

2006

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Recommended Citation

Hsia. 2006. "Empowering "Foreign Brides" and Community through Praxis-Oriented Research." *Societies Without Borders* 1 (1): 93-111.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol1/iss1/6>

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Hsiao-Chuan Hsia

Empowering "Foreign Brides" and Community through Praxis-Oriented Research

Abstracts

Through the author's direct participation in the empowerment of the "foreign brides" and in a rural community, which are both stigmatized in the mainstream Taiwan society, this paper discusses the theories and methods of praxis-oriented research, and its implication to social studies. This paper illustrates how the concepts and techniques of the "theater of the oppressed" can be combined with "pedagogy of the oppressed" to break through the "culture of silence" of the oppressed, develop their critical awareness, and help the women organize themselves for social transformation. It is proposed that praxis-oriented research can achieve more sophisticated research results, because by actively involving oneself in the process of social transformation, the researcher can observe and examine much more directly the mechanisms of social construction and transformation.

La Vigorización del Status de las Novias Extranjeras y de la Comunidad a Través de una Investigación Práctica

Al examinar la participación directa del autor en la vigorización del status de las "novias extranjeras" en una comunidad rural, que no son aceptadas por la sociedad de Taiwan, este artículo analiza las teorías y los métodos de la investigación orientada a

la práctica y sus implicaciones para los estudios sociales. El artículo ilustra como los conceptos y las técnicas del “teatro de los oprimidos” pueden combinarse con la teoría de la “pedagogía de los oprimidos” para romper la “cultura del silencio” de los oprimidos, desarrollar su autoconciencia crítica y ayudarles a organizarse para actuar. Se propone que la investigación práctica puede producir resultados más sofisticados porque al involucrarse uno activamente en el proceso de transformación social, el investigador puede observar y examinar más directamente los mecanismos de construcción y transformación social.

L’habilitation des jeunes mariées étrangères et la communauté à travers la recherche praxis orientée

En examinant la participation directe de l’auteur à l’habilitation “des jeunes mariées étrangères” et d’une communauté rurale qui sont toutes deux a stigmatisé dans la société traditionnelle de Taiwan, cet article discute les théories et les méthodes de la recherche qui est praxis orientée, et son implication aux études sociales. Il illustre comment les concepts et les techniques du « théâtre des opprimés » peuvent être combinés avec la théorie de la « pédagogie des opprimés » pour traverser la « culture du silence » des opprimés, développer leur conscience critique, et les aider graduellement à s’organiser pour la transformation sociale. Je propose que la recherche orientée vers la praxis achève les résultats plus sophistiqués puisque, par engageant activement dans le processus de la transformation sociale, le scolaire peut observer et étudier beaucoup plus précisément les mécanismes de la construction et la transformation sociale.

Empowering “Foreign Brides” and Community through Praxis-Oriented Research

Beginning in the late 1980s hundred of thousands of Taiwanese peasants and working-class men left the countryside in search of brides. Led by marriage brokers, they are transported to international airports, where they encounter the strangeness of the vast spaces, complex immigration forms, and expressionless customs bureaucrats.

Meanwhile, marriage brokers and matchmakers weave in and out of communities on the margins of cities and rural areas in Indonesia, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian countries, encouraging young women to come to meet the men. Transnational marriages of this type require a long time and a large sum of money. If a man successfully marries a woman, he must pay the broker between US\$10,00–15,000, of which only 10% goes to the bride’s family as a dowry, which is a large amount for families in Southeast Asian nations.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Indonesia became the primary source of "foreign brides" in Taiwan. To reduce the number of Indonesian brides, the Taipei Economic and Trade Office in Indonesia slowed the processing of visas, making many Indonesian brokers impatient with the Taiwan government's slow pace and they turned to matching Indonesian women with Hong Kong men, while Taiwanese brokers turned to Vietnam and Cambodia to find women.

According to the Ministry of Interior, there are 240,837 foreign spouses who entered Taiwan between 1987 and 2003, including those from Southeast Asia (42.2%) and Mainland China (57.8%), who entered Taiwan between 1987 and 2003. Ninety-three percent of these foreign spouses are women. Among those from Southeast Asia, 57.5% are from Vietnam, 23.2% from Indonesia, 5.3% from Thailand and another 5.3% from the Philippines.

Root Causes: Globalization and Unequal Development

Most Southeast Asian women marry Taiwanese men because they hope to escape poverty in their home countries, which has been intensified by globalization. This entails privatization, deregulation, and liberalization, resulting in unemployment, hunger and disease, and threats survival for the vast majority of farmers and workers. Southeast Asian women could choose to find work abroad or escape poverty through transnational marriages. The Taiwanese men married to "foreign brides" are mostly farmers or working class. Though the poverty created by globalization was not as serious in Taiwan, low-skilled agricultural and industrial laborers are disadvantaged in Taiwan's domestic marriage market.¹

Constrained Situations of "Foreign Brides"

"Foreign brides" tend to come from poor households. According to one survey, 31.3% of the interviewed "foreign brides" said their family expenses are higher than family income, 48.9% said they could just make ends meet, and only 2.7% had incomes higher than their expenses.² Since their Taiwanese husbands

¹ For detailed analysis, see Hsia 2004.

² Hsu 2004.

have low incomes, most “foreign brides” need to work to supplement family income. However, they face many obstacles while searching for jobs. Due to language barriers and isolation, they do not have adequate access to necessary information and resources. Some employers mistreat them because of prejudice and the “foreign brides” often do not know their rights. Further, immigrant women have to face constraints imposed by laws and regulations, reflecting Taiwan’s exclusionary policy of immigration.³ These laws and regulations are prejudicial and reinforce prejudice. Indeed, the very term, “foreign brides,” reflects discrimination against Third World women. This common parlance only refers to foreign spouses from Southeast Asia, not to those from developed countries, and these immigrant women from Southeast Asia are called “foreign brides”, no matter how long they have been living in Taiwan.

Despite various constraints, “foreign brides” are never passive victims. They have formally established an organization, TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT), actively participating in the making of an immigrant movement in Taiwan.⁴ As the first scholar systematically studying the phenomenon and an activist directly involved in the immigrant movement in Taiwan, I discuss the theories and methods of praxis-oriented research, and their implications for social studies and social change. “Foreign brides” is used in quotes not only to remind readers that the term is ideologically charged, and also to illustrate how these Southeast Asian women have come a long way to fight against discrimination and have become the historical subjects of social transformation.

The Origin and Development of the Research

I became involved in the movement as a result of participating in a research project conducted by a progressive professor in Taiwan. My three research colleagues were activists who decided to return to their hometown, Meinung, from which they had been uprooted in the process of urbanization. After years of community activism since returning, they achieved success with the anti-dam movement and the rejuvenation of the withering rural town of Hakka under the leadership of a formal community organization, Meinung

³ Hsia 2006.

⁴ Hsia 2005a, 2006.
<https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol1/iss1/6>

Peoples' Association (MPA).⁵ By being involved in the MPA, I noticed the increasing popularity of "foreign brides" in rural communities. After discussion with my comrades, I decided to work on this research, since it was essential to include the voices of the marginalized.

Since my comrades had developed trust with the local people through long-term interaction and participation in social movements, I had little difficulty in gaining access to the subjects. Many had accepted me through MPA, and those who did not know me quickly accepted me once I was introduced as a participant of MPA. Many readers of my research are surprised at the intimate details the subjects revealed to me, but this 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 larger movement aimed at voicing the marginalized.

This is a long-term study, beginning in May, 1994. As the research began, I learned that not being able to write Chinese and speak Mandarin was a primary barrier in the everyday lives of "foreign brides" and I started to offer free Chinese classes. After a few classes, my MPA comrades discussed the significance of the classes as part of community activism and therefore decided to expand it to the "foreign brides" in the town of Meinung. On July 30, 1995 we started the Chinese literacy program for "foreign brides," the first in Taiwan.

Inspired by Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed",⁶ I worked collectively with the communities to empower these immigrant women. Through trial and error over ten years, we have helped the immigrant women transform themselves from being isolated in their households and silent in public, to being publicly engaged. In 2003, these immigrant women in collaboration with local women formally founded a national organization, TASAT, which became one of the members of the Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHRLIM), spearheading the movement for immigrants' rights in Taiwan.⁷

⁵ Hakka is an ethnic minority in Taiwan. Regarding the movement in Meinung, see Chung 1996.

⁶ Freire 1970; Boal 1979.

⁷ Hsia 2005a.

Praxis-Oriented Research as Part of the Continuous Social Movement

An increasing number of scholars have been interested in combining research with activism, giving their work different names: action research,⁸ participatory action research,⁹ liberation sociology,¹⁰ and feminist action research.¹¹ In spite of differences, participatory oriented researchers believe that positivistic research maintains the status quo and reduces ordinary people to numbers. The result is the perpetuation of a singular process regarding people as sources of information, possessing bits of isolated knowledge, but not analyzing social realities.¹²

Participatory oriented research can be further separated into two groups: those emphasizing personal and social transformation, and those stressing participation of “subjects” in research. This paper is the former and I refer to it as “praxis-oriented research”. I do not use the more commonly used term “action research” because “action” in sociology is defined as “any unit or sequence of individual social activity which is intentional or purposive and involves conscious deliberation rather than merely being the result of a biological reflex”,¹³ where “action” does not necessarily involve personal and social transformation. Besides, “action research” often ends up being appropriated by policy makers who want efficient – rather than fair – outcomes.¹⁴ “Praxis” has Marxist roots, meaning “purposive action (including political action) to alter the material and social world, including humans themselves.” As a central concept of Marxism, ‘praxis’ draws attention to the social construction of economic and social institutions and the possibility of changing them – enhancing humanity’s capacity for freedom, which cannot be achieved entirely at the individual level.¹⁵ In other words, “praxis-oriented research” does not merely encourage the participation of research subjects, but more importantly, the research gears itself towards the material world, analyzing the contradictions in societies, and pinpointing the possibilities of changing them.

⁸ Argyris 1983.

⁹ Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991.

¹⁰ Feagin and Vera 2001.

¹¹ Reinharz 1992.

¹² Hall 1979; Maguire 1987; Feagin and Vera 2001.

¹³ Jary and Jary 1991, p. 4.

¹⁴ Greenwood and Levin 1998.

¹⁵ Jary and Jary 1991, p. 517.

I recognize, along the lines argued by Alain Touraine, that the impact of research is inevitable, and I also understand research to be sociological intervention,¹⁶ and to empower subjects whose voices have been silenced. Instead of studying a situation, a trend or an opinion, the research objective points to the domain of social relations and social action. As Touraine stresses, the intervention is a struggle for and within a movement and not for the sake of the research itself.

Freire, the Brazilian revolutionary educator and philosopher, suggests that the involvement of researcher in the "third" world requires even more. For Freire, an interventionist sociologist should not be different from a liberating educator whose aim is not merely to teach illiterate people to read and write, but to help them critically perceive their personal and social reality and to radically transform the world. 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".¹⁷

Both Freire and Touraine argue for a critical self-examination on the part of the educator/sociologist, but with different objectives. For Touraine, it is to overcome the fragility of the educator/sociologist position. For Freire, it is to pave the way for a profound comradeship between the educator/sociologist and the oppressed. The differences between Touraine and Freire are related to their social contexts.¹⁸ Their differences remind us that relations between the praxis-oriented researchers and subjects, or intellectuals and the masses in the movements, should be understood and examined in concrete social contexts.

From Literacy Programs to the Theater of the Oppressed

By providing a venue for the immigrant women to learn Chinese collectively, the literacy program serves to help the "foreign brides" to break away from isolation and gradually build their subjectivities and collectivity. That is, this program is not to enhance immigrant women's accommodation and assimilation to mainstream Taiwanese societies. It refuses to employ literacy

¹⁶ Touraine 1981.

¹⁷ Freire 1970, p. 36.

¹⁸ Freire wrote about impoverished peasants in Latin America, whereas Touraine dealt with student movement in France.

as a tool of transmitting “ideology of accommodation” and reinforcing “culture of silence”.¹⁹ I designed materials to focus on introducing situations and Chinese conversations that the “foreign brides” would encounter most frequently in their daily lives. When I had to leave for the U.S. for my studies, I asked local volunteers to continue the program. Since I do not consider learning “standard” Chinese an ultimate goal of this program, I did not ask professional teachers to teach. Instead, I asked a housewife, Kwei-Yin, who would not intimidate the “foreign brides” as a professional school teacher might. Since I was not present, Kwei-Yin and the other teachers followed the textbooks written by Taipei Municipal Education Bureau for the adult literacy program. In the United States, I started to study Freire’s and became interested in various theories and methods of liberation education and the “theater of the oppressed.”²⁰

Adrian Jackson summarizes the theater of the oppressed: it is “about acting rather than talking, questioning rather than giving answers, analyzing rather than accepting.”²¹ As a Brazilian artist influenced by Freire, Boal believes that anyone can act and that theatrical performance should not be solely in the province of professionals. For Boal, the word “act” has a dual meaning: *to perform and to take action*. Theater, for Boal, is a force for change, rather than for mere bourgeois entertainment.

Trial and Error in the Theater’s Application to “Foreign Brides” Literacy Program

When I returned to Taiwan in September 1996, I suggested that we collaborate with an activist, Chao Chung, who had been working to introduce “theater of the oppressed” in Taiwan. A new literacy program employing the methods of the “theater of the oppressed” begun in November, 1996.

We needed a spacious room for the theater project so we moved the literacy program from a normal school classroom to a place with a wooden floor and no desks or chairs. At the first workshop, Chung explained to the “foreign brides” how to develop the ability to express themselves and build trust among the group members through theater and games. While these games had been successfully used with college students, they were resisted by the

¹⁹ Freire 1985.

²⁰ Boal 1979.

²¹ Jackson 1992, translator’s note in Boal 1992, p. xxiv.
<https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol1/iss1/6>

"foreign brides." They told me that only children play games and that their families took care of their babies so that they could study Chinese, not to play! I asked if they were happier in the workshops than in the regular classes. They said yes, but they still believed that studying Chinese should be the only goal. Some even suggested that we should have tests to push them to study harder. Chung and I sadly realized that learning had become a cruel thing, especially for marginalized people. To them, this program should not be about learning about expressing themselves and developing creativity; it should be about learning techniques so they could be more competitive. This coincides with what Freire terms "duality" of the oppressed,²² where the oppressed simultaneously have the consciousness of the oppressed and the oppressor. The "foreign brides" internalize the "oppressor consciousness" and look at themselves through the lens of the oppressors. However, though we understood these dynamics, we also reflected that we could not alienate ourselves from the immigrant women by overlooking and oversimplifying their practical concerns.

I called every "foreign bride" the night before the next workshop and explained to them that in the following classes we would focus on conversation in Mandarin, because in the past they had mostly studied writing and rarely practiced speaking Mandarin. We moved back to the regular classroom, with desks and chairs, where they felt more comfortable.

Chung designed 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 used abstract methods. For example, Chung prepared three pictures, butterflies, masks and planets, and asked them what they thought about the pictures and how they would describe them. Chung's ideal was that these images would encourage them to express their feelings more freely because there were no "right" answers. However, probably because the images were so remote from their daily experiences and they did not understand the teacher's expectations they did not seem very enthusiastic. Each answered in the same way that the first answered so all their answers were about the same.

²² Freire 1970.
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Breaking the Culture of Silence

Gradually, Chung employed methods that the “foreign brides” could more directly relate to their everyday lives. One exercise was called “My Typical Day,” where they were asked what they hear, see, smell, and do at each 7:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m., noon, 2:00 p.m., 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Before we began 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. Shi-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 the ironing*.

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*.

Mei-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 TV*.

Compared to earlier, they laughed more, were more willing to talk, asked questions and helped each other out. They were at last developing a sense of “we-ness” in the class. By doing several exercises they began to talk about their experiences, and began to know each other and themselves better. This is a stage where we break the “culture of silence.”

As Freire urged, the key to breaking silence is to link literacy to issues that deeply concern the oppressed. When Chung and I first employed the methods of the theater of the oppressed, we indulged ourselves in abstract thinking, using abstract pictures to initiate discussion, and the result was total failure. As we linked literacy to their everyday lives, these immigrant women began to break their silence and actively participate in discussion. Through this ten-week program, we developed Chinese literacy materials based on the lives and needs of these women.

Tension and Transformation

The breaking of "culture of silence" invites tension. At one workshop, the topic was about their experiences of coming to Taiwan. Chung asked everyone to close their eyes. Then he played gentle music titled "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. Chun-Mei said.

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 travelers*.

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 exercise provided an environment for them to express their complicated emotions. They all openly talked about sad feelings. Chun-Mei used to be quiet in classes, since her ability to write and read Chinese lagged behind the others. Yet she was among the most expressive and outspoken at the workshops. She expressed how threatened she felt before she left home. 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." Chung said to Chun-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" sat in the back of the classroom as usual. They panicked when they saw their wives talk about sadness. Two 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, stigmatized as losers, and having difficulties in marrying women locally. We also worried that they would stop their wives from coming to the workshops, since family support had been crucial for "foreign brides" to participate in the program. Yet, we did not want to perpetuate patriarchy. Our goal was to encourage the "foreign brides" to critically reflect on their experiences. Chung, other MPA activists and I discussed this dilemma and decided to 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-expression. At the same time, however, we did not want to intensify the tensions. We decided to incorporate some less threatening themes in the program. We also talked with the husbands so that they could understand the importance of their wives expressing feelings of homesickness. Happily, nobody dropped out of the workshops. The husbands became happy about the program because they found that their wives had learned much practical knowledge. Chun-Mei's husband said, "Since she attended the Chinese classes, she is less afraid of going out alone and became happier because now she has friends to talk to."

After ten sessions of the workshops, we observed some changes between the couples. To ease burdens of childcare, we provided childcare services during classes. But many husbands volunteered to take care of the babies at home or in the back of the classroom during classes. Some husbands would take their babies out for a walk or to a playground and then came back for their wives after class. A-shuei once excitedly said, "Whenever I have classes, my husband takes care of the baby so that I can attend the classes. He never took care of the kid before, as if the baby was only mine!"

Empowerment of the Immigrant Women

We also saw some changes in the immigrant women. Compared with other "foreign brides" who had not participated in the workshops, these participants had become more outspoken, self-assertive and had a stronger sense of solidarity. One example shows that the immigrant women had become more assertive after the series of workshops. At one session with the theme about environmental pollution, they were provided three pictures, a house nearby a clean and beautiful river; a house nearby a dirty and polluted river surrounded by factories; and third a big question mark. Chung explained, "Suppose you live in the house of the first picture, then the factories moved in and polluted the river. You want the clean and beautiful river back. What would you do?" The first two immigrant women suggested that they would ask the neighbors to go to the police together and ask the government for help. The third one, Shuei-Fen, said she would go to the police by herself. Chung asked why her suggestion was different from the previous two classmates. She replied defiantly, "Everyone thinks differently." This was in clear contrast to the situations in the past when they almost always had the

same answers as the first one who answered. What was more exciting is that they could confront authority (teachers). In traditional education, the immigrant woman's questioning would be perceived as a threat to authority and should be corrected. Contrarily, from the position of liberation education, this questioning symbolizes the breaking of the "culture of silence." Chung encouraged Shuei-Fen's questioning by agreeing, "Yes, everyone has her own opinions."

For the last session, everyone brought desserts to share. An MPA volunteer taught us a Hakka folk song and changed the lyrics to tell a story about the literacy program. After the Hakka song, the "foreign brides" started talking enthusiastically. Chung, the MPA activists and I were confused because they spoke Indonesian. 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 we are with friends, and we want to know when we can get together again. We will be very sad if we do not see our dear friends again." We asked them to teach us the Indonesian songs. 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. Their teaching their Taiwanese teachers and volunteers Indonesian folk songs was symbolic of the beginning of this transformation.

Our assessment study shows that the "foreign brides" in our literacy programs have changed in three aspects: (1) their language abilities in Chinese improved, reducing their dependence on others; (2) they developed self-confidence and self-esteem; and (3) they expanded relationships and improved their communication with their families.²³ Moreover, the networks of the immigrant women grew significantly.

Empowerment of the Receiving Communities

The attitudes towards the "foreign brides" in Meinung have changed as well. Unlike the public image of the "foreign brides" as foreigners and as "other," Meinung folks began to see them as one of "us". One day, a Meinung folk, also a member of MPA, chatted with me about the literacy program. He

²³ Wu 2001.

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 with the list of “foreign brides” and they sent out the invitation letters. In the following years, the Rotary Club in Meinung district routinely invited the immigrant women for Chinese New Year party. In 1998, the Rotary Club held a speech contest at Mothers Day and they organized a group specifically for the immigrant women so they could express their feelings of longing for their mothers back home. Several local organizations became involved as well. In 2001, a famous progressive folk band in Meinung, “Labor Exchange Band,” released an album with a theme of farmers’ lives, where two songs were dedicated to the immigrant women. One song titled “After a long period, a strange place becomes home,” was sung by the immigrant women in our Chinese literacy program. At the concert of Yellow Butterfly Festival, a yearly ritual of the anti-dam movement in Meinung, the immigrant women performed their first song on stage and received enthusiastic applause from the audience. A labor movement leader who drove a long way from another city to attend the concert commented after the concert, “After watching the ‘foreign brides’ performance, I was deeply touched and reflected that our unions have long been unfriendly to migrant workers. We should learn from the Meinung experience and befriend migrant workers.” We also took efforts to organize community volunteers and train them as facilitators of the literacy programs. These community volunteers began to take initiatives to seek other supports for the literacy programs and help immigrant women in their neighborhood.²⁴

Formation of Immigrant Movement in Taiwan

We began to extend the network by collaborating with other community organizations. In 2002, I formed another community base in Taipei in a community college. After eight years of grassroots-based empowerment of the “foreign brides” and the communities, we collectively established a national organization, TASAT. Beginning in 2004, TASAT trained the immigrant women as teachers of their language and cultures of their home countries. TASAT also joined other NGOs to establish the AHRLIM, which marks the beginning

²⁴ Wu 2001.
<https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol1/iss1/6>
 DOI: 101163/18721910677304296

of the formation of the immigrant movement in Taiwan.²⁵ AHRLIM has proposed progressive immigration policies to replace the Immigration Law regarded as conservative and discriminatory, and has taken on several issues to raise the public consciousness of the human rights of migrants. At the first protest initiated by AHRLIM, immigrant women organized by TASAT were at the front line voicing their dissent by performing a short play in front of the Legislative Yuan.

TASAT has also endeavored to change the public perceptions of immigrant women. Through methods like seminars, writings and films showing, TASAT strives to create a sense of *betweenness*²⁶ of the Taiwanese and the immigrants. Immigrant women's voices effectively help subvert the public images of immigrant women as submissive, problematic, and incompetent. In September 2005, the first book of a collection of writings, paintings, and pictures of immigrant women was published. Entitled "Don't Call Me a Foreign Bride", the book caught public attention.²⁷ As the editor of this book, I have noticed that one of the most common responses from readers has been amazement over how talented immigrant women are, and how the book has made many readers so much more appreciative of multiculturalism and aware of their own prejudices.

Lessons from the "Chinese Literacy Programs for Foreign Brides"

Dialectics of Research and Praxis

When the literacy program started, some feminists criticized the programs as perpetuating patriarchy arguing that by offering a better environment for women's adjustment, more men would be encouraged to buy "foreign brides." One women's group even considered ways to send "foreign brides" back to their home countries assuming that these marriages were merely "trade" and products of patriarchy. Though I agree that these transnational marriages are commodified, I do not believe that sending the women home was in their best interests. I deeply understand that the immigrant women and their

²⁵ For detailed analysis of the formation of the immigrant movement in Taiwan, see Hsia 2005a.

²⁶ Hsia 1997, 2002.

²⁷ The first print sold out in less than a month.

families have strived to escape poverty. Without thoroughly analyzing the politic-economic structures behind these transnational marriages, one can easily simplify them as mere reflection of patriarchy and perceive the husbands of the “foreign brides” as the sole evil-doers.

Creative Praxis-Oriented Research Methods

Praxis-oriented research emphasizing conscientization and empowerment requires effective methods to realize the goals lest it become merely abstract ideals. Freire’s liberation education proposes alternative “problem-posing” approaches to develop critical awareness. However, “problem-posing” can easily become “inquisition” without effective methods. Methods developed by Boal’s “theater of the oppressed” are very useful to get group members actively involved. The combination of liberation education and people’s theater has been widely used in much grassroots organizing.²⁸

Democratization in Praxis-Oriented Research

Many praxis-oriented researchers emphasize participation of the researched subjects.²⁹ However, it could easily become merely formalistic democracy, or the researched subjects could be misused as “cheap research assistants,” if the research is not geared towards the root causes of inequality and ways for transformation. Praxis-oriented research relies on “empowerment,” trusting in people’s potentials to build capacity, suppressed by unjust structures. By empowerment, oppressed people are stimulated to develop critical awareness and commit themselves to collective struggles for transformation. The form and extent of “democratic participation” of the praxis-oriented research are contingent on the conditions of the researched subjects.

Moreover, praxis-oriented researchers should analyze the effects of “false consciousness” and the mechanisms of transformation. Praxis-oriented research endeavors to find the conditions where dialogue can be developed for people to discuss ideology more freely and critically. Dialogue needs efforts to develop, especially for the oppressed, who might otherwise keep silent. Additionally, only when the apathy and fatalism is broken through, can democratic participation (real dialogue) be developed.

²⁸ Hope and Timmel 1984.

²⁹ Lather 1986; Green and Levin 1998.
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The Importance of Team Work

Empowering the "foreign brides" has been a long process where frustration and bottlenecks have occurred over and over again, far beyond one person's ability to continue alone. Though I took the initiative to develop the literacy program, it has been put into practice with the help of many people. Praxis-oriented researchers need to see ourselves as part of the team. Furthermore, praxis-oriented research needs to be linked to social movements, lest it serves merely as a mechanism of domesticating by providing "catharsis."³⁰ In "theater of the oppressed," the oppressed' emotion is released in the "rehearsal of revolution" by acting out what they think, another form of domestication without linking to larger social movements. Similarly, without linking to movements, praxis-oriented researchers are only domesticated to believe that they contribute to social transformation.

Praxis-Oriented Research Produces Better Social Research

Praxis-oriented research can produce better research. First, because of trust, praxis-oriented research produces better quality data, deep rather than superficial information. Second, because one of the core issues in social studies is understanding the mechanisms of social change, praxis-oriented research creates better research because by involvement and praxis it can examine the dialectic between structural constraints and human agency. Because of praxis, what appears as reified "structures" becomes dynamic "structuring" processes.³¹

Moreover, being actively involved in empowering marginalized subjects not only serves to voice the voiceless, but also to reveal how the oppressive elite rules.³² My work has attracted interest from the media, resulting in my further reflection on knowledge production and power game of reality construction.³³ In spite of their efforts to be "objective," the media often portray the immigrant women as the inferior "other." My analysis of media coverage illustrates the political nature of claim-making, and my first-hand observation

³⁰ Boal argues that Brecht had subverted the elitist tradition in poetics and theater since Aristotle. The effect of the Aristotle's tragedy was "catharsis," purging the audience through pity and fear, so that the audience's anger with injustice was suppressed. That is, the audience is "domesticated" by watching the tragedy.

³¹ For detailed analysis, see Hsia 2005a.

³² Feagin and Vera 2001.

³³ Hsia 1997, p. 200.

of this power game of reality construction is possible because of my participation in, rather than the distance from, peoples' struggles.

An Invitation to Self-Critique

The commitment to voice the voiceless often puts researchers in a vulnerable position, where self-reflexive researchers are aware of the danger that they might impose their own opinions on the voiceless. This can easily lead to passivity, a form of neo-conservatism because not taking any action serves to maintain the status quo.³⁴ As a result of commitment to social transformation and self-critique, praxis-oriented researchers face constant questioning from other people and ourselves. From my experiences, I realize that the researchers' real predicament is not that there are too many risks to take, but rather that we are too afraid of taking risks and consequently conceal our fear by academic jargons. This fear once led me to question the very meaning of the academy. But through years of devoting myself to praxis-oriented research, I remind myself of how deeply moved I was by the early idealistic origins of Sociology. Praxis, not distance, reaffirms my commitment to the academy!

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³⁴ For more details, see Hsia 2001.
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