

## Empowering “Foreign Brides” and Community through Action Research

Hsiao-Chuan Hsia

Prospects of betrothal money for their families, young women from Indonesia put themselves up for sale to Taiwanese men. This elaborate and complex exchange involves Indonesian women flying to Taiwan to meet their husbands. I use the technique of the “theater of the oppressed” to break the culture of silence and to help build bonds of solidarity among these young women. Researchers, I conclude, must be committed to stand by the “oppressed” and at the same time constantly question our own voices and our right to speak for others.

Along with the threats of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to the agricultural economy and the exodus of labor-intensive industry, thousands of Taiwanese peasants and working-class men have been leaving the countryside in search of brides. Led by marriage brokers, they are transported to the modern international airports, where they are confronted by an alien combination of luxurious lounges, complex and wordy immigration forms, and expressionless customs bureaucrats.

Arriving at the exotic Jakarta International Airport, the Taiwanese men's attention is immediately seized by a series of strange, yet familiar, images: Indonesian customs officials smiling, but asking for bribes, taxi drivers shouting and competing for passengers, people with different languages and discrete life practices, and dusty streets crowded with diverse vehicles. However, their confusion is soon eased by the courteous reception of the Chinese-Indonesian marriage brokers, who speak Mandarin and other Chinese dialects. These Taiwanese men are often lodged at hotels, where matchmaking meetings will soon take place. For many of them, this is the very first time they have been abroad.

Meanwhile, brokers and matchmakers are shuttling among Jakarta's poor neighborhoods, and islands surrounding Java, persuading young Chinese-Indonesian women to attend the matchmaking meetings. Dozens of young women, mostly aged from 16 to 30, come to the meetings where they are chosen and choose. Men are anxiously searching, women are bashfully wondering, and brokers are enthusiastically matching.

A few days later, pairs of Taiwanese men and Chinese-Indonesian women get engaged and officially registered as married couples in Indonesia and Taiwan. The man then returns to Taiwan and waits for another year to be informed by the Taipei Economic and Trade Office (TETO) in Jakarta of their scheduled interview. The Taiwanese man then has to accompany his wife to the TETO to be interviewed for her visa application. If granted, the wife can fly to Taiwan, and the husband's family will arrange a wedding party so that the couple is socially married. The Indonesian women and their sisters from other Southeast Asian countries, are called “foreign brides” in Taiwan, no matter how long they have been married to their Taiwanese husbands.

The prolonged process of this international marriage consumes a great share of the life-long savings of a peasant family as well as the working-class family. Of the 350,000 NT (about U.S. \$14,000) they pay the brokers, only one-tenth goes to the bride's family as betrothal money. However, this betrothal money is enormous for the working-class people in Indonesia (about a two-year salary), where the living standard remains very low.

For each of the past few years since early 1990s, more than two thousand Indonesian brides have left home, heading to their imagined prosperous paradise --Taiwan. Although the Taiwan government builds up numerous barriers to immigration, thousands of Chinese-Indonesian women line up anxiously to be probed by the officials of the TETO in Jakarta. Since the waiting list for Taiwan-bound women is growing, many Indonesian brokers are getting impatient and are increasingly matching Indonesian women with Hong Kong men, while Taiwanese brokers are introducing Taiwanese men to Chinese women in Vietnam and Cambodia.

### The Origin of the Research

Since I have conducted the research, many questions have been asked regarding how I could have access to the information that is so personal. My answer has always been: this research needs to be understood as a part of a larger movement in Taiwan, instead of an action for itself.

I began to be involved in the movement as a result of participating in a research project conducted by a progressive professor at a major research institute in Taiwan. This project aimed at studying the political economy of two Hakka rural areas in southern Taiwan, Meinung and Neipu. The three colleagues of this research project were activists who were frustrated by the increasing domination of social issues by political struggles and consequently decided to return to their hometown, Meinung. Via the research assistantships offered by this progressive researcher, they returned their hometown from which they had been uprooted in the process of urbanization. Years of community activism since their return, they have achieved success of the anti-dam movement and a rejuvenation of the withering Hakka rural town under the leadership of a formal community organization, Meinung Peoples' Association.

In the course of doing this research and being involved in the movement, I got in touch with my own suppressed Hakka identity, gathered a sense of what peasant life was like in the course of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and the women's dilemma in the face of westernization and liberation. My colleagues inspired me greatly by their passionate commitment to social transformation from the grassroots. It is also in the process of understanding the various aspects of a peasant's life in Hakka communities that we notice the increasing popularity of "foreign brides" in many rural communities. After discussion with the comrades, I decided to work on this research,

since we thought it was essential to have the voices of the marginalized heard in the face of ubiquitous elitist discourse.

Since my comrades had developed trust with the local people through long-term daily interaction and participation in social movements, I have had little difficulty in getting access to the subjects despite the sensitivity of this issue. Many of them had accepted me in their everyday life long before I started this research. Those who did not know me, quickly accepted my existence once I was introduced as a participant, or related to the participants, of the social network this movement has been built upon. Many readers of my research are surprised at the intimate details the subjects have revealed to me. They are always reminded that a sense of trust cannot be easily bought by elaborate research techniques such as getting in and “leaving the field.” It is a collective endeavor of all the participants of the movement aimed at voicing the marginalized.

### Action Research as Part of the Continuous Movement

As mentioned earlier, this research has meant to be part of the community movement I have been involved in. The applied methods are therefore geared to empower the researched subjects who have been marginalized in the mainstream society. In the following, I will illustrate the theories of action research, the methods I have employed, and the results of this participatory research.

### A Rejection of Objectifying the Subjects

An increasing number of sociologists and other scholars have been interested in combining scholarly research with activism. In spite of the differences, these approaches share the critical view of positivism. That is, the view that reality is objective and it is independent of human will and volition and can only be understood by specialized, trained professional social scientists. The critique of positivism by participatory scholars generally focuses on three issues: (1) positivistic research is used as a legitimizing tool for the state; (2) positivism is ideological; therefore, not objective value free and (3) the complexity of the social world is reduced by the subject object distance in the research process. Participatory oriented researchers believe that positivistic research is used to maintain the status quo because it is usually funded by the states or interested corporations, and the ordinary people are reduced to numbers and cut out of the meaningful decision-making process. The result is the perpetuation of a one sided process which regards people as sources of information, as having bits of isolated knowledge, but they are neither expected nor apparently assumed to be able to analyze a given social reality.

Participatory oriented scholars, in their critique of positivism agree that value neutrality is a pretension, in part, because social facts differ from natural facts. Not taking action is indeed an action in itself. Therefore, the values, beliefs and feelings of the participants

are essential to an understanding of the social world; personal involvement does not necessarily hamper and, in fact, upgrades the quality of research.

### Research as Action

The participatory oriented research can be further separated into two groups: those that emphasize personal and societal transformation, and those that merely stress participation of “subjects” in social research. This research is meant to be the former. As Peter Park argues, the effect of reifying social sciences is the promotion of an unchanging reality in which neither a past nor a future are visible. Without motion, he maintains, transformation is not conceivable. This paper does not only recognize that the impact of research is inevitable, but also views itself as a sociological intervention to empower the subjects whose voices have been silenced. Instead of studying a situation, a trend or an opinion, the new research objective points to the domain of social relations and social action. As Alain Touraine has written: “Sociology's chief problem is to bring these relations to the surface, so as no longer to be the dupe of the categories of social practice. This then presupposes the active intervention of the sociologist. [The] task is to bring out these social relations concealed behind a mesh of approved and organized practices.”

Touraine established four principles for sociological intervention. The first and foremost principle is for sociologists to come face to face with social movements. Sociologists should consider themselves as historical actors and as representatives of real or potential actors greater than themselves. Second, sociologists need to go beyond ideological language and to apprehend the social movement group in its militant role. Third, the researchers should not be identified with the actors and even less with their adversaries. Instead, the researcher should be the person by whom the social movement is set in its context, the person who speaks both to the militants and to the opponents, and above all, the person who endeavors to delineate the social movement from the struggle and, hence, also to designate the social and cultural stakes of the conflict. Fourth, the analysis is turned into militant action and the researcher learns to become acquainted with the movement by participating in the group's analytical work. The requirement that researchers not be identified with the actors does not preclude their involvement in the movement. The independence of and distance from the movement are themselves of service. Both are indispensable for the disengaging of a social movement from the fiercest protest struggles or revolts. To sum up, in Touraine's sociological intervention, researchers put themselves "in a situation in which the object of sociology, social relations and collective action all emerge directly." Therefore, sociological intervention is “the action of a sociology” which is itself “a sociology of action.”

As Yung-Feng Chung points out, sociological intervention is of even greater value and importance in the "third" world conditions in which highly uneven development gives rise to tremendous social injustice, access to knowledge and information is often controlled by the elites, and social movements usually burst out amid repressive and exploitative state control. As the privileged members of their own societies, sociologists

not only have access to the most holistic and critical knowledge and information about their society, but also are in a position to develop an understanding of the struggles against the established order. Sociological intervention herein can help prolong and intensify social movements.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian revolutionary educator and philosopher, in contrast to Touraine, suggests that the involvement of researcher in the "third" world countries requires more than what Touraine has in mind. First, for Freire, an interventionist sociologist should not be different from a liberating educator whose aim is not merely to teach the illiterate people to read and write, but to help them critically perceive their personal and social reality and to radically transform the world. According to Freire, the pedagogy of the oppressed is both humanist and libertarian. It first encounters the problem of consciousness. Through libertarian education, the oppressed are empowered to develop a critical consciousness of the world of oppression and, through praxis, commit themselves to its transformation. After transforming the reality of oppression, the pedagogy extends its scope from person to society and "becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation."

Freire is similar to Touraine in that they both argue for a critical self-examination on the part of the educator/sociologist. But their perceived functions are different. For Touraine, it is to overcome the fragility of the sociologist's position, with the bottom line of maintaining identity distance. For Freire, it is to pave the way for a profound re-socialization and comradeship with the oppressed, only through which, Freire believes, can the educator understand the characteristic ways of living and behaving of the oppressed and reconstruct, for and with the oppressed, the state of social consciousness and reality.

### From Literacy Program to Theater of the Oppressed

In this study, as a tool to increase the subjects' ability to engage in dialog with others and to increase democratic participation in the production of knowledge, a Chinese Literacy Program for the "foreign brides" was initiated on July 30, 1995. To make the public aware of the "foreign brides" issue, we held a formal opening ceremony, in which several important figures were invited. The attention of the press was drawn to this program because it is the first and the only one, as of today, which is designed exclusively for "foreign brides." At the opening ceremony, humanist messages were delivered by the invited figures: the local Taiwanese are responsible for helping the "foreign brides" adjust to the Taiwanese society.

I designed material that focuses on introducing the environment in the local community and on the Chinese conversation the "foreign brides" would encounter most frequently, such as those used at night markets, the banks and the airports. However, since I had to return to the U.S. for my study, I asked two local folks to continue to teach the courses. Since I do not consider learning standard Chinese to be the ultimate goal of this program, I purposely did not ask professional teachers to teach. Instead, I encouraged a

housewife, Ms. Kwei-Yin, who has suffered from marital violence and sought help from MPA. My hope was to help her develop self-confidence and that the foreign brides would be less intimidated by a mother-like teacher than professional school teachers. The former hope has been achieved. In an article that Ms. Kwei-Yin wrote for a special issue on "foreign brides in Meinung" in a community newspaper, she remarks,

One day, Ms. Hsia called. She mentioned her plan of the "literacy program for the foreign brides." I congratulated her. But she unexpectedly invited me to be the teacher.... I was surprisingly flattered, but did not dare to accept it. In addition to having no experience, I thought of the feel that I had always been a member of the corner throughout my education process. I rarely had a chance to speak in front of the public, and always prayed secretly that the teachers would not call on me.... After the schools, I never had a chance to be in charge. Yet Ms. Hsia was very patient and sincere. She continually convinced me and encouraged me, so I decided to accept it.... It has been a beautiful experience for me. At the age of near fifty, I finally know what I can do....(Special Issue, Moonlight Magazine, 4, 29, 1996, p. 3)

Since I was not present to realize my original plan, Ms. Kwei-Yin and the other teachers followed the textbooks written by Taipei Municipal Education Bureau for the adult literacy program. The purpose of empowering the "foreign brides" in addition to learning how to read and write Chinese was not put into practice. When I returned to Taiwan in September, 1996, I discussed with MPA activists and suggested that we collaborate with an activist friend of ours, who has been working to localize the theater of the oppressed in Taiwan. A new Literacy Program employing the methods of theater of the oppressed begun in November, 1996.

### The spirits of the theater of the oppressed

What is the Theater of the Oppressed? Adrian Jackson, a practitioner of Augusto Boal's methods in the "Western" world, summarizes it best: "The Theater of the Oppressed is about acting rather than talking, questioning rather than giving answers, analyzing rather than accepting." Informed by Paulo Freire, Boal is a Brazilian activist/artist. It is Boal's fundamental belief that anyone can act and that theatrical performance should not be solely the province of professionals. Moreover, for Boal, the word "act" has dual meaning: to perform and to take action. Theater, in Boal's mind, is indeed a force for change, rather than for mere bourgeois entertainment: "[T]heater... should help us learn about ourselves and our times. We should know the world we live in, the better to change it. Theater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theater can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it."

### Trial and Error in the theater's application to "foreign brides" literacy program

Mr. Chao Chung was first informed of the Theater of the Oppressed by a group of third world activists of the People's Theater, especially those from the Philippines. He has been trying to find a catharsis through theater for the Chinese in Taiwan, who are at the crossroads of the third world and the developed country. Being more familiar with working with college students and laborers, combining the People's Theater with Literacy Program for the “foreign brides” has been a great challenge for him.

As mentioned above, teaching the “foreign brides” how to read and write Chinese is the vehicle through which the “foreign brides” can voice themselves, rather than a goal in itself. As for any workshops of the People’s Theater, we needed a spacious room with no objects, so that the participants could freely extend their bodies. We thus moved the Literacy Program from a normal school classroom to a room with a wooden floor and no desks or chairs. At the first class, Chao Chung explained to the “foreign brides” how to develop the ability to express themselves and to build trust among the group members through theater and games. While these games have been successfully applied to college students, they were resisted by “foreign brides,” though they found the games a lot of fun. They told me that only kids play games. They asked their families to take care of their babies so that they could study Chinese, not to play. I asked them if they were happier in the workshops than in the regular classes. They said yes, but they still believed studying Chinese characters should be the only goal. Some even suggested that we should have tests to push them to study harder. We sadly realize that learning had become a cruel thing, especially for the marginalized people. To them, this program should not be about learning about ourselves and developing creativity. It should be about learning techniques so we can be more competitive.

After a discussion, we decided to employ the least resisted methods. I called each of the “foreign brides” the night before the next class. I explained to them that in the following classes, we would focus on conversation in Mandarin. In the past, they had mostly studied how to write, and rarely had a chance to practice speaking Mandarin. So we moved back to the regular classroom, with desks and chairs, where they felt more comfortable, because, in their minds, it was what a classroom should be like.

Chao Chung designed several different methods so that the “foreign brides” felt they were learning something practical, that is, written and spoken Chinese, and at the same time, had a chance to express themselves. At the beginning, Chung still used more abstract methods. For example, once Chung prepared three pictures, butterflies, masks and planets, and then asked them what they thought about the pictures and how they would describe them. Chung's hope was that these images would encourage the women to express their feelings more freely, because there were no apparent right answers to any one of them. However, probably because the images were too distant from their everyday experience and they were not sure what the teacher expected from them, they did not seem very enthusiastic. They tended to have the same answers as the ones before them.

Breaking the culture of silence

Gradually, Chung employed methods that the “foreign brides” could more directly relate to their living experiences. For instance, one exercise is called “My Day.” They were asked what they hear, see, smell, and do at 7:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m., noon, 2:00 p.m., 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., respectively. Before we did the exercise, Chung asked everyone to close their eyes and flash back to what they do everyday. They responded excitedly and everyone had different answers. Ching-Hua's reads,

At 7:00 a.m., I get up. I hear some else's baby crying.

At 10:00 a.m., from the windows I see the neighbor doing ironwork.

At noon, I am at the kitchen and smell cooking.

At 2:00 p.m., I hear dogs barking and see many dogs.

At 4:00 p.m., I am doing the cementing work.

At 8:00 p.m., I am teaching my son mental arithmetic.

Hung-Chu's reads,

At 7:00 a.m., I get up. I hear my baby crying.

At 10:00 a.m., from my bedroom I see my father come back from the field.

At noon, I am at the kitchen and smell cooking.

At 2:00 p.m., I hear father getting up and see him go to work.

At 4:00 p.m., I am taking a shower.

At 8:00 p.m., I am watching T.V.

Compared to what I had seen in their regular classes before the workshops, they laughed more, more willing to talk, and to ask questions and to help each other out. Before the workshops, they only repeated what the teacher said. When the teachers attempted to ask them to read the text alone, they were intimidated, let alone to ask questions. What surprised me more than anything else is that after a year of having the classes together, they did not even know all their classmates' names, or where they lived and what they did, not to mention a sense of solidarity. Ms. Kwei-Yin complained to me about it many times and she feels guilty for not being able to develop a sense of "weness" in the class. By doing several exercises that encourage the “foreign brides” to talk about their own experiences, they have come to know each other and themselves better. This is a stage where we break the “culture of silence” common among the oppressed.

### Tension and transformation

However, sometimes, the breaking of “culture of silence” invites tension. For example, at one class, the topic was about their experiences of coming to Taiwan. Chao Chung asked everyone to close their eyes. Then he played a gentle music called “Silk Road” and asked them to reflect on what they felt when they left home, on the airplane, their

expectation of Taiwan and their first impression of Taiwan. After the music, Chung asked everyone to share their experiences. Chi-Mei expressed,

When I left Singkawang, I heard sea gulls crying and the steamship whistling.  
Then, I went to Pontianak's airport to take airplane. I saw sad travellers.  
At the airplane I thought Taiwan would be a progressive place with many buildings.  
When I got to Taiwan, I thought Meinung is similar to my hometown.

This particular exercise provided an environment for the “foreign brides” to express their complicated feelings when they left their homes for Taiwan. From this exercise, they had the chance to know the experiences of others as well. They all openly talked about their sad feelings. Chi-Mei used to be quiet in the class, because her ability to write and read Chinese lagged behind the others because of several missed classes. Interestingly, she has been among the most expressive and outspoken at the workshops. She expressed how threatened she felt before she left home. She overheard a woman who was about to leave home for work in Taiwan telling her parents that she did not want to go to Taiwan. The woman's parents told her not to worry and behave herself. Chi-Mei was afraid of her future in Taiwan. She said, My heart was so confused. I don't speak the language. I didn't know how my husband and his family would treat me.... When I heard the sea gulls crying and the steam whistling, my heart was broken. I wanted to cry. Chao Chung said to Chi-Mei and the whole class, “Your experience is very similar to a poem of the greatest Chinese poet, Li Po.... Everyone can be a great poet....” He then wrote down the poem on the board and taught them to read it.

Several husbands of the “foreign brides” as they usually did in this class sat in the back of the classroom. They panicked when they saw their wives talk about how sad they were when they came to Taiwan. Two of them complained to us, “Are you trying to make them homesick?” Their complaints put us in a dilemma. We understood and sympathized with the insecurity of the Taiwanese husbands, as they are victims of the urban-industrial-biased society, which stigmatizes them as losers and consequently contributes to their difficulties in marry women locally. We also worried that they would stop their wives from coming to class, since the family's support had been the most crucial factor in their participation in the Literacy Program. Yet, we did not want to perpetuate patriarchy. Our goal was to encourage the “foreign brides” to critically reflect on their experiences. Chao Chung, myself and other MPA activists discussed this dilemma seriously. We decided that we would continue our approach. Even if conflicts between the “foreign brides” and their husbands arose because of the workshops, we thought it was better than suppressing their feelings and self-expressions. Gladly, no foreign brides have dropped out of the workshops. After all, the classes are free and no “obvious” harms have been created.

After ten sessions of the workshop, we saw some changes. Compared with other “foreign brides” who have not participated in the workshop, these participants have become more outspoken, self-assertive and have a stronger sense of solidarity. Once we had to

reschedule the classes from Sunday morning to Monday evening. Several “foreign brides” who could not participate in the workshop on Sundays attended this session. Like the “foreign brides” at the beginning sessions of the workshops, they did not ask questions, and were very shy when they were called upon.

At one session of the workshop, the topic was about environmental pollution. They were provided three pictures: first, a house nearby a clean and beautiful river; second, a house nearby a dirty and polluted rivers surrounded by factories, and third a big question mark. Chao Chung explained, Suppose you live in the house of the first picture--nearby the clean and beautiful river. Then the factories moved in and polluted the river, like the second picture. You want the clean and beautiful river back. What would you do? The first two “foreign brides” suggested that they would ask the neighbors to go to the police together and ask the government for help. The third “foreign bride” said she would go to the police by herself. Chao Chung asked her why her suggestion was different from the previous two classmates. She replied confidently, “Everyone thinks differently.” This is in clear contrast to the situations in the past when they almost always had the same answers as the first one who provided an answer.

For the last session, everyone brought some desserts to share with classmates. Chao Chung asked them what they had learned in the past ten sessions. They all said they had been able to speak more Chinese. Though none of them mentioned what they had learned about themselves, we still think they have been empowered. Chao Chung, myself and other MPA activists were confused by what they were discussing, when they spoke Indonesian with great enthusiasm. Then, Hung-Chu announced to us, We want to sing an Indonesian song. They then sang a song with hands clapping. Hung-Chu later explained to us, “This song is about how happy they are with friends, and they want to know when we can get together again. We will be very sad if we do not see our dear friends.” We asked them to teach us to sing the Indonesian song. Hung-Chu volunteered to be the teacher. Another “foreign bride” suggested that they sing another Indonesian song, so an Indonesian children's folk rhythm followed. It was a vivid contrast to the first class, when MPA provided a birthday cake to celebrate the one-year-old birthday of the Literacy Program. I asked if they could sing an Indonesian song for celebration, they just shyly smiled.

After more than two years of trying out the Literacy Program, we observed some changes in the gender relations between the couples. Although we offered baby-sitting for the “foreign brides” so they could be relieved of child-care responsibility and come to the classes, yet the husbands often volunteered to take care of the babies in the back of the classroom while their wives were in the classes. Some husbands would take their babies out for a walk and then come back to pick up their wives after classes.

The attitudes towards the “foreign brides” in the Meinung community have changed too. Unlike the public image of them as foreigners and others, Meinung folks have began to see them as “us”. One day, a Meinung folk who is a member of MPA, chatted with me about the “foreign brides” issue and the Literacy Program. He suggested that he would ask the Rotary Club at the local district, of which he is a member, to hold a

Chinese New Year party for the "foreign brides" and their families. I provided the Rotary Club the list of "foreign brides" in the community and they sent out the invitation letters. In the letters, they spoke as the members of the community, who were holding the welcoming party for the new members of the community--the "foreign brides".

### An Invitation to the Power Game of Reality Construction

Being actively involved in empowering these currently marginalized subjects does not only serve to voice the voiceless, but also to reveal how the oppressive elite rule. Since the Literacy Program is the first directed towards enhancing the welfare of the "foreign brides" in Taiwan, the press has been extremely interested in contacting MPA and myself. In the process of dealing with the media workers, the mechanism of reality production by the media are clearly revealed. This observation of the power game of reality construction in action cannot be achieved by researchers who maintain a distance from their subjects.

### News Filter

News workers recognize good and newsworthy stories by using criteria that systematically filter out things that are not coincident with how they believe the reality should be. Todd Gitlin's study of how the media covered the New Left and the anti-war movement of the 1960s describes how claims makers who challenge dominant institutions fare in encounters with the media. He studied coverage of anti-war activity by the New York Times and CBS News in 1965. When movement spokesperson sought to use the media to convey their views of American society and the war, they found to their dismay that what came out usually gave short shrift to important ideas, but gave full play to conflict, the dramatic, and the bizarre. Individuals in actions were important to reporters, who are taught that objectivity and balance are produced by quoting spokesperson for various sides. Yet little do they realize that the selection of the sides of the story and editing process are inevitably subjective. In the following, the selective process will be discussed by the experiences we have had with the media workers.

As mentioned above, the MPA and I have become the major contacts for news workers to do reports on "foreign bride" issues. We have developed an understanding of the phenomena which refutes the official elitist perspectives. Since no access was allowed by the media to the editing process, we are always dismayed at how our main arguments were omitted and the theme is manipulated by the narration.

In early 1996, a team of news workers from a popular cable TV station contacted MPA for the aim of doing an in-depth report on the "foreign brides." Originally, the MPA workers refused to introduce subjects for them to interview, because they had been disappointed by the mainstream news coverage. The news workers continued to convince MPA, and finally MPA agreed, under the consideration that MPA would need the media

to publicize their ideals and activities. As requested by the news workers, MPA arranged a few “foreign brides,” their husbands, parents-in-law, matchmakers, the Township Mayor, an official of the community Household Registration Office, and MPA workers. When interviewed, MPA workers emphasized structural reasons underlying the transnational marriages, such as the deterioration of the agricultural sector as the result of urban-biased developmental policies, and the marginalized status of rural Hakka. They also rejected the public image of the “foreign brides” as “exotic other.” However, through tactful visual effects and verbal comments, the transnational marriages are constructed exotic and problematic, and the report is made male-centered.

Television news publicizes the distinction between mainstream populations and those designated as problematic, by artfully manipulating visual images and verbal commentary to attach public idioms to selected aspects of experience in contrast to others. At the beginning of this TV report, the audience sees the quiet rural scenes of mountains and rice fields, and women with traditional Hakka costumes making paper umbrellas, which have been constructed as the community's cultural commodity. It is narrated,

The Southeast Asian brides have been fighting to marry Taiwanese men. Just a random walk in the community, our camera finds a foreign bride....

Then it is followed by an image of a “foreign bride” shyly saying “I don't know” to the reporter's question, Why did you come here to get married. It is constructed as if the “foreign brides” are so exotic that they can be easily identified at a quick glance. Note that the “foreign brides” are the subjects introduced by MPA for them to interview. These “foreign brides” are indeed Chinese, who can not be told from other local Chinese merely by their appearance.

The narration continues,

But (emphasized by the narrator) this conservative rural town has been added many fresh topics.

The scene is then turned from the quiet rural images to busy wedding party full of traditional red symbols and firecrackers. The countryside and rural folks are constructed as conservative and dull figures who have had nothing to do until the exotic "foreign brides" come in their boring lives.

The report is clearly male-centered. The reporters and the narrators are all male. More importantly, almost all interviews incorporated in the report are voices of men, including the Township Mayor, the official of the Household Registration Office, Taiwanese bridegrooms and their male matchmaker. The only female MPA worker whose voice is

included is the executive director of MPA. However, her feminist argument was curtailed. What is left is her comment on how the "foreign brides" are happy to have the Literacy Program. In addition to the "foreign bride" saying "I don't know" at the beginning, the only "foreign bride" that is voiced in this report is an Indonesian woman commenting on how her Indonesian friends ran away. Interestingly, she was accompanied by her husband when interviewed and her statement was often cut off by him. It is in clear contrast with that other Taiwanese bridegrooms were not accompanied by their wives when interviewed.

The report ends with a shot from an aerial view looking at the crowded street of Taipei downtown. The camera lens was then zoomed in with slow motion at a few women among the crowd. It is narrated,

However, looking at the whole Taiwan, there are surprisingly as high as more than 20 thousand foreign brides submerged in the 21 million population. There are about 5 to 6 thousands entering Taiwan every year. What kind of social problems will they cause?

The "reality" is thus revealed. These marriages are exotic as well as problematic.

### Process of Silencing Voices

Given the experience with many media workers, we have become more cautious while dealing with the them. We decided to refuse as much news workers' requests for reports as possible. Another popular cable TV news team contacted us for doing a report on "foreign brides" in Meinung. I questioned their motives for doing this report given that many media have done the same topic. I also criticized the media's professional voyeurism and ruling out voices in conflict with their ideology. The reporters immediately changed their frame of narratives from doing an "objective report" to "making the voices of the oppressed heard." In order to make sure the voices of the oppressed really be heard, I requested them to discuss with the subjects their edited videotape before broadcasting it. Surprisingly, they agreed. However, since I was still suspicious of the reporters' claim of speaking for the oppressed, I was not willing to be cooperative. However, I also know the danger of being directly hostile to the media. Since we will have to depend on them to publicize issues we are concerned. And they can always easily destroy our reputation by a simple negative report. Therefore, my strategy was to postpone the process and encourage them to report other issues instead. Partly because of my uncooperative policy and their deadline to finish the story in three days, they avoided me and got access to "foreign brides" through the teacher of the Literacy Program, Ms. Kuei-Yin, who had no experience dealing with the media before. She was present as the reporters agreed with my requests, so she thought it was all right to introduce them to interview the "foreign brides."

No sooner than I was informed that the interviews had been done, did I call the reporters and ask them to keep their promise of discussing their report before broadcasting. The reporter promised again hastily but politely. The report was broadcasted and the promises

were broken. Ms. Kuei-Yin and the two involved “foreign brides” complained to me and thus I called the reporter again. She had no intention to explain or apologize. “It was only the deal (emphasized in English by her) between us. But since I found the subjects myself, it's none of your business,” said she professionally. I emphasized the point that the subjects themselves complained to me. She refuted, “I think it's your one-sided story. I have developed a very friendly relationship with them. They never complained to me.” I lost my patience: I need to talk to your supervisor. She showed no hesitation, “I don't think it's necessary. If you like, it's up to you.” So the supervisor was contacted. He shouted at me, “You are not their parent, so you have no rights to speak for them. If they have complaints, ask them to call me themselves.” I shouted back, “Didn't you say your mission is to speak for the oppressed? You should know they don't know the rules of the game so they need someone to contact you for them.” To my dismay, he replied, “What oppressed? We are not their parents. We are not responsible. If I have to deal with the third parties all the time, we will be tired to death.... If you continue to harass us, I will sue you for interfering free reports.” Ironically, this supervisor is a well-known humanist who had captured lives of the marginalized population through photographs.

Indeed, the main reason that I did not reject their request for a report is that two friends of mine who had worked in the media assured me that this supervisor had a good reputation. Yet his primary concern has become how to have the jobs done efficiently as he is now employed in the media industry, as he remarked clearly, “If I have to deal with third parties all the time, we will be tired to death.” Jaber F Gubrium's idea of “organizational embeddedness” well applies to this instance. Under the capitalist logic of production, the TV company has to find ways to gain profits to maintain and prosper itself. Consequently, humanist doctrine of “speaking for the oppressed” becomes a specialized commodity that distinguishes itself from other media to be marketable.

The above struggle of negotiating with the media industry over the rights of interpretation illustrates the process of silencing voices. Even when we claimed the status problematic, they discredited our argument efficiently, given the knowledge that we, like any other individuals and organizations, have to depend on them for publicity and reputation. Furthermore, once they gain the materials for the stories, all the promises and claimed friendship are left behind.

We continued to refuse requests from media workers interested in the "foreign brides" issues. A friend who works as a journalist for a major newspaper and has been very friendly to MPA warns us,

If the information is spread that MPA is very critical of media reports, they will probably be unwilling to publicize any of your concerned issues.

Her sincere comment and concern indeed summarize the political nature of social construction of reality in the so-called information society. As many constructionists

argue, social problems are the definitional activities of people around conditions and conduct they find troublesome. However, it is important not to view the definitional activities as “anything goes.” It is power game. As Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse argue, viable claims and definitions are those that live and that claimants can get away with. Viability is evident when participants give credibility to claims and definitions. Viability is often produced by media coverage. It is produced when officials and professionals warrant definitions, implement them, and accept responsibility for problematic conditions.

Moreover, most journalists are highly dependent on the news and data released by various governmental agencies. As I discussed elsewhere, the journalists are institutionalized to find ways that they can fulfill their tasks easily and efficiently. Reports readily written and press conferences are the two most convenient access for them to write up "news" reports. However, only organizations with sufficient resources would be able to call on a press conference, and are familiar with the rules the journalists play in the news games. The government, on the other hand, needs the media coverage to publicize the decrees, policies and the claimed achievements. Consequently, press conferences are often called on by the governmental agencies. Once the news is released by the government, almost all media, especially newspapers, would report it with a significant coverage, which creates a sense of prevalence of whatever the officials claim as social problems.

Due to the routine dependence on official statements, the media are inclined to correspond with official definitions of the problems. Under the protection of "objectivity" and press freedom, the reporters are almost immune to objections of those whose voices are silenced or distorted. Moreover, though the silenced do resist, their resistance and protest are not without limitations, because of their ironic dependence on the media to publicize the conditions they consider problematic. Consequently, the voices contradicting the official construction, and the like, are caught in the catch-22 game. In order to make claims public enough to be considered social problems, they have to have the credibility granted by the media coverage. Nevertheless, as the result of the institutionalized network between the media and the governmental agencies, their claims are often distorted so that they do not threaten the official construction of reality. The catch is: their voices will not be heard if isolating themselves from any media, but their voices will be distorted in such a way that they might as well accept the dominant definitions.

To sum up, the discussion above of how the media coverage is done provides an example of the political nature of claim-making. And this first-hand observation of the power game of knowledge production is made possible because of my participation in, rather than the distance from, the struggles.

### An Invitation to Self-Critique

The critique of the silencing mechanism can be equally applied to the participatory researchers themselves. The commitment to voice the voiceless and to sociology “ from

the bottom up” often puts researchers in a vulnerable position. For example, from the workshops, I came to the realization that expressing yourself has sadly become a privilege enjoyed by intellectuals and professionals. When asked to express opinions and feelings, especially in front of a group, the “foreign brides” often replied by “I don't know,” or “I don't know how to say it.” These answers can be easily used as the evidence that the ordinary people are indeed simple-minded or incompetent. However, from the perspective of liberation sociology, we want to believe that these responses are a protective strategy that “underdogs” often use since they have learned that the dominant society believes their opinions do not exist or do not count. Nevertheless, a self-reflexive researcher will soon become aware of the danger that they might be imposing their own opinions on the voiceless. That is, they are privileging themselves to use their voices. However, this realization can easily lead to a decision of inactivity, that can be viewed as neo-conservatism because not taking any action serves to maintain the status quo. Critique and self-critique are thus crucial to participatory research. The latter is often the most difficult. As Touraine warns us: “The researcher must, in fact, fight against a dominatory part of [themselves]. [They] must, therefore, be exposed to the group's criticism; he must come out of himself in order to be able to speak from the point of view of the movement.

The vulnerable position of a participatory researcher can be illustrated by my experience dealing with the media workers whose behaviors were criticized by me as manipulating the “oppressed” and who in return told me that I am not the parent of the “oppressed” and thus have no right to speak for them. Researchers have to be committed to stand by the “oppressed” and at the same time constantly question our own voices and our right to speak for others. As Hernan Vera points out, the answer to this dilemma can only be found in what is the task of the day. If the task of the day is to stand between a rapist and a raped, then we cannot take the luxury to question the legitimacy of our action, we have to do it! But what if what we perceived as rape was just a move of loving passion? Well, that is the risk we must take! Everyone takes risks to live. The risks of academicians are always related to being wrong, unjust, stupid, and simplistic.

I teach at the Graduate School for Social Transformation Studies, Shih Hsin University, Taipei, Taiwan. Please feel free to contact me for the full text, complete with references. My email is: [hsiahc@ms11.hinet.net](mailto:hsiahc@ms11.hinet.net)