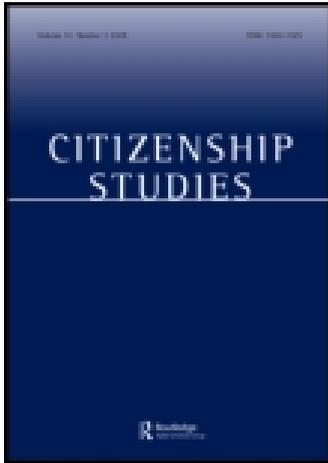


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Ethnicity, citizenship and reproduction: Taiwanese wives making citizenship claims in Malaysia

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This paper focuses on the experience of one specific group of Taiwanese women married to Chinese Malaysian men to examine the contestational process of bidding for citizenship status in an ethnicized polity. Positioned within a trajectory of transnational linkages between origin and host countries, they achieve success through making use of networking links with co-ethnic Chinese Malaysian women who are well-positioned within government bureaucracy, while forwarding an argument based on familial ideology and the (reproductive) citizenship rights of their Malaysian husbands. As noncitizens, they nevertheless engage in socially contributive 'acts of citizenship' that signify their suitability as citizens, nonthreatening to social cohesion. Furthermore, they enhance their strategy by ethnic boundary-making efforts aimed at distancing themselves from People's Republic of China wives who constitute a stereotyped and stigmatized 'other.' The discussion makes a contribution to the literature on ethnicity, citizenship, and gender.

Keywords: marriage migration; reproductive citizenship; ethnic boundary-making; acts of citizenship; intersectionality

Introduction

Citizenship is often a contested terrain, particularly around notions of ethnicity. Malaysia is a country where the ethnic dimension of citizenship was foregrounded at its very inception. The Malaysian nation was initially built on negotiated terms of citizenship for three major ethnic categories defined as the Chinese, Indians, and Malays. With the entry of Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation, the ethnic framework of the state was later revised to take into account other indigenous groups, but the discourse of 'Malay privilege' continued to overshadow many aspects of state and society. Ethnic categories play an important role in defining individual citizens' access to substantive entitlements in reality and in the popular perception.

It is in this context that foreign spouses married to Malaysian citizens have generally found it difficult to gain citizenship through naturalization. In fact, it is even difficult for foreign spouses to obtain permanent residency (PR), let alone citizenship. There is widespread belief that ethnicity features prominently in regulating differentiated access to residence and employment rights among foreign spouses, and that the state privileges the (biological and social) reproduction of the Malay-Muslim majority over those of other ethnicities. The dynamic interplay between reality and popular perception may, however, serve to conceal a complex relationship in which dimensions (other than ethnicity) such as

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gender, class, and local networking also play contributory roles in the process and practice of citizenship.

In this paper, we draw from our research on international marriages in Malaysia to interrogate the concept of ethnicity in the contestational process of bidding for residential rights.¹ Focusing on the experience of one specific group of Taiwanese women married to Chinese Malaysian men, we examine how these ethnic Chinese women of Taiwanese nationality successfully organized and negotiated for PR, thereby successfully passing through the first stage in the process of advancing toward citizenship. Positioned within a trajectory of linkages between Taiwan and Malaysia that includes international marriage, education, and business, they achieved this through making use of networking links with co-ethnic Chinese Malaysian women who are well-positioned within government bureaucracy overseeing women and family issues, while forwarding an argument based on familial ideology and the (reproductive) citizenship rights of their Malaysian husbands.

Their experience is contrasted with other foreign spouses, especially those from the People's Republic of China (PRC), who have not been able to access these linkages. Furthermore, we highlight aspects of the Taiwanese women's discourse that aims to sharpen the boundary separating them from the PRC women. By focusing on one group of foreign spouses whose ethnicity manifestly disadvantages them in the field of immigrant entitlements, but who have collectively succeeded in their progression toward achieving these, we will tease out the interlocking dimensions of ethnicity, social class, and gender in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of how citizenship claims are made by a 'national other' in an ethnicized polity.

The concepts of ethnicity, citizenship, and reproduction

Barth's (1969) seminal work shifted the study of ethnicity from focusing on ethnic groups as culturally defined entities to how they are constructed and made, thereby shifting the focus to boundary-making, the processes of constituting and reconstituting, as well as the criteria upon which individuals are included or excluded in group-making. Subsequent literature building on this has approached ethnicity as a form of social organization, viewing ethnic groups as the outcome of reversible social processes of boundary-making (Wimmer 2009, 254). Ethnic boundaries are marked by subjectively relevant cultural symbols rather than 'objective' cultural differences, and ethnic groups emerge from processes of social closure and distancing in relation to members of other categories.

The ethnic boundary-making approach has proved to be particularly salient in studies of citizenship and nationhood (Brubaker 2009). While the ideal nation-state model presupposes a nation that is bound by common interest and identity, most nations are in reality defined in terms of ethnic origins and ethnic cores, including those that are defined by a plurality of ethnic origins (Wimmer 2004). Wimmer argues that ethnicity is invariably linked to citizenship because modern nation-states are built on three overlapping and fused notions of peoplehood – the people as sovereign (based on the principles of democracy), as citizens (equality before the law), and as an ethnic community (or ethnic communities) held together by a common political destiny and shared cultural features: 'Since being a part of the sovereign body and a citizen became synonymous with belonging to a particular ethnic community turned into a nation, the definition of this community and its boundaries became of primary political importance' (Wimmer 2004, 43). Ethnicity therefore is politicized, and claims on citizenship are made and contested on various ethnically defined bases.

The ethnic framework of a nation-state defined at its formation may undergo periods of relative stability, gradual shifts, or tumultuous changes. Migration, by bringing people with their own ethnic and national subjectivities into the borders of the nation-state, poses challenges to institutionalized ethnic frameworks, creating tensions and unsettling taken-for-granted ethnic assumptions. This is particularly so when the ambiguities of an ethnic framework is highlighted by the juxtaposed presence of ethnicities and nationalities that call into question the boundedness of a particular group, such as when people from China (i.e., Chinese nationality) or those from elsewhere but who also identify as 'Chinese' migrate to a nation-state that has a formulated 'ethnic Chinese' membership.

Our paper illustrates one such context, focusing on how an organized group of marriage migrants are able to insert themselves within the ethnicized political landscape of their host country to successfully make claims on citizenship. Wimmer (2009, 245) defines immigrant incorporation as a 'shifting of the boundaries of belonging,' in which immigrants have to 'overcome existing forms of social closure along ethnic lines,' but at the same time, they have to 'distance themselves from stigmatized others through boundary work.' The Taiwanese marriage migrants in our study reshape meanings of ethnicity by building on transnational linkages to align themselves with a citizen 'co-ethnic group,' while at the same time, doing boundary work to separate themselves from a stigmatized other 'national group.'

The construction of citizenship has historically excluded women, and continues to be gendered because its construction is based on the entitlements of men as 'representatives of a family' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 12), while access to certain citizenship rights remains different for men and women, such as the right to bring in foreign spouses and to confer citizenship status onto children. Women's citizenship rights are particularly affected in relation to national and ethnic politics due to the discourses that have been constructed around their biological reproductive role (Yuval-Davis 1996).

From another perspective, it has been pointed out that effective claims to citizenship entitlements are made on the bases of reproduction, work, and war service (Turner 2001). Therefore, reproducing the next generation of citizens through marriage and household formation is one of the primary bases for claiming citizenship entitlements, and 'a familial ideology of procreation' becomes 'a major legitimating support' of the set of entitlements constituting the social rights of citizenship (Turner 2008, 53). The primary issues in much of the current contestation over citizenship for a range of migrants including refugees, asylum seekers, and temporary work migrants, however, are related to the right of entry, residence, and employment rather than social entitlements. Marriage migrants, on the other hand, are usually eligible for citizenship through naturalization procedures. Nevertheless, in situations where marriage migrants are restricted from access to citizenship status, state ideology arising from a nation-state's imperative to socially and biologically reproduce its population, as well as conventional notions of reproductive gender roles, provide an opportunity to couch their claims to citizenship precisely on those very terms. The set of citizenship rights and obligations pertaining to reproduction, both social and biological, then becomes the basis for claiming nation-state membership.

Critical theories of citizenship that have disentangled citizenship and nationality have enabled the conceptualization of citizenship not only as a membership status but also as political subjectivity (Isin 2012, 568–571). This makes it possible to see that when migrants claim citizenship rights that they do not have, they are involved in 'acts of citizenship' that invent new ways of becoming political subjects as citizens. The marriage migrants in our study may be viewed as being involved in 'acts of citizenship' even though they do so through gradual and painstaking maneuvering rather than strident demands, by

being exclusive rather than inclusive and making use of conventional rather than feminist notions of gender and reproduction.

The methodology we employ in our analysis draws from the intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989; Denis 2008). This means that we highlight the different social locations of the marriage migrants, occupying at one and the same time disadvantaged positions within the host society on account of certain categories (for example as foreign wives without full citizenship) and advantaged positions on account of other categories (for example as independent businesswomen). Nevertheless, they effectively employ their multiple identities in organizing as a collective, in ‘acts of citizenship,’ and in doing boundary work to distance themselves from stigmatized others.

Ethnicity in the making of Malaysia

When Malaya was granted Independence from Britain in 1957, the ethnic category headings as listed in the population census were Malaysian (under which were placed Malay, Indonesian, and Aborigines), Chinese, Indian, and Others (Hirschman 1987).² In the 1970 and 1980 censuses, the category Malay was used instead of Malaysian because Malaysian by that time had come to mean the citizens of the new nation Malaysia that was formed in 1963 from an amalgamation of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore (which separated in 1965), and the states of Sabah and Sarawak in North Borneo.

In the run-up to Independence, the contestation over citizenship in the new nation-state was keenly fought along ethnic lines. The negotiations and bargaining that took place resulted in a Federal Constitution that concretized ethnic boundaries, particularly by defining a ‘Malay’ as ‘A person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom’ (Article 160(2) of the Federal Constitution, Malaysia 2006, 149).³ With the rise of the Malay nationalist party UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and its partners, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress, politics in postcolonial Malaya also came to be organized along ethnic lines.

Article 153 of the Constitution specifying ‘the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak’ in terms of access to positions in public service, educational and training privileges, and permits and licenses was originally interpreted as a form of affirmative action policy. Following the implementation of the New Economic Policy from 1970 onward, the scope of privileges was expanded to encompass other dimensions such as share ownership in the corporate sector. Ethnic boundaries have further hardened over the decades since then.

In the constructed ethnic landscape of the nation, the Chinese is numerically the second largest ethnic category to the Malays⁴ and considered to be in a position of economic advantage vis-à-vis the rest of the population. Despite the durability of the category, its members are by no means homogeneous, with intra-Chinese boundaries at one time considered sufficiently significant to be included in population censuses, and the local-born Chinese placed in a separate category in the population censuses of 1911 and before (Hirschman 1987). A prominent boundary-making project for the Chinese Malaysians has centered around the right to mother-tongue (meaning Mandarin) education and Mandarin medium schooling, giving rise to language competency (and hence access to Chinese language newspapers, for example) as one of the intra-ethnic dividing lines. The ambiguities surrounding Chinese identity within and beyond China’s borders have been problematized.⁵

With the politicization and bureaucratization of Islam in the country, the institutionalization of ethnic divisions was sharpened along religious lines. There has been a trend in the last two decades of a growing Islamic bureaucracy within the government, and clearly discernible efforts at sharpening ethno-religious boundaries between the Malay-Muslim and non-Malay-Muslim population, in what has been called a move toward the ‘making of the Malay-Muslim majority’ (Mohamad 2010). This trend has included widely reported Syariah court cases that have either dismantled non-Muslim families where it was found that one of the spouses was formerly Muslim, or seen to have ruled unfairly in favor of the Muslim spouse for the custody of children in divorces. Such cases contribute to public perceptions of Malay-Muslim privilege in family and reproductive politics. Indeed, all these state institutional processes have had a profound effect in terms of naturalizing the role of ethnicity in public life and in people’s consciousness.

Gender, citizenship, and the foreign spouse

Even though women were given the vote when the nation-state was formed (following international practice at that time), the underlying assumptions of the patriarchal family still underpin its institutions (Chee 2011). The legal institutional framework governing foreign spouses’ access to citizenship is unequivocally structured by gender. Article 15(1) of the Constitution states that ‘any married woman whose husband is a citizen is entitled, upon making application to the Federal Government, to be registered as a citizen ...’ subject to a residential requirement of two years preceding the date of the application. There is no such provision for the husbands of citizens. There are also substantial differences in eligibility criteria for access to PR and employment permits between male and female foreign spouses, generally disadvantaging the male foreign spouse, i.e., discriminating against the female citizen’s husband.⁶

Arguably, access is also stratified by social class because those with money can gain legal residential rights in other ways, such as by obtaining an employment pass, as an investor, or by participating in the Malaysia my second home program, which provides a 10-year residence permit with multiple entry visas based on an individual fulfilling certain age and financial criteria. Although these visas, like the annual social visit passes given to foreign spouses, are temporary, they may have longer validity periods. In any case, the immigration regime in general is explicitly structured by social class. Work permits issued to unskilled and semiskilled workers, for example, are bound by many restrictions that do not apply to employment passes issued to professionals.

Although the entitlement of citizens’ wives to citizenship is constitutionally framed, the public discourse around this issue is not about the attainment of citizenship but of PR. Foreign wives, not to mention foreign husbands, have found it extremely difficult to obtain the PR, with many having waited for decades (Chee 2011).⁷ The PR has many advantages because it allows the foreign spouse to be resident in the country independently of the citizen spouse. Without the PR, the foreign wife has to renew her social visit pass every year (in the beginning, it could be every one, three, or six months), for which she has to be sponsored by her citizen spouse. Before 2010, the administrative restrictions were such that foreign spouses on social visit passes found it extremely difficult to obtain legal permission to work or to engage in business.

From 2010 onward, it became evident (from our fieldwork) that the restrictions were relaxed and social visit passes for foreign spouses could be issued for five-year periods, and it also became easier for foreign spouses to obtain work permits. The employment

restrictions were first eased at the end of 2008 because of a governmental policy to attract highly educated professionals to the country, but the administrative circular that was issued at that time did not clarify whether these changes that were explicitly for employment pass holders (professionals) also applied to work permit holders (unskilled workers).⁸ These measures have since been streamlined for all foreign spouses on social visit passes (Immigration Department of Malaysia 2012). Nevertheless, the five-year social visit pass is still subject to the discretion of the immigration officer handling the case, and the PR is still a distant target. Vagaries in administrative regulations, the lack of clear communication to the public on changes undertaken, and a wide scope in discretionary provisions all contribute to setting up an open space where different interpretations, usually based on anecdotal evidence, take root.

Ethnicity/nationality and citizenship

Among the non-Muslim foreign spouses in our study, there is widespread belief that the granting of PR is tied to ethnicity and religion. The perception is that the Malaysian state privileges Muslim/Malay (hence ethnicity) over non-Muslim/Malay migrant spouses, with a general conflation between ‘Malay’ and ‘Muslim.’ For example, Vani, who married an Indian Malaysian, came here to live in 1991 and is still waiting for her PR. She cited anecdotal evidence to claim that Indonesians (most of whom are Muslims) are readily given entry permits (precursor to PR), but not foreign spouses of Chinese and Indian Malaysians, ‘... because they would rather our population don’t grow,’⁹ thereby directly linking Malay-Muslim privilege (and ethnicity) to reproductive advantage.

The injustice felt by foreign spouses is perhaps accentuated by the common knowledge that the borders of Malaysia are very porous, and there are huge numbers of foreign migrants who are either without valid travel documents or holding false or fraudulent documents.¹⁰ Furthermore, there was a quasi-official scheme whereby Muslim immigrants from Indonesia and the Philippines in the state of Sabah were easily given identity cards (citizenship) for political reasons (Sadiq 2009).¹¹ These various threads are further complicated by the structuring of the labor immigration regime by nationality, evident in the issuance of work permits, where recruitment is rigidly stratified by specific industrial and occupational sectors and by specific origin countries, with these changing from time to time.

Vani also told us that in 2007, when she inquired at the Immigration Department about the length of time it would take for her to obtain a PR, the official had told her that she should consider herself fortunate because if she were Chinese (meaning from the PRC), she would not even be able to apply for PR. According to the Memorandum submitted by the Wanita MCA (2010, 3)¹² to the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Chinese (PRC) and African noncitizen spouses can only submit their applications for long-term special visit pass extension at the Immigration Department Headquarters located in Putrajaya, and not at any other branches. The memorandum also cites a case study by the MCA National Citizenship Taskforce which shows that eligibility for PR appears to be determined by the nationality of a noncitizen spouse, and that Chinese (PRC) noncitizen spouses had difficulty even to obtain entry permit/PR application forms (Wanita MCA 2010, 3). On the other hand, a key informant told us that at one of the NGOs’ meetings with the Home Minister, they had asked him about this, and he had denied that PRC women cannot obtain PR application forms.¹³

The ‘policy’ that privileges Muslim over non-Muslim migrants and foreign spouses in PR applications, or that which prohibits PRC and African women (or men) from obtaining

PR, is perceived and experienced on the ground rather than stated officially. In our fieldwork, we have come across Muslim spouses of Malay Malaysians who have not been successful in their PR applications after many years of eligibility, although there were also those who have succeeded.¹⁴ What is clear, however, is that the discourse on ethnicity being a crucial factor mediating citizenship claims easily moves into a discourse on the differential access by countries of origin, i.e., nationalities. It is not so clear therefore where ethnicity ends and nationality begins (Brubaker 2009).

Taiwanese wives' claims to citizenship

Notably, the problem of not being able to obtain residential and citizenship rights is seen as a non-Malay issue. This is why the political parties that address this issue are those appealing to the non-Malay electorate. In this regard, Wanita MCA took the initiative, and the MCA National Citizenship Task Force was set up on 11 April 2010 to handle the issue at the policy level. Arising from a workshop on 5 June 2009, Wanita MCA, together with eight organizations including the Foreign Spouses Support Group (FSSG) and the Formosa Women Organisation of Malaysia (FWO), submitted the memorandum 'Recognising rights of noncitizen spouses of Malaysians and their children to uphold equality and non-discrimination' to the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development on 24 March 2010.

The FSSG consists of a loose network of foreign spouses with diverse nationalities, both male and female. They are English-speaking, and FSSG is visible in the English language world because their main strategy is to write in English language newspapers, online media, and blogs. As the organization is not formally registered, the NGOs which address migration issues and women's issues, as well as the Wanita MCA, provide them with a platform to carry out advocacy. Bina Ramanand, the coordinator of the FSSG, feels that their advocacy work has been effective.

In 2008 when we spoke of not being able to work, they brought up a law that allows us to work. Then when we spoke of Malaysian women [who marry foreigners and reside abroad] who have to come back to Malaysia to deliver their children [otherwise the children won't have Malaysian nationality], they changed the rule [for them] ... And in June, when we had the meeting with Wanita MCA, the next day we had an article in the press, talking about all these cases ...¹⁵

Nevertheless, members of the FSSG, including Bina, who has been married and living in Malaysia for the last 20 years, have still not obtained their PR.¹⁶ Through their networking, the FSSG members met up with the Taiwanese wives in the FWO. Bina's comment about the FWO was that, 'They are more organized than us [FSSG]. They quietly get all Taiwanese women to join together and get their PR done. We are not so successful.'

In contrast to public discourse and the experiences of the other foreign wives, the Taiwanese wives whom we met either have PR status or were expecting to receive PR status in the near future. They are all members of the FWO which is probably the only foreign spouse organization that has organized to collectively apply for PR. From August 2010 to April 2011, with the support of the Women Development Organization (WDO) (more on this NGO later), FWO organized a signature campaign, collected many petitions, and met with the representatives of the Immigration Department to discuss the processing of the PR applications of Taiwanese women. At that meeting, they managed to extricate an agreement from the immigration officers to speed up the application process if they submitted a batch of applications together. The WDO would hand over the list to the Immigration Department and liaise with it regarding the progress of the applications.

In FWO's own words, this is a form of 'group pressure,' and WDO would put pressure on the Immigration Department to speed up the process. On their part, FWO would only list Taiwanese spouses of citizens and not include other foreign spouses.

Considering the difficulty of foreign spouses generally, and the impossibility of PRC wives specifically, in getting PR status, how is it that the Taiwanese wives are able to apply for PR collectively with support from a local NGO and an undertaking from the authorities that their applications will be speedily and favorably attended to? We will address this question and analyze their strategy and success in terms of (1) building upon historical transnational linkages, networking and aligning with local co-ethnic citizens, and engaging in 'acts of citizenship,' (2) framing their claims on the basis of women's rights, their (ethnic) reproductive role, and their husbands' citizenship entitlements, and (3) group-making and boundary work to maintain their exclusivity and to distance themselves from a stigmatized 'other.'

Historical transnational linkages, networking, and acts of citizenship

The FWO members' networks and strategy are built upon long-term transnational linkages that developed over many decades between Chinese Malaysians and Taiwanese, and among the Taiwanese who live in Malaysia. A substantial number of Chinese Malaysians who go through the independent Chinese school system attend universities in Taiwan largely because they find themselves shut out from the national universities in Malaysia.¹⁷ In the 1960s, Malaysia was considered a country with better economic prospects compared to Taiwan, and therefore many Taiwanese (women) who married Malaysian (men) migrated to Malaysia with their husbands. In the 1980s, another trend began of Taiwanese businessmen doing business in Malaysia (Tho 2012). In line with the electronics industry that started in Malaysia in the 1970s, many of the small and medium-sized manufacturers that subcontracted as suppliers to the industry came from Taiwan. In those early years, some of the Taiwanese businessmen and their wives settled down and obtained Malaysian PR. When the FWO members decided to register their organization with the Malaysian authorities, therefore, they could easily do so through some of them who already have Malaysian PR.

The FWO was officially established in May 2010, but many of the members had already started to meet informally in social functions as early as 2005. In 2012, it was reported that it had more than 100 members (Tho 2012). The majority are wives of Chinese Malaysian men and wives of Taiwanese businessmen who had immigrated and settled in Malaysia. Many of the Chinese Malaysian husbands are also businessmen ranging from big to small businesses. The FWO members themselves have a diverse occupational and social profile. Some own small retail businesses or do petty trading as street vendors, while others are housewives or are employed as waitresses or in sales. Their migration trajectories are also different. For example, Chee and Lu separately know two Taiwanese housewives (formerly architects) married to Chinese Malaysian architect husbands: one of them had met her husband when she came here on a work project about five years ago, while the other met her husband while they were both undergraduates in Taiwan. These two women may be viewed as representing the two waves of Taiwanese marriage immigrants: the first wave came to Malaysia in the late 1970s and are now enjoying retirement and grandchildren, while the second wave (majority of the members) have children in elementary or secondary schools. Most of the active FWO members live in the Klang Valley, but they maintain contact with the others who live in other parts of the country (including East Malaysia) through social media.

The key to FWO's success in obtaining PR lies in their relationship with a local women's NGO, the WDO that we mentioned earlier. The historical transnational linkages were only a springboard; the relationship that FWO currently enjoys with WDO is one that has been built up through hard work over the long term. This hard work consists not only of social networking, but also involves time and energy spent in harnessing national (referring to Taiwan) and group resources to engage in 'acts of citizenship,' actions that contribute service to 'the nation' (referring to Malaysia), and signify their alignment with their co-ethnic partners. It may be useful to first understand the nature of WDO.

The WDO was established in 1998 by the deputy chairperson of Wanita MCA at that time.¹⁸ In 2003, after the setting up of several branches, WDO became a national-level organization with the stated objective of upgrading the economic status of women. Its activities included trade exhibitions, training workshops, and seminars for women entrepreneurs, as well as a microcredit project. Largely based among Chinese-educated women, WDO has been involved in issues related to Chinese education. Although it is an NGO, many of its members are also Wanita MCA members. It is an interface between the women's wing (or at least one faction of it) and the public and community at large, functioning simultaneously as recruiting ground, power base, and public relations vehicle. In 2008, after a change in the political leadership of MCA, many of the WDO members left the MCA to join an opposition party. Nevertheless, there are still many WDO members remaining in the MCA (the current deputy president of WDO, for example, is still an active leader in the Wanita MCA) who provide the linkage with government.

The 'national service' work that FWO does is by helping WDO organize activities such as festival celebrations, charity events, and fund-raising for scholarships, sometimes drawing upon the resources of the Taiwan Ministry of Overseas Chinese and the Taipei Representative Office (of the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs). For example, they organized a big fund-raising concert on 18 February 2011 for a WDO charity, using resources from the Taiwanese Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission. A follow-up concert was organized on 26 February 2013, again supported by the same commission, to raise funds for Chinese independent school students from a disadvantaged background. Thus, they draw upon the natal family nation's resources and group resources (their members' energy and time) to make contributions that signify their belonging and 'citizenship' in the host nation, as well as align themselves with the ethnic project (as in the support for Chinese school students or joint celebration of cultural festivals) in the host society.

The social networking among individuals is of course important, but it is expedited through such organizational work. For example, after the 2011 fund-raising concert, they had a dinner which was attended by 120 people, mostly FWO and WDO members, as well as children from an orphanage that FWO supports financially. Through such social functions, members of FWO and WDO mingle and socialize. At another party on 5 March 2011, for example, we observed that the FWO committee members interacted closely with the chairperson and members of the WDO Petaling Jaya Branch.

However, the relationship is not unidirectional. When the FWO organized several public sessions to explain the procedure of applying for PR and citizenship, it was with the cooperation of the WDO. At the 14 June 2011 session for example, Ms Ng Geok Chee, the founder and chairperson of the WDO Petaling Jaya Branch, also a lawyer, was at hand herself to explain the legislation and procedure of citizenship. These sessions were held at the MCA headquarters and had immigration officers present to help people with filling out forms. Indeed, Ms Ng is a key contact for the FWO, and, through her, the FWO was able to gain access to the Deputy Minister of Women, Family and Social Development (until mid-November 2012), Ms Heng Seai Kie. Ms Heng, although not a WDO member, is a national

vice-chairman of Wanita MCA. Through her, the FWO was able to access the services of the Immigration Department.

We should note the characteristics of FWO that enable them to achieve close links with WDO. First, the members of the two organizations share a similar language; the immigration sessions cited above for example were conducted in Mandarin. As such, it is not difficult for them to network socially, but more than that, the language is a signifier of co-ethnicity. Second, the FWO leadership consists of entrepreneurs, and, third, they are part of the transnational elite who have access to, or know how to access, the Taiwan state organs (such as the Taiwanese Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission) as well as the Malaysian state and business elite. The chairperson, for example, is a woman entrepreneur who takes on the role of the sole agent for China (PRC) Chamber of Commerce Malaysia. She is married to a fellow Taiwanese who is the Chairman of Taiwan Chamber of Commerce in Malaysia, and carries the honorific title of Datin on account of her husband being conferred the honorific title of Datuk, usually given to people of wealth and high social standing. Being entrepreneurial business people, FWO leaders would have the expertise and connections that WDO leaders would find useful since WDO as an organization is involved in promoting and developing entrepreneurship among women. FWO therefore is able to establish connections with WDO by indirectly playing the 'ethnic card' (language, common festivals, etc.) and using the business connections of their members. This is the social capital that the English-speaking FSSG members do not have, and the PRC women have no access to. Taiwanese women could mobilize this collective social capital through their sociality and from a particular collective positionality provided by the earlier waves of Taiwanese businessmen and women who are already well integrated in the local (Chinese) business network and well connected to local political elites.

To understand how important WDO is for FWO, we should note that FWO cannot achieve this level of linkage (that is both social and political at one and the same time) if they only networked with Wanita MCA. MCA being a political party, it would have been difficult for FWO members (who are noncitizens) to support or to join in its activities. Furthermore, through active engagement with a local Chinese Malaysian NGO, FWO members themselves learn the nuances and the ins and outs of Malaysian politics. FWO supports FSSG but the FWO members we talked to think that the strategy employed by FSSG (criticizing government openly in the print and online media) is too radical. FWO members believe that they understand Malaysia's politics of patronage, i.e., that shouting in public will not work, one needs to use political and economic connections and do things indirectly. In the chairperson's own words, 'We need to argue with reason, but we cannot be too aggressive. We should appeal with feelings but stand on firm ground of reasoning.'¹⁹

Women's rights and social reproduction

The framework that FWO uses is that of 'family,' one of their stated organizational objectives being to serve as 'Taiwanese women's natal home' in Malaysia. Although the FWO leaders are active entrepreneurial women, they assume for themselves a conservative gender role that is congruent with the Malaysian state's underlying migration framework (which forces foreign wives to be dependent on their husbands through the need for husbands to sponsor their wives' social visit passes), avoiding confrontation with authority and playing down the activist approach (as contrasted to the FSSG).

The way in which FWO frames the issue is that when foreign wives do not have a stable (residential and employment) status, it is the Malaysian family (their husbands and children who are Malaysian citizens) and society that will suffer. Gently, they also remind their audience (the WDO members who are sensitive to women's issues) that as wives and mothers of Malaysian citizens, they should be entitled to certain rights, which are, in essence, women's rights. The unstated underlying argument is that of the reproduction of the (Chinese) Malaysian family and an emphasis on the citizenship rights of their (Chinese) Malaysian husbands, while the message is conveyed to an audience (the WDO) who are highly conscious of women and ethnic rights issues. The secretary said that she and other members have studied UN conventions on women's rights, and framing the issue as a family issue, and a women's rights issue, they seek support from Malaysian society, in particular the WDO.²⁰

The significance of WDO's framing of the issue as preserving family well-being and social reproduction can be better appreciated when we reflect upon the contrasting stereotyped images of PRC women – prostitutes, 'husband stealers,' and mistresses. These stereotypes of PRC women are widespread in the Malaysian print and online media, particularly the Chinese language press – an analysis of which, for example, found that the volume of reports on PRC sex workers far exceeds their numbers and proportion (Lu 2011). In 2007 and again in 2009, Wanita MCA lobbied the government against PRC women being approved as foreign domestic maids, from the fear that the proximity within the family home will lead to 'husband stealing.'²¹ In direct contrast, the Taiwanese women cast themselves as wives and mothers, custodians of the Chinese Malaysian family, safe in their conventional gender role.

Boundary-making and exclusivity

To underscore the previous point, the FWO women achieve their claims to citizenship by actively and definitively drawing a line between themselves (as Taiwanese women) and the PRC women. For example, one of the FWO leaders joked when she learnt that we were doing research on PRC women married to Malaysian citizens, 'Do you include mistresses and second wives in your research?' At that remark, others in the room chimed, 'I'm not a mistress, I'm married to a Taiwanese businessman.' On a more serious note, the FWO secretary explained to us why they did not want to include PRC foreign wives from the beginning, even though they were very eager to expand their organization and get more members. In explaining how the PRC wives are different from them, she says '... we cannot tell whether they are real [wives] or whether they are mistresses. If they are mistresses, and they join our organization, it would jeopardize our reputation.' She continued, 'Taiwanese are generally simple and kind-hearted. We did not come to Malaysia to do bad things, we don't have ill and selfish and criminal intention and we won't cheat each other.' The FWO chairperson, had also separately commented to Lu on another occasion, 'Unlike mainland Chinese ... they come here and the first thing they ask is "What does your husband do?" And before you know it, they steal your husband away ...'

FWO's membership is based on gender and nationality; all Taiwanese women in Malaysia are welcomed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the complex construction of ethnic boundaries and identities in Taiwan among the sub-ethnic Han Chinese groups such as the Fukienese and the Hakka, the 'mainlanders,' and the aborigines.²² As immigrants in Malaysia, however, they emphasize their 'national' identity so as to distinguish themselves from Chinese Malaysians and from PRC Chinese,

although it is vital for them to emphasize their Chinese cultural identity at the same time so as to build affinity with local Chinese.

The FWO actively engage in 'group-making' by constructing the togetherness of Taiwanese women.²³ As the FWO secretary explained to us, 'We felt that when we Taiwanese get together, even though we might just have met two times, we trust each other, and we can be at ease.'²⁴ To further illustrate their Taiwanese solidarity, she told us the story of how they helped a Taiwanese single mother whose Malaysian husband had died leaving her with three teenage children. They brought the family from Sarawak to Kuala Lumpur, helped her to renew her long-term social visit pass, obtain a job and a work permit, and included her in their joint PR application. She emphasized to us that none of them had known this family before, but they wanted to help her because 'We are all Taiwanese.'

The FWO excludes not only the PRC women, but also other foreign spouses, i.e., the Caucasian male and non-Chinese female foreign spouses of the FSSG, in their efforts to obtain PR. Despite their universal claim of women's rights, the FWO did not act with the inclusiveness inherent in the rights framework that they employ. The truth is that they would not have been effective had they been more inclusive, because their strategy is implicitly based on an underlying principle of being 'an exception.' The Immigration authorities could accommodate them because they are a small group, and by accommodating them they are also not running counter to the liberalizing trend in state practices of making it easier to obtain residential status.

Nationality/ethnicity: proximity, ambiguity, and distancing

Each of the three sets of two-way relationships between the PRC women, Taiwanese women and Chinese Malaysian women is complicated by how they are viewed as co-ethnics in a local context where Chinese is one of the major ethnic categories, and yet at the same time, they are known to be different by virtue of the different nation-states to which they each belong. In Taiwan, PRC marriage migrants are viewed by the state as a hidden threat because of cultural proximity, i.e., it is too easy for them to be assimilated (Lan 2008, 838).

In the case of domestic care labor, an explanation forwarded for why PRC maids are not allowed in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia draws from the cultural affinity theory that they pose a threat because they cannot easily be distinguished from citizens, and their cultural proximity makes them sexually attractive to male members of households, thereby threatening family cohesion (Yeoh and Huang 2010). Lu (2011) has pointed out, however, that this explanation is inadequate because it cannot explain why Indonesian maids who may be considered cultural affines of the Malay population are nonetheless widely accepted in Malay families, nor the greater acceptance of *Jeoseonjok* (ethnic Koreans with foreign nationality, majority PRC) in Korea and *Nikkeijin* (ethnic Japanese with foreign nationality, majority from South America) in Japan compared to maids from Southeast Asia. Lu proposed that we should instead understand the PRC domestic maid issue from the viewpoint of political economy, sexualized construction of PRC women, and the threat to the social fabric of the host society (i.e., broader than family cohesion).

Both the ethnic and gender frameworks form integrated parts of the social fabric of Malaysian society. Its cohesion and stability may be threatened by the presence of ethnic and sexual others. By the same converse logic, a migrant group that is able to insert itself into the social fabric and construct itself as contributing to, rather than threatening, social

cohesion will have a better chance of overcoming exclusionary barriers to citizenship status. The Taiwanese wives in FWO have managed to achieve this through a combination of positionality and strategies. They have strategically employed historical transnational linkages, their elite business positionality, and the 'ethnic card' to ally themselves with co-ethnic Chinese Malaysian women in the WDO. They have succeeded in presenting themselves as docile nonthreatening wives to the Malaysian immigration authorities, and as contributors in social reproduction as well as co-claimants to women's rights to their citizen partners. At the same time, they engaged in a project of distancing themselves from the stereotyped and stigmatized PRC women which served to accentuate their social acceptability and strengthen their alliance with Chinese Malaysian women.

Conclusion

Our paper contributes to the literature on the intersection of ethnicity, citizenship, and reproduction by highlighting the role that ethnicity plays in citizenship claims, and how the rhetoric of women's reproductive contribution may be employed within a conservative gender framework to make these claims. By focusing on noncitizen marriage migrants' 'acts of citizenship' to claim a status that they do not yet have, we illustrate the understanding of citizenship as political subjectivity and as agency by extending Isin's (2012, 567–569) framework to include acts of service-work contribution, nonstrident maneuverings, and gentle persuasion.

This paper also contributes to the intersectional approach by analyzing the marriage migrants' intersecting positionalities and identities as business elites, wives and mothers of citizens, women's rights claimants, and co-ethnic contributors to social reproduction. Although their dominant identity is as Taiwanese nationals, they appeal to co-ethnic Malaysians with an unstated notion of protecting the reproductive welfare of the Chinese Malaysian citizens. Moreover, while they insert themselves unobtrusively into the ethnic framework of the Malaysian state, in actuality they achieve their aims through the social networks and resources that they have access to by virtue of their social class, elite status, and collective transnational history. They frame their claims within a conservative gender framework that is not threatening to the status quo but instead emphasizes traditional gender and familial roles, based on the rhetoric of family that is congruent with the Malaysian state's own frame of reference of the male citizen's entitlement to form family and the well-being of the Malaysian family. It is the intersection of all these, and their own diligence and agency as political subjects/citizens, that enables their claims to citizenship.

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Notes

1. This project focused on different types of international marriages, including marriages between the People's Republic of China (PRC) women and Malaysian men. Although Taiwanese women who marry Malaysian citizens were not a target group, one of the researchers (Lu, who is herself Taiwanese) befriended several while following leads for PRC wives. She followed up with interviews with the Taiwanese, in addition to the PRC, wives. This fieldwork was carried out from January 2010 to August 2011. All three authors took part at various times with Lu carrying the main responsibility, greatly aided by our research assistant Tan Pok Suan.

2. The total population was 6,279,000, of which 3,125,000 were categorized as Malaysians (of which 90% were under 'Malays'), 2,334,000 as Chinese, 707,000 Indians, and 112,000 Others. In these categories, the proportions born in the Federation of Malaya were 97% for Malaysians, 74% for Chinese, and 65% for Indians. (Fell 1960, pp. 3, 16.)
3. The fluid and shifting boundaries of Malay ethnicity, and the political appropriation of 'Malay' by the Malaysian state have been explored in scholarly works. See, for example, Barnard (2004).
4. In 2010, the population of Malaysia was 28.3 million, of which 92% were Malaysian citizens. The citizens were divided into *Bumiputera* (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%), and Others (0.7%), and the Malays constituted 63.1% of the population in Peninsular Malaysia. (Department of Statistics Malaysia, undated). Bumiputera includes Malays and other indigenous groups.
5. See, for example, the special issue of *Asian Ethnicity*, 10(3), 2009.
6. For example, the foreign wife has to have 5 consecutive years of residence in the country to be eligible to apply for PR, while the foreign husband has to have 10 years. Furthermore, the Constitution specifies that male citizens' children, wherever they may be born, are entitled to citizenship, whereas female citizens' children are only entitled to Malaysian citizenship if they are born within the country. Following charges of discrimination, the Home Ministry devised an administrative mechanism for foreign-born children of female citizens to be registered as citizens within one year of birth in Malaysian embassies and consular offices (Singh 2010).
7. See also Ramanand (2011).
8. Malaysian Immigration Circular No. 31/2008, posted at PEMUDAH (*Pasukan Petugas Khas Pemudahcara Perniagaan*) (Special Taskforce to Facilitate Business) website. Accessed June 27, 2012. <http://www.pemudah.gov.my/web/guest/571>
9. Interview with Lu, 4 March 2011, Kuala Lumpur. Vani is not her real name. Except for public figures, names of interviewees have been changed in order to preserve their confidentiality.
10. Although migrants are relatively free to enter the country (for example as tourists), it is not easy for them to gain legal access to stable long-term residential rights.
11. Termed Project IC, this is currently being investigated by a Royal Commission of Inquiry. See, for example, Malaysiakini (2013).
12. Literally 'MCA Women,' the women's wing of the MCA. The MCA is one of the political parties in the coalition that has ruled the country since Independence. It appeals to the Chinese Malaysian electorate and purports to represent the Chinese Malaysian population. In the 2008 and 2013 General Elections, it failed to win most of the seats that it contested.
13. Lu's interview with Bina Ramanand, 4 March 2011.
14. An informant (non-Muslim Chinese Malaysian) who worked in the Indonesian Consulate from 1970 to 2006 is of the opinion that for Indonesian foreign spouses, there is no difference between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of chances of obtaining PR from the Malaysian government. In the 1970s, it was easy for foreign wives to get PR – if they were in the country for two years continuously, usually they would be granted PR – but it gradually became harder when the flow of foreign spouses grew bigger (personal communication with Chee, 8 January 2013).
15. Lu's interview with Bina Ramanand, 4 March 2011.
16. This may not be a fair observation because there could be a process of self-selection in which foreign spouses who have not been able to attain PR may be more likely to join the FSSG.
17. More than 30,000 Malaysians furthered their studies in Taiwan over the past four and a half decades. See website of the Federation of Alumni Associations of Taiwan Universities, Malaysia (FAATUM). Accessed February 25, 2013. <http://www.faatum.com.my/index.php>
18. This is Tan Yee Kew who was deputy chairperson from 1996 to 2005 and a member of parliament from 1995 to 2008. Information from interview of Tan Yee Kew by Chee, 22 December 2012, Subang Jaya, and from pamphlets and websites of WDO branches.
19. Conversation with Lu, FWO chairperson's home, Cheras, 2 April 2011.
20. Conversation with Lu, 2 April 2011, Kuala Lumpur.
21. The origin countries approved for recruitment of foreign domestic workers are specified and can change from time to time. See Lu (2011) for a fuller discussion of the Wanita MCA campaign.
22. See Chun (1996) and Wang (2003).
23. They have a *Facebook* page and an online forum (in Chinese), and they use social media and Internet very effectively in organizing their members.
24. Conversation with Lu, 2 April 2011, Kuala Lumpur.

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