make use of their limited resources to negotiate their relatively disadvantaged circumstances. It is also important to note that the foreign brides do find various ways and means to empower themselves, and become independent. Some strategies include job employment, as well as attending English classes. This research has also found that state structures do work to restrict the opportunities and experiences as well as the identity of the foreign brides.

The research could be further improved by investigating the extent to which foreign brides can be seen to be potential contributors and cultural mediators in Singapore. The various roles undertaken by the foreign brides should also have been investigated. This would have resulted in a more complete understanding of the foreign brides in Singapore. This research could also be further improved by conducting researches on foreign brides from other countries, such as Vietnam or Thailand, who marry and migrate to Singapore. The findings would probably differ from this research, as the cultural and social background of the respondents play a part in shaping their choices and experiences. More attention could also be paid to the relationship between the foreign brides and the state, in light of the government's recent implementation of the long term visit pass plus, which enables foreign brides to seek employment, and gain access to subsidies. Further research could be conducted on this new

initiative, and the extent to which this new initiative impacts on the everyday experiences of the foreign brides could be investigated.

This research has sought to deconstruct the common stereotype of foreign brides as passive victims, or as “gold-diggers”. The wider significance of this research is to demonstrate the complex interplay between victim and agent. Although this research seeks to emphasize the agency that foreign brides display, this research also seeks to highlight that there are indeed certain structures in place which restrict the agency of the foreign brides. This research therefore resonates with Piper and Roces’ (2003) argument that the experiences of the foreign brides have to be contextualised and qualified, before we are able to discern whether the foreign brides are victims or agents.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Details of respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Years in Singapore	Husband's		Citizenship status
			Age	Occupation	
Madam Geraldine	24	2 years	54	Cook	Short term social Pass
Madam Jenny	38	2 years	60	Hotel Housekeeper	Short term social Pass
Madam Sarah	39	9 years	64	Retiree	Long term visit Pass
Madam Carol	33	10 years	54	Taxi driver	Long term visit Pass
Madam Abigail	27	7 years	Passed away		Long term visit Pass
Madam Zoe	34	6 years	59	Ambulance driver	Long term visit Pass
Madam Kristen	30	8 years	36	In prison	Long term visit Pass
Madam Chloe	42	8 years	69	Landscape architect	Long term visit Pass
Madam Janice	31	7 years	58	Part time cook	Long term visit Pass
Madam Tina	39	12 years	49	Caddy, DJ	Permanent Resident
Madam Eileen	40	7 years	Divorced		Permanent Resident