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BETWEEN CIVIC INCLUSION AND INFORMAL CONTROL: GENDER,
MIGRATION AND THE BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING
IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWAN

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Abstract:

This research investigates the relationship between gender, migration and national identities in contemporary Taiwan, specifically the social and legal experience of migrant women. Through fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with labor migrants and marriage migrants from Southeast Asia and mainland China, this research examines the boundaries by which the lines of the Taiwanese civic community are constructed and enforced. An important point of analysis is the contradiction between the official discourses on the “new Taiwanese” (*xinzhumin*, 新住民), that highlights the idea of a common civic identity and democratic development and more complex aspects encountered in everyday life. The research considers the process of the state governance of migrant women’s reproductive and social life that is often framed through the concept of care and welfare, making it significantly harder to identify and contest. A further dimension of the analysis concerns the informal transmission of normative expectations through religious communities and peer networks among migrant women themselves that work as carriers of social norms without any involvement of the state. In this context, the research attends to the active role of migrant women in navigating these systems, documenting the strategies through which they exercise agency, build solidarity and negotiate their place within the social fabric of the island.

Abstract (italiano):

Questa ricerca indaga la relazione tra genere, migrazione e identità nazionale nella Taiwan contemporanea, concentrandosi in particolare sull’esperienza sociale e giuridica delle donne migranti. Attraverso ricerche sul campo e interviste semistrutturate a migranti (sia per motivi di lavoro che matrimoniali) provenienti dal Sud-est asiatico e dalla Cina continentale, lo studio esamina i confini che definiscono e consolidano la comunità civica taiwanese. Un aspetto centrale dell’analisi è la

contraddizione tra i discorsi ufficiali sui “nuovi taiwanesi” (*xinzhumin*, 新住民), incentrati su un’identità civica condivisa e sullo sviluppo democratico e le dinamiche più complesse che emergono nella vita quotidiana. La ricerca prende in esame le modalità con cui lo Stato governa la vita riproduttiva e sociale delle donne migranti, spesso inquadrando tali dinamiche nell’ottica della cura e del welfare, il che rende più difficile individuarle e contestarle. Un’ulteriore dimensione dell’analisi riguarda la trasmissione informale di aspettative normative attraverso comunità religiose e reti di pari tra le stesse donne migranti, le quali agiscono come veicoli di norme sociali indipendentemente dall’intervento statale. In questo contesto, lo studio valorizza il ruolo attivo delle donne migranti nel muoversi all’interno di tali sistemi, documentando le strategie attraverso cui esse esercitano la propria agency, costruiscono solidarietà e negoziano la propria collocazione nel tessuto sociale dell’isola.

List of abbreviations:

- **ARC:** Alien Resident Certificate
- **BP2MI:** Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia
- **DOLAB:** Department of Overseas Labor
- **DMW:** Department of Migrant Workers
- **DPP:** Democratic Progressive Party
- **ECFA:** Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement
- **KMT:** Kuomintang
- **MOL:** Ministry of Labor
- **MOI:** Ministry of the Interior
- **NCCU:** National Chengchi University
- **NDC:** National Development Council
- **NIA:** National Immigration Agency
- **PDOS:** Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar
- **POEA:** Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
- **PRC:** People's Republic of China
- **ROC:** Republic of China
- **TIA:** Taiwan Immigration Act
- **TNA:** Taiwan Nationality Act

Glossary of Terms:

- Xinzhumín – 新住民 – “New Taiwanese” / “New Residents” / “New Immigrants”
- Xīn Taiwan rén – 新台灣人 – “New Taiwanese”
- Yì – 夷 – “Barbarians”
- Fān – 番 / 蕃 – “Barbarians” / “Border peoples”
- Sìyì – 四夷 – “Four barbarian peoples”
- Dōngfān – 東番 – “Eastern Border”
- Dōngfān jì – 東番記 – “Record of the Eastern Border”
- Mǐn – 民 – “Settlers” / “People”
- Shúfān – 熟番 – “Cooked aborigines”
- Shēngfān – 生番 – “Raw aborigines”
- Nàichìjīn – 內地人 – “Mainland Japanese”
- Hōntōjīn – 本島人 – “Han Taiwanese” / “Island residents”
- Takasagozoku – 高砂族 – “Indigenous peoples”
- Dāngwài – 黨外 – “Outside the Party”
- Wàishēng rén – 外省人 – “Mainlanders”
- Běishēng rén – 本省人 – “Native Taiwanese”
- Hùkǒu – 戶口 / 戶籍 – “Household registration”
- Táopào – 逃跑 – “Escape” / “To run away”
- Sāncóng sìdé – 三從四德 – “Three Obediences and Four Virtues”
 - Fu de – 婦德 – “Moral conduct” / “Female virtue”
 - Fu yán – 婦言 – “Appropriate speech”
 - Fu róng – 婦容 – “Modest appearance”
 - Fu gōng – 婦功 – “Diligence in domestic work”
- Xiào – 孝 – “Filial piety”

- Hao – 好 – “Good”
- Dalumei – 大陸妹 – “Sisters from the mainland”
- Jia jie hun chen mai yin – 假結婚真賣淫 – “Sham marriage for prostitution”
- Jiemei – 姐妹 – “Sisters”

Introduction:

Since the 1980s, Taiwan has undergone a quiet yet significant demographic shift: thousands of women from Southeast Asia and mainland China have immigrated to the island for marriage or employment, becoming part of a new population segment referred to in Taiwanese public discourse as “New Taiwanese” (*xinzhumin*, 新住民) (Hsia, 2007; Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). However, the notion of “New Taiwanese” is not neutral: it is situated within a specific period of Taiwan’s political history, namely, the era of democratization and the consolidation of a Taiwanese identity distinct from that of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Chao, 2004; Tsai, 2011). Moreover, the term is used in two ways: first, the concept conveys a message of inclusivity that aligns well with Taiwan’s image as a pluralistic democracy standing in contrast to the authoritarianism of the Beijing government. Second, as this thesis will demonstrate, this discourse of inclusivity coexists with administrative, social and family practices that continue to treat migrant women as subjects to be disciplined rather than as full citizens: this is a tension that official discourse tends to render invisible precisely through its own inclusive language (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013)

This tension between rhetoric and practice has certainly not gone unnoticed in academic scholarship. Various lines of research have demonstrated how migrant women’s bodies serve to mark national boundaries and defense processes (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013), how their reproductive capacities are often lauded as essential to the survival of the national community (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013) and how their maternal authority is systematically subordinated to that of their in-laws (Wolf, 1972; Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). In this context, other studies have shifted the focus from analyzing power mechanisms to the practices of agency migrant women employ to inhabit, negotiate or even challenge these mechanisms (Wang, 2007; Zani, 2018; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

While existing academic studies have highlighted elements of paternalistic state welfare (Lan, 2008) or employer benevolence (Chien, 2026), these dynamics have largely been analyzed in isolation. There remains a lack of a comprehensive, integrated framework examining the discursive mechanisms through which institutional and familial control is structurally disguised as help, assistance and care across both public and private domains. It is precisely in this area, the systematic interplay between control disguised as care and the strategic agency deployed by migrant women in response, where the originality of this thesis lies.

From a theoretical standpoint, the initial premise is that the literature addressing migration, gender and nation-building has extensively discussed how the control of intimacy, reproduction and family life was used in colonial and post-colonial contexts as a primary means of establishing and enforcing the boundaries of race and the politics of the national community (Stoler, 2002; Lan, 2008). When applied to the case of Taiwan, this perspective allows to view the governance of migrant women's reproductive and social lives not as a politically neutral realm of social policy, but as a constitutive arena of civic citizenship itself (Chao, 2004; Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013): it is a terrain where, as the second and third chapters in particular will demonstrate, the boundary between those who fully belong to the Taiwanese community and those who remain on its margins is drawn and redrawn daily, often through mechanisms presented as protective (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026).

Based on this hypothesis, the research sets out to address a complex problem across two interconnected levels: in what concrete ways (legal, administrative, bodily and community-based) are the boundaries of the Taiwanese civic community towards migrant women defined and reproduced? What actions do these women themselves take, while navigating these mechanisms, to negotiate their position within Taiwan's social fabric? The decision to combine these two levels, one structural (control) and the other, in a sense, its counterpart (agency), is intended to avoid, on the one hand, an

approach that casts migrant women merely as passive victims of state policies and, on the other, an overly optimistic view of their agency that might overlook existing power asymmetries. The project's central premise is thus the conviction that control and agency are not mutually exclusive, opposing poles, but rather co-existing elements of the migration experience itself.

Structure of the thesis:

This thesis is organized into four chapters, following a sequence that moves from the historical-structural dimension to the corporeal and affective dimensions and, finally, to that of individual action.

The first chapter traces the historical roots of Taiwanese identity, an identity rooted not in an essence inherited through lineage, but in a collective identity negotiated through shared institutions, experiences and influences (Stockton, 2002). This chapter argues that the ethnic divisions on the island, among Indigenous peoples, Hoklo, Hakka and Mainlanders, are not primordial differences but the result of successive projects of colonialism and statism, spanning from the era of Japanese colonial rule (1.1) to the period of democratization and the construction of the “New Taiwanese” (*xinzhumin*, 新住民) discourse (1.2) that permeates the entire work.

The second chapter outlines the administrative and legal framework governing marriage and labor-related migration to Taiwan, drawing on regulatory documents, secondary sources, and, where necessary, thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted in Taipei between April and May 2026. It also incorporates two interviews with social workers from a center for new residents. This chapter delineates the differences between the regulatory regimes applicable to wives from Southeast Asia, wives from the People's Republic of China and contract workers, demonstrating how naturalization requirements, such as language proficiency, financial resources and the

renunciation of prior citizenship (2.4), serve not merely as procedural steps but also as mechanisms for defining the boundaries of the civic community.

The third chapter shifts from the legal to the physical realm: drawing on well-established concepts from gender studies and the role of the nation-state in shaping bodies and national boundaries, it explores how reproduction, sexuality and even aspects, such as the accents of migrant women, serve as the terrain where the boundaries of national identity in Taiwan are negotiated. This chapter makes explicit the research project's central conflict: the tension between discourses of care and well-being and practices of control across three frontiers: reproduction (3.1), sexuality (3.2), and the political/ethnic (3.3). It also provides a historical account of the regulatory framework governing reproduction in Taiwan from the 1990s to the early 2000s, focusing on mandatory pregnancy testing for migrant women (3.4).

Finally, the fourth chapter proposes a shift in perspective: instead of exploring the power relations governing the behavior of migrant women, the focus shifts to their experiences, practices and responses to these forms of control. The chapter then introduces the concept of agency within migration studies, drawing on scholarship addressing migrant women's subjectivity, as well as broader reflections from critical theory on the relationship between voice, power and norms (4.1). It begins by analyzing informal economic practices (4.2), emotions as social resources (4.3), the negotiation of assimilation vis-à-vis both the State and the family by marriage (4.4), and, finally, the role of religious communities and peer networks as vehicles for the transmission of social norms (4.5).

Methodological note:

This work is based on a predominantly qualitative research framework, built around a corpus of thirteen in-depth interviews, conducted in Taipei between April and May

2026, with migrant workers and migrant brides from Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia) and mainland China, who settled in Taiwan through marriage or work. These are accompanied by a collective interview with the social workers of a center for new residents in Taipei, whose institutional perspective offered a complementary point of observation on administrative practices and their translation in the lived experience of the interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in English and Mandarin, based on the respondents' language skills and preferences, in order to minimize potential communication barriers. Access to respondents was primarily secured through personal and organizational networks, ranging from the center for new immigrants involved in the study to civil society organizations active in the field. Respondent anonymity was ensured by changing the names of individuals mentioned in the thesis.

Regarding data analysis, the interpretation process was conducted on a qualitative and thematic basis. This approach proved particularly well-suited to the project, taking as its analytical starting point the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between restriction and care: the interpretation of the material revealed the coexistence, within the same narratives, of an institutional language of support and practices perceived as restrictive, a coexistence that is undermined by a binary approach. It was precisely in this way, for instance, that the presence of the religious community and peer networks emerged as one of the most recurring factors in the research.

A further point requiring clarification is the internal diversity among the interviewees, all of whom are migrant women. It is common practice in public and administrative discourse in Taiwan to describe female migrants from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia as “Southeast Asian” (Hsia, 2007; Lan, 2006), a term this thesis also uses occasionally, particularly when referring to the regulatory framework. However, the participants' countries of origin (the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia)

differ in terms of religious and ethnic composition, the history of labor and marriage migration and the mechanisms governing their departure for Taiwan, such as recruitment and pre-departure training (POEA, 2001; BP2MI, 2023) (Wang and Chang, 2002; Lu, 2008). In other words, these women bring varying social expectations, obligations and resources with them to Taiwan. For this reason, it is fundamental to affirm that this thesis does not view the culture of origin as a static explanation because doing so would risk reproducing the very essentialism it seeks to avoid. Instead, it examines how these backgrounds emerge within the participants' own narratives, as described in Chapter Four. Given the diversity of the sample, no systematic comparison between national groups is attempted.

Chapter 1: Identity, Ethnicity and the Purpose of the Historical Reconstruction

Before examining the process of constructing Taiwanese identity, it is necessary to clarify what notion of “identity” is being discussed. This chapter uses the term in a specifically political and civic sense: identity is understood not as a fixed cultural essence transmitted by descent, but as a form of collective belonging constructed and negotiated all the time through common institutions, history and, as it will be demonstrated in subsequent sections, through the external influence as well (Stockton, 2002). “Taiwanese identity” in such a case is not about an ethnic group but about the sense of belonging to the political and territorial entity called Taiwan, which was acquired unevenly by various social strata on the island, the indigenous people, Hoklo, Hakka and mainlanders (Dreyer, 2003). Likewise, the concept of “ethnicity” is used in this chapter as a classification imposed by particular colonial and state administrations rather than as a preexisting characteristic of the population (Rigger, 2013). The chapter’s central argument is that Taiwan’s ethnic-based fractures are not natural or primordial, but were constructed through successive colonial and state projects, and that this historical layering is the foundation on which the contemporary civic and reactive dimensions of Taiwanese identity has developed.

1.1 The Historical Origins of Taiwanese Identity: Colonialism, Internal Migration and Ethnic-Based Fractures

The following sections provide a periodization of the economic and political contexts within which the ethnic and national categories of Taiwan emerged. Starting from the very first contacts made by Chinese settlers and traders to the island, through successive waves of colonization, to the eve of the modern period, this chapter aims to present not only the events that occurred but to explain how these changes generated new boundaries between groups on the island, limits that this chapter treats as

historically contingent constructions rather than the seeds of a predetermined national identity.

Before large-scale colonization, Chinese knowledge of Taiwan was vague and fragmentary (Hung, 2000). Ancient records mentioned names such as I-chou or Liu-ch'iu, but historians believe that Chinese sources often confused Taiwan with the Ryukyu Islands (Hsu, 1980). Natural obstacles also limited regular contact: strong currents in the Taiwan Strait and unpredictable monsoons made navigation difficult until the 16th century. Nevertheless, Chinese activity in the surrounding areas gradually increased. The Penghu Archipelago was settled by the Chinese as early as the 11th century and formally incorporated into the empire during the Yuan Dynasty (1281-1367). At that time, Chinese sailors from Fujian and Zhejiang provinces began visiting the island to trade deerskins with indigenous peoples. It was only in the second half of the 16th century that fishermen and merchants from these regions decided to settle there permanently. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644), however, never recognized the island as an integral part of China, considering it an "overseas" territory populated by "barbarians" (yi), a marginal periphery unworthy of administrative efforts (Jenco & Tremml-Werner, 2025; Hsu, 1980).

By the sixteenth century, Taiwan had become a refuge for pirates such as Lin Tao-ch'ien and Lin Feng. At the same time, the abundant supply of fish and the lucrative deer trade with the aborigines gradually attracted more Chinese fishermen and merchants on the west coast of Taiwan. Southern Fukienese settlement of southwestern Taiwan had begun by the early 1590s, however they were just a few (Hsu, 1980).

It is at this early stage that the classificatory logic this chapter traces begins to take shape. Although the initial number of settlers was small, this increasing contact laid the foundations for a complex social hierarchy, shaped by encounters with the

Austronesian peoples. Probably having arrived from the Philippines around 4,000 years ago, these communities lived in autonomous groups with distinct cultures and languages (Ye, 2013).

As the Han presence became more established, a clear distinction began to emerge between the new arrivals and the original inhabitants: in the imperial imagination, the indigenous peoples were generically classified as *fan*¹ (barbarians, 番/蕃), to distinguish them from the Han settlers, known as *min* (settlers, 民).

Over time, this classification became more sophisticated to reflect the degree of assimilation into the dominant culture. A distinction was thus drawn between the so-called ‘cooked aborigines’ (*shufan*, 熟番), those who had adopted Han customs and submitted to the government, and the ‘raw aborigines’ (*shengfan*, 生番), who maintained their own traditions and remained outside administrative control (Chen, 1961).

This colonial classification was not merely cultural because it also structured rights, tax obligations and access to land, creating an ethnic fragmentation that is still reflected today in the official recognition by the Taiwanese state of sixteen distinct groups (Yi-huah, 2004).

¹ It is worth clarifying the conceptual distinction between the terms *yi* (夷) and *fan* (番/蕃). *Yi* was the term employed since the pre-imperial era to designate, traditionally, the “four barbarian peoples” (*siyi*, 四夷), whereas *fan* originated as a neutral geographical and spatial category, used to indicate the peripheral or “border” regions of the Sinosphere. In Western translations and historiography, however, *fan* has frequently been conflated with *yi* and rendered indiscriminately as “barbarians” (Jenco & Tremml-Werner, 2021). Taiwan itself was among the territories classified as *fan*, historically referred to as *Dongfan* (東番, “Eastern Border”). This conceptual overlap is visible in the *Dongfan ji* (東番記, Record of the Eastern Border), written by *Chen Di* (陳第) in 1603, during the Ming dynasty: “The indigenous *Yi* people live on the island of Eastern Fan in the outer ocean of Penghu, which lost their history of origin. The indigenous villages [...] are located along the west coast for more than one thousand li. There are many different kinds of communities with thousands or five to six hundred people but without a chieftain” (Chen Di 1603, cited in Wu 2021, 125–150).

1.1.1 European colonialism

The classificatory apparatus first sketched by the Ming was reshaped again with the arrival of the European powers in the seventeenth century. The first European power who arrived in the islands were the Portuguese, sailing along the northwest coast of Taiwan in the 1540s. They were struck by the island's lush beauty and, for this reason, named it Ilha Formosa, meaning "Beautiful Island" (Hsu, 1980). However, it was the Dutch who first formally occupied it, settling in 1624 in the southwestern part, in Tayouan (An-p'ing), where they built Fort Zeelandia (Ye, 2013). The Dutch actively encouraged the migration of Chinese peasants to develop agriculture, in particular promoting the cultivation of rice and sugarcane, and attracted the interest of Fujian traders, who purchased deer hunting licenses (Hsu, 1980). However, the indiscriminate sale of these permits harmed indigenous populations, depriving them of vital rice: in response, they attacked plantations and suspended the payment of taxes, sparking a violent repression by the Dutch (Gabellini, 2022). In 1626, the Spanish also occupied the northern asset portion of the island, including Keelung and Tamsui, to counter Dutch influence and promote Catholic missions, but were expelled by the Dutch in 1642 (Hsu, 1980).

The founding of Fort Zeelandia in 1624 radically transformed Taiwan into a crucial logistical hub and a melting pot of ethnic interactions (Hsu, 1980). Despite the incentive for permanent migration from Fujian, the Han settlers did not form a unified identity, remaining rigidly divided between the Hoklo groups (which were themselves fragmented by dialectal conflicts between Zhangzhou and Quanzhou) and the Hakka, who maintained distinct cultural backgrounds and geographical areas (Yi-huah, 2004).

External pressure was the trigger for internal solidarity during the Guo Weiyi rebellion in 1652 that united approximately 15,000 Han immigrants in their resistance to the colonial rulers, forming the structure of external pressure as the cause of internal

solidarity (Ye, 2014; Hsu, 1980). Activated by heavy Dutch taxes on activities such as fishing, hunting and butchering, the revolt represented the first major act of collective anti-Western resistance in the island's history, marking the beginning of a distinction between "inhabitants of the land" and "outside powers", a distinction to which section 1.2 returns as the earliest form of political solidarity on the island. In this context, the indigenous Austronesian populations underwent a process of strategic marginalization, often being employed by the Dutch against the Spanish or as a repressive force against the Chinese revolts: a dynamic that accentuated social divisions and laid the foundations for the complex ethnic stratification that would characterize the following centuries.

The Dutch did not aim to establish a European-style agricultural system in Taiwan. Instead, they promoted immigration from southeastern China, encouraging settlers to reclaim land and participate in the profitable deer hide trade². Ignoring the Ming dynasty's restrictive maritime policies, the Dutch sometimes transported Chinese migrants to Taiwan free of charge on their trading ships. For example, in 1632 they carried 170 migrants from southern Fujian to the island, and many more reportedly wished to join but could not due to limited space. These immigrants were the protagonists of the agricultural expansion promoted by the Europeans and they were concentrated mainly in what is now the Tainan region and in the northern part of present-day Kaohsiung County to the south. It is not known the exact number of Chinese who remained in the island during this period, probably around forty or fifty thousand at the end of the Dutch rule (Hsu, 1980).

² Between 1634 and 1661, the island produced an annual average of about 68,000 deerskins, 50,000 of which were shipped to Japan. After 1645, Taiwan annually produced 9,000 piculs of sugar, and after 1657, 17,000 piculs, which was sold as far away as Persia (Hsu, 1980).

1.1.2 Zheng Chenggong

Meanwhile, the Chinese Ming dynasty collapsed in 1644 and the Manchu Qing dynasty came to power. In this context, in 1662 the Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong, known as Koxinga, expelled the Dutch and turned Taiwan into a base of resistance against the Qing dynasty. Under his rule and that of his successors, the island underwent significant demographic and institutional changes (Ye, 2013). Due to the Qing Dynasty's coastal evacuation policies on the mainland, Chinese migration to Taiwan intensified and the Han population increased by about 70,000 people (Hsu, 1980). Zheng implemented a system of military colonization, allocating land to soldiers so they could become self-sufficient farmers. Confucian temples and schools were established, transplanting elements of elite Chinese culture and imperial political institutions to the island (Hung, 2000). However, the Cheng regime made no concrete plans to develop northern Taiwan: most of the island remained under indigenous control, with lifestyles and farming practices distinct from those of the Chinese. Although an advisor proposed providing tribes with tools, oxen, and Chinese instructors to promote agriculture, there is no evidence that this plan was ever carried out (Hsu, 1980).

Under the Zheng regime, Taiwan ceased to be merely a foreign trading colony and became a fully functioning Chinese frontier society. Although the government remained highly militarized and imposed heavy taxes comparable to those of the Dutch, it succeeded in establishing effective social control and administrative structures (Hsu, 1980).

1.1.3 The Qing

This period ended in 1683-1684, when Qing forces conquered Taiwan and formally incorporated it into the Chinese Empire, in the context of the policy of territorial

expansion pursued by the emperors Kangxi (1661–1722), Yongzheng (1723–1735), and Qianlong (1736–1795) (Ye, 2013). The decisive turning point was the strategic argument of General Shi Lang, who warned that leaving Taiwan without a government would endanger the four richest coastal provinces of the Qing: Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Jiangsu. His position was supported by recent history: the Koxinga Campaign of 1657 had nearly reached Nanjing and devastated the Qing navy, and Zheng Jing's campaigns in the 1670s, during the Revolt of the Three Feudatories³, had again used Taiwan as a base to threaten the southeastern coast (Hsu, 1980). These events convinced Emperor Kangxi that Taiwan posed a serious strategic risk if left out of imperial control⁴. As a result, Taiwan became a prefecture of Fujian Province, marking the first time a dynasty based in China ruled the island (Shi, 1960; Yi-huah, 2004).

The annexation of Taiwan and its gradual Sinicisation thus stemmed less from grand imperial design than from strategic security considerations and the private interests of the powerful military elite in Fujian. This structural logic, with Taiwan treated as a peripheral region to be kept under control rather than as a territory of cultural unity, was reflected in the immigration and land policies of the time (Ye, 2013). Even if in the early Qing period, the government strictly controlled migration from mainland China to Taiwan, requiring official approval for relocation and effectively prohibiting family resettlement, in order to prevent Taiwan from becoming a stronghold for rebels or pirates, there was a significant increase in the island's Han population (Gabellini 2022). For this reason, Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1735–1796) adopted even harsher measures: he prohibited immigrants from purchasing or cultivating Indigenous lands and ordered those already settled to return the land. This policy reflected the attempt at

³ It was a violent civil war (1673-1681) started by three Chinese generals who, after helping the Manchus conquer China, rebelled when the Kangxi Emperor tried to revoke their immense dominions in the south. The main leader, Wu Sangui, attempted to restore Han rule, but poor coordination among the rebels allowed the Qing to crush the revolt. The imperial victory marked the definitive consolidation of the Manchu dynasty and the centralization of power over all of China.

⁴ The Emperor changed his mind very quickly, because just some months before he had opined that 'Taiwan lies over the seas and does not matter much'. The Emperor concluded that 'Taiwan is no bigger than a pebble. Nothing is gained by obtaining it and nothing is lost by not obtaining it' (Ruiping, 2013).

the time to maintain a fragile peace between groups with fundamentally conflicting interests. These policies aimed to maintain peace and prevent disputes between settlers and the Indigenous population. Moreover, the Qing established clear boundary markers separating Qing-controlled areas from raw aboriginal territory. Laws in 1730, 1737, 1750, and 1760 reinforced these boundaries and prohibited Han encroachment, as most conflicts arose when settlers crossed into aboriginal lands (Ye, 2013).

Despite the Qing's overall expansion and prosperity during the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong reigns, Taiwan's raw aboriginal areas were deliberately left alone (Ye, 2013). The court had no interest in exploiting their land or resources, focusing instead on peace and the safety of settlers (Ruiping, 2013). However, there were many ethnic rifts accumulated over centuries: between Indigenous peoples and Han Chinese, between Minnan and Hakka communities, and between Fujianese and Cantonese immigrants, which would form the bedrock of modern Taiwanese identity (Yi-huah, 2004). These were not merely cultural differences, but deep-rooted political and social fault lines, formed by decades of competition over land, resources and institutional recognition (Schubert and Damm, 2011).

1.1.4 Japanese imperialism

The transfer of Taiwan from Qing sovereignty to Japanese rule, formalized by the Treaty of Shimonoseki (April 17, 1895) at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War, was neither an automatic nor a peaceful process. While Qing officials abandoned the island in humiliation, the Japanese troops who landed in May encountered unprecedented hostility from the local population (Myers, 1973). The Chinese resistance organized itself into guerrilla units, led by leaders such as Li Ta-pei and Lin Li-ch'eng, who operated primarily in the mountainous areas of the northeast and the central highlands. These units attacked Japanese garrisons and cities, spreading panic and forcing the colonial government to reconsider its entire occupation strategy. It was only in 1902

that the rebels' activities were officially crushed (Myers, 1973). The repression was brutal: between 1900 and 1906, approximately 4,610 people were executed by regional courts for "banditry" (armed resistance), while another 2,220 were sentenced to prison or flogging. The bloodiest moment was the Tapani Incident massacre in 1915. Subsequently, Japan consolidated its control by integrating the island politically, economically, socially and culturally: it imposed the Japanese language, reorganized the administration, transformed the urban layout and banned some practices of Chinese origin, such as footbinding and the use of opium (Gabellini 2022, pp. 28-29; Yi-huah, 2004).

To govern this turbulent island, Japan established Sōtokufu, the Governor-General's Office, which possessed absolute legislative, executive, and military power. An administrative turning point occurred in 1898 with the appointment of Governor-General Yoshitaro Oda and his civil administration chief, Shinpei Goto. He introduced the concept of "biopolitics," arguing that colonial governments should adapt to local customs and social environments⁵ (Myers, 1973). Instead of forced assimilation, Japan opted to use existing social structures for precise population control, imposing a rigid social hierarchy divided into three main groups: mainland Japanese (*naichijin*, 内地人), Han Taiwanese (*hontōjin*, 本島人), and indigenous peoples (*Takasagozoku*, 高砂族) (Dawley, 2018). From 1935 onwards, parliaments were established at various levels of administration, allowing the "reliable" Han Taiwanese elite to participate in political life. However, these bodies only had advisory powers and could not prevent Japanese officials from making decisions.

Moreover, the Japanese colonial period brought significant infrastructure and economic changes (Yi-huah, 2004). The 1904 land reform, the state monopoly on salt,

⁵ The expression "biological politics" (*seibutsu-gaku-teki seiji*) was used by Gotō Shimpei to indicate a colonial approach that scientifically studied the population's habits before intervening, avoiding traumatic ruptures that would have generated resistance. The parallel with Foucauldian technologies of governance, biopolitics as the management of populations' lives, has been explored by several historians of Taiwanese colonialism (Myers, 1973).

camphor, tobacco, and opium, and the development of a vast infrastructure network connecting Keelung to Kaohsiung profoundly altered Taiwan's economy (Ka, 1995; Myers, 1973). This history has led some people to have a less negative impression of the Japanese era compared to the postwar period under the Nationalist government, and has fostered distrust and a divided identity, leaving a profound impact on the political and social history of postwar Taiwan (Yi-huah, 2004).

Although much of the historiography on Japanese colonial administration in Taiwan focuses primarily on the Chinese component of the population, it is clear that the government also had to develop specific policies towards indigenous communities, especially regarding territorial control and the exploitation of natural resources (Myers, 1973). As early as 1900, the colonial administration introduced Statute No. 7 on Aboriginal Land, a measure that represented the first systematic attempt to formalize state control over the island's interior. This legislation not only aimed to legally define land ownership, but also served as a political tool to extend colonial authority into mountainous areas, traditionally inhabited by indigenous populations and less integrated into administrative circuits (Ye, 2013). In 1903 and 1904, statutes were also promulgated to regulate the so-called "Ta-tsu" rights, a land tenure system that often referred to indigenous communities' original rights over lands subsequently occupied by Chinese colonists or claimed by the state. The regulation of these rights responded to the need to clarify legal overlaps and facilitate the incorporation of lands into the colonial economic system, while also reducing potential disputes (Myers, 1973).

The control of mountainous areas became particularly important (Yi-huah, 2004). Indeed, the mountains constituted not only a refuge for Chinese rebel groups but also a strategic area for the exploitation of valuable resources, such as camphor forests and mineral deposits. To consolidate their presence, the Japanese authorities established a widespread network of police stations in aboriginal areas, frequently coming into direct conflict with local tribes. In this way, the management of indigenous populations

became an integral part of the broader colonial strategy of security, territorial integration and economic development of the island (Myers, 1973).

Beginning in the 1930s, with the push toward industrialization and the outbreak of conflict in China, pressure on the local population increased dramatically. Japan sought to make the island self-sufficient by developing heavy industries (metals, chemicals). War mobilization was widespread: by 1943, 600,000 young Chinese from Taiwan had been recruited into local militias or as laborers to support the imperial army. Despite this massive mobilization, the Chinese were never granted equal rights to Japanese citizens, and police control remained tight until the surrender in 1945 (Myers, 1973).

In fifty years of Japanese domination (1895-1945), the identity of Taiwan was completely transformed: Japan started creating the necessary infrastructure to connect the island with the new motherland and, in this process, they saw the Taiwanese as second-class citizens. This process laid the groundwork for the emergence of a distinctly ‘Taiwanese’ political identity⁶ (Jiang & Gallo, 2004).

1.1.5 The aftermath of Second War World

The territories ceded to Japan in 1895 returned to Chinese administration at the end of World War II in 1945, in accordance with the 1943 Cairo Declaration, in which the United States and the United Kingdom committed to restoring them upon Allied victory (Sendyka, 2020). However, following their defeat in the Chinese Civil War

⁶ One of the intriguing dimensions of current Taiwanese politics is the re-evaluation of Taiwan’s past as a colony of Japan and its relevance to Taiwan-Japan relations. Since taking office, the DPP has also promoted a partial reappraisal of the Japanese colonial period, emphasizing the historical and cultural ties between Taiwan and Japan through the choice of terminology, the valorization of colonial-era heritage sites, and cultural soft power initiatives. This is a strategy that also extends into bilateral political relations. This decision, reflected in the choice of terminology, the valorization of colonial-era heritage sites and forms of cultural soft power, should not be read simply as uncritical nostalgia, but as part of the same broader project of identity construction: it reinforces the distinction between Taiwan’s historical trajectory and that of mainland China, not through opposition to an external threat, but through affinity with an alternative historical reference point (Lin, 2022; Wachman, 2014).

against Mao Zedong's Communist forces in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) government retreated to Taiwan. Relocating the institutions of the Republic of China (ROC) to the island, Chiang presented Taiwan as a temporary stronghold from which to eventually reconquer the mainland (Chen, 2008). The loss of mainland China rendered the Nationalist regime exceptionally rigid and paranoid, enforcing strict authoritarian control to eliminate communist infiltration and suppress local autonomist movements (Gold, 2003). In parallel, the United States escalated its military and economic backing for the KMT to contain communist expansion in East Asia, ultimately pushing for the legal formalization of Japan's territorial status; this culminated in the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco, under which Japan officially renounced its sovereignty over Taiwan (Dreyer, 2003).

For example, in 1947, an anti-government uprising was met with an extremely violent response from the regime. Known as the February 28 Incident, the crackdown targeted local elites, arresting and eliminating community leaders, intellectuals, professionals, and representatives of social groups (Chen, 2008). The methods of repression were particularly brutal: mass public executions, prisoners being displayed in inhumane conditions before being executed, and the creation of an atmosphere of terror to deter any future resistance. Some scholars, citing Michel Foucault's theory, have compared this repression to the logic of Damian's public executions described in *Watch and Punish*: a public act of violence perpetrated by sovereign power to demonstrate its authority through fear (Chen, 2008). The February 28 Incident is now considered a traumatic event that ushered in the era of "White Terror" (1947–1987), a long period of martial law during which civil liberties were drastically reduced, and tens of thousands of people were arrested, imprisoned, or executed (Pelaggi, 2020).

Against this backdrop, Chiang Kai-shek consolidated his power through martial law, censorship, and suppression of dissent (Stockton, 2002). The language policy, based on unilaterally imposed bilingualism, established Mandarin as the sole official language,

banning the use of local dialects such as Holo, Hakka, and aboriginal languages in schools and public offices. Those caught speaking Taiwanese could be fined or forced to wear humiliating signs, creating shame related to their origins and relegating non-native Mandarin speakers to a subordinate social position. Schools were used to cultivate “pro-China” individuals, with local history, geography, and literature removed from the curriculum and replaced with content aimed at glorifying the culture and heritage of the Republic of China (ROC) (Sendyka, 2020; Chen, 2008).

The land reform that began in 1949 was a core element of the regime’s strategy to consolidate its control over the island (Chen, 2008). By confiscating and redistributing land from Taiwanese landlords, the Nationalist government deliberately weakened the economic and social power of the local elites and gradually transferred authority to the central government. This process also facilitated the migration of approximately two million mainland Chinese to various parts of the island (Dreyer, 2003). The establishment of so-called “military dependents’ villages” further exacerbated the fragmentation of the local social structure: in these settlements, the resettled Chinese residents had direct contact with Taiwanese residents and indigenous people, often through marriage, and brought mainland culture and customs with them (Chen, 2008).

1.2 The Democratic Transition and the Rhetoric of the “New Taiwanese”

Rather than any process of rupture or break, what has occurred in Taiwanese history is rather one of the progressive accumulation of classificatory divisions (ethnic, linguistic, and political) which have become part of the permanent legacy of the island’s collective memory and social structure (Pelaggi, 2020). The processes of democratic transition that occurred in the late 20th century, and the associated discourse of the “New Taiwanese,” cannot be separated from this process of accumulation, being a partial and contradictory response to the problem of political inheritance.

Of all the layers discussed in section 1.1, it is the Kuomintang nation-building project in the era of martial law that has been most systematically repressive; hence it is this layer that democratization had to face head-on, not the colonial layers. Through its Sinicization campaign, it constructed the “pro-China” identity through the education system and language policy (Yi-huah, 2004; Chen, 2008). This system of forced assimilation, explored further in section 1.1, resulted in a significant gap between proficiency in Mandarin and that in one’s mother language as well as in culture of shame associated with the latter (Chen, 2008). However, the cultural imposition process was a failure and the democratization will then create a room for other identities to emerge (Stockton, 2002; Dreyer, 2003).

The process of identity formation was inherently subject to other types of corrosion. On the international level, the ousting of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) from the United Nations in 1971 (Pelaggi, 2020) and the normalizing of relations between the US and the PRC in 1979 damaged the credibility of the Kuomintang’s claim to represent “the only legitimate China” (Dreyer, 2003); the identity of Taiwan had ceased to be that of a China-in-exile waiting to be reunited, and rather a separate political entity needing to legitimize itself (Stockton, 2002; Yi-huah, 2004). In parallel with this, the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s, also called the “Taiwanese economic miracle”, produced an urban middle class and a local industrial bourgeoisie unwilling to tolerate exclusion from political power. The latter were to serve as a support base for the movement known as the Dangwai (*Outside the Party*, 党外): while officially existing outside the law because opposition political parties were illegal under martial law, the Dangwai gained a growing number of supporters by channeling the dissatisfaction of this emerging middle class into political opposition (Gold, 2003; Pelaggi, 2020).

Liberalization began with Chiang Ching-kuo, who, unlike his father Chiang Kai-shek, understood that the Kuomintang's survival depended on its ability to adapt to Taiwanese society, not its ability to rule it (Pelaggi, 2020). The tolerance of the Democratic Progressive Party, formally established in 1986, and the abolition of martial law in 1987 marked the end of a forty-year-long regime (Chen, 2008). But the most groundbreaking moment in terms of identity came in 1988 with Lee Teng-hui's election as president. He was the first Kuomintang president with a Taiwanese background and the first president to explicitly acknowledge that Taiwan's political legitimacy could no longer be based on claims of representing China (Stockton, 2002). Among other reform policies, a politically important gesture of Lee was the official memorialization of the victims of the February 28 Incident, which was a topic banned from public discussion by the government for decades. This act, which made it possible to talk about the previously untouchable topic, became an important step towards uniting the history of two categories that had long structured Taiwanese society along ethnic and political lines: on the one hand, the "mainlanders" (*waisheng ren*, 外省人), those who arrived on the island with the Nationalist government after 1945 and who, for decades, occupied a privileged position within the KMT party-state. On the other hand, the "native Taiwanese" (*bensheng ren*, 本省人), a broader category including both the Han population settled on the island since the Qing and Japanese periods and the indigenous peoples, who had instead been subject to political marginalization under martial law. It was precisely within this context that the rhetoric of the "New Taiwanese" (*xin Taiwan ren*, 新台湾人), sought to articulate a unifying civic identity capable of transcending the *waisheng/bensheng* dichotomy (Dreyer, 2003).

The first direct presidential election of 1996 represented a critical moment for this nascent citizenship, supra-ethnic civic identity, meaning identity based on joint political participation and territorial destiny rather than common ethnicity. China's military exercises in the Taiwan Strait days before the vote had the opposite effect

Beijing expected: instead of deterring Taiwanese voters and leading them to favor candidates more accommodating to China, this military pressure acted as a catalyst for a shared sense of identity. Hokkien, Hakka, mainland immigrants, and indigenous people, who had never voted together in the past four decades, were united for the first time because they felt they shared a political destiny threatened by external forces (Sendyka, 2020). KMT Lee Teng-hui's victory with 54% of the vote is considered by many observers to be the day modern Taiwanese citizenship was born (Rigger, 1999).

In this context, Lee Teng-hui's rhetoric of "New Taiwanese" (*xin Taiwan ren*, 新台湾人)⁷, coined during his presidency from 1988 to 2000, was far more than just a political slogan. It represented a coherent effort to rebuild Taiwan's collective identity based on citizens and territory, rather than on ethnicity or culture (Yi-huah, 2004). Essentially, Lee's idea was this: anyone who tied their political destiny to that of Taiwan could be considered a "New Taiwanese". Ethnicity, language, or origin, whether Hokkien, Hakka, mainland Chinese, or indigenous, no longer mattered, as much as their commitment to the island's future (Dreyer, 2003). This sense of belonging was no longer a matter of bloodline or original culture, but a matter of choice and actual existence: people are Taiwanese because they live in Taiwan, participate in its civic life, and collectively face its political uncertainties (Pelaggi, 2020, Hung, 2000).

This discourse-based approach follows a clear political logic and functions to mediate accumulated social tensions. In a society where the division between "native Taiwanese" (*bensheng ren*, 本省人) and "mainlanders" (*waisheng ren*, 外省人) still constructs electoral preferences and informal networks of solidarity, a supra-ethnic citizenship may provide a platform for political convergence. Rather than requiring

⁷ This term was firstly used explicitly by Lee Teng-hui in a 1998 speech, in which he stated that anyone living and working in Taiwan, regardless of ethnic origin, was a "new Taiwanese". The concept had already circulated in the intellectual debate of the 1990s as a response to the need to construct a post-martial political identity (Hung, 2000).

individuals or groups to relinquish their particular identities, it seeks to subordinate these distinctions to a broader sense of shared political belonging (Stockton, 2002; Pelaggi, 2020). Moreover, the second-generation mainland in Taiwan had, through their lived experiences, developed a stronger Taiwanese identity than the Chinese themselves. The discourse of the “New Taiwanese” therefore offered them a path toward integration without requiring them to renounce their familial origins. At the same time, for long-term settled Taiwanese, it ultimately acknowledges the specific legitimacy that forced Sinicization attempted to erase. Finally, for indigenous peoples, this discourse at least rhetorically provided a space to gain recognition within the national political community (Dreyer, 2003).

However, the rhetoric of “new Taiwanese” is historically problematic and cannot resolve the tensions it seeks to transcend (Stockton, 2002). Firstly, fifty years of discriminatory language policies have had cultural effects that cannot be undone by a change in presidential rhetoric (Sendyka, 2020, Chen 2008). Secondly, for generations, Taiwanese have carried deep-seated shame about their mother tongue, shame that has been internalized through years of humiliation in schools and society. The revival of Taiwanese Hokkien, Hakka and indigenous languages that started in the 1990s through more time at school and more exposure on television was a necessary step, but could not restore lost language skills, eliminate cultural hierarchies or repair the symbolic damage inflicted on those who have learned to view their mother tongue as a cultural inferiority (Chen, 2008).

On the political level, the electoral competition between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)⁸, a competition that dominated Taiwan’s political scene for the next two decades, continued to instrumentally reactivate ethnic-

⁸ The origins of the Democratic Progressive Party can be traced back to the formation of the “Dangwai” (*Outside the party*, 黨外) movement in the 1970s. This was an informal coalition of independent politicians and political activists who were unable to form any kind of political party due to the existing prohibition under the KMT’s single party rule. The establishment of the DPP in September 1986, still a technically illegal act under the regime of martial law which lasted until July 1987, represented the development of the movement from informal opposition into institutionalized opposition.

based divisions as a mobilization resource (Stockton, 2002; Schubert and Damm, 2011). The DPP was largely based among long-settled Taiwanese populations and in the south of the island, and tended to emphasize Taiwan's uniqueness to counter "contamination from the mainland"⁹. The KMT, however, had a strong base among mainlanders and in northern urban areas, and emphasized cultural ties with China (Yi-huah, 2004).

Therefore, while the democratic transition opened a space for debate, it did not resolve the underlying tensions surrounding Taiwanese identity (Yi-huah, 2004). What remained after 1987, and even more so after 1996, was not a stable and peaceful Taiwanese identity, but a field fraught with dynamic tension, where historical ethnic divisions, layered colonial memories, and new problems arising from relations with mainland China continue to reshape the outline of "us" in Taiwan (Stockton, 2002; Schubert and Damm, 2011; Pelaggi, 2020). Democracy provided the institutional tools to manage this conflict, but it did not, and cannot, solve the fundamental questions: What does it mean to be Taiwanese? Relative to whom is this identity defined? Who, living on the island, has the right to answer these questions?

1.3 The Relationship with China as a Driving Force of Civic Identity

The core issue analyzed in this section is the role China has played in promoting the development of Taiwanese nationalism. Academic literature shows that the political, military, and diplomatic pressure exerted by the People's Republic of China has indeed contributed to the formation and consolidation of a unique Taiwanese identity, making it the constitutive "other" defining the boundaries of the Taiwanese island

⁹ This distinctiveness is increasingly articulated, in DPP-associated discourse, through a selective reappraisal of the Japanese colonial period. Rather than being remembered solely as an experience of subjugation, Japanese rule is reframed as a formative episode of modernization and separateness from China. This is a reappraisal visible in the choice of terminology used to describe the period, the preservation and touristic valorisation of colonial-era heritage sites and the deployment of this shared history as a resource of soft power in Taiwan-Japan bilateral relations (Amae, 2011; Lin, 2022; He, 2014). This dynamic should not be read as uncontested consensus within Taiwanese society because it remains politically charged, criticized by pro-unification voices as an instrumentalization of history in service of a separate Taiwanese identity, and is analytically distinct from, if related to, the KMT/DPP ethnic division.

community (Schubert and Damm, 2011). While Taiwanese identity has deep historical roots, its formation spanning centuries of colonial rule and ethnic divisions between native Taiwanese and mainlanders, its modern form cannot be understood without considering the structural role of China as a continuous external pressure (Sendyka, 2020). In this context, Taiwan has evolved into a “community of shared destiny” with the threat from China acting as a catalyst for transcending internal divisions and promoting political integration (Stockton, 2002).

However, paradoxically, this effect is a direct result of the failure of the nationalist project of the Kuomintang discussed in section 1.2. As it was perceived as artificial and detached from life, the Chinese identity imposed by the state was rejected rather than accepted (Stockton, 2002): people whose ancestors came many decades before and who were oppressed during the February 28 Incident formed a permanent distrust towards the idea of “China” (Yi-huah, 2004). This is why local identity was not replaced, but rather lay dormant underground, gradually evolving into a form of cultural resistance (Sendyka, 2021). With the advent of democratization, these emotions, suppressed for decades, were revitalized and found space for open expression (Stockton, 2002).

In other words, the Kuomintang’s attempt to prevent the rise of Taiwanese nationalism inadvertently created ideal conditions for its growth (Stockton, 2002). This is only the first layer of meaning of the paradox. The second aspect concerns the relationship with mainland China: on the one hand, the Kuomintang claimed that Taiwan was an inseparable part of China, while on the other hand, it defined the PRC as an illegitimate regime that had to be overthrown, thus constructing a narrative that viewed China both as a motherland that needed to be recovered and as an enemy that had to be confronted (Stockton, 2002; Chen, 2008). This contradictory mentality, viewing China both as a reference point for identity and as a threat to survival, left a deep imprint on Taiwanese society. By the 1980s and 1990s, when the plan to recover the mainland

became clearly unsustainable, only the factor of China as a permanent external threat remained (Dittmer, 2004). As widely documented in nationalist literature, the perception of external threat has become one of the most powerful driving forces for internal unity and the consolidation of a unique national identity.

1.3.1 The threat as a generator of solidarity: the Strait crises

The mechanisms by which Chinese pressure has contributed to the solidification of Taiwanese identity are particularly evident in the analysis of a series of military crises in the Taiwan Strait. The First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954-1955), the Second (1958) and the Third (1995-1996) all marked a point where tensions between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China reached a level that could lead to military escalation and significantly impacted public opinion in Taiwan (Stockton, 2002). The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis is particularly noteworthy in the field of Taiwanese identity studies because it occurred precisely during a period when democratization provided tools for systematically measuring its impact on popular self-identity (Schubert and Damm, 2011). In 1995, in response to President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States (the first visit by a Taiwanese leader to the US since 1979), China conducted military exercises in the Strait, including the launch of short-range ballistic missiles near Taiwan's main ports. These exercises continued into 1996, just weeks before Taiwan's first direct presidential election. Beijing made it clear that this was intended to send a signal to candidates and voters that any move towards formal independence would have military consequences (Sendyka, 2020). As Rigger (1999) documented, the political outcome was quite the opposite of what was expected: Lee Teng-hui won the election by a large margin, and polls conducted a few

weeks after the exercise showed that the number of people who identified as “Taiwanese” had increased compared to previous surveys¹⁰.

This pattern: first Chinese pressure, then a strengthening of Taiwanese identity, has come back in different ways in many subsequent events (Stockton, 2002; Pelaggi, 2020) as, in March 2005, when the National People’s Congress passed the Anti-Secession Law¹¹ which specifically allowed for the use of force if Taiwan declared independence. This led to one of the largest protests in Taipei history, with an estimated hundreds of thousands involved. On 28th February 2004 a human chain of some 2 million people stretched across all Taiwan (Yi-huah, 2004). In this context, rhetorical speeches from Chinese leaders calling Taiwan a “rebellious province” or setting timeframes for unification further hardened public opinion in the island, making positions supporting reconciliation with Beijing more and more unpopular (Sendyka, 2020). Zhu and Lin (2001) provided a structural explanation of this phenomenon: they contend that the growth in Taiwanese nationalism is, to a great extent, a defensive response to a perceived threat of identity erosion, a threat that is expressed not only in a military sense but in cultural and political terms. The People’s Republic of China not only claims sovereignty over Taiwan, but systematically denies the existence of a unique Taiwanese identity, portraying Taiwanese nationalism as a bias artificially created by foreign powers or opportunistic political elites. This denial of the legitimacy of Taiwanese identity has, in fact, reinforced it: when faced with those who deny Taiwan’s existence as a distinct community, asserting Taiwanese identity becomes a primary political act, suspending all other internal divisions (Stockton, 2002, Pelaggi, 2020).

¹⁰ The concept of “external threat as a glue for identity” has a long tradition in the literature on Nationalism. In-group solidarity in response to out-group threat is one of the most well-documented mechanisms in the social psychology of groups. In the Taiwanese case, this mechanism was analyzed by Chu and Lin (2001) in the specific context of cross-strait relations, showing how each Chinese military or diplomatic escalation produced a measurable increase in Taiwanese self-identification in Election Study Center surveys.

¹¹ The term “anti-secession law” refers to the Anti-Secession Law passed by the National People’s Congress of the PRC on March 14, 2005. The law authorizes the use of “non-peaceful force” if Taiwan declares independence or if the possibility of peaceful reunification is “exhausted”. It was the first time China codified in legislation its willingness to use military force against Taiwan. The law’s passage sparked protests in Taipei with over a million participants, according to organizers.

This reactive strengthening of identity is clearly mirrored in longitudinal data, where the cumulative effect of external pressure and internal consolidation has fundamentally reshaped public consciousness. This is why systematic data on Taiwanese identity is one of the most important factors in analyzing the relationship between Chinese pressure and Taiwanese nationalism (Yi-huah, 2004) (Schubert and Damm, 2011). The Election Research Center at National Chengchi University has conducted a semi-annual Taiwanese self-identity survey since 1992 (Figure 1), asking respondents to identify themselves on a spectrum from “Taiwanese” to “Chinese”, with the option of “both”. The results of this time series record one of the most rapid and significant identity shifts during the period of democratic consolidation. In 1992, the starting year of the time series, approximately 17.6% of respondents identified only as “Taiwanese”, 25.5% identified as “Chinese”, and 46.4% chose “both”. By 2025, the proportion identifying only as “Taiwanese” exceeded 60%, while the proportion identifying as “Chinese” dropped to below 3%, and the proportion of those identifying as “both” shrank to about one-third of the total (National Chengchi University Election Research Center, 2025). This developmental trajectory is linear and almost uninterrupted: even during periods of greatest détente in cross-strait relations, such as the Ma Ying-jeou administration (2008-2016), when economic and diplomatic relations between Taipei and Beijing reached their peak, this trend did not show a significant reversal.

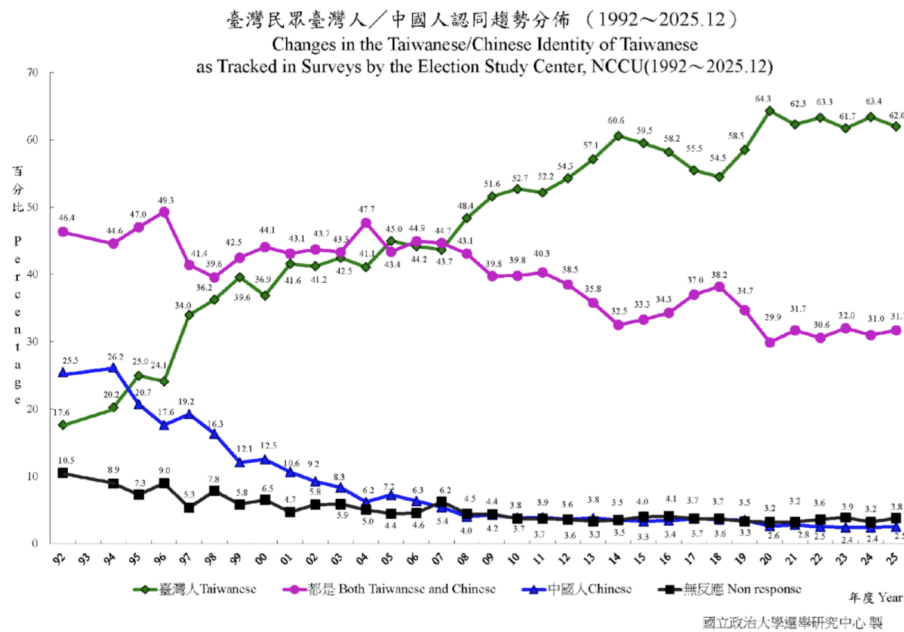


Figure 1: Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese (1992–2025.12).

Source: Election Study Center, NCCU (2025).

The fact that this trend did not reverse during periods of external pressure is of significant analytical importance. If Taiwanese nationalism were merely a temporary response to Chinese pressure, it would be normal to expect a decline in Taiwanese self-identity during periods of relative calm. However, this did not occur, indicating that over time, identity transformation has acquired its own autonomy and inertia, no longer influenced by fluctuations in external pressure (Schubert and Damm, 2011). It can be said that Taiwanese identity has “detached” itself from the Chinese factors that contributed to its formation, becoming an autonomous social fact, and continuously self-replicating through institutional mechanisms such as political processes, education, and the lives of Taiwanese citizens (Brown, 2004; Sendyka, 2021). This situation is crucial to answering the analytical question posed at the beginning of this section. China has always been an input factor to Taiwanese nationalism, but not a sufficient condition (Schubert and Damm, 2011, Yi-huah, 2004). It provided the external conditions to accelerate and solidify a process of identity formation with its own historical roots; however, once this process began, it developed an internal logic

that no longer depended on, or rather, became increasingly independent of, the continuous pressure exerted by China. In other words, Taiwanese nationalism is not a purely passive and reactive nationalism: it has become a nationalism with its own initiative and cultural connotations. It is historical and institutional, capable of self-replication independently of the threats that led to its birth (Schubert and Damm, 2011).

However, while Taiwanese identity has demonstrated sociological autonomy in the face of military threats, its stability in the face of another powerful factor of integration remains to be examined: economic ties (Schubert and Damm, 2011). Taiwan is so economically dependent on China that formal political independence is often regarded as not only diplomatically unrealistic but also economically costly (Dittmer, 2004). China is in fact Taiwan's largest trading partner, absorbing approximately 40% of its exports, and hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese entrepreneurs and workers have built their businesses and wealth within the Chinese economy (Stockton, 2002; Pelaggi, 2020). This cross-strait economic dependence is real and structural, and cannot be ignored in any serious analysis of cross-strait relations.

In any case, the trajectory of Taiwanese identity surveys suggests that this economic dependence has not translated into identity convergence (Schubert and Damm, 2011). For example, at the height of economic integration¹², Taiwanese identity not only did not weaken but actually strengthened. Brown (2004) interprets this phenomenon as evidence that identity is not a variable of economic dependence: people can conduct business with someone without identifying with that person. In fact, direct contact with mainland China through business travel, trade, and daily clashes between the political and social systems of both sides often reinforces rather than diminishes the sense of cultural and institutional distance between Taiwan and mainland China (Dittmer, 2004; Pelaggi, 2020).

¹² During President Ma Ying-jeou's administration from 2008 to 2016, with the signing of trade agreements like the ECFA, the opening of direct flights, and the initiation of free trade agreement negotiations.

The most extreme example of this dynamic is the 2014 Sunflower Movement. Tens of thousands of Taiwanese students occupied the parliament building for 24 days, blocking the ratification of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement signed by the Ma Ying-jeou administration without enough parliamentary debate (Schubert and Damm, 2011; Dreyer, 2003). This was not simply protectionism or isolationism, but a resistance to being incorporated into mainland China; the Taiwanese people feared that integration would threaten their democratic sovereignty (Stockton, 2002; Sendyka, 2021). The protagonists of the Sunflower Movement were young Taiwanese who were born and raised in the post-democratization era, and this protest marked the political birth of a generation who later expressed their political leanings in the 2016 elections, leading the Democratic Progressive Party to its largest number of seats in the Legislative Yuan in history (Schubert and Damm, 2011). This event reveals that economic integration with China has not eliminated Taiwanese nationalism; on the contrary, it has made a generation that grew up in Taiwan's democratic system acutely aware of the potential erosion of democratic sovereignty that integration with China could bring (Schubert and Damm, 2011; Sendyka, 2021).

One final element deserves attention in understanding how the relationship with China has shaped the specific form of Taiwanese nationalism. As mentioned, the broad strengthening of Taiwanese identity in polls has not translated into a corresponding increase in support for formal independence as an immediate political goal (Rigger, 2003). Election Study Center data shows that the most widespread position among the Taiwanese population is that of maintaining the status quo (Figure 2), so basically a state of institutionalized ambiguity in which Taiwan neither declares independence nor accepts reunification, *de facto* retaining all the characteristics of an independent state without *de jure* claiming that recognition (Rigger, 2003; Dittmer, 2004). At first glance, this position may seem to be a form of indecision or fear, but Schubert (2004) has reinterpreted this as a rational strategic choice that reflects a sophisticated understanding of geopolitical constraints. Those Taiwanese who favor the status quo

are not giving up their distinct identity: they are choosing not to put that identity at risk by making a formal declaration that could provoke a Chinese military response.

One of the most interesting particularities of the Taiwanese case is the dissociation between identity and formal political status: it is possible, and indeed common, to have a very strong Taiwanese identity while rejecting formal independence on grounds of strategic prudence (Schubert and Damm, 2011; Dittmer, 2004).

This finding has important implications for the initial analytical question: if Taiwanese nationalism was merely a product of Chinese pressure, then it would be normal to expect it to push for independence as a logical response to that pressure. As Taiwanese identity is accompanied by a pragmatic support of the status quo, this suggests that Taiwanese nationalism has evolved its own response to Chinese pressure in a more sophisticated way than a purely reactive model might predict (Dittmer, 2004; Rigger, 2003). This is not an escape from China, but a kind of controlled coexistence with its counterpart: an identity that has solidified under pressure and has learned to exist, with remarkable resilience, in the permanent condition of unrecognized sovereignty.

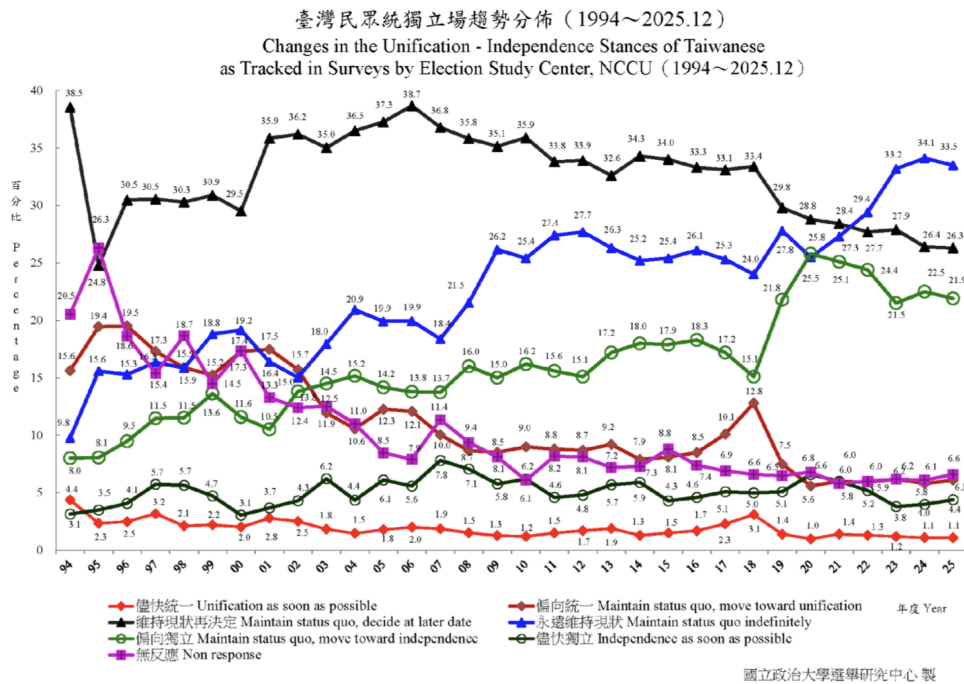


Figure 2: Changes in the Unification - Independence Stances of Taiwanese (1994–2025.12). Source: Election Study Center, NCCU (2025b)

In conclusion, the answer to the initial question, is China a driving force for Taiwanese nationalism?, must be articulated on at least three levels. Historically, China has provided the external conditions- military threat, diplomatic pressure, the negative model of authoritarian rule- that have accelerated and cohered an identity-building process that had its own historical roots, rooted in centuries of colonialism and the ethnic fractures described in the previous paragraphs. Dynamically, each Chinese escalation has produced a strengthening effect on Taiwanese identity measurable in surveys, making the relationship between external pressure and identity consolidation one of the most well-documented mechanisms in the literature on contemporary nationalism. Structurally, however, Taiwanese nationalism has acquired a certain autonomy over time that makes it irreducible to the Chinese variable: it reproduces itself through democratic institutions, historical memory, and the cultural practices of a society that has developed its own internal coherence independent of the continuity of

the external threat. China remains the primary interlocutor and catalyst for Taiwanese identity; but it is no longer, if it ever was, the sole or decisive constitutive factor.

1.4 The New “Others”: The Arrival of New Immigrants

The evolution of Taiwanese identity and the continued existence of the “new Taiwanese” narrative were put under pressure by two waves of immigration since the 1990s (Lan, 2008). These waves have radically altered Taiwan’s demographic structure (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026).

Historically, the roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to the late 1980s, when the lifting of martial law (1987) paved the way for Taiwanese people to visit relatives and travel to mainland China for the first time, triggering the first wave of cross-strait marriages (Lan, 2008). This period marked Taiwan’s first transition from a relatively closed society to one with an exponentially growing immigrant population: from a mere 30,288 in 1991 to 428,240 in 2006, immigrants accounted for 2% of the total population in just over a decade (Lan, 2008).

This transformation was not accidental but driven by the needs of what is known in the literature as a “developmental immigrant nation” (Chien, 2026). Under this model, population flows are strategically adjusted to address pressing economic needs and population decline. In fact, Taiwan’s fertility rate has plummeted from 5.8 in 1960 to 1.1 in 2007, making the importation of labor and “fertility resources” indispensable (Cheng, 2013; Liang, 2023). This shift is driven primarily by two pillars: labor migration (accounting for approximately 79% of arrivals) and marriage migration (accounting for approximately 18%) (Lan, 2008).

The first pillar consists of female migrant workers, almost all of whom come from Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand), to fill a growing “caregiving gap” (Lan, 2008; Liang, 2023). This gap stems from profound social

changes: the participation rate of Taiwanese women in the formal labor market rose from 39.1% in 1988 to 51.1% in 2018, resulting in many families lacking traditional caregivers to care for the elderly and disabled (Liang, 2023). The state's response has been to institutionalize migrant women's presence as temporary labor, ensuring social reproduction, but depriving them of any permanent residency rights (Chien, 2026; Liang, 2023; Lan, 2008). This reliance has grown significantly over time: as of October 2023¹³, 232,996 migrant workers in Taiwan were classified as social welfare workers, accounting for approximately 31% of all migrant workers in the country. By 2024¹⁴, the total number of migrant workers from Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand had exceeded 810,000. Despite their central role in sustaining Taiwan's care economy, migrant domestic caregivers remain excluded from the Labor Standards Act, leaving them without protections on minimum wages or regulated working hours. Recent reforms have introduced a "medium-skilled" pathway to more permanent status, but the proportion of reclassified workers remains low, with only 14.88% among caregivers having obtained this status¹⁵.

The second pillar involves immigrant brides, whose arrival addresses a "bride shortage", a problem that particularly affects Taiwan's working class and rural men (Lan, 2008). As Taiwanese women gain greater economic independence, men are often excluded from the local marriage market because they tend to postpone or refuse marriage if they cannot find a partner of equal or higher status (Momesso and Zani, 2021; Lan, 2008). Immigrant brides have become a structural feature of Taiwan's demographic landscape: between 1998 and 2003, transnational marriages accounted for 20% to 28% of all newly registered marriages, peaking at 16% in 2003 before stabilizing at around 7% in recent years (Lu and Yeung, 2024). As of 2024, a total of 366,591 mainland Chinese spouses had married Taiwanese nationals, of whom

¹³ Ministry of Labor, Taiwan (2023) Statistics on Migrant Workers. Available at: <https://english.mol.gov.tw>

¹⁴ National Immigration Agency, Taiwan (2024) Statistics on Foreign Workers. Available at: <https://www.immigration.gov.tw>

¹⁵ Ministry of Labor, Taiwan (2025) Foreign Intermediate Skilled Workforce Program Statistics. Available at: <https://english.mol.gov.tw>

343,272 were female¹⁶, making them the largest group of foreign spouses in Taiwan. By 2022¹⁷, nearly 91% of all foreign spouses in Taiwan were female, underscoring the deeply gendered nature of this migration flow. Among non-Chinese foreign spouses, Vietnamese nationals top the list at 116,883, followed by Indonesians (31,971) and Filipinos (11,604)¹⁸.

Although these two types of migration are legally distinct because labor is considered temporary and mobile, while marriage is for settlement, they both occupy a hierarchical “other” position based on class, gender, and racial prejudices (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). These women are like “insiders and outsiders”: while they physically integrate into the intimacy of family relationships and assume daily care responsibilities, they are symbolically out of place within the nation’s “imagined community” (Zani, 2020; Lan, 2008). In this context, the bodies of immigrant women become “boundary markers” determining who is eligible to be a member of the Taiwanese nation and who must remain “outsiders” (Lan, 2008).

The discourse of “New Taiwanese”, heavily promoted in the 1990s and touted as an open form of citizenship, is now facing a fundamental challenge. The emergence of these new subjects, who are drastically different from traditional ethnic groups on the island of Taiwan, neither mainland Chinese nor indigenous, and belonging to any traditional ethnic classification, poses a completely new challenge. It reveals the true boundaries of Taiwan’s inclusivity with a precision unattainable in debates about China: who can become a “New Taiwanese” under what conditions, and at what cost in terms of identity? It reveals the true boundaries of Taiwan’s inclusiveness: who can

¹⁶ National Immigration Agency, Taiwan (2024) Statistics on Mainland Spouses. Available at: <https://www.immigration.gov.tw>

¹⁷ National Immigration Agency, Taiwan (2022) Statistics on Foreign Spouses. Available at: <https://www.immigration.gov.tw>

¹⁸ National Immigration Agency, Taiwan (2024) Statistics on Foreign Spouses. Available at: <https://www.immigration.gov.tw>

become a “New Taiwanese” under what conditions, and at what cost their identity will be established? (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013).

Chapter 2: Immigration and Citizenship in Taiwan

The purpose of this chapter is to retrace the legal-administrative framework that controls marriage and labor migration in Taiwan, using the legal text and secondary sources and, in the cases when the interview material provides insights about a particular legal process, thirteen semi-structured interviews that have been conducted in Taipei between April and May 2026, as well as two interviews with social workers from a new immigrant care center. The interviews are used in this context for a very limited purpose: they are employed to examine whether the officially constructed timelines and requirements are recognizable in the experience of migrant women who go through them.

2.1 The Taiwanese Immigration System

This section outlines the structure of the Taiwanese immigration system, beginning with the demographic pressures that make the state structurally dependent on migration. It then examines the legal architecture that governs entry, residence and citizenship and the distinct regimes applied to Southeast Asian and Chinese women.

2.1.1 Demographic context: population decline and dependence on migration

The legal regime analyzed in this chapter needs to be read as part of a demographic trend which has placed Taiwan in such a position that it is structurally dependent on immigration, not only to maintain its labor force, but also to make up a considerable portion of its annual births. The country's total fertility rate dropped to 0.695 in 2025, a new low and, at that time, the lowest fertility rate ever recorded in the world (Ministry of the Interior [MOI], Department of Household Registration, 2026). It had been 0.885 in the previous year, a number even lower than the official rate projected by the government for the year of 0.87 (MOI, Department of Household Registration,

2026). In this context, birth rates dropped to 107,812 in 2025 and marriages to 104,37 and both record lows compared to more than 400,000 births annually during the period of the 1970s and 1980s (MOI, Department of Household Registration, 2026). Moreover, marriage and childbirth are becoming increasingly delayed processes: first marriages have risen to an average of 33.1 years for males and 31.1 years for females while first-time motherhood stands at an average of 31.7 years (MOI, Department of Household Registration, 2026).

For these reasons, the year 2025 marks Taiwan's entry into the "super-aged" stage, as the country's population aged 65 or above constitutes over 20 percent (MOI, Department of Household Registration, 2026). The population, which peaked at about 23.6 million in 2019, has dropped to 23,299,132 by the end of 2025. The long-term population projections made by the National Development Council (NDC), Executive Yuan, keep being lowered due to the discrepancy between the actual number of births and those estimated earlier by the officials. Thus, the Council's 2024 population projection puts the figure at less than 20 million in 2067 under the conditions of medium scenario assumptions, while according to an updated "ultra-low fertility" projection prepared in 2026, the number is estimated at less than 12 million in 2065, instead of 14.37 million estimated to be reached by 2070 (National Development Council [NDC], 2026). The share of the population aged 45 to 64 years in the labor force is projected to reach 60 percent by 2070 (National Development Council [NDC], 2026).

It is upon such a demographic foundation that the government has based its reasoning to justify expanding its use of migrant labor. Taiwan had around 873,000 registered migrant workers by March 2026, rising to one million when the undocumented migrant workers are taken into account, representing more than five percent of Taiwan's total resident population (Ministry of Labor [MOL], 2026). The Cabinet took measures towards loosening the restrictions on hiring quotas in late 2025, stating that

low birth rate, aging population and lack of skilled labor are the main reasons behind such measures (Focus Taiwan, October 2025). In this context, long-term elder care is provided by roughly 228,000 migrant caregivers and many Taiwanese families depend as their sole means of long-term care (Ministry of Labor [MOL], 2026). The marriage migrants represent a smaller but equally significant proportion of the productive force: out of roughly 200,000 foreign spouses living in Taiwan, about 150,000 are employed (Ministry of Labor [MOL], 2026).

Moreover, the phenomenon of marriage migration has been an important factor in contributing disproportionately to the declining annual number of births in Taiwan. During the time of high-level immigration from Southeast Asia to Taiwan through marriage migration, babies born from foreign mothers comprised almost one out of every ten babies born in Taiwan from 2005 to 2014 (Lin et al., 2021). In more current single year birth cohort statistics, babies born from immigrant mothers represented about 6.6 percent (Hsieh et al., 2011).

This is the concrete context in which the legal regime examined in the following sections of this chapter and the “New Taiwanese” discourse of integration presented in Chapter 1 must be understood. The official statistics clearly reveal that the state is dependent upon migration, both that of laborers under contract and, in the past, that of marriage migrants for reproduction of a population and workforce that it cannot anymore reproduce itself. This dependency is the backdrop against which the conditional, suspicious and graduated legal regime surrounding the very same migrants, detailed in sections 2.2 to 2.4 below, must be judged: the state is in need of migrants demographically and economically, but is legally kept at an arm’s length from them.

2.1.2 The Legal Architecture: The Nationality Act and the Cross-Strait Act

Until the late 1980s, there was no immigration law in Taiwan. For decades, Taiwan had been isolated from international migration due to the Cold War period, acting predominantly as an emigration state; the government regulated entry and exit of foreigners only through its border controls but not by means of an immigration policy (Cheng, 2013). This situation changed since the late 1990s as the marriage migration of immigrants from Southeast Asia and mainland China, along with the employment of contract workers, turned Taiwan into an immigration state despite the lack of its recognition (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026). There were two laws that marked this transition. In 1999, the Immigration Act (Taiwan Immigration Act, TIA) transformed the previous border control into the migration law of entry, residence and deportation of foreigners, and, the next year, the Nationality Act (Taiwan Nationality Act, TNA) established the legal conditions for the naturalization of the foreigner as the citizen of the Republic of China (Cheng, 2013).

The two laws function in a complementary way in order to accomplish a double goal, as indicated by Cheng (2013). The first one deals with exclusion and the second with assimilation: the TIA deals with admission and residence, and the TNA regulates who, from amongst those admitted, should be allowed citizenship. Residence is itself conditional to the marriage in the case of marriage immigrants. Indeed, Article 23 of the TIA states that the woman's residency depends on her marital status and in cases when the marriage is established fraudulently, the woman loses the residency permit (Cheng, 2013). Naturalization represents a further condition: it is not automatic because of residency since it depends on specific conditions defined in the TNA and its Enforcement Rules.

There is another layer of the system which is not always considered and that concerns naturalization itself. Indeed, in addition to naturalization there is household registration

(or hukou): this last step allows the woman to exercise citizenship and it is removed if the woman divorces her husband, in case he dies or in case the marriage is considered fraudulent (with a few exceptions concerning motherhood) (Cheng, 2013).

This multi-level hierarchy of migration, residence, naturalization and registration as resident is aptly described by Ong's (1999) idea of "graduated citizenship": states grant different levels of rights and entitlements to people based on considerations of utility, loyalty and ease of governance and not on a single grant of all the rights as a reward for crossing one single line of legal compliance. The migration regime of Taiwan does not merely divide migrants into "in" and "out" categories but creates a hierarchical gradation of increasingly secure, yet increasingly revocable, statuses that have to be negotiated in order by a migrant woman (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026).

Such a general structure does not, however, cover all foreign spouses alike (Lan, 2008; Chen & Wu, 2014). The immigrants from mainland China, for instance, fall under a completely different legislative document, the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, commonly referred to as the Cross-Strait Act, adopted in 1992 and later amended many times (Chen & Wu, 2014). While TIA and TNA talk about "foreigners" and "nationals", the Cross-Strait Act refers to the same spatial division as in the post-war constitution of the Republic of China (ROC), dividing the Chinese nationals into those who reside in the "free area" (Taiwan and its islands) and in those in the "mainland area", under the PRC's jurisdiction (Chen & Wu, 2014). In constitutional terms, the two are ROC nationals, but their difference lies in different household registration, which can be changed into "free area" residence only through a separate procedure that takes longer (Lan, 2008). Sovereignty issues between Taiwan and PRC allow Taiwan to put the mainland spouses in a third category, different from foreigners and ordinary nationals, often justified by concerns over national security and political identity (Lan, 2008; Chen & Wu, 2014).

This, however, stands in stark contrast to how the state discourse frames such architecture. Instead, the discourse used by the state will present policies that aim to help marriage immigrants, such as the New Immigrants Development Fund (founded in 2003 and later renamed in 2015) and orientation programs and language lessons, as examples of a caring state that helps new citizens integrate into their new nation (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). The difference between the discourse on integration and the status hierarchy presented above is not an error in the discourse of the state: this difference is precisely what is being proven through this thesis.

2.2 Two Separate Regimes: Southeast Asian and Chinese Spouses

The immigrants' wives from Southeast Asia and China may be considered to belong to the officially adopted idea of inclusiveness through marriages and motherhoods. However, the legal status of the women in question is such that it places them in the position of foreigners, where each particular group has its own logic of suspicion applied to it. It is shown clearly by Cheng (2013), who herself differentiates the cases in question and decides to exclude the Chinese migration from her study because the political and legal situation of the Chinese spouse is inseparable from the general context of hostility between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. While the former, Southeast Asian immigrants, are perceived by Cheng as being less culturally and economically developed, poor, rural and backward, the latter, the Chinese immigrants, are considered to be political enemies (Cheng, 2013). This differentiation is not merely social, but deeply institutionalized. Even though both groups enter Taiwan under the same domestic framework of marriage and motherhood, the legal system translates these distinct forms of suspicion into two separate and unequal paths toward full citizenship (Lan, 2008; Chen & Wu, 2014).

Following the end of the martial law in 1987, Taiwan has transformed into a *de facto* 'immigration state' through marriage migration (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). Data

reveals that 384,000 marriages have been recorded between the Taiwanese nationals and residents of China, Hong Kong, and Macau, although less than half of these couples (157,000 spouses) have attained permanent resident status or citizenship in Taiwan. In this regard, the naturalization rate of these mainlanders (approx. 40%) is in contrast with that of the foreign spouses, mainly Vietnamese, Indonesian, Filipino and Thai immigrants numbering 210,000 with 141,000 of them (approx. 67%) naturalized in Taiwan (MOI, Department of Household Registration, 2026; NIA, National Immigration Agency, 2026). Mainland wives are thus not a marginal group, but a bigger one compared to the second group, and so their process is a matter of policy decision and not an accident (Cheng, 2013).

Foreign spouses from Southeast Asia and elsewhere who are not Chinese are processed under the usual provisions of the Nationality Act: marriage registration, Alien Resident Card and residency for at least three years before renouncing their old nationality and initiating the naturalization process, which will take another one to five years (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). Immigration authorities say the entire procedure takes four to eight years (Chen & Wu, 2014). In contrast, a mainland spouse goes through the Cross-Strait Act in a process that involves several stages that are much more numerous and are more strictly monitored: after completing marriage registration, the mainland spouse is eligible to apply for dependent residence and, after four years in which the spouse maintains a minimum of 183 days' residence annually, the spouse can apply for long-term residence (Chen & Wu, 2014; Lan, 2008). Following another two years and only after having deregistered from her mainland household, she will be eligible for permanent residence (Chen & Wu, 2014; Zani, 2018). This process, which is already a six-year process, actually represents a big improvement compared to the pre-2009 procedure which provided no right to reside after arriving, very strict entry quotas and took ten or more years to complete (Chen & Wu, 2014; Zani, 2018).

Moreover, after having obtained permanent residence, mainland spouses are not put on an equal civic level with a Southeast Asian naturalized spouse because, according to Friedman (2010), there is another period following naturalization when a mainland spouse is still barred from civil service employment and from family reunification rights enjoyed by other citizens. With the added monitored period taken into account, the total time span for attaining civic equality may go up to twelve years, twice as much as that required by the spouse from Southeast Asia, and significantly more than the six years required to gain permanent residency alone (Friedman, 2010; Chao, 2004).

This difference in timing is not an artificial one brought about by differences in how the statutes have been written; rather, it is the way in which the constitutional ambiguity discussed in section 2.1.2 finds expression (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). As stated by Tseng & Wu (2011), the ROC and the PRC have never formally renounced the legal fiction regarding their civil war over who has the right to rule over all of China and this means that both sides can treat the very same people as their own nationals but yet as foreigners. In this regard, the Cross-Straits Act capitalizes on this constitutional ambiguity and it allows Taiwan to deny many of the fast-track procedures available to South-East Asian spouses to mainland spouses without ever designating them as “foreigners” (Cheng, 2013; Chen & Wu, 2014). In this sense, both regimes can be viewed as variants of the general logic of exclusion-assimilation of Taiwan but adapted to different types of otherness: in the first one, to ethnic otherness, and in the second one, to political otherness (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

It should also be noted that the ambiguous position of Chinese marriage migrants in Taiwan has not been stable over time. In particular, Friedman’s (2010) research on this matter emphasizes the fact that the concrete ratio between restriction and accommodation was changing throughout the period of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party administration headed by Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008)

and the subsequent period of the Beijing-friendly Kuomintang administration headed by Ma Ying-jeou. As a result, the requirements concerning residence and labor rights of mainland spouses have been changing during the rule of Chen Shui-bian under the influence of the political situation related to the demographic path to unification; some restrictions were being lifted during the rule of Ma Ying-jeou, especially those related to the 2009 reform. This reform granted the right to work more readily and reduced the waiting period to obtain citizenship (through household registration) from eight years (or more) to six years, whereas Southeast Asian spouses typically reach this status in four years (Chen & Wu, 2014; Zani, 2018).

Nowadays, this political sensitivity with regards to cross-strait relations has not diminished; rather, it has only become more intense during this period. From April 2025 onward, the government in Taiwan has mandated that citizens who were born in China present evidence that they have canceled their household registration in mainland China. This imposition is strictly linked to the context of rising geopolitical tensions and the coercive policies of the PRC towards the island (Global Taiwan Institute, 2026). This has been done after the case involving Li Zhenxiu, the first China-born legislator, who had her eligibility questioned since she was found to have retained her household registration in mainland China even as she was running for office. As a result of the Li Zhenxiu incident, the Mainland Affairs Council has mandated in May 2026 the further strengthening of the verification process to ensure that a mainland spouse intending to run for office has renounced Chinese citizenship and has undergone ten years of single household registration in Taiwan (Taipei Times, 4 May 2026). In this context, civic associations managed by mainland spouses have themselves been placed under suspicion as carriers of the PRC's influence activities (AEI, 2026).

In other words, the timing criterion examined above is not simply an inert legal construction but a dynamic element that is constantly being renegotiated in light of the changing state of affairs between the two shores. The timing requirement analyzed

above, in other words, is not a static legal artefact: it continues to be actively renegotiated in direct response to the fluctuating state of cross-strait relations.

2.3 Becoming Citizens: Naturalization Requirements as Instruments of Control

According to Cheng (2013), Taiwan's naturalization policy must not be interpreted as impartial administrative thresholds but rather as legal translations of gender, class and ethnic discrimination. There are three conditions that make up the framework of naturalization.

2.3.1 Financial Adequacy

The provisions of the Nationality Act stipulate that the applicant must establish his/her financial independence: this is an obligation that stems from the perception of the woman as being financially dependent due to taking care of children (Cheng, 2013). Translated into the minimum income and assets that have been in effect since 2004, this requirement was widely criticized for overlooking the true economic situation of transnational couples and valuing the right to citizenship (Cheng, 2013). In December 2008 the requirement was revised so that the properties of the husband and in-laws were taken into account as well; however, this move did not free the woman from financial burden and, as Cheng (2013) puts it, shifted the responsibility for her adequacy onto the husband's household.

The interviews also provide evidence of the economic dependence experienced by some migrant women within the family. A social worker at a Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center identified economic dependence as one of the main difficulties faced by new immigrant women, explaining that many struggle to earn their own income and therefore rely on their Taiwanese spouses for financial support:

“Many new immigrants, especially women, have difficulty making their own money because they often have to rely on their Taiwanese spouses for financial support. [...] In some families, the husband controls the household finances and does not give his wife enough money. As a result, the wife becomes financially dependent on him and has to obey him because she has no independent source of income”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

The social worker further connected women’s economic dependence to traditional gender roles within Taiwanese families, in which women are expected to prioritize domestic and caregiving responsibilities. As he explained:

“Traditionally, in Chinese culture, the man is expected to work outside the home while the woman stays inside the home and takes care of the family. [...] Many immigrant women are expected not only to take care of their own children but also to care for their parents-in-law”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

2.3.2 Language Proficiency

Since 2005, candidates must prove proficiency in Mandarin Chinese or familiarity with local life, through recognized courses or a special examination. Although formally gender-neutral, the government’s own draft law made clear that the provision was intended for immigrant mothers, on the assumption that a woman’s language skills determine her ability to raise and educate Taiwan-born children (Cheng, 2013).

The interviews suggest that this requirement operates less as a single test than as a durable, multi-year filter that some women never completed. Carmen, an Indonesian-

Chinese spouse married for over two decades, enrolled in the 72-hour course required for the ID but was unable to complete it after a serious illness interrupted her attendance:

“I felt very pressured because learning Mandarin was extremely difficult for me. [...] Every day, we had to read a book as part of the class. The rule was that if you could not read, you could not go home. [...] After I was discharged from the hospital, I did not go back to school. I stopped attending the classes”.

(Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026)

Over two decades after her arrival in Taiwan, Carmen is still without Taiwanese citizenship. Her case demonstrates the fact that what is presented as an individual responsibility can, if stopped for some reason, preclude the possibility of acquiring citizenship forever, because apparently the process is unable to be continued from where it was left. In addition, the requirement is different depending on the linguistic and educational background of an individual, although the statute presents it as universal. Josefina, a woman who has Chinese origins but was brought up and naturalized as a Filipino citizen in the Philippines, possessed a Chinese citizenship certificate and received elementary education in Chinese. For these reasons, she said that her own naturalization was relatively quick:

“I don’t need to learn Chinese because I graduated from elementary education for six years in the Philippines. So I don’t need to undergo the training, and I don’t need to learn the Chinese curriculum. [...] I think the document was processed a little bit faster because I already had my Chinese citizenship”.

(Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026)

In comparison with the process of Carmen, the case of Josefina also reveals that the language requirement, which is seen as a means of gendered control by Cheng (2013), does not affect all candidates equally: for example, a female candidate who has received previous education in Chinese-language studies, like Josefina, moves through this formality at a much lower cost. Although the law considers the language requirement to be uniform, in practice it favors those who have linguistic and cultural capital similar to the Han Chinese. This is a dimension the law does not name but that visibly shapes how burdensome the identical formal requirement turns out to be in practice.

2.3.3 Renunciation of Prior Nationality and Household Registration

The immigrant is required to give up her original citizenship, which Cheng (2013) interprets as an insistence on exclusivity of political allegiance rather than simply a formality, further underscored by the patriarchal requirement that the wife have the same citizenship as her husband. Mainland immigrants do not give up their domestic residence registration in mainland China, because the ROC constitution does not consider the PRC as a foreign state whose citizenship can be renounced.

As per the interviews, the act of renunciation comes with a practical price besides the symbolic aspect. This is illustrated by the experience of Nena, a spouse from Indonesia, who naturalized after three years of marriage:

“The problem is that to go everywhere, we need a visa, while with an Indonesian passport we don’t need any visa to go abroad. [...] This is something that I really don't understand because in general, why [can’t] people [...] have two passports, you know?”.

(Nena, interview, 23 May 2026)

The story ties the abstract notion that the household registration system “can be revoked from her if she divorces her husband [or] he dies” (section 2.1) to the practical outcome of an economic nature: without Taiwanese citizenship, the widow may have her marital property, insurance and inheritance fully claimed by her husband’s family, leaving her with no legal standing whatsoever.

It should be noted, however, that under the Taiwanese Civil Code, a spouse’s right to inherit is not conditional on household registration: Articles 1138 and 1144 grant the widow spouse a right to inherit regardless of citizenship or hukou status. A case decided by the Hsinchu District Court (Case No. 97 Jiasu 7, 2008) confirms this in a situation strikingly similar to the one Nena describes: a Vietnamese widow, married to a Taiwanese citizen who died intestate, had never obtained ROC citizenship. The other heirs argued that her nationality deprived her of any right to inherit. The court rejected this claim, holding that Article 18 of the Land Act, which bars Vietnamese nationals from registering real estate rights in Taiwan in the absence of reciprocity between the two states, governs only the form her inheritance of real property must take, not whether she may inherit at all: she could not have land registered in her own name, but nothing prevented her from inheriting movable property such as insurance policies, stocks or bank deposits.

Nena’s case, then, illustrates not an absence of legislation but a practical barrier layered onto a right that already exists and has already been upheld in Taiwanese courts. The real vulnerability lies elsewhere. A wife without Taiwanese citizenship typically holds an Alien Resident Certificate issued on the basis of her marriage to a Taiwanese citizen. Under Article 31 of the same Act, that certificate lapses once the marriage that justified it ends, subject to a narrow set of statutory exceptions concerning child custody or divorce due to domestic violence. It is within this administrative window that her vulnerability is concentrated: she must prove her

identity to banks and insurers without a local ID, regularize her own residency status, and do so, as the Hsinchu case shows, often without knowing that Taiwanese courts have already recognized her right to inherit, and often without fluency in Mandarin to find that out. What Nena's account exposes, in other words, is not the absence of a right but the absence of the time, legal knowledge and means required to claim it, at the very moment her husband's family holds every procedural and informational advantage over her.

2.3.4 The Administrative Geography of Naturalization

Another layer of stratification, not mentioned in the text of the TIA or TNA, arose separately from two interviewees who had never met each other before: different municipal departments deal with naturalization and integration programs in different cities, which demonstrates that there is a different institutional vision of how the subject of immigration is seen. This was described in particular by Faye, who is a Malaysian spouse and has been residing in Taipei for more than thirty years:

“Taipei City, new immigrants are under the civil department [...] here it's like everybody is Taiwanese. [...] New Taipei City puts all the immigrants in the education department, because according to the government, they need to be educated. [...] In the South, [they] have a social department — someone who needs social subsidies, social help. [...] Weaker group in this society”.

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

A social worker at a Taipei new-immigrant care center, interviewed independently, offered the identical distinction and drew out its implications:

“Immigrant affairs are under the Civil Affairs Department, which means that immigrants are considered part of society. However, in New Taipei City, they are under the Education Department, which gives the impression that new immigrants are people who need to be educated. [...] Even the name of our organization is interesting. We are called a Care Center, but not all immigrants actually need care. [...] I think this puts a label on immigrants”.

(Social worker, Taipei New Immigrants Care Center, 14 May 2026)

It is noteworthy to highlight the convergence of two independent data sources here from a methodology point of view: it supports, from the administrative data set up to the higher level, Ong’s (1999) claim that graduated citizenship results from not only the legislation at the national level but also from the day-to-day bureaucracy of the sub-national governments who decide the status of each newcomer either as citizen, student or welfare recipient city by city.

In conclusion, all these criteria share a similar logic: they all relate to factors of the life of the migrant woman which, in theory, have nothing to do with her entitlement to stay legally in the country: finances, linguistic competence, nationality or residency, yet each criterion uses these factors to assess her eligibility for citizenship (Cheng, 2013). This logic is typical of immigration policies in many countries of East Asia, particularly in Japan and South Korea, where the process of naturalization of marriage migrants includes such features as income requirements, sponsorship and language or cultural test. The whole pattern can be traced to the process of incorporation of formally homogeneous nation-states faced with growing numbers of marriage migrants attempting to introduce their conservative gender and cultural norms via citizenship law, rather than naturalization as an administrative procedure (Cheng, 2013). The household registration requirement in Taiwan described in section 2.1 is an additional specifically Taiwanese twist to the procedure. In other cases, when the

woman meets all the three criteria, obtains her citizenship, then she needs nothing more; however, in Taiwan she should obtain household registration first, which is possible only through marriage (Cheng, 2013).

Yet the legal dependency that has been gendered through the naturalization process in Taiwan is anything but an isolated case, specific to Taiwan; although the particular mechanisms, i.e., the family register and the Cross-Strait Act, are unique (Chen & Wu, 2014). Research on Chinese women who come to the USA on a dependent visa, such as the H-4, following the H-1B work visa issued to her husband, demonstrates a similar trend, namely women who cannot lead an economically independent life and have no access to a bank account as well as cannot obtain their own legal standing for many years because they are dependent on the legal status of their husbands (Huang, 2020). According to Huang, due to the lack of alternative routes to take under the framework of law regarding these women, many of them have to resort to re-feminization, meaning taking up a more traditional role in the family after migration. It may be demonstrated through the comparison with Taiwan since in both cases a certain legal term defining the conditions for entry and legal presence is also the condition of possibility of economic independence and even identity of the migrant woman (Huang, 2020). Just like the naturalization regulations of Taiwan spell out the requirements through which the status of the migrant woman is undermined through such aspects as sufficient income of the husband and exemptions from loss of household registration based on her motherhood, the other regimes have the same effect indirectly through visa policies that make it impossible for the woman to work, the similarity being that neither citizenship nor immigration policy treats the woman as an individual entity (Huang, 2020; Cheng, 2013).

2.4 Contract Labor Migration and the Limits of Citizenship

As the route for marriage migrants to citizenship can be gradual, albeit achievable, there is no such route at all for labor migrants (Chien, 2026). Workers imported since the 1990s under the Employment Service Act for work in manufacturing, construction, fishing, agriculture and more recently elder care institutions, have been prohibited from becoming permanent residents or citizens no matter how long they have stayed in Taiwan (Chien, 2026; Lan, 2008). The legal system regulating contract labor assumes, from the very outset, that it is only temporary in nature. This is ensured through a series of interconnected legal instruments.

In the first place, the labor contract is temporary and belongs to a particular employer (Lan, 2008). Such contracts are entered into through the intermediary of an agent demanding very high commissions for recruitment and services which can be obtained through deductions from the earnings of the worker during the first year of employment and sometimes even beyond, which makes the worker an almost indentured servant in that he or she cannot change the employer without risk of deportation and is reluctant to report any maltreatment and nonpayment of wages for fear of losing his or her job. Furthermore, the maximum period during which anyone could spend in Taiwan has been limited throughout the history of existence of this system with gradual increases (Chien, 2026; Lan, 2008). Another important exclusion is that domestic and institutional caregivers, mainly women immigrants from Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam, are not covered by the Labor Standards Act, unlike factory workers (Liang, 2023; Lan, 2008).

These four factors: ceiling policies, employer-based contracts, the indebtedness of brokers and lack of inclusion in sectoral labor laws, work together to ensure that there is effectively a rotating pool of workers who can spend many decades of their lives in Taiwan without ever attaining the type of residence status that might have led

elsewhere to permanent resident status (Liang, 2023; Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026). The connection to marriage migrants is deliberate and not incidental (Chien, 2026). There has been a legal basis for the stay of the marriage migrant in the country in terms of a relationship in which the government would potentially be willing to recognize future membership at some point, since marriage and motherhood are an accepted national narrative of family making, even if, as shown in the above sections, this is not easy, nor consistent across national origin (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). With the labor migrants, however, there is no legal basis for anything other than a contractual period of time and the government has until quite recently had very little in terms of addressing labor claims (Chien, 2026).

The first noticeable attempt to reverse the scenario has been witnessed in the introduction of the Mid-Skilled Foreign Worker Program through an executive order issued in April 2022 after the failure of the earlier legislative bill known as the New Economic Immigration Bill in 2019 because of the resistance from the trade unions and the indigenous people fearing job competition (Chien, 2026). Under the new program, the foreign contract workers who have been working legally for the past six years in particular industries including manufacturing, construction, agriculture, fishing, slaughterhouses and eldercare, will be able to become mid-skilled workers by earning certain salaries or acquiring appropriate education and language competencies. After this, they will qualify for indefinite residence, family reunion and permanent residence after five more years of earning the requisite salary (Chien, 2026). However, according to Chien's (2026) results, the reform should not be seen as an example of the true movement towards unconditional inclusion. Based on official figures, more than eighty percent of reclassified mid-skilled workers became such because of their "high wage", which means that eligibility for the reform is conditional not on any measure of qualification of workers but on the willingness of their employers to pay them high salary.

Reclassification itself also happens under the control of the employers and the interviewees in Chien's (2026) research admitted that they had to negotiate with their employers and even pressure them in order to become eligible for the transfer into the mid-skilled category. Even after the reclassification, the eligibility criteria for the permanent residency still rely on such characteristics as income, property and qualification standards, which cannot be fulfilled by the majority of blue-collar and care workers, whose salaries are below statutory minimums. The reform also does not include any additional labor protection measures for care workers, who are excluded from the Labor Standards Act irrespective of their status (Chien, 2026).

The Filipina caregiver Rosemarie illustrates how this employer-dependent structure affects workers' negotiating power in practice, beginning even before their arrival in Taiwan. She described the orientation provided to prospective workers as follows:

"Before we come here [...] there's some kind of group, they teach us. When you get there, expect worse [...] because they just don't want us to be disappointed. [...] Most of them, they just don't have the choice, but to take this job and finish it".

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

Rosemarie also emphasized the gap between the formal possibility of changing employers and the practical difficulties involved in exercising this right. Although workers were formally given a mechanism through which they could terminate their contract and transfer to another employer, she explained that most caregivers were reluctant to do so because of the difficulties involved: "It's really hard to transfer to another family" (Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026). This gap between the formal right to transfer and its practical exercise shows how even after formal rights have been made, they become difficult to implement because of the legal framework (Cheng, 2013).

The interviews also shed light on the consequences of this employer-dependent system through the phenomenon of 逃跑 (*taopao*, “escape”), whereby workers abandon their assigned employer. A social worker explained that the phenomenon is politically sensitive because of the social reaction it may generate:

“This refers to foreign workers who leave their registered employers. Many migrant workers come to Taiwan to work, but some are not treated well. Their salaries are lower than average, or they feel they are not adequately protected by the law. Because of this, some decide to leave their employers in search of better opportunities”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

Official figures indicate about 20,000 cases, but the actual total number, according to this source, is more like 300,000 (Cheng, 2013). The social worker observed that it is politically risky for reasons of “the social reaction it can cause” and is not information freely offered by the government. This is another example of how the structure of the employer-linked contract creates an entire population outside the law, instead of solving the rigidity of the structure that caused them to exist.

Another example, Grace, a Filipina wife working together with the contract laborers, made a similar point in regards to how the legal wage regime associated with contract labor also persists despite naturalization in that Taiwanese citizens and new contract laborers get placed on the same entry-level salary scale irrespective of whether they are citizens or educated (Grace, interview, 09 May 2026). Her account suggests that acquiring citizenship and achieving full economic inclusion are not necessarily synonymous. Although marriage migration provides a potential pathway towards political membership that is unavailable to ordinary contract workers, citizenship does

not automatically erase the labor-market hierarchies experienced by migrant workers (Cheng, 2013).

The Foreign Mid-Skilled Worker Program created in 2022 (Chien, 2026) enables workers in certain industries who have worked for six or more years in legal employment status to seek reclassification and, subsequently, permanent residency, but reclassification hinges critically on the employer's commitment to increase their salary beyond a particular threshold, instead of assessing the worker's merits independently. The underlying principle of employer-mediated inclusion thus remains intact despite the program creating an avenue for settlement that did not exist before (Cheng, 2013).

When all four sections are read together, the effect of Taiwan's legal system is differential inclusion, as Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) describe it. This means that while migrants are not always excluded, they are included selectively and revocably in accordance with categories of origin, marital status and employment, which it is for the state rather than the migrant to define. As section 2.2 revealed, even in the category of "marriage migrant", there are two different citizenship clocks depending on whether the spouse comes from Southeast Asia or the Chinese mainland; as section 2.3 revealed, the criteria by which these clocks run are not impartial and consistent, but vary according to health conditions, prior language skills, and the city from which the applicant comes; and as section 2.4 revealed, certain migrants are wholly excluded from these clocks in that their work has no bearing on citizenship whatsoever (Cheng, 2013).

Chapter 3: The Body of Migrant Women as Frontier

While the second chapter focused on how the administrative structure of laws differentiates marriage migrants according to regimes of belonging, this chapter shifts from law to body, exploring how the migrant woman's body, in particular, her reproductive capacities, her sexuality or her accent, becomes the terrain upon which the boundaries of the national identity of Taiwan are negotiated. The concept of "boundary markers" as proposed by Pei-Chia Lan (2008), is the conceptual starting point for the discussion that follows: while reproduction and sexuality are considered to be private domains of the individual, they become subject to constant surveillance, discipline and instrumentalization through family, employers and the state as ways of configuring and regulating the ethnic and political boundaries of the nation. Cheng (2013) shows how, in the Taiwanese context, the image of a foreign woman married to a Taiwanese man is constructed around a profound contradiction: her fertility is exalted because it contributes to the reproduction of state-led assimilation, while her maternal agency is subordinated to the patriarchal authority of the host family. This tension can be interpreted more deeply in light of Anne Laura Stoler's (2002) study, which has demonstrated how the regulation of reproduction, sexuality and intimate life has historically been an instrument through which authorities define and maintain racial and political boundaries. What is relevant is the idea that kinship is not separate from politics: relationships, reproduction and family life can become norms while simultaneously defining the limits of belonging to political communities. From this perspective, the regulation of migrant women's bodies in Taiwan not only deals with their personal status, but also participates in a broader definition of who can be recognized as nationals and who can be considered potentially vulnerable (Stoller, 2002).

The empirical basis for the arguments presented in this chapter stems from the thirteen life history interviews as well as two interviews with social workers at a new-immigrant care center in Taipei. Together, these interviews reveal the multiple frontiers described by Lan (2008). The first one is the reproductive frontier where women migrants are pressured to procreate but, at the same time, are perceived as untrustworthy parents, as well as being too sexually promiscuous to raise their children without any supervision (3.1). The second one is the sexual frontier where live-in caregivers are desexualized by means of strict clothing norms, monitoring practices and erasure (3.2). The third frontier is the political-ethnic frontier characteristic of the marriages where the spouses are from the People's Republic of China and thus, rather than being characterized as culturally inferior like their Southeast Asian counterparts, they are seen as politically questionable (3.3). The final section (3.4) reconstructs the historical context of the institutional framework for reproductive regulation in Taiwan in the 1990s and early 2000s, focusing on the mandatory prenatal testing of migrant workers. Although this practice has been abolished, its underlying mechanisms have not disappeared but have changed to practices that produce similar forms of governance without the direct involvement of the state.

3.1 “Fertile but Unfit”: The Control of Reproduction

According to Cheng (2013), the case of nation-building in Taiwan reflects an ironic situation concerning the status of the foreign women who are married to Taiwanese men. On the one hand, these foreign women are encouraged to integrate into Taiwanese society and have babies because their ability to reproduce is particularly important in a country where the number of births is relatively low (see chapter 2). On the other hand, however, this ability to serve as mothers raises many doubts and becomes the object of certain control or interference practiced by Taiwanese institutions or families. This results in a paradoxical situation in which the foreigners who can participate in the reproduction of the nation turn out to be inadequate or

require correction. This contradiction is particularly relevant when considering how such interventions are experienced and interpreted by the people involved: as can be understood through the interviews, these interferences are not always viewed as forms of discrimination or control on the part of the Taiwanese men, but rather, as demonstrations of care for them from the Taiwanese society (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). In this sense, the same practices that may be interpreted analytically as forms of control can, from the perspective of those involved, be understood as forms of support, protection or concern. Nevertheless, this positive understanding of the issue does not cancel out the contradiction presented by Cheng (2013) but, rather, it makes this contradiction more complex, since control does not necessarily operate through explicitly negative or discriminatory attitudes. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether foreign women are expected to reproduce, but also: firstly, under what conditions their reproductive and maternal roles are considered legitimate or appropriate, and, secondly, how these women should perform motherhood. It is precisely this tension between reproductive value and maternal inadequacy that provides the starting point for examining how practices of intervention can be framed not as coercion, but as care.

3.1.1 Surveillance Dressed as Care

One of the clearest examples of this reproductive frontier is the mechanism of home visits and post-partum check-ups which Taiwan's public health machinery has set out especially for migrant women, nominally as an expansion of maternal care. However, as the example below will make clear, these measures are designed from the very beginning according to the woman's foreignness rather than some commonality of need (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013)¹⁹.

¹⁹ In this context, these practices not only address the woman's foreignness as a given characteristic, but also produce and reinforce it, as they convert an administrative category into a biological one: foreignness, in this sense, is not only the starting point of these policies, but also their result (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013)

Faye, a Malaysian Chinese who immigrated to Taiwan in 1991 and is currently sixty years old, recounted in great detail how she was visited at her house by public health nurses after giving birth to her children.

“The health department sent somebody to my house and teach me what to do in the early stage. And when I gave birth to my kids, then maybe I need to know some knowledge about how to take care of my baby. And you know the government, the health center, health department will send a nurse to my house, make sure, because I’m foreigner, so they have to care, make sure that you know how to take care of your children. [...] They taught me about the nutrition, nutrition knowledge. This made me feel very touched”.

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

Her interpretation of the visit is tender and appreciative: it is proof of “how the government and the people here really embrace us” (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). What Faye has not considered is that in her description lies the process that Lan (2008) has mentioned: an intervention prompted by her status as a foreigner (“because I’m a foreigner, so they have to take care of me”) and not by any signs of deficiency she might share with native-born mothers. It is a true act of care, but it is also a differential one, and it is this difference that makes the body of the migrant woman a body in need of correction.

The same logic recurs, in more coercive form, in Faye’s description of the seminars mandated for pregnant migrant women.

“When they are pregnant, they need to go to the seminar, you know. [...] In this seminar they will teach you, and you have to go to the hospital or clinic. And then they will tell you what to do, they will use their own way to take care of the baby. [...] Not all new immigrants will follow. Not all. Also, maybe they ask them to go for the

seminar, but they don't. [...] They don't go because they need to work. They need to take care of the elders. Or they need to work in the field".

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

It should be noted that the seminar is presented as educational, not as a punishment, but the narration by Faye demonstrates its coercive side as well: women who are unable to attend, usually due to being already fully involved in unpaid domestic work and paid agricultural work, are seen as women who "never cook something for their children" or women who allow a one-year-old to still drink milk (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). In other words, the assessment of a mother's qualification depends on whether or not she is capable of participating in the activities and to be visible in the spaces designated for them by the state (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

However, an empirical clarification is worth registering here. When the social worker interviewed for this research answered the question about specific cases of mandatory prenatal seminars for illiterate pregnant migrant women, he affirmed that it is not a common practice, stating: "maybe in the past, but not anymore" (Social worker, Taipei New Immigrant Support Center, May 14, 2026).

First, the publicly available records from the Ministry of Health and Welfare of Taiwan indicate that there are indeed two formally distinguished tools currently available: the first one is subsidy scheme providing for prenatal examinations for new immigrant women not having National Health Insurance within the first half-year of staying in the country; second, the additional voluntary "orientation for life adjustment for new immigrants" class provided by the National Immigration Agency about Taiwanese culture, law, language and healthcare. Neither of these instruments are indicated as mandatory in the ministry documents in the manner in which it is implied by Faye's

narrative²⁰. Such a difference in policy descriptions may be considered on three grounds:

1. as an actual change in the policy line, reflecting the general trend of development of this instrument within the framework of the policy line traced in 3.4 of this chapter;
2. as a contrast between the experience of a particular generation of women at the district or clinic level thirty years ago and what is observed by a city-level social worker now, who has a mandate more aligned with providing integrated services than with maternal health care;
3. or, more speculatively, as the indication that the mandatory component kept in Faye's narrative may reflect a locally constructed practice rather than an official requirement of the programme. However, it's possible that this assessment was never officially imagined in the workshop's policies. It may instead have arisen at the local level, through the daily practices of health workers and the expectations of migrant women themselves, within a formally voluntary program.

Regardless of these interpretations, what emerges from the interview is that coercion may have been experienced by at least one generation of migrant mothers and that the institutional memory of coercion, as discussed during this research interview with an employed worker, may have become weaker with time.

3.1.2 An Architecture Inherited, Not Chosen

The interview conducted with a social worker provided an understanding of the context of such a process of supervision in relation to a broader institutional history (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026). Speaking

²⁰ The document never uses language of obligation (“必須”, “強制”) but it talks about a service (“服務”) and a subsidy (“補助”): it is an offer conditioned on the absence of insurance coverage, not an obligation.

of the background behind the demands on foreign wives, the social worker pointed to the traditional view of the Taiwanese family and the roles inside it.

“Traditionally, in Chinese culture, the man is expected to work outside the home while the woman stays inside the home and takes care of the family. [...] Many immigrant women are expected not only to take care of their own children but also to care for their parents-in-law”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

The social worker went even further in expanding the metaphor, explaining that these expectations are roots “that continue to support and mold the way the family works today”, a description which perfectly captures how many of those interviewed see something that is already there and is not up for negotiation, rather than something new imposed upon them individually. In other words, the migrant wife does not join a neutral family, she joins a structure of obligations that existed before her, and which in many cases is why the husband’s family sought out a foreign daughter-in-law (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008; Zani, 2018).

“These are the rules of the extended family. So, when you enter this family, you have to follow the rules. Otherwise, this is what we call revolution”.

(Faye, interview, April 23, 2026)

Faye’s terminology: “rules” that one “enters” when one marries and whose breach can be as dramatic as “revolution”, perfectly summarises a framework that exists prior to and beyond the specific migrant bride. It is a framework that absorbs her rather than one that emerges from her own specific situation.

Moreover, these “rules” to which Faye refers can be read against a much older normative repertoire governing the conduct of Chinese women within the patrilineal household. Its best-known formulation is the code of the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” (*sancong side*, 三從四德): on the one hand, the three obediences bind a woman to her father in youth, to her husband in marriage and to her son in widowhood, so that she is never the autonomous head of her own life. On the other hand, the four virtues prescribe moral conduct (*fu de*, 婦德), appropriate speech (*fu yan*, 婦言), modest appearance (*fu rong*, 婦容) and diligence in domestic work (*fu gong*, 婦功) (Swann, 1932; Ebrey, 1993). Alongside it stands filial piety (*xiao*, 孝), which in the patrilineal family translates for the daughter-in-law into a moral duty to serve her parents-in-law and to secure the continuity of the lineage through the birth of a son (Wolf, 1972; Ko, 1994). None of the women interviewed invokes this code by name and it would be a mistake to treat it as a literal description of contemporary family life but what is fundamental here is the fact that it names the logic that makes the migrant wife’s obligations appear as roles she enters rather than as terms she negotiates. Faye’s warning that breaking the “rules” would amount to a “revolution” registers the same principle of a woman defined by her position toward others.

Grace, a Filipina woman who has been in Taiwan for almost twenty years, gave an even more concrete example of such a framework in her own daily life experience and highlighted the fact that she has an obligation to cook for her elderly father-in-law, something that her husband’s brothers had avoided simply by living elsewhere.

“There’s pressure on me too, because I have to cook every day. [...] I have to do it because I’m the eldest son’s wife. [...] The Chinese, I don’t know, I can’t understand them. Parents, when they get older, choose to stay with the eldest son. That’s their culture. The eldest son”.

(Grace, interview, 9 May 2026)

This bafflement on Grace's part: "I don't know, I can't understand" in the face of a requirement she must nevertheless fulfill embodies the tension that this section explores in the text; that is, the requirement to care is one that Grace must do despite the fact that she may not be in agreement with, or even comprehend, the reason for which the obligation applies to her. In other words, Grace's evident bewilderment regarding this custom is not the result of a mere cultural difference that might one day be overcome; rather, it is the direct consequence of the fact that the custom predated her entry into the family and was never discussed with her and now it is imposed upon her because of the structural role she occupies, not because of who she is as an individual.

Moreover, Grace's responsibility to cook for her father-in-law every day is by no means an exceptional case within this study; rather, it is a structural feature of the majority of the stories analyzed for this project. As Faye herself points out in her account, this requirement is a common structural element in the lives of all immigrant brides, rather than a situation unique to her own family: immigrant women are expected to care not only for their children but also for their in-laws (Faye, interview, April 23, 2026). The recurrence of this theme across various interviews reveals that the care work performed by the immigrant bride is not limited to the mother-child relationship described earlier in this section; it also encompasses horizontal responsibilities toward the entire family structure she enters through marriage, a characteristic long recognized in the literature on patrilineal families in East Asia (Wolf, 1972; Wang & Chang, 2002).

Caring for in-laws is a distinct but closely related form of child-rearing management (Liang, 2021). While the bride's body is under state control, treating her as a potentially unsuitable mother (Lan, 2008), other expectations regarding her care for her in-laws are managed by her relatives, who may view her as an accessible domestic worker and caregiver (Cheng, 2013; Zani, 2018). This responsibility is added to

parental responsibility, not a replacement for it. In both cases, the control is based on the same principle already described in this section: the woman does not become a family member whose responsibilities have not yet been defined or negotiated, but rather is placed within a context of pre-existing roles and expectations (Liang, 2021; Zani, 2018). Thus, her role is defined primarily by the expectations placed upon her: to be a son-in-law, a mother and a caregiver for her adult family rather than by her independence. It is precisely this attachment to family structures, rather than the welcoming of family members, that makes the obligation to care for in-laws a recurring theme in the interviews, even among women of different origins, ages and immigration status (Cheng, 2013; Liang, 2021; Zani, 2018).

3.1.3 The Son as the Price of Belonging

Where institutional surveillance is practiced using the contemporary language of reproductive and nutritional health, the weight exerted within the extended family more likely speaks the language of lineage continuity (Lan, 2008; Chao, 2004). There is no interview which exemplifies this better than the one conducted with a Vietnamese woman who came to Taiwan via a marriage broker about thirty years ago and who recounted the atmosphere surrounding herself and other Vietnamese brides from her generation arrived.

“很多台灣男人去越南娶太太回來以後，很多人都生兒子。不知道為什麼，那個年代大家都說，好像十個裡面有八個都生男生。所以如果台灣家庭沒有辦法生兒子，就會想：那去越南娶老婆好了。[...] 甚至有些婆婆會比較媳婦。比如看到隔壁家娶了一個越南媳婦，結果生了兒子，就會說：為什麼別人家的媳婦可以生兒子？為什麼你不能？[...] 如果我沒有生兒子，我可能也不知道自己是不是還能留在這個家庭”。

“Many Taiwanese men went to Vietnam to find wives, and after coming back, many of them ended up having sons. I don’t know why, but back then everyone said that eight out of ten women had sons. So if a Taiwanese family couldn’t have a son, they would think, ‘Then go marry a Vietnamese woman’. [...] Some mothers-in-law would even compare their daughters-in-law. For example, if they saw that the neighbour had married a Vietnamese woman and had a son, they would say, ‘Why can other people’s daughters-in-law have sons? Why can’t you?’ [...] If I hadn’t had a son, I might not know if I could still stay in this family”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026)

In her own gloss of this passage in English, she makes the point quite explicitly: “If I had not given birth to a boy, I do not know if I could continue to be part of this family”. What is remarkable about this testimony is not only that the birth of a son ensured her security, something that happens in many kinship systems in patrilineal societies, where sons secure inheritance, but also that there was folk belief that Vietnamese brides had a special gift for giving birth to boys. This belief was itself another reason why Taiwanese families chose to bring in Vietnamese wives. The body of the migrant is thus instrumentalized in two ways: first, because of this “gift” and, second, also because of the success of her body to give birth to the desired son (Lan, 2008).

Nena, a woman of Indonesian-Chinese origin who migrated to Taiwan in 1999, provides the second, very straightforward, case of such pressure acting on her against her own direct desires. “I don’t want a child” declared Nena but then described how her in-laws’ anger eventually forced her to have one.

“His family, you know, in the Chinese tradition, you must have. [...] We get married three years, we have no child. Because I don’t want it, actually. But after that, my father-in-law, mother-in-law, got angry and say something bad about me. And okay, I give up. I agreed to have one”.

(Nena, interview, 23 May 2026)

The story told by Nena provides insight into the pronatalist pressure laying bare any pretense of caring about her welfare; it is made clear to her that the request comes from the desire for progeny to carry on the family line through her body (Lan, 2008). In her giving in to the pressure and conceiving a child, she is reclaiming her place in the family.

However, not all interviewees felt such pressure and this discrepancy in stories is analytically valuable because it indicates the presence of a discriminatory mechanism which is implemented inconsistently, based on the personal qualities of each set of in-laws and the specific background of each particular family. Both Faye and Grace emphasized that their parents-in-law have never pressured them to have kids or have a specific number of them: “This is your family. You decide”, Faye quoted her mother-in-law as saying (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). However, later on, as an interpreter of a governmental hotline, Faye came across other women under pressure.

“I received also one in the 0800, call in, you know, call in for assistance, uh, I received many complaints. Their parents-in-law ask them to have to give birth. If they cannot, they will show them very bad face. Give them stress. I received this type of call many times”.

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

Fanny's good fortune, therefore, does not contradict the broader pattern revealed by the hotline calls; rather, it coexists with it. From the perspective of a single family, her experience may suggest that no coercion is involved. However, when the cases emerging from the interviews and the social worker's caseload are considered collectively, a broader pattern becomes visible: a form of coercive mechanism operating at the level of individual family relationships, particularly between husbands and wives and between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (Lan, 2008; Chao, 2004; Cheng, 2013).

In this context, there is also a new trend emerging because the way people think about having babies is changing. Fanny's experience reflects how migrant women have started considering parenthood. In the past, they believed that it was better to have a family but today they are no longer convinced. This shift does not depend on the government in Taiwan which imposes its policy, but depends on the conversations among migrant women who are concerned with the cost of living. Fanny recalled an ideal that people believed in the past: "one girl, one boy is hao" (好, "good"). However, today when migrant women discuss their lives in the group, they talk differently.

"We will encourage the sister from China or from other family immigrants, they will deliver this value. Now we think why you are so stupid to have so many children? [...] Only one is enough. [...]. Why are you so stupid to have more children? You have to pay more, you know? Attention, money, time, whatever".

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

While the substance of the norm has changed from an expectation of having several children to the demand that "one is enough", the form of the norm has not changed. In any case, the woman's reproductive decisions are open to collective scrutiny and

correction: in the former case by the woman's mothers-in-law for failing to produce enough children and in the latter case by other migrant women for having too many children.

Interesting is also the testimony of Hoa, the Vietnamese woman interviewed above. She described the postpartum practices that were observed after she herself gave birth. These practices demonstrate how the successful reproduction becomes an external performance for the wider family rather than a private accomplishment for the mother and child.

“我老公家的爸爸很疼我，因為我剛來台灣，身體很虛弱，所以他每天煮麻油雞給我補身體。滿月的時候，公公還訂了一百多斤的油飯，送給親朋好友，算是一個很大的慶祝”。

“My father-in-law cared for me very much. Because I had just arrived in Taiwan and was physically weak, he prepared sesame oil chicken for me every day to help me recover. When my baby was one month old, my father-in-law also ordered more than 100 kilograms of traditional oil rice to give to relatives and friends, which was considered a very big celebration”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026)

Then, she even revealed one negative experience of her pregnancy that happened one month after she had her first child: during that period she experienced a form of jealousy from her sister-in-law, who had already had three children but they were all girls. The sister-in-law complained that she had not received the same postpartum treatment, since her own parents lived nearby and had traditionally assumed that role. “Maybe she thought that things were unfair,” explained the interviewee. This story

brings to light an interesting dynamic within the family in which the reproductive success of the daughter-in-law, especially the gender of the baby, becomes the source of social prestige and favor (Lan, 2008).

However, this was not the case for all the women interviewed. Carmen, a Chinese-Filipina wife of many years, met her husband when working as his secretary in Manila. Her experience shows how the same family dynamics can be experienced positively when the daughter-in-law is valued by the family and granted greater freedom to make her own choices.

“I was very lucky because my mother-in-law liked me very much. She loved me a lot, even more than her own daughter. [...] According to them, I was a good person. They appreciated that I was good at cooking and that my heart was full of love. They felt that they were lucky and blessed to have me as part of their family. I feel grateful because I had the freedom to make my own choices”.

(Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026)

The evidence offered by Carmen, like that of Faye and Grace noted above, does not contradict the coercion trend outlined throughout this section but rather illustrates its unevenness. This particular variance should not be understood in terms of the personality of the individual mother-in-law but as an indication of how the coercion of a structurally coercive system, based on the gender relations and marital structure, is filtered through the lens of the household (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). What is important about the behavior of the mother-in-law is not its manifestation as an individual characteristic but the exercise of the structural power that she holds through that position; it is the exercise of the power that determines levels of coercion or violence experienced (Wolf, 1972; Lan, 2008). For this reason, the lack of pressure Carmen

feels is described as good fortune (“I was very lucky”) and not as something she had a right to expect.

3.1.4 Motherhood as the Last Legal Anchor

These pronatalist forces, which have been identified throughout this chapter, take on an even sharper focus when the realisation that, for many foreign wives, having a Taiwanese citizen child is not simply a social obligation but also a legal necessity (Cheng, 2013). In the second, more reflective interview with the social worker, this reliance was illustrated clearly in the case of a Vietnamese young lady who had separated from her husband after only two years of marriage.

“Because this woman divorced before completing the process, she could not obtain Taiwanese nationality. In this situation, the only way for her to maintain a legal connection with Taiwan was through having a child. Since the child would be Taiwanese, the mother could maintain her ARC based on her status as the mother of a Taiwanese child. She would depend on her child’s legal status until the child reached eighteen years old”.

(Social worker, interview, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

Here, a child is, quite literally, a means of obtaining a residence permit: the right for the mother to stay in the land where she has built “her new home” is dependent on her citizenship status, which in turn depends on the body that she has birthed (Cheng, 2013). The testimony of Faye is the clearest example of what may happen when divorce occurs before this reproductive tethering has occurred or when it fails to be recognized in the courtroom. She gave an account of her church sister who was divorced by her husband without knowing her legal status in Taiwan.

“She didn’t know the law in Taiwan. It says you have to meet the custody of your children to stay in Taiwan. She didn’t know this so she has to leave the family, leave Taiwan within 10 days after you divorce. And now she’s in Vietnam and her children are here. The father permitted her to visit her sons but not openly, just from far. Very, very bad”.

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

In other words, custody becomes the legal means by which the reproductive act is transformed into the ongoing entitlement to be near one’s own children; an entitlement this woman lost not because she had been found to be an unfit mother but simply because of a ten-day time limit of which she was unaware.

Janet, a Filipino-Chinese woman, shared the story of the breakdown of her first marriage, offering another example of how reproductive politics can operate under different circumstances. In her case, however, reproduction, bodily violence, legal status and motherhood became deeply interconnected within an abusive relationship. Describing the assault that finally led her to seek for help, she recounted:

“It was then that I realized he was having an affair with a woman in China. I said something he didn’t like and he reacted violently: he bit me and began physically attacking me. [...] Since it was Sunday and I was in the emergency room, I was kept under observation for about six hours while they monitored my condition. [...] The police also advised me to file a complaint and request a protective order. At first, however, I was too afraid and decided against it. [...] Later, when my husband was in China with the woman he was having an affair with, I finally decided to file a complaint and request a protective order. I waited until he was out of Taiwan because I feared that, if he were present, he would attack me again”.

(Janet, interview, 10 May 2026)

Janet's choice to wait until her husband had fled out of the country before making use of the protections offered by the laws of Taiwan demonstrates just how fragile her faith in the state's ability to protect her truly was, despite the existence of a legal protection (Lan, 2008; Zani & Momesso, 2021). Her story concludes differently from the one previously explained: she managed to secure "a legal right to half of the house today" by virtue of the Taiwanese citizenship of her children (Cheng, 2013) as well as her own persistence in seeking free legal assistance despite two lawyers who seemed unconvinced her case could succeed²¹ (Zani & Momesso, 2021).

Faye's and Janet's stories together illustrate that the reproductive frontier discussed in this section is not only defined by the number of children a migrant wife should produce but it is also defined by whether these children born will be sufficient to keep her inside the country even in case of divorce.

It is worth closing this section on a note of complexity. Faye, whose story has served as a major part of the discussion on institutional surveillance up to now, concluded her interview with a sentiment that stands in stark contrast with any explanation of reproduction as merely an external imposition: when asked what changes she would make to her life if she could, she replied: "if I go back, I would have had another child" (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). It would be inappropriate to take this as an example of desire as a separate sphere that is not connected to the coercive system explained in this chapter (Hsia, 2007). Motherhood, and especially the fact that a woman has several children, gives her a certain social status that, although does not mean improvement in terms of financial security and law, is still social recognition. In such a way, Faye's desire to have another baby cannot simply be opposed to

²¹ Even if Article 31 of the Taiwan Immigration Act (TIA) provides for explicit exceptions to deportation and the revocation of residence permits upon divorce if the woman has suffered physical or mental abuse (verifiable via a court protection order) or has obtained custody of minor children with Taiwanese household registration. Furthermore, Article 10 (TIA) allows divorced women to apply for permanent residency (household registration) if they exercise guardianship over children born of the marriage.

pronatalism as a purely individual wish that is unrelated to it. The difference between imposition and desire can be used in the analysis, but it is necessary to understand that those are not separate systems, the same system influences both (Lan, 2008). In this context, this pronatalist structure, described by the social worker as having been “built over thousands of years” does not just function as a system of coercion imposed upon uninterested bodies; it is also, for some women, an ideal they hold for themselves, internalised long before marriage migration and carried into it (Cheng, 2013; Huang, 2020; Lan, 2008; Zani & Momesso, 2021).

This makes complex what it means to talk about “frontier” in terms of Lan’s (2008) discussion. Lan (2008) borrows the concept in her argumentation deliberately, referring to the concept of territorial sovereignty, according to which reproduction and sexuality represent the mechanisms by which an ethnic nation reproduces its identity as a closed community, so the female body of the migrant becomes the line which the nation controls as well as the territorial border, as demonstrated in this chapter through the efforts of nurses, mothers-in-law and hotline callers responding to the behavior of non-compliant women. In this way, Faye’s regret demonstrates that the same line can be present within the aspirations of a woman who is not under any external surveillance. Thus, the concepts of external control and internal aspiration can be seen as the two sides of the same frontier rather than contrasting concepts in this context, as a woman may perceive the state intrusion into her reproductive sphere as intrusive and regret not going further in the very norm which she had been obliged to observe.

3.2 “Invisible” Workers: The Control of Sexuality

While the reproductive frontier is controlled by overexposure through nurses in the house, workshops and discussions about reproductive choices, the sexual frontier, which exists in relation to live-in migrant domestic workers, is controlled by forced invisibility (Lan, 2008). This is not a neutral response to the fact of a stranger living

under one roof but a very particular response resulting from the caregiver's physical proximity and structural non-inclusion in the family she works in. It is this combination of physical closeness and structural exclusion that makes the caregiver's desexualization not simply a condition of her presence, but the very price of her acceptance (Lan, 2008).

This finds ample confirmation in the corpus gathered for this study: workers describe how they are forced to eliminate all the signs of sexuality in their appearance, which, otherwise, would mark them as sexual beings and make them liable to suspicion or expulsion (Lan, 2008). The second part of the picture is provided by Liang's (2021) research about the emotional labor performed by migrant domestic workers to compensate for a care deficit that Taiwanese families are incapable of fulfilling on their own. It gives the same explanation: it is the desexualization of the body of the caregiver that enables the exploitation of her work.

Rosemarie, a Filipino caregiver in her late forties who arrived in Taiwan in March 2025 to look after her former employer now ill with cancer, provided one of the most elaborate discourses on the regulation of the caregiver's appearance. When directly asked about the claim that caregivers are denied the right to wear makeup or dress as they please, she responded by sharing her experience and that of one of her friends.

"We cannot, we did not know that when we went there, what kind of employer she is. [...] When you get there and you're the kind of girl that you dress well, you put some makeup, perfume, because you live in this lifestyle. [...] The problem is, you forget your respect to the employer. [...] Even though we said that it's my lifestyle, you still need to respect her. The boundaries. You have to try to adjust yourself. Not to be yourself. [...] When you are at work, you have to try to, oh, I'm working. I can't dress so short. I can't dress like a girl".

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

Rosemarie's "not to be yourself" identifies exactly what Lan (2008) outlines: the caregiver must forego an entire system of identity display, not through a dress code mandate from her employer, but rather as a consequence of the very structure of the domestic unit, in which the live-in woman's perceived sexual desirability is treated as a potential threat to the marital order of the household. Rosemarie frames this restriction within the larger gendered triangle of herself, her female employer, and her employer's husband, in which the caregiver's simple politeness toward the man of the household may be interpreted by his wife as a sign of infidelity.

"This girl, she found something, oh, you like my husband? [...] You take care of my husband more than me. But it's not. [...] It's not really like, ah, he likes me. No. Maybe he just only cares more, because you're the one who's in the house who helped them, right? It's not only about the money. When we come here, we do sacrifice our life".

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

The mistrust which Rosemarie has mentioned is not simply an example of friction; it is an inherent characteristic of the live-in system, where one woman works for money by staying permanently in another woman's household and family life and where the desexualization, in the form of wearing no make-up and no tight clothes or of paying no attention to her own beauty, is the cost she pays (Lan, 2008).

Janet, who has interpreted for Filipino migrants working as caregivers in courts and on health hotlines for a long time now, mentioned what happened to a caregiver.

"She told me that, when she was taking care of the husband, he sometimes touched her inappropriately. Because of this, she became careful about how she dressed. She liked

wearing makeup and nice clothes, but she knew how he was, so she stopped wearing them. She avoided shorts and certain dresses because she wanted to avoid attracting his attention. [...] When I asked her, ‘Do you want to report it or complain to someone?’ [...] she said, ‘No, no, no’. [...] Because of this, she felt grateful to the family and decided not to report it, even though she understood that what happened was not acceptable”.

(Janet, interview, 10 May 2026)

The caregiver’s reluctance to report the threat is determined because of gratitude to the perpetrator’s daughter or fear of being dismissed from an esteemed position and the vulnerability of a live-in caregiver, who cannot afford to lose her job, housing and legal status.

This negotiation of the body through desexualization does not originate in a neutral or unmarked body: it corresponds to a prior construction of the caregiver’s body as hypersexualized, intrusive and threatening simply by virtue of its foreign and racialized presence within the intimate space of the home (Lan, 2008). It is this presumption of a provocative body that calls for disciplinary intervention in the first place and desexualization is the form that intervention takes. This situation is made possible by the institutional framework that places workers in a position of personal subordination because the state dictates that they can only serve a specific employer without the possibility of transfer, making their permanence entirely dependent on maintaining an asymmetrical relationship with the host family (Lan, 2008). In this scenario, the migrant acts as a “deferential surrogate”, adopting codes of conduct and dress that not only protect her from the risk of harassment but also serve to fortify the moral order of the globalized home, easing her Taiwanese wife’s anxiety about the fragility of marriage and the presence of a “stranger” in the intimacy of the home (Lan, 2008). This performance of asexual alienation embodies the reality of a “desired but

unwelcome” workforce, trapped in a regime of structural temporariness where the elimination of every sign of beauty or femininity becomes the necessary cost of ensuring their conditional inclusion and avoiding the threat of deportation (Lan, 2008).

Moreover, while the experiences of domestic workers and family caregivers are characterized by a practice of desexualization, this bodily regime extends beyond the domestic sphere. It is part of a broader system of vulnerability, hypersexualization and governability that subjects the majority of migrant workers in Taiwan to exploitative practices (Chen, 2015). Taiwan’s immigration policies, combined with labor market rigidities (such as debt incurred during agency recruitment or the inability to easily change employers), render migrant women from Southeast Asia and mainland China highly vulnerable to human trafficking (Shih, 1998). As highlighted in the literature on the trafficking of women in Taiwan, the vulnerability of migrant workers often manifests as labor and sexual exploitation resulting from clandestine brokerage practices and debt-based arrangements (Shih, 1998). Domestic helpers and industrial workers are frequently forced to flee oppressive work environments or situations involving sexual harassment and violence that go unpunished by employers, thereby becoming undocumented or facing document confiscation and ultimately relying on the informal economy or sex work to support themselves and their families (Huang, 2017; Wu, 2021; Chen, 2015).

Regarding migration from mainland China, strict and gendered border policies have led to the stereotyping of Chinese wives as “sisters from the mainland” (*dahumei*, 大陸妹), conflating migrant women with the image of the prostitute or the opportunist entering the country through sham marriages (*jia jie hun chen mai yin*, 假結婚真賣淫) (Shih, 1998; Chen, 2015). Labeling Chinese wives with such stigmatizing terms has helped legitimize state surveillance, including home inspections and bedroom interrogations conducted by the National Immigration Agency (NIA) (Chen, 2015).

This reveals the ambivalence permeating Taiwan's gender and border regime: on the one hand, the domestic sphere demands the stripping away of all sexual characteristics from the caregiver to neutralize what is perceived as a threat to the host family's marital stability; on the other, the public sphere and immigration authorities constantly cast a shadow of hyper-sexuality over migrant women, viewing them as potentially dangerous, deviant or sexualized bodies (Chen, 2015).

3.2.1 3.2.1 From Individual Transgression to Collective Suspicion: The Migrant Body, Media and Stereotypes

The regulation of the migrant body described earlier does not limit itself to issues of clothing and sexual behavior but includes a broader regulation of deportment, in particular: eating manners, speaking volume and respect for authority. When these values are not adhered to in Taiwanese terms, they serve as proof of an inherent inability to conform and not just an occasional failure (Hsia, 2007). It must be stated that a number of these supposedly 'impolite' gestures refer to specific cultural and linguistic practices which the new immigrant has never been in a position to learn before coming into the new culture; in other words, they are often a result of cultural miscommunication (Gumperz, 1982).

Faye shared one instance of this type from a community gathering to which she and her husband, who is Taiwanese, attended.

"When they [immigrants from South East Asia] eat not very polite or not very gentleman or ladies. My husband told me: next time never ask me to go. [...] During somebody's give speech on the stage with all the new immigrants, they will sit down. Never give respect to the speaker. You cannot like this".

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

Faye, for example, does not simply repeat this judgment but she instantly recasts it as an issue of class and hunger, not one of morality: “Maybe they are poor, maybe they don’t have a lot”. However, her husband’s blunt refusal to attend a future event reveals how fast an individual breach of table manners can be turned, by a Taiwanese observer, into an assessment of “this new immigrant” as a whole. The testimony of Josefina demonstrates the same tendency at work.

“Sometimes if they saw news, you know, because a lot of caregivers give treatment care in Taiwan. Sometimes they believe the caregivers steal money, jewellery. They see it the news. Or maybe some of them steal pockets in the market. So sometimes the other Taiwanese look at you in that way. So sometimes it hurts because not all people, Filipino are bad”.

(Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026)

In her narrative, Josefina shows how the desexualization regime discussed previously fits within a wider continuum of body suspicion where the migrant domestic worker’s body is regarded as a likely transgressor (sexual, economic or moral) that needs to be managed beforehand (Lan, 2008). Whatever the transgression may be (theft, improper behavior or bad eating habits), the process involved is the same: the individual body is not viewed as such but rather as a member of a group that is already under suspicion (Lan, 2008).

The fact that Josefina uses the words “they saw the news” twice in one sentence is not an accidental observation. It is an identification of a certain process by means of which an individual becomes part of a suspect group and it is precisely such a process that the social worker interviewed for this study described in connection with the phenomenon under examination.

“In Taiwan, when foreign workers appear in the media, it is often because they commit crimes [...] Many of these workers are not native Taiwanese and may not be familiar with Taiwanese laws. [...] Unfortunately, these reports can reinforce stereotypes about Southeast Asian migrants”.

(Social worker, Taipei New Immigrant Support Center, May 14, 2026)

When we read Josefina’s statements and the social worker’s narrative, it is possible to discern a process where a legally registered immigrant is not perceived as such by her neighbour, because the media covers crimes committed by “runaway” migrant workers which leaves a deep impression on them. These reports have a far greater impact on Taiwanese society than direct contact. As Nicole Constable (2003) argues, the process by which media discourse persistently shapes the image of middle-class migrant women and, more broadly, migrant domestic workers, portraying their moves as selfish, fraudulent or even criminal acts, explains why a single television report about theft is enough to lead the Taiwanese public to redefine the presence of immigrants inside the Taiwanese society, even if it represents only a minority.

This system is not confined to only the broadcast media. Faye narrated the case of one of the interviewees who informed her of how someone in a fruit and vegetable market had asked a Taiwanese mother-in-law, while in the presence of her Vietnamese daughter-in-law, “how much did you pay for your daughter-in-law?”, a comment which sees marriage as a commodity that must be priced. The language of news coverage and gossip in the marketplace, is rooted in suspicion, and, in turn, informs the interpretation of the activities of a caregiver or a wife: the way she eats, the way she speaks, whether she listens to anyone speaking from a stage, and even how she came about to marry become something that was scripted for her, rather than something she does on her own (Wang & Chang, 2002; Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

3.2.2 A Body on the State's Clock: Anticipated Mistreatment and the Extreme Case of Escape

The control exercised over the caregiver's body, described above, extends to her time as well: her time is not considered fully her own but is organized and regulated by others. This has been vividly portrayed by Rosemarie's description of her week, whereby her one free day in each week is spent taking care of her needs.

"From Monday, I start my work. I just wanted to wait for the night because this night, that night, that's the only time, the only time that I can have for myself. And after that, I'm gonna wait tomorrow again and then wait for the Sunday. [...] That's the only life we have here".

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

It is no coincidence that Rosemarie and most other Southeast Asian interviewees in this study's structure their one day of respite through church-going because it is the one socially sanctioned space in which the caregiver can dress, present and inhabit her body in her own terms and not according to those of her employer (Cheng, 2013). The desexualised and deferential body that is demanded six out of seven days per week is in this sense the prerequisite for her respite on the seventh and not something separate (Lan, 2008).

What makes this particular system of exploitation different from an individual case of employer abuse is precisely the anticipation of the conditions that will arise and to a certain extent the normalisation of the process through state-sanctioned training programs prior to departure (Liang, 2011). These training programs constitute an official, recognized and formal part of the process. While their institutional structures

vary by country, they share a common function, as can be analyzed in countries' systems: the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. In the Philippines, all migrants bound for Taiwan must attend a mandatory Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS) tailored to their specific destination²². The seminar is organized exclusively by associations and NGOs accredited by either the POEA or the DMW and its completion is a prerequisite for obtaining travel documents (POEA, 2001). The Indonesian counterpart is known as "Pre-Departure Orientation"²³ issued by the Indonesian Agency for the Protection of Migrant Workers (BP2MI). This process comprises three stages: planning, implementation and reporting and relies on pre-departure training centers that organize language classes, domestic work training and social conduct courses for Indonesian women bound for Taiwan (BP2MI, 2023).

In Vietnam, the process is organized by the Department of Overseas Labor (DOLAB). Despite the differences between these institutions, they all share a common structural feature that makes Rosemarie's testimony particularly relevant here: the training is mandatory, government-certified and conducted by the very recruitment agencies that profit from sending workers abroad. This conflict of interest has also been highlighted by civil society groups as a factor that discourages informing workers about their rights in foreign countries (Five Corridors Project, n.d.).

The testimony of Rosemarie describes the training provided to Filipino caregivers prior to their departure to Taiwan in the following manner.

"Before we come here, uh in our government, uh there's some uh kind of group, they teach us. When you get there, expect worse, not the good things, not the beautiful things that you can hear from them. But try to expect worse [...] because they just don't want us to be disappointed. They just want us to face the reality, this is it".

²² This requirement, originally introduced in the early 1990s by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), is now managed by its successor body, the Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), following the 2022 migration governance reform in the Philippines.

²³ It was codified under Regulation No. 4 of 2023.

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

An orientation program that trains departing care workers to “expect worse” effectively amounts to a formal recognition that abuse in the form of surveillance, harassment and incarceration, among other instances, is likely to occur often enough to necessitate psychological preparation, offered as a course subject rather than as a warning (Lan, 2006; Silvey & Parreñas, 2020). The consequence of such framing is the shifting of accountability from the sending and receiving households and labor markets responsible for the abuse, toward the resilience of the individual caregiver: she learns to adjust her expectations downward rather than putting pressure from the sending and receiving states to improve their standards of protection (Silvey & Parreñas, 2020).

This architecture derives its legitimacy from the concept of “asexual technologies of alienation” proposed by Lan (2008). This is an institutional mechanism in which the state, intermediaries and training centers collaborate to create “defeminized, disciplined and naturally submissive subjects” before they even arrive in Taiwan. Through “moral education” programs that mandate strict behavioral rules and anonymity, the system constructs a dynamic of personal submission; this prepares the subject to accept surveillance and the violation of privacy as natural features of the living arrangement (Lan, 2008). According to Chien (2026), precarity is not a system failure but a “regime of controlled temporality” aimed at extracting maximum economic value from the migrant while keeping them in a state of permanent legal insecurity. Consequently, whenever an act of abuse occurs, institutional discourse attributes responsibility to “personal traits” or an “inability to adapt”, thereby reducing survival to a matter of individual performance and obscuring the accountability of a state that utilizes the labor but rejects the person.

The official exit strategy from abuse of a care worker who will not tolerate mistreatment is also constrained by the anticipatory logic of this kind of framing. Rosemarie gave the following description of her co-workers who opted out of their employment prematurely:

“I will not continue to take care of this old man because he touches me. Yeah, like that. And some of them, maybe they just said, it’s okay, it’s just a touch. [...] They complain and they ask for termination of their contract”.

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

Rosemarie remarked, in the very next sentence, that “the right of termination is officially guaranteed by the government” and the employees are provided with an emergency contact number to dial “if you think is unfair to you”. There was no denying that right; however, Rosemarie’s statement along with the one made by Janet makes it clear that the use of this right is conditional upon a caregiver identifying the act of touch as not acceptable but “just a touch”.

However, for many migrant workers, even these partial rights cannot be exercised because they have completely detached themselves from the system. The social worker interviewed for this study located the disciplining of caregivers within a larger phenomenon: the practice, referred to in Mandarin as *taopao* (to run away, 逃跑).

“Many migrant workers come to Taiwan to work, but some are not treated well. Their salaries are lower than average or they feel they are not adequately protected by the law. Because of this, some decide to leave their employers in search of better opportunities. [...] There are more than twenty thousand cases of migrant workers who have left their assigned employers. [...] According to what we know, it is much higher,

at least around 300,000 people”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

As the social worker made clear, however, this number is highly politically charged and intentionally left vague by those in charge: “the government does not always want to show the exact figures, because it is a very controversial issue” . In this way, there is a media-driven reticence about certifying the exact number of migrants who leave the country.

3.3 Chinese Spouses: Too Close to Be Trusted

So far, this section has examined the exclusion experienced by women from Southeast Asia, due to stereotypes about their supposed poor education and backwardness, which would allegedly make them unfit to enjoy the same degree of sexual and reproductive freedom afforded to Taiwanese women (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). Chinese spouses are positioned quite differently: in fact, the interviews conducted for this research show that a distinct principle of exclusion is at play here: Chinese wives are perceived as insufficiently foreign, as they are seen as potentially loyal to Beijing rather than to their new family and country (Lan, 2008). Even though the shared language and often common roots make Chinese wives the easiest migrant wives to integrate into Taiwanese society, it is precisely this closeness that generates distrust (Lan, 2008).

Lin, who originates from mainland China, spent nearly ten years working for an American logistic firm in Guangdong province before moving to Taiwan sixteen years ago. She married a Taiwanese man whom she had met at her workplace. Among the participants in the interviews, she provided the most detailed account of the type of discrimination Chinese migrant women can experience in Taiwan. Her case was markedly different from those of the Southeast Asian immigrants.

“I think it’s better if you come from like the Malaysia, come to the other Southeast countries, they just, oh, you are foreigner. Okay, but I would be from China, so they are kind of complicated”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

Lin continued by describing how her accent, serving as evidence that she is not a Taiwanese citizen despite speaking the same language, involuntarily marks her as a representative of the Chinese state.

“When there were political tensions between Taiwan and China, some people would talk to me as if I were personally responsible for what the Chinese government had done. They would say things like, ‘Your country did something bad to us’. [...] I often did not agree with what the Chinese government had done either. [...] Those were decisions made by a government, not by me. Yet people still spoke to me as though I should somehow take responsibility for them”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

What is significant here is the process of collapsing that Lin refers to; in other words, during these meetings, her individual body is reduced to the state in which she was born (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). This collapsing does not emerge from the interviews of the Southeast Asian participants since their native countries do not have a sovereignty conflict with Taiwan. The distrust shown toward Lin is therefore a political one and it comes and goes depending on the cross-strait situation, which Lin herself mentioned: “whenever political tensions increase, some people begin to see me simply as someone from ‘that country’ and they associate me with everything they dislike about China” (Chen & Wu, 2017; Zani & Momesso, 2021).

The distrust does not just end there. Lin narrates an episode of interaction between her and one of her husband's relatives that makes the matter more explicit.

“One of his older relatives once told me very directly, ‘I don’t like your country’. Although I knew the comment was directed at China rather than at me personally, it still hurt because it made me feel that I was being judged because of my nationality instead of being seen for who I am”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

The second incident, concerning Lin's parents' attempt to return the hospitality they had enjoyed in Taiwan by inviting their daughter's in-laws to come to China, resulted in an even more vehement denial.

“One of my husband's relatives immediately replied, ‘I will never go to China because your country is not friendly to us. If I go there, I will probably be sent to prison’”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

The refusal is telling in its content as much as its tone: in contrast with the cultural or economic inadequacy of Southeast Asia, this response sees China as a political threat to the well-being of the Taiwanese family member who has come to visit. This threat may reflect the kind of fear with which Lin has to live as a citizen of Taiwan (Chao, 2004).

“Communicating things for me because I was born in China, that's in mainland China and Taiwan, they have the really, I don't know how to say, that's very, very sensitive.

[...] We're kind of similar but we are different. And especially when I came here, I didn't realize that it was so different".

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

What Lin calls the near-equivalence of language and physical appearance ("we kind of similar but we are different") is, in fact, the very thing that constitutes the difference between the mainland spouse and the Southeast Asian one, in the eyes of the state and in Taiwanese society: the difference which is visible (for example in the accent or in the lack of familiarity with local customs) may be assimilated or corrected by the educational apparatus described, while the difference that is invisible and that could be potentially hidden, is seen as something threatening (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013; Chao, 2004).

The "too close to be trusted" logic found in Lin's account is confirmed also from another testimony by Carmen, a Filipina woman whose husband is Chinese, born in the Philippines of mainland Chinese and Hong Kong parents and then working in Taiwan for more than forty years. While Carmen stated that she has not experienced any discrimination from Taiwanese society herself, the story of her husband's experience in the labor market is also marked by the same ethnic suspicion independent of citizenship or national origin.

"He recently resigned from his job, and during his years of work he noticed that Taiwanese workers who were born in Taiwan received higher salaries than Chinese workers like him. [...] He worked in Taiwan for almost 42 years, and he always felt that Taiwanese workers earned more than he did, even when they were doing the same job. [...] They would tell him, 'You do this, you do this, you do this' while some Taiwanese workers were sitting down and still receiving a higher salary".

(Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026)

When asked if the cross-strait political tensions affected the way he was viewed at work, Carmen said that yes, she thought it did and that her husband felt powerless in changing the situation because “even when people complain about discrimination to the authorities, nothing will really change” (Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026). In fact, what this statement suggests is that the political discrimination mentioned by Lin is not simply a form of discrimination faced by one woman in her marriage but is a politically-based discrimination directed against all Chinese people: even a Filipino born Chinese, with a Philippine passport who has worked and lived in Taiwan for more than forty years, is apparently not trusted enough to be paid equally to his Taiwan-born coworkers (Lan, 2008; Zani, 2018).

This ambivalence regarding proximity is not limited to political discourse and the labor market but extends to the intimate sphere of family life. Both Southeast Asian and Chinese brides join Taiwanese families shaped by Confucian-derived patriarchal norms: patrilocal residence, deference to in-laws and the daughter-in-law’s primary responsibility for housework and elder care (Lan, 2008; Wang & Bélanger, 2008). For a Southeast Asian bride, a lack of familiarity with these norms is viewed benevolently as a gap to be bridged through the “moral education” and language training described above: their ignorance of the rules serves as proof of her cultural otherness and is, consequently, consistent with her assigned status (Hsia, 2007; Wang & Bélanger, 2008). Conversely, a Chinese bride is assumed to be already familiar with this same patriarchal model, given the culture nominally shared across the Strait: her ability to fulfill the role of a competent daughter-in-law can become a form of cultural capital, facilitating her integration into the family in ways unavailable to the Southeast Asian brides (Chao, 2003; King, 2011). However, since Chinese brides are presumed to already possess the “correct” cultural model, any friction, resistance or failure to adhere to the norms cannot be attributed to otherness or ignorance: these are

interpreted as a personal choice or, even more problematically, a political one: a refusal that fuels suspicions of unassimilated loyalty, rather than being viewed as the manifestation of a cultural gap yet to be bridged (King, 2007, 2011). Momesso's (2020) research on civic organizations formed by Chinese migrant women who came to Taiwan through marriage clearly illustrates this dynamic. Rather than simply accepting or negotiating the patriarchal structures they entered, several women in the study formed a strategic alliance with their Taiwanese husbands' accepting their guidance and their role as intermediaries with the state. This suggests that, for Chinese spouses, the shared patriarchal code cannot be read simply as acceptance or resentment: it can also be a strategic resource against state suspicion (Momesso, 2020). The result is a form of adaptation that cannot be interpreted simply in terms of acceptance or resentment: the shared Confucian cultural code offers Chinese spouses an authentic path to recognition, a path closed to Southeast Asian brides, but this comes at the cost of relinquishing the justification based on cultural otherness that might otherwise have shielded them from being held personally responsible for their subordinate status (Lan, 2008; Momesso, 2020).

3.3.1 3.3.1 Positioned Between Two Frontiers: The Chinese Spouse and the Western Spouse Compared

An interview with the social worker at the support center for immigrants in Taipei City provided an explicit three-way comparison that adds much to the argument presented in this section.

“Even in the case of [the Vietnamese interviewee], whom they considered relatively fortunate, her husband had still been questioned by his parents about why he had married a woman from Southeast Asia. [...] Even if [a European man] had arrived in Taiwan without a job or financial resources, his Taiwanese in-laws would probably never question his marriage simply because he came from Europe or the United States.

[...] Nationality itself carries different social meanings in Taiwan. Being a Western migrant is generally associated with prestige, whereas being a Southeast Asian spouse often carries negative stereotypes”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

This comparative frame permits to understand different types of perspectives: first, the Western spouse’s otherness becomes a source of prestige even when their motives for migration are not scrutinised (Lan, 2011); second, the Southeast Asian spouse’s otherness is framed through a combination of alleged cultural and economic deficits, resulting in the pedagogical and remedial scrutiny described in 3.1 and 3.2 (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008); third, the Chinese spouse’s otherness becomes difficult to recognise as otherness in the first place, since she speaks the same language and uses the same writing system (Lan, 2011). Yet this proximity does not translate into greater social acceptance. In other words, ethnical and linguistic distance from the Han-Taiwanese population does not straightforwardly determine the extent of exclusion a migrant spouse faces; rather it is the unresolved question of sovereignty that shapes the terms of exclusion (Chao, 2004; Cheng, 2013).

More broadly, this uneven positioning of migrant groups can be understood through Pei-Chia Lan’s (2011) concept of “positive racism” or “white privilege” which draws attention to the fact that white, English-speaking Western immigrants occupy a symbolically superior position and are distinguished from other immigrant groups. Because of their high linguistic capital (English) and “expatriate” status, they enjoy a degree of social legitimacy that precludes questioning the actual reasons for their migration, owing to the local perception of them as “superior others” (Lan, 2011). This inequality in the treatment of different immigrant groups can be demonstrated by the actions of authorities, such as the police force, which tends to be more respectful towards Westerners than towards Southeast Asian immigrants (Lan, 2011). In this

racialised hierarchy, therefore, not all foreign bodies are positioned in the same relationship to Taiwanese society: some are more readily incorporated as legitimate “others” while others remain objects of suspicion (Lan, 2011).

This differential positioning becomes particularly apparent in Lin’s account, where the hierarchy described above intersects with another form of anxiety that is especially relevant to migrants of Chinese origin. The logic expressed by the woman Lin encountered brings together, within a single interaction, the two forms of anxiety treated as analytically distinct in this chapter: first, demographic anxiety (3.1), in which foreign wives are both needed and distrusted as reproducers of the future of the nation; second, political anxiety (3.3), in which the body of Chinese origin is seen as a vector of political unification rather than just population growth.

“She asked me how many children I have. Then she said: ‘Taiwanese people don’t want to have children anymore. Now many children’s mothers are from other countries’.[...] She saw me having two children and said that it was good because Taiwan needs more children. But at the same time, I felt that she was not happy about the fact that many mothers are from other countries. [...] She said something like: ‘In the future, all children will have mothers from other countries’. Then she connected this with the fear that China might take over Taiwan”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

In this way, the two kids are not regarded as a demographic contribution similar to that recognized to other migrant mothers. Rather, the children become a sign of the problematic future when “all children will have mothers from other countries”.

At the same time, Lin’s account of her son’s experience at kindergarten provides an important counterpoint to this adult anxiety. As a “story mom”, a mom who tells

stories in the kindergarten, she introduced her background to her son's classmates and observed that:

“Young children did not see the differences that adults often focus on. [...] They were too young to think about politics, nationality or the stereotypes they might hear on television. They simply looked at me as a person”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

The contrast suggests that the suspicion directed towards Lin is not an inevitable response to her foreignness or Chinese origin, but rather a socially and politically produced form of distinction. The boundaries between legitimate and suspect forms of migrant belonging are learned and reproduced through socially and politically-mediated understandings of nationality, ethnicity and cross-Strait relations. In this sense, Lin's experience extends Lan's (2011) analysis by showing that the unequal positioning of migrant groups is not limited to their treatment as workers or residents, but can also shape how their children, families and reproductive contributions are imagined as part of Taiwan's national future.

Completely different from the concerns about Lin's children from the point of view of politics, the children with mothers from Southeast Asia are generally considered merely in terms of demography and eugenics because they possess some form of “quality deficit” that threatens national competitiveness (Cheng, 2013; Chen & Wu, 2017). These children, described in the media as the “new Taiwanese children”, are usually stigmatized in the public domain as a social problem; the state or institutions normally scrutinize them with an obsession over their school performance and cognitive ability as their mothers, who are perceived deficient in linguistic or education terms, could negatively influence their performance (Chen & Wu, 2017). In this scenario, their inclusion is not experienced as a socio-cultural enrichment, but as a

biopolitical necessity requiring corrective assimilation mechanisms to protect the country's homogeneity and prosperity (Cheng, 2013; Chen & Wu, 2017).

At the same time, the children of immigrants of white Western origin are at the top of this hierarchy. Their ethnic and linguistic hybridity (particularly their command of English) is not perceived as an obstacle but as a resource in Taiwan's internationalisation process (Lan, 2011). Whereas the government and families within Taiwan carefully examine the intentions of Asians' migration and their "quality", the children of "Westerners" are considered socially legitimate because they symbolize the ideal identity of a cosmopolitan country without being suspected of disloyalty like the Chinese or stigmatized as backward like Southeast Asians (Cheng, 2013).

3.4 From the Mandatory Pregnancy Test to Today's Informal Mechanisms

The regulation of migrant women's reproductive lives has not remained unchanged over time. While some forms of control have been explicitly codified by the State, others have become less visible and increasingly dispersed across different institutions and social actors.

3.4.1 The Old System: An Explicit and Codified Instrument

The reproductive and sexual control mentioned in the previous paragraph has a particular history and legal background. From 1992 onwards, migrant workers in Taiwan, mostly women working as factory workers or caregivers, were obliged to undergo periodic health checks that included a compulsory pregnancy test. A positive result led to their deportation irrespective of the migrant's choice or the identity of the man who fathered the child (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2020). What was unique about this device and what will be the point of comparison to everything else discussed below, was its homogeneity and visibility: a standardized test for all migrant workers,

imposed uniformly on all migrant workers' bodies, to answer a single question: is this migrant pregnant? The test was officially discontinued in 2015 after years of protests by feminist and labor activists (Hsia, 2015).

None of the interviewees in this study described the pre-2015 test explicitly, an absence which is itself consistent with the sample's make-up, where most interviewees are marriage migrants and not contract laborers and even the youngest caregiving interviewees, such as Rosemarie, came to Taiwan well after the legislation had been changed. What the interviews do supply, in rich and consistent detail however, is evidence for this section's central argument: that the abolition of a single, explicit, legally codified instrument of reproductive surveillance did not abolish the underlying logic that instrument served, but instead dispersed that logic into a set of informal mechanisms, administrative, financial, marital and disciplinary, that are individually harder to challenge in court precisely because none of them is, any longer, written into a single national statute (Ong, 2003). What has changed, in other words, is not surveillance but rather its means.

3.4.2 The Surviving Forms of Surveillance after 2015

In most cases, control over foreign women's bodies do not begin with pregnancy tests or the intervention of institutions and families (Lan, 2008). For many of the women interviewed, an initial selection process took place even before marriage, through the system of transnational marriage agencies that connected them with their future Taiwanese husbands (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008; Zani, 2018). This informality is clearly reflected in the story of Hoa. She recounted the day her husband chose her among several women who were presented to him by a matchmaker who had shown him more than one hundred photographs.

“我老公那時候看了一百多張照片。但是到了越南以後，卻找不到照片上的那個人。[...] 那個媒婆帶了一批女生過來，一批一批進來，排隊讓男方看。[...] 輪到我的時候，我進去了。剛好前面沒有人讓我老公選。[...] 他就說：「我要這個女生。」那個女生就是我”。

“My husband looked at more than one hundred photos. [...] The matchmaker brought a group of women. They came in one by one and stood in a line for the men to see. [...] When it was my turn, I entered. [...] He said: ‘I want this girl’. That girl was me”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2025)

Xue was able to meet her husband through a similar process, involving a landlord, a tenant and two different matchmakers. She described the process as something far from romantic.

“在越南，女生通常不用付仲介費，費用主要是由男方家庭支付。仲介會幫忙介紹很多女生，讓男方選擇。[...]通常是在成功結婚或確定關係之後，仲介才會收費”。

“In Vietnam, usually women do not pay the broker fee. The husband’s family usually pays. The broker introduces many women, and the man chooses among them. [...] Usually, the broker receives payment after the relationship is successful, for example after marriage”.

(Translated by the author)

(Xue, interview, 14 May 2026)

The fact that the groom's family makes the payment and which is contingent on the successful outcome of the marriage, places the bride's body in the position of a commodity to be purchased, rather than an equal participant in the transaction (Cheng, 2013; Wang and Chang, 2002). Constable's (2003) analysis of arranged and brokered marriages in Asia and the Pacific suggests that such arrangements should not be understood as an exception to courtship, but rather as a particular form of courtship historically practiced in the region²⁴. Unlike pregnancy testing, this mechanism was never directly administered by the state and did not disappear with the repeal of the relevant legislation in 2015. Therefore, the examination and assessment of migrant women's bodies began before their arrival at a clinic or their application for immigration status: their bodies had already been examined, assessed and selected through the marriage brokerage system (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

While this initial assessment is necessarily private and informal, it does not mark the end of the process: immediately after, the State intervenes through a mandatory pre-departure interview (Friedman, 2010; Friedman 2015). Taiwan requires this process for prospective brides from twenty-one listed countries, mostly in Southeast, South, and West Asia and Africa, before granting them a visa. A similar, though differently administered, practice applies to brides from mainland China, whose marital status is determined by National Immigration Agency officers at the border crossing itself. Friedman's (2010; 2015) ethnographic study of married Chinese migrants suggests that this bureaucratic mechanism constitutes an interrogation regime focused precisely on uncovering the "truth" of the marital bond, with officers trained to detect any signs of a "sham marriage" by asking the couple intimate questions. Friedman (2010; 2015)

²⁴ Even the social worker interviewed for this study provided a historical background to this system, showing that it is not a recent phenomenon but one that is deeply rooted in time. He shared the story of his grandmother, who worked as a matchmaker bringing Vietnamese women to Taiwan to marry Taiwanese men, at a time when Taiwanese law had yet to catch up with this emerging trend. Reflecting on this period, he emphasized that people doing that job were not considered illegal, but rather operated in a legal gray area, created by the lack of adequate legislation.

"It's not because she was illegal. It's because the lawmakers didn't make the law for them, so they had to work underground".

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

situates this apparatus within the context of the Taiwanese state's general anxiety regarding the exercise of sovereignty over its borders, an anxiety compounded by the fact that this very sovereignty is a subject of international dispute. The marriage interview thus becomes one of the few instances in which the state is able to exercise and demonstrate its capacity for border control (Friedman, 2010).

Another study by Chao (2015) addresses this issue by describing the procedure in which a couple is compelled to simulate heterosexuality and a procreative marriage: this is a performance based on cultural standards of intimacy rather than any universal standard of marital validity (Chao, 2015; Jamieson, 2012). In this context, Taiwanese news outlets and human rights organizations, having documented how this procedure operates for applicants from Southeast Asia, revealed that interviewers can even demand intimate details, such as the color of a partner's underwear and the frequency of sexual encounters, representing a level of intrusion that goes beyond the boundaries of any administrative process for verifying marital status (Taiwan Association for Human Rights, 2017). In this way, a woman's body and her intimate life are assessed a first time, informally, during the selection process by the intermediary, and a second time, formally, by the State itself, even before she is permitted to cross the border.

Once having crossed the border and gotten married, the migrant woman's body does not stop being an object of external evaluation: she becomes subject to a different kind of scrutiny. This is clearly illustrated by one of the interviewees, whose story about a workplace injury is described below.

“他跟我講話的方式就像是在討價還價一樣，好像在賣東西。他說：你的手這樣，六萬塊要不要？我搖頭。他又說：十萬塊給你要不要？我還是搖頭”。

“He talked to me like he was bargaining in a market. He said: ‘Your hand is like this, do you want sixty thousand?’ I said no. Then he said: ‘How about one hundred thousand?’ I still said no. He even said: ‘If you don’t accept it, go and sue me’”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2025)

Her choice of words, namely “bargaining”, like “this person was selling something” are words which could well describe the broker system that, some years before, had introduced her into Taiwan in the first place (Cheng, 2013). The process of commodification described above is an example of “technologies of asexual alienation” which, according to Lan (2008), transform migrant workers into a “disposable” workforce lacking reproductive or social rights, rendering them “alien, marginalized and permanently subordinate”.

Her testimony reveals that he perceived her as a recent migrant whom he could “take advantage of” precisely because she “didn’t know about her rights” and “couldn’t manage everything” (Cheng, 2013; Zani, 2018; Zani & Momesso, 2021).

While marriage and the workfield demonstrate how the migrant’s body is valorized through private mechanisms, independent of state legislation, it is precisely in the healthcare sector that the role of the state is most evident. In this context, the health sector is revealed as a preferred site for the exercise of state biopower, where subsidies and health services that are ostensibly based on welfare, such as coverage of prenatal testing and amniocentesis, are in fact shaped as mechanisms of eugenic control and technologies of citizenship, aimed at selectively regulating the reproductive capacity of immigrant bodies to the benefit of the host country’s ethno-nationalism (Lan, 2008). These technologies of citizenship also manifest themselves through tariff barriers and economic restrictions. The price of medical examinations for entry thus becomes a tool for quantifying the attractiveness of the immigrant body and the economic validation

of transnational intimacy. Nena explained, in some detail, the mandatory health examination she and her husband were supposed to complete prior to her arrival in Taiwan and her experience of discriminatory pricing in relation to this test.

“I remember it was around 1,500 or 1,800 Taiwanese dollars. But Taiwanese people only had to pay around 300 dollars for the same examination. My husband asked the staff why the price was different. [...] The staff answered, ‘Because you married a foreigner, so you have to pay more. If you wanted to save money, you should have married a Taiwanese woman’”.

(Nena, interview, 23 May 2026)

Nena herself was mindful to point out that this incident took place two decades ago and that things could have changed since then, but this story is especially relevant because it reveals the persistence of rules and practices still existing in an apparently neutral and bureaucratic form: a health check and its price (Lan, 2008). While the pregnancy test asks whether the body is pregnant, here, the question is instead framed in terms of how expensive this body might be for the state to process (Cheng, 2013). The clerk’s explanation, presented as advice about whom Nena’s husband “should have” married, makes explicit what the pregnancy-test system had left implicit: that a foreign woman’s pregnancy is treated as a potential cost to be taken into account (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

Another form of indirect control, which goes beyond regulating migrant women’s fertility, concerns residence, which is closely linked to the continuity of marital relationships. In this context, the social worker interviewed during the research offered a particularly illuminating description of how citizenship can be established and revoked through marriage, a process directly linked to the state’s control over a migrant woman’s fertility (Cheng, 2013). Specifically, speaking about the case of a

Vietnamese woman who came to Taiwan as an exploited migrant worker but then married a Taiwanese man who agreed to regularize her residence status, the social worker said: “If they want to stay legally in Taiwan, then marriage is their only option” (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026).

This example highlights how marriage may serve as another route to gaining lawful residency for migrant women who would have otherwise remained in a state of insecurity regarding their legal status (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). In this light, even though the mandatory pregnancy test was once a form of scrutiny of the migrant woman’s body, continued residence may now be contingent upon sustaining of the marriage itself (Lan, 2008). The form of control has thus changed but not ceased, from the examination of the reproductive status of the migrant woman in the government clinic to the continued residence being contingent on the marriage and the actions of those who wield authority within it, such as her husband (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

To conclude, it is important to mention another form of indirect control by the state. The conversation with the social worker indicates that the state has not completely abandoned its role of assessing the legitimacy of marriages between immigrants (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). The only thing that has happened is that the arena for the assessment has shifted: while the state no longer checks the reproductive health of the migrant woman via the medical examination, it still assesses the legitimacy of the marriage through immigration policies (Lan, 2008). As the social worker explained, immigration officers can even visit the house and check whether the marriage is real or fake (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026). This means that the domestic space of the household becomes yet another place where the state carries out its assessment (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

“In some cases, immigration officers may visit the couple’s home to verify their living situation. They might check where the couple sleeps, whether they share a room, whether they have children together, and whether there are signs of a genuine relationship. The process resembles the type of questioning that occurs when applying

for a green card in the United States [...] but the verification can involve physical inspections of the home and evidence of daily life together”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

In this context, the birth of children is seen as one of the factors used by the state to ascertain whether a marriage and thus a legal right to stay, is real. The question that the pregnancy test posed was more limited and crude compared to that posed by the home inspection, which is broader (have this couple produced proof of a real family?). In this way, the intrusion by the state into the private life of the migrant woman can be intended to have the scope to verify whether a woman merits to stay in Taiwan (Chao, 2004; Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

The combination of all this evidence suggests that, on the one hand, the deconstruction of the most obvious tool of reproductive regulation targeting migrant women is indeed a significant legal accomplishment, resulting from sustained activism and feminist labor (Hsia, 2015). On the other hand, it is not accompanied by a similar deconstruction of the assumption that migrant women's fertility, sexuality and behavior within the household remain subject to the scrutiny of institutions or family members. What happened since 1992 is that the form of surveillance did not disappear but merely shifted from one site to another, from a hospital conducting the test to a family monitoring the bed of a household and an immigration officer counting toothbrushes in a shared toilet. The border theorised by Lan (2008) that is traced on the body of a migrant woman, has not disappeared but it has been subcontracted.

Chapter 4: Beyond Survival: Migrant Women's Agency and Everyday Strategies in Taiwan

The previous chapters have reconstructed the legal, administrative and symbolic architecture within which the experience of migrant women in Taiwan is situated: the marriage and labor recruitment system, the hierarchical classification of foreigners, the discourse on “new Taiwanese” (*xinzhumin*, 新住民) and the media stereotypes that still portray these women as passive, vulnerable and in need of care. This chapter presents a different perspective on the topic: the focus here is not denying the existence of these power dynamics, which are also well documented through field interviews, but rather exploring precisely how these migrant women actually behave within those structures.

The starting point to understand this system is an extract of a conversation with one of the social workers interviewed at a center for new residents in Taipei:

“From the outside, their life experience seems to be simply one of ‘surviving’ rather than ‘being happy’, their overall life in Taiwan might be described as “okay” rather than truly happy”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

Nonetheless, the concept of survival should not be restricted only to the idea of vulnerability or the limited opportunities available to migrant women. Instead, it refers to a dynamic activity involving choice, negotiation and adaptation, through which migrant women actively navigate and re-signify the structural constraints in their everyday lives (Scott, 1987; Lan, 2008; Zani, 2018). As critical literature on female migration in East Asia emphasizes, the everyday practices carried out by these women do not necessarily constitute open, direct challenges to institutional and patriarchal frameworks (De Certeau, 1980; Wang, 2007); nor do they imply that these women operate in complete freedom from such constraints. On the contrary, these practices demonstrate how subaltern subjects creatively carve out hidden spaces of resistance and autonomy within the very limits of the structure (Wang, 2007; Zani and Momesso, 2021). This is how the subsequent sections will analyze the different, situational ways in which agency is performatively enacted by the women in this study.

The chapter is divided into four sections: the first section, Section 4.1, introduces the concept of agency from a migration studies perspective: it proposes a reading that does not consider migrant women merely as victims or fully autonomous subjects. The second section, Section 4.2, focuses on informal economic strategies such as small-scale cross-border trading via WeChat and Facebook as a creative reaction to the marginalization of the skilled labor market. The third section, Section 4.3, discusses the use of emotions as social resources and, in particular, differentiates between three types of emotional strategies, according to Zani and Momesso (2021): an imaginative, an implosive and a mutual one. The fourth section, paragraph 4.4, addresses the strategies for rebuilding a new life: from a new profession to a new hobby. The fifth section, paragraph 4.5, addresses the transversal theme of the role of the church and religious faith as a space for resistance, healing and community organization.

4.1 Migrant Women Are Not Just Victims: The Concept of Agency

Even if migrants may feel limited, dependent and vulnerable, they still find ways to negotiate and adapt by utilizing the opportunities available to them (Lan, 2008; Zani, 2018). It is, therefore, the concept of agency that is employed throughout this chapter to explore migrant women not as autonomous agents but as actors in conditions that are beyond their choice and control (Wang, 2007; Cheng, 2013; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

4.1.1 From Structural Subordination to Migrant Subjectivity

An important aspect of the literature on female migration in South and East Asia and, particularly in Taiwan, has long been the analysis of the structural aspect of subordination: the control of migratory movements by the state, the dependence of foreign spouses on citizen-husbands and the segregation of the labor market by relegating foreign women to the informal sector of the labor market (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). Such an approach brings into focus the institutional processes involved in the production and reproduction of migrant women's subordination in Taiwan, such as the marriage-agency recruitment process and the administrative classification of foreigners (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

These structures are also reflected in broader social perceptions. The experiences of the social workers interviewed provide a particularly useful entry point into this dimension, as well as into its historical development. For example, the lack of trust towards foreign brides is not an insignificant problem in contemporary Taiwanese society but rather is based on a widespread fear, especially in the 1970s and 1980s²⁵, that the bride might abandon the family and take away her husband's money.

²⁵ Although the first foreign wives from Southeast Asia began arriving in Taiwan in the 1970s, their numbers became significant only from the late 1980s onwards, with cross-border marriages increasing rapidly throughout the 1990s. The number of marriages involving Southeast Asian spouses, for instance, increased from approximately 4,900 in 1994 to more than 21,000 in 2000 (Lu, 2008). The phenomenon continued to grow in the following years, reaching its overall peak in 2003, when around 50,000 marriages in Taiwan involved foreign spouses (Hugo, 2016).

“Some Taiwanese families, especially parents-in-law, may worry that a foreign wife will leave the family and take the husband’s money. In the past, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, this fear was stronger. Some families would even ask a new immigrant woman whether she planned to “escape” after marriage”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

This broader climate of suspicion, partially mitigated by the efforts of social workers as well as by the Taiwanese government’s attempts to present Taiwan internationally as a country committed to human rights, provides a useful lens for interpreting cases such as Nena’s, already discussed in Chapter 3. This woman, for instance, had to demonstrate that she was economically and morally trustworthy in order to establish relationships with her husband’s family (Nena, interview, 23 May 2026). Similarly, Josefina stayed in an irregular state for four years until she managed to regularize her status through a secret marriage, which was arranged to prevent her deportation (Josefina, Interview, 10 May 2026). This shows how legal status, economic dependence²⁶ and familial ties may affect the movement of migrant women.

However, structural vulnerability is not the only aspect that contributes to understanding the experiences of the migrants. According to Zani (2018), and Zani and Momesso (2021), the construction of migrant subjectivity happens in the context of subordination, which is the reality of migrant women. This approach focuses on the activities carried out by migrant women, especially in Zani’s case, by Chinese women “trapped” in the network of the Taiwanese migration system that allow them to create spaces for self-realization, employment and social integration. According to Zani (2018), these careers are described as “migratory careers” characterized by

²⁶ The social workers interviewed similarly emphasized the economic vulnerability of many migrant women, stating that: 90% of people who move to Taiwan are women and in many cases the husband manages the finances, thus depriving the woman of any means of income (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026).

entrepreneurial creativity that arises not despite, but precisely because of, structural exclusion: it is precisely because the labor market does not allow migrant women to access jobs matching their skills that they find ways to carry out autonomous or informal activities.

These practices allow them to “show their abilities and feel that their value is recognized” (Lin, interview, 22 May 2026), a dimension that will be explored in greater detail in the following sections. In this sense, Lin’s account resonates with what Zani and Momesso (2021) describe as migrant subjectivities constituted “in and through” the experience of subordination and pain, rather than simply being shaped by or subjected to it.

4.1.2 Agency within Constraints: From Resistance to Negotiation

This section requires a clearer definition of agency. If agency is connected only with the definition of resistance, only actions that go against the system can be defined as an expression of agency (Lan, 2008; Zani and Momesso, 2021). This makes it hard to comprehend the various experiences documented in this research, which do not necessarily involve rejecting the norms in question but, in many cases, negotiating them (Butler, 2004; Lan, 2008; Momesso, 2020).

Judith Butler’s (2004) reflections on gender and social norms in her book “Undoing Gender” help explain why migrant women’s agency should not be seen as absolute freedom and their subordination as absolute determinism. Indeed, for Butler (2004), subjectivity is necessarily constructed through norms that precede and transcend the individual. For this reason, the individual’s capacity for action does not lie in escaping these norms, but rather in reworking them in different ways, thereby opening, within their apparently closed boundaries, possibilities for deviation, reinterpretation and subversion through repetition. It is, in fact, an approach that permits interpreting less

contradictory cases like that of Faye, who arrived from Malaysia to Taiwan in 1991. Even though she herself describes her integration as something fundamentally free from pressure (for example: “My in-laws never asked me to have a child... they said it’s up to you” (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)), yet she asserts with equal clarity the right to refuse, for the sake of her ideal daughters and daughters-in-law, the obligation to care for the elderly that she herself had accepted:

“If my daughter got married, I wouldn’t ask my daughter-in-law to take care of me [...] When because they newly got married, you both need a lot of time to know each other, you know, otherwise you got another family, another work responsibility, really bother you”.

(Faye, interview, April 23, 2026)

Through these words, Faye does not reject the norm of filial care as such because she accepts it as a constitutive part of her own identity, but she redefines it, reshapes it, shifts it in time and space: she is a paradigmatic example of what Butler (2004) means by agency within the norm, not against it.

Another exemplary case is represented by Hoa’s account of her marriage thirty years ago, which was arranged through an intermediary service facilitating “marriages” between Taiwanese and Vietnamese individuals. From a structural perspective, this scene is hardly open to misunderstanding: a group of Vietnamese women are introduced one after the other to a Taiwanese man who has already rejected over a hundred photos and a group of girls before choosing Hoa. She was the last to arrive and therefore, as she herself admits, she smiled naturally in front of him, unlike the previous candidate:

“When it was my turn, I walked in. At that moment, there was no one left for my husband to choose for... he said ‘I want this girl’. That girl was me”

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026)

This is a moment that almost embodies the mechanism of the commodification of the female migrant’s body: a mechanism by which the act of choice is almost entirely in the hands of the male buyer, while the female migrant is simply chosen from hundreds of photographs, with very little room to say no. Yet it is the same interviewee, thirty years later, who gives an interpretation of the scene introducing a mechanism of reciprocity: “In reality I believe that there was a sort of mutual selection. He chose me and I accepted him” (Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026). What is important to note here is that, on the one hand, the interviewee herself clearly identifies the objectively unequal conditions of the situation; but, on the other hand, her account highlights the exercise of agency within extremely narrow limits of action. Her acceptance takes the form of a spontaneous smile, a particular way of presenting herself, and, ultimately, the voluntary decision to accept a proposal that she could have refused. This possibility of refusal is illustrated by the experience of the previous candidate, who rejected the man by simply refusing to look at him. In fact, it is precisely within this narrow margin of choice, this almost infinitesimal crack in an otherwise highly constrained structure, that the material collected in this research offers an immediate illustration of Butler’s (2004) theory. Hoa does not reject or attempt to escape the structural norm that shaped the encounter, either at the time of her marriage or in her reflections thirty years later. Rather, she insists on her capacity to exercise a degree of choice within that very norm. Her agency therefore does not take the form of a refusal of the structure itself, but of a selective appropriation of the limited possibilities it makes available to her. It is precisely through this repetition of the norm with a difference, through accepting the rules of the encounter while simultaneously asserting her right to choose within them, that the possibility of transformation emerges.

Agency, therefore, should not be reduced to a single form of political or everyday resistance. Resistance can be one expression of agency, but so can negotiation, adaptation, selective compliance, exit and the creation of alternative spaces of action.

4.1.3 Voice, Representation and the Limits of the Interview

The acknowledgment of the women migrants as subjects in their own right poses another methodological issue regarding the concept of “voice”. The interviews may permit one to access their understanding of what they have gone through, but the interviews cannot be seen as a transparent representation of an autonomous subject.

For this reason, in Lin's narrative but also other women interviewed, there is a methodological question that cannot be set aside: to what extent does an interview transcript actually give access to a migrant woman's own voice and to what extent is that voice itself already shaped by the research encounter that generates it?

Spivak's article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (2010) may help to address this issue: she identifies two related dangers in the representation of subaltern subjects. The first is the one related to the interpretation of the subaltern subject (the woman, the migrant, the poor worker from the Global South) as a silent object of other discourses, thereby depriving her of her voice, even when they try to speak in the first person. The second, conversely, is the risk of attributing to the subject a voice that is too complete and transparent, ignoring the linguistic, institutional and epistemological structures of power that continue to shape and filter her discourse. In the context of the research, Spivak's (2010) warning implies that the interviews conducted are not a transparent

window onto the “true voice” of migrant women but rather narratives constructed within a research device, an interviewer, a language not necessarily the interviewee’s native speaker and an institutional context that frames what can be said.

This caution is not abstract because it also emerged in conversations with social workers who work with Southeast Asian women. As they themselves pointed out, there is a tension between the way migrant women represent their experiences in face-to-face encounters and the structural obstacles that emerge in conversations with the social workers who follow their lives more closely. In direct encounters, these women often emphasize positive aspects of their experience, including their good treatment by Taiwanese people and their sense of being fortunate to be in Taiwan (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026). In conversations with social workers, however, more difficulties and experiences of frustration may become visible (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026).

The difference between public discourse and the “hidden transcript” of frustration and exhaustion should not be taken as a sign of hypocrisy but rather as a typical form of everyday resistance: migrant women may present an image of successful adaptation in public while expressing frustration and exhaustion within safer spaces, such as their communities, churches, groups of compatriots or informal networks. These spaces can therefore provide room for experiences and forms of subjectivity that may remain less visible in more public accounts of migrant life.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the mere fact of the existence of “voice” during the interview process does not mean that the researcher has to take each story literally. Rosemarie’s story is especially insightful in this respect. When asked about the perception that Southeast Asian women marry Taiwanese men for economic reasons, she does not simply reject the stereotype:

“It happens. Yeah, that women come here just to marry and... It really happens. Maybe 50% here and 50% love. Really, it’s not really that you can avoid on that part because it really happens”.

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

In this way, her answer does not support but rather complicates a simplistic dichotomy between being victims and exercising agency. It is not necessary to assume that all migration stories are those of resistance in order to accept the ability of migrant women to make their own decisions, nor is it necessary to negate the importance of economics in decisions about migration and marriage.

Another type of evidence is provided again by Rosemarie. While openly expressing her own feelings of exhaustion and frustration at work, she makes a specific statement in response to the question about changes she would make to the living conditions of migrant workers in Taiwan. She expresses not a desire for improvements in her own situation but rather a right to representation in general.

“To have a voice to protect us people. Yes, to help these people, to fight for these people, new immigrants. Yes, new immigrants, wherever we go, we really encounter this matter. So that’s why we need to stand for these people. Yes. To protect them, to give them the rights”.

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

This statement shifts the discussion from an individual to a more collective experience of being a migrant worker and is directly related to the themes considered in section 4.5 in terms of community leadership among the interviewees.

4.1.4 Agency as a Heterogeneous and Negotiated Process

The previous discussion suggests that migrant women's agency should be understood as a heterogeneous and situated process rather than as a fixed personal characteristic. A social worker interviewed for this research offered a useful metaphor for understanding this relationship between individual experiences and the structures that surround them:

“The problem we see is only the small part above the surface. The real issues are underneath and unless we understand those deeper causes, we cannot really help people”.

(Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026)

What appears as an individual problem at the superficial level, Lin's professional frustrations, Faye's negotiation of filial duty or Hoa's workplace accident, actually originates from a structure that remains below the surface: differentiated citizenship regimes, marriage recruitment systems and administrative hierarchies organised by nationality (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008; Wang & Chang, 2002).

The point is not to dissolve these individual experiences back into structure, but to examine how women act within them. The interviews suggest that the possibilities available to each woman depend on different combinations of economic resources, language skills, social networks, family circumstances and religious or community connections (Huang, 2020; Lan, 2006; Zani, 2020, 2022; Zani & Momesso, 2021). Agency is therefore unevenly distributed and can change over time. A woman may have considerable autonomy in one area of her life while remaining highly constrained in another. In some aspects of their lives, a woman might be relatively autonomous, while at the same time very restricted in others. This is especially true since the

experiences of not all of the women who have been interviewed are characterized by struggle against their situation. For example, while Carmen and Ratna talk about stable lives, other women, such as Nena, talk about adaptations to family expectations although these people had previously tried to resist them. The examples mentioned above should not be considered exceptional cases; they illustrate how agency can consist in adaptation and adjustment of the existing conditions.

Similarly, the idea of leaving the place does not necessarily mean the rejection of the structures which caused the need for such actions. For example, leaving an unequal relationship, changing the occupation, organizing an informal business or joining a new social circle can be considered different actions which do not imply any sort of refusal from the existing structures (Wang, 2007; Yeoh and Willis, 2005; Zani, 2020).

The agency, in other words, it is not a given acquired once and for all, nor a quality possessed in equal measure by all women migrants: it is rather, to resume Zani and Momesso (2021), a process located, heterogeneous, which is distributed differently depending on economic resources, the language capital, social network and religious biography of each woman. What shares the collected testimonies is therefore not a uniform capacity for self-determination, but the presence, in all of them, of a space of negotiation: migrant women respondents are neither entirely free nor entirely determined by the system that has brought them to Taiwan, but they act, as mentioned in the opening, in the spaces that they can cut off.

4.2 Surviving with Creativity: Informal Trade and Solidarity Networks

While the previous section suggested a theoretical approach to understanding female migrant agency, this one focuses on a more practical approach to the problem, analyzing how many of the women interviewed used their informal economic strategies in response to their occupational marginalization. The first step in this

process is a common theme across all our interviews: the Taiwanese labor market does not always recognize the academic credentials and professional experience gained abroad by female migrant workers, thus leaving them marginalized and forced into positions below their qualifications (Chao, 2004; Huang, 2020; Yeoh and Willis, 2005; Zani, 2018). This is most effectively explained by Lin, a graduate with a decade of experience working for an international logistics company who moved to Taiwan, when she says:

“Another important issue is work. In Taiwan, even if we graduate from university, our degrees are often not fully recognized. Only degrees from some of the top universities may be accepted. For many others, our qualifications are not considered equivalent. Because of this, it is difficult to find a job that matches our education and experience. For example, in China I studied for a specific career, and I have the skills to do that job, but in Taiwan I may not be able to find the same level of position. I could work in another type of job, such as cleaning or something similar, but I studied for something else. I spent many years studying and working hard, so it is frustrating to feel that my qualifications are not recognized. I think many foreign women in Taiwan experience the same problem. They studied for many years, they have knowledge and abilities, but they cannot always use them in the job market. Sometimes they think: “Why did I study so much if I cannot use what I learned?””

(Lin, Interview, 22 May 2026)

These informal exchange mechanisms are a response to the specific type of downward structural mobility that is at the heart of Zani’s (2018) study on the “migrant careers” of Chinese women in Taiwan. Lin explains how these networks function: WeChat, Line, and Facebook groups through which Chinese women living in Taiwan order and then resell to other Taiwanese citizens food, snacks, clothing and “household goods”

that cannot be found on the Taiwanese market (Zani, 2018; Zani, 2020; Zani, 2022). The most typical case is that of food.

“There are some Facebook groups and online communities where Chinese women sell products that they import from China, such as food, snacks, clothes, or things from their hometown. Sometimes we just miss the food from our own country. For example, people from Sichuan really love spicy food, but sometimes it is difficult to find the same kind of food in Taiwan. So they create these groups where they can buy things from China. I also joined some groups to buy Chinese snacks. I think many people in these groups are Chinese women, although I cannot say exactly if everyone is Chinese because I mainly join Chinese groups. But I know that these kinds of communities exist. I think these groups are not only about buying products. They also create a space where people can connect with others who have similar experiences. Some Chinese women may feel that they are not completely part of Taiwanese society, so these online communities become a way to feel more comfortable and connected”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

The story of Lin is one where food is not only an option for nutrition but also becomes what can be termed as the “emotional commodity” or “emodity”, a consumable product imbued with feelings of nostalgia, sadness and care (Zani, 2020). Through the import and sale of traditional spices and Sichuanese spicy sauce through the use of WeChat, these digitally networked entrepreneurs create an emotional link that helps in reducing the distance between their rural childhood and urban adulthood in Taiwan (Zani, 2020; Zani and Momesso, 2021). The microeconomic activity of trade, referred to as “translocal emotional petit capitalism” by Zani (2022), exists alongside the existing global value chains and helps women overcome any formal economic constraints to challenge their marginality (Zani, 2020; Zani, 2022).

In these digital spaces, the roles of buyer and seller are not rigidly separated. Since any migrant woman deeply understands the nostalgic needs of her peers, she can easily turn her role as a consumer of ‘emotional commodities’ into that of an active entrepreneur, establishing an informal business directly from her home (Zani, 2020). This informal digital trade serves a vital purpose for migrant mothers, allowing them to bypass formal labor barriers (Zani, 2020). In this way, migrant women manage to earn money on their own terms, which have nothing to do with the recognition (and often lack thereof) of their professional skills. Moreover, these activities are consistent with the time and challenges associated with caring for their children, as Lin emphasized:

“I also think there is another important reason: many women need to take care of their children. When you have young children, it is difficult to have a full-time job because you always need to be available. If your child gets sick, for example, you have to leave work and take care of them”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

For these reasons, it is possible to establish a link between informal trade and the idea of agency that was discussed in the previous paragraph. Since such practices also provide a possibility for social acceptance and reconstruction of one’s professional self-image, “some women decide to start their own businesses. Through online groups or small businesses, they can show their abilities and feel that their value is recognized. They can use their skills and create something for themselves” (Lin, interview, 22 May 2026). Through “running their homes like a business” and setting up their digital marketplaces in their kitchens, these women are not only making money but are challenging the social exclusion of the host community by turning informal relationships into sources of self-respect and collective empowerment (Huang, 2020; Zani, 2020).

This interpretation is further confirmed by the accounts gathered in interviews with social workers, where it was found that this phenomenon is widespread even outside the Chinese community: “It’s like really common for, and I think this is a good way because they can be independent from their husband, you know” (Social Workers, Interview, 14 May 2026). These social workers place this practice within a broader institutional approach aimed at promoting migrant women’s professional training and entrepreneurship. While this approach confirms the evolution of Taiwanese public policy compared to the past (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008), it indirectly suggests that informal entrepreneurship remains the only option for economic independence for many women (Cheng, 2013; Huang, 2020; Zani, 2018; Zani, 2020).

Beyond the purely economic aspect, another creative response to marginalization emerges from the interviews: the creation of transnational solidarity networks. These networks are characterized by the interviewees themselves as symbolic kinship relationships, such as 姐妹 (*jiemei*, “sisters”). It reflects and at least partially replaces the relationship network that they have abandoned in their country of origin. Among the most powerful expressions of solidarity is the one offered by Lin in relation to her friendship with a Malaysian woman:

“When we are together, we are not people from different countries. We are just mothers. We talk about our children. I think this is very important. At that moment, we are not Chinese, Malaysian, Taiwanese or foreigners. We are just moms”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

This statement permits to strengthen, the theory developed so far: the international female solidarity described in this chapter need not necessarily involve any national or religious affiliation, but can be based on the simple fact of having the same function as

motherhood in the migratory experience, which is capable of suspending, during a meeting or discussion, the identity categories that dominate in other contexts.

Faye explains how these networks work based on her personal observations: the weekly meetings organized by her religious group, where immigrant women discuss concrete problems, from childcare to managing family conflicts, are a more reliable source of support than her family still in Malaysia because: “they [her Malaysian family] don’t know what’s happening here, what our problems are, while with my sisters in church it’s easier because they also live here and understand us better” (Faye, Interview, 23 April 2026) (Huang, 2020; Lan, 2006; Zani and Momesso, 2021). This reliance on church “sisters” over distant biological relatives highlights a crucial sociological process: the establishment of a “fictive sorority” among companions of similar destinies of attachment and emancipation (Raulin, 2023). Through the strategic adoption of kinship terms, 姐妹 (*jiemei*, “sister”), migrant women construct a familial rhetoric that underpins a dense network of psychological, emotional and financial mutual support, effectively replacing or extending the distant kinship structures left behind in their home countries (Raulin, 2023).

An even more evident example of mutual aid is presented by the testimony of Josefina, who recounts a story of collective fundraising organized by her religious group to help a Filipino woman separated from her Taiwanese husband.

“But we helped her by fundraising. We accompanied her to the doctors, hospitals every day. But the rules in Taiwan, you can only stay for three months in one hospital. So we went to three hospitals for nine months. Because she was divorced, she had no one. Yeah, and she didn’t have ID. But the social workers and lots of, how do you call that, social worker community agency, corporations, lots of foundations helped her. Not only our church. Our church helped her, including the social workers, the institution, foundation, even the hospitals helped her. She wasn’t able to pay in a single unit”.

(Josefina, Interview, 10 May 2026)

Significant is not only the extent of the emotional solidarity shown but also the community network's ability to mobilize various types of resources (health, assistance, religious) to create a link between the informal bond of "sisterhood" and the social services offered by Taiwan (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Josefina's account illustrates how individual suffering, when shared within safe social spaces, undergoes a profound process of collectivization (Zani and Momesso, 2021).

Furthermore, these supportive networks operate seamlessly across physical and digital borders. The effective density of this "culture of ties" is sustained both through offline physical gatherings, such as church meetings, dance classes or shared meals, and through online platforms like WeChat and Line (Raulin, 2023). The mobilization of digital resources significantly accelerates the pace of migrant women's initiatives, giving them a capacity for rapid action, whether they are organizing a crowdfunded medical rescue or helping a sister navigate administrative procedures (Raulin, 2023).

4.3 Emotions as a Resource: From Individual Pain to Collective Action

The interviews collected as part of this research are, in a literal sense, charged with emotions: frustrations due to the lack of professional recognition, nostalgia for their homeland, loneliness during the first years spent in Taiwan, but also feelings of gratitude, relief and happiness. A superficial understanding might interpret the emotions experienced by these migrants as purely psychological experiences that are important in the biographies of each individual but are irrelevant to the sociological analysis of migration processes. However, it is precisely this understanding that Zani and Momesso (2021) propose to abandon in order to understand migrant women's emotions not as private experiences but as true social resources: tools through which subalternity is elaborated and shared and sometimes becomes collective action. The

authors distinguish three recurring states in the emotional experience of migrant women in East Asia: the imaginative state, the implosive state and the mutual state, identifiable in the fieldwork data of this research (Zani & Momesso; 2021).

The first state coincides with the period that usually precedes departure or even the first days of life in Taiwan and is characterized by the hope of a better future, the dream of love, of stability or something their home country does not offer (Zani & Momesso, 2021).

Lin talks about her decision to leave a secure job in China to come to Taiwan with her husband, saying: “When I first came to Taiwan, I was really happy. I was excited because I imagined starting a new life here with my husband. I looked forward to building our future together and I was genuinely enthusiastic about this new chapter of my life”. (Lin, Interview, 22 May 2026). This feeling, which according to Zani and Momesso (2021) exists before and creates the possibility of the migration process itself as a motivational horizon, often comes into conflict with reality, as Lin admits after a few years: “I never imagined that life would be so difficult. If I had known beforehand how many challenges I would face, I might have made a different decision. Maybe I would have said no” (Lin, Interview, 05 May 2026).

The second stage is characterized by the distance between the imaginary and the real, which generates a form of pain that leads migrant women to prefer solitude (Zani & Momesso, 2021). Unwilling to share their suffering, they do not comfort themselves either with their family of origin (who is distant and do not understand the Taiwanese context) or with their new adoptive family (where her suffering may be seen as a problem). This is precisely the case of Xue, who moved to Taiwan from Vietnam through a marriage broker during the COVID-19 period. Despite having relatives already living in Taiwan nearby, Xue said she did not want to ask for their help because “Every family has its own problems, and I did not want to bring my problems to them” and she overcame the most difficult moments alone: “So many times, I just

endured everything by myself. Sometimes I hid in the bathroom and cried, even while taking a shower” (Xue, interview, 14 May 2026). The image of secret tears in the shower is a particularly evocative element mentioned by Zani and Momesso (2021): it is a pain that cannot find valid ways to express itself, a pain that devours itself in the privacy of its own space and for this very reason risks being invisible to anyone who is not looking for it.

A particularly touching variant of the implosive state, this time linked not to marital life but to the moment of the breakup with the family of origin, emerges from the testimony by one of the interviewees met through the new residents’ center. Hoa shared her parents’ reaction to her decision to marry a Taiwanese man.

“他們聽到非常生氣。因為我是家裡最大的女兒，他們沒有想到我只是出去一個下午，回來就說我要結婚了。他們覺得太突然了，甚至氣到打我”。

“My parents were extremely angry. I was the oldest daughter in my family, so they could not understand how I could make such a big decision after only going out for one afternoon. They thought everything happened too suddenly. They were so angry that they even hit me”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026)

This is an experience that the interviewee herself transforms into a more general social context immediately afterwards:

“可是那個年代，在越南這種事情真的很常見。很多女生透過仲介認識外國丈夫，尤其是台灣男性。大家都知道台灣人會來越南找老婆，所以很多女生也會想嫁到台灣”。

“But at that time, this kind of marriage was already very common in Vietnam. Many women met foreign husbands through marriage agencies, especially Taiwanese men. People knew that Taiwanese men came to Vietnam to find wives, so many women also considered marrying to Taiwan”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026)

This illustrates the way in which the tragic personal experience of a family breakdown, the father’s violent behavior at that time, existed simultaneously with the awareness of being part of a much larger social process. In other words, the rupture in her natal household and the violent acts committed by her father are indicative of the severe consequences of the “transgression” against the norms that have been set within the patriarchal family according to Zani (2018). Through choosing to migrate across borders via the use of a marriage broker, Hoa consciously challenged the domestic power within her family, leading to a situation where she found herself faced with a crisis that is characteristic of the intense “tug-of-war” felt by daughters prior to migration (Cheng, 2013). Significantly, Hoa’s ability to view her personal trauma from a structural perspective highlights how such biographical events are deeply entangled within the larger transnational marriage and migration industry (Lan, 2008; Wang and Chang, 2002).

Very similar to Hoa’s, is the testimony of the social worker who explained that many women have faced strong opposition from their parents before migrating. One woman had told them that both her mother and father had tried to prevent her from marrying and moving to Taiwan. Among older generations in Vietnam, marriages with foreign men, whether Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese or Chinese, have long carried a negative reputation. Families often believe that women who leave in this way are abandoning

their relatives for economic reasons. For this reason, many women arrive in Taiwan carrying a profound sense of shame and they do not want to talk about their migration because they feel that they have betrayed their parents. Some had even been told, before leaving, that if they chose to go abroad, they should never return to Vietnam: as a consequence, many mothers have not gone back to their home country for ten or even twenty years. When asked how their families in Vietnam are doing, some simply answer, “I don't know”. This is particularly striking because today’s technology would make communication very easy through phones or the internet. For this reason, according to the social worker: “the obstacle is not distance but shame” (Social worker, Taipei City New Immigrant Support Center, 14 May 2026).

Finally, it is precisely the third state, defined by Zani and Momesso (2021) as the mutual one, that constitutes the most original and, in some respects, most politically relevant element of this analysis. In the transition from one state to another, the pain experienced by each individual is transformed into a shared resource and an action carried out for the benefit of other women (Zani & Momesso, 2021).

In the interviews, the most exhaustive case is the one of Josefina, whose personal experience of being financially and emotionally abandoned by her husband for seventeen years becomes a direct source of inspiration for her future mission to help other Filipino women in difficulty.

“They became Christian, but I went through a difficult process. I was scolded, I was threatened, but I’m determined. And my passion to help those women, because I had undergone, I had the same experience, with an irresponsible husband, right? So my passion to help got bigger, more bigger”.

(Josefina, Interview, 10 May 2026)

Another example of the mutual transformation of pain is provided by the story of a manager at a reception center for new immigrants. Her personal experience: a serious workplace injury, followed by the struggle to obtain fair compensation from her employer and the search for legal and social resources for a new resident alone, proved to be one of the factors that led her to become a point of reference for other Vietnamese women victims of domestic violence. Part of her work is accompanying women to the hospital, helping them file a complaint and supporting them in obtaining protective measures. Speaking about her learning process regarding the availability of resources, she stated:

“我覺得當初不是政府主動找到我，也不是家人幫助我，而是我自己一步一步去找資源，然後透過朋友建立起這些關係”。

“I think at that time it was not the government that found me, and it was not my family who solved my problems. I found the resources step by step by myself, and through these relationships I built my own support network”.

(Translated by the author)

(Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026)

Hoa's powerful indictment of both the state and her adoptive family highlights a crucial structural void: in Taiwan's familialist welfare regime, where public support for marginalized immigrants is remarkably residual, subaltern women may be left to navigate crises in complete isolation (Cheng, 2013; Liang, 2021). Consequently, the support network Hoa built from her own suffering does not merely represent a psychological coping mechanism; it becomes a vital, self-managed “social infrastructure from below”, an informal safety net of mutual care that performatively “undoes” the double exclusion of the host society and the domestic sphere (Zani, 2020; Zani & Momesso, 2021). This support network built from one's own suffering

becomes, in this case, a social infrastructure that can be replicated and transmitted to other women, in a dynamic that illustrates with particular clarity the transition, theorized by Zani and Momesso (2021), from individual pain to collective action²⁷. The mutual state (Zani and Momesso, 2021) can also emerge through the sharing of everyday experiences and the creation of collective spaces in which individual suffering is temporarily relieved and performatively converted into bounded solidarity. This process can also be observed in the way migrant women collectively transform their limited free time into a space of mutual support and social connection. Rosemarie's account is particularly illustrative in this regard. Although she is a different interviewee and works under different conditions, her description of the weekly rhythm closely resembles Carmen's: after a week entirely structured around work, Sunday emerges as the only extended period of time that can be devoted to herself and to others.

“From Monday, I start my work. I just wanted to wait for the night because this night, that night, that's the only time, the only time that I can have for myself. And after that, I'm gonna wait tomorrow again and then wait for the Sunday. Yeah, that's it. That's the only life we have here”.

(Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026)

“I always look forward to Sunday. Going to church is the happiest part of my week. The church is the house of God, and it is the place where I feel peace and happiness. At home, when I am alone, I always talk to God. When Sunday comes, I can worship, meet my church sisters, talk with them, and share our lives. This gives me strength and helps me a lot”.

²⁷ This process, by which personal hardship is converted into mutual support, echoes a broader strand of scholarship on 'affective politics' and 'affective networks' (Ahmed, 2004; Clough and Halley, 2007; Svašek, 2010). Within this literature, emotions and affective ties are conceptualized not as passive psychological states, but as relational resources that circulate within informal networks, sustaining grass-roots solidarity and collective agency. The 'emotional communities' (Rosenwein, 2006) that emerge in this way help to explain why the mutual state described by Zani and Momesso (2021) so often takes the form of self-organized care.

(Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026)

In two distinct occasions, in two separate interviews carried out at different times, the same structure of temporality of suffering and relief has emerged: six days of work and wait and one day of happiness and relief. This is not a series of isolated biographical observations but it is rather a structure that runs throughout different migratory experiences to demonstrate how temporal struggles and coping strategies spread across gender-based social relations (Ong, 1999). It suggests the point that the reciprocal part of emotions, facilitated by the religious congregation, becomes indeed a structuring rhythm of life for the migrant women interviewed here (Zani & Momesso, 2021).

Reflecting on the above testimony with the help of the social worker from the Taipei New Residents' Center, brought out an altogether different and much more nuanced picture of what lies behind seemingly rosy statements from direct interviews. Specifically, the very fact that one day in seven is when people feel truly happy and free prompts the following question: "if Sunday is the only day in which someone feels free and happy, what happens during the other twenty five or twenty six days of the month?" (Post-interview analysis, 14 May 2026). The social worker's comment here that the majority of women migrants "survive" but do not really live since happiness is confined to some specific points in time and space, especially the church (Post-interview analysis, 14 May 2026). This is actually a direct precursor to the discussion in Section 4.5 about the importance of faith and the congregation, but in terms of this particular section, this observation shows the analytical value of Zani and Momesso's (2021) model. In other words, their feelings are indicative of the power relations that rule their lives while also becoming a powerful source of affect that they utilize for self-determination (Zani and Momesso, 2021).

The collective dimension of Sunday is also spatial. Rather than simply resting from work, migrant workers assert their presence in the urban center: the main hall of Taipei's central station is taken over by groups of Southeast Asian workers, primarily Indonesians, who eat, share meals and socialize together (New Naratif, 2021), while nearby Beiping West Road, nicknamed "Little Jakarta", is home to businesses and services facilitating remittance transfers (The China Post, 2018). Filipino workers gather in the area around Yuanshan Station, known as "Little Manila", to attend Mass in Tagalog and send goods to their families (Taiwan Panorama, 2023). For these reasons, Sunday is thus not merely a day of rest but a means of building community within the constraints of the host society, creating an enclave in the heart of the city.

4.4 Rebuilding a Life: New Skills, New Work and Small Everyday Joys

It is clear from Chapter 3 that Taiwanese institutions and even Taiwanese families, impose an apparatus of control over the reproduction and sexuality of migrant women. This paragraph is not revisiting this apparatus of control, the point that needs to be discussed here, that was left unanswered by the previous chapter, is entirely different: once a woman has crossed those controls, survived them or simply lived alongside them for years, how does she go about rebuilding a life that feels, in some meaningful sense, her own? The interviews provide a rich response, far beyond the bare necessities of survival and include: new occupations undertaken not merely out of need but out of a sense of pride and identity; courses and certificates that people took even when they were no longer required to do so; hobbies discovered and small daily habits such as a walk in the park, time spent at a playground or new languages learned.

4.4.1 Professional Reinvention

Many of the professional careers can now be reconsidered, in this paragraph, from another perspective altogether, one that is not defined by a response to exclusion, but

rather represents the real trajectory of personal development. Faye's life is a case in point. After having started out in her career as a technical arts teacher in Malaysia, "For a short [...] period of vocational training to be a teacher" (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026), she later reinvented herself professionally completely in Taiwan as a Malay language teacher and interpreter, a career she expresses obvious pride when considering what her future will be like in ten years' time:

"I am also already 60, and I'm still working as a Malay teacher, as an interpreter. I have a group of students; I do part-time work, and then the rest of the time I'm doing [...] voluntary work".

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

It is worth noting the fact that Faye's volunteer work was far from peripheral: she has been personally invited by the Taipei Civil Affairs Department to be a member of various committees in charge of planning cultural events for Taipei. Here, her role as a migrant woman is also one based on civic value.

"They will ask me to join the discussion of the government city, Taipei city groups, many kinds of cultural events. So we will sit together and discuss what kind of cultural events, and that I can help. And sometimes these cultural events, we need to ask the embassy to join. So these two countries get more because related".

(Faye, interview, 23 April 2026)

Faye's participation in community affairs is a very good example of the concept of "cultural citizenship" or "active citizenship from below" in the field of citizenship studies (Chao, 2004; Momesso & Cheng, 2017). Unlike a passive participant in the assimilation process of the state, Faye becomes a recognized cultural mediator who

contributes to the creation of public and cultural policies in the host city through active co-production. In negotiation with municipal administrations and foreign embassies on the organization of events, her path moves beyond the confinements of the national identity as a “migrant spouse” into a transnational space of bilateral connections and turns into a valuable civic resource (Momesso, 2017; Zani, 2022).

A closely related trajectory, discussed in 4.1 primarily in terms of economic vulnerability, is the one of Hoa. Her story is characterized not in terms of adaptation but rather as “a process of continuous accumulation” that has been made possible due to her refusal to give up (Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026): this course can be seen as echoing precisely the theory of “migratory careers” as discussed by Martiniello and Rea (2014)²⁸. The case of Hoa shows that a subaltern subject, who is originally stuck in a hyper-precarious and low status part of the local market, may gradually mobilize and rearrange different types of cultural, social and linguistic capitals (Martiniello & Rea, 2014). She moves from selling ferry tickets to teaching her mother tongue, working in the field of insurance business and finally becoming the president of a newcomer support center. In this way, Hoa goes through a deep “process of subjectivation”, that permits her to pass from a structural dependency and vulnerability to a position of institutional authority and independence (Momesso, 2017; Zani, 2022). By doing so, Hoa manages to reverse the usual process of “re-domestication” and “deskilling”, which characterizes the lives of married migrant women and turns into an important provider of welfare resources for her own community (Liang, 2021).

One more aspect of this phenomenon is brought up by Josefina. Before she came to Taiwan, Josefina was trained for a totally different profession: she had a degree in Psychology and she dreamed about becoming a doctor. However, she gave up on this

²⁸ The case of Hoa illustrates how a migratory career is not a static or linear path but rather a dynamic process built upon the dialectical tension between structural constraints and individual agency. Even when initially trapped in a hyper-precarious, low-status segment of the host labor market, a subaltern subject does not remain a passive victim. Instead, she actively mobilizes, rearranges and weaponizes different forms of social, cultural and linguistic capital accumulated throughout her multi-staged geographical displacement to performatively contest her marginalization and navigate her way toward social and economic autonomy.

dream due to lack of financial assistance from her family, “I wanted to be a doctor, but we didn’t have financial support for my parents. So we still have some siblings to study, so I sacrificed myself. After college, I came here in a factory. And it was illegal” (Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026). With regard to this context, it becomes clear that her profession as a private English teacher and afterwards as a leader of a fourteen-year-old Christian community, cannot be seen simply as a replacement for the career she did not pursue, but rather as another career which she invented for herself in a new country. The process of professional reinvention, which was initially driven by necessity (her husband did not provide any financial assistance to her for seventeen years), led her to discover training possibilities she never thought would have been open to her before. Moreover, by transitioning into teaching, Josefina strategically mobilized her English proficiency as a valuable form of “linguistic capital” to bypass formal labor market exclusions and assert her socioeconomic autonomy (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008).

The narrative of Janet also provides a variant of the same theme. In this case, five years before the interview, Janet encountered a training program where people were trained to teach their own languages in schools in Taiwan. To her surprise, she realized that she was eligible to apply as a teacher of the Filipino language, which is her native language. “I told them I’m from the Philippines. And when I, five years ago, I went to a training for teaching your mother language. I just went and I didn’t know that I can teach Filipino at school” (Janet, interview, 10 May 2026). But then, after finding this out, she never applied for the job since she met this information when her second marriage fell apart. “So I just went and I didn’t apply for the job. [...] Because at that moment, ending my second relationship with my second husband” (Janet, interview, 10 May 2026).

Janet’s case exemplifies the deep and painful entanglement between the productive and reproductive/intimate spheres of migrant women’s lives (Yeoh and Willis, 2005; Zani, 2022). Although the host country provides multicultural channels for the

professionalization of immigrant women through mother tongue programs (Cheng, 2013), the ability to utilize these organizational resources becomes subjected to the domestic reality. As far as subaltern women are concerned, any crisis in the intimate realm, such as divorce, does not confine itself to the private life but spills into the public realm, thus undermining women's efforts at economic empowerment (Yeoh and Willis, 2005; Zani, 2022)

Another example of such a case is the one presented by Ratna, which is unique among all previous ones since it is not related to changing professions but instead the conscious choice to continue working just for its own sake. Having worked for several years at an international trading firm, where her English proficiency made her responsible for communicating with the overseas partners of the company, Ratna took a short career break six months prior to the interview and talks about her intentions to go back to work without any delay: "I worked until about six months ago. At the moment, I am on a break, but before that, I was working always. [...] Now I am searching for another job because I like working. As we do not have children, we have much time" (Ratna, interview, 23 May 2026). This is important to note because it changes the concept of employment, usually seen in the context of this chapter's previous paragraphs (4.2) as an economic means of survival, into more of an intentional form of personal fulfillment: a single woman without dependents and sufficient funds for a comfortable life who can afford not to work but wants a new job "because I like to work" becomes an example of how the salaried employment is performed in the process of transitioning "from a mere means of survival to a crucial place of 'responsibility, dream, and aspiration'" (Huang, 2020). At first glance, such a remark may sound out of place within the context of necessity discussed in Chapter 3; however, it perfectly fits into the one described here.

4.4.2 Learning as Self-Realization

A second, closely related dimension concerns the pursuit of formal learning (language classes, computer classes, professional certifications) as something not seen as an externally-imposed demand but as a sphere which the informants lay claim to as their own, often against all odds. The example of Carmen trying to fulfill the requirement of 72 hours of Chinese language class to get a Taiwanese identification card is illustrative in this regard. Stopped halfway because of a cancer diagnosis and never finished, this class still comes through in Carmen's narrative not so much as an instance of institutional pressure, but as an attempt to achieve something despite all odds (Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026). Xue's story about her night classes is also similar: she joined a specially created elementary class for immigrants shortly after her arrival in Taiwan and stayed there for approximately a year, which was quite a lot considering the fact that at that time she had just got married and moved to a new country; however, then, due to her pregnancy and having to care for a child, attending the classes became impossible (Xue, interview, 14 May 2026).

Xue's story and her consequent inability to continue attending the classes due to pregnancy serve as a prime example of what migration studies define as the "structural re-domestication" of married migrant women (Yeoh and Willis, 2005). In a legal sense, these language classes are set up by the host state as paternalistic biopolitical tools of assimilation, targeting explicitly the goal to "cook" and sinicize the ethnic other to compensate for the supposedly "low quality" of foreign motherhood (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). However, by actively engaging with this space, Carmen and Xue may transform a tool of institutional surveillance and control into a space for personal growth and self-development (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Nevertheless, Xue's withdrawal demonstrates a highly painful gender aspect of the "reproductive contract": once she became a mother, the demands of unpaid reproductive work increasingly constrained her ability to pursue her aspirations for intellectual freedom (Lan, 2008; Yeoh and Willis, 2005).

Finally, Faye provides what may be the clearest instance of learning done exclusively on one's own terms and independent of any sort of institutional compulsion at all: in confronting the difficulty of bringing up her first child without access to a familial support network, she recounts having taught herself how to parent via books rather than formal classes, specifically because she could not afford, or wanted nothing to do with, paid childcare assistance: "And I bought the books to study. So I learned parenting by reading books" (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). It is a small but revealing incident: confronted with something that she could have seen merely as a deprivation (lack of a familial support system, lack of funds for assistance), Faye transforms it into something to study.

This practice of autodidactic parenting by Faye is an excellent example of the use of "the weapons of the weak" mentioned by James C. Scott (1987), and "creative response and adaptation strategy" as defined by Beatrice Zani (2018). Rather than falling into the passivity and loneliness associated with the "implosive" emotional reaction that stems from the lack of structural childcare provisions both locally and within her family, Faye turns her loneliness into an arena of actively created knowledge (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Teaching herself, she manages to redefine her domestic identity and become active independently of either the state surveillance or commodified care system (Cheng, 2013; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

4.4.3 Hobbies and Small Everyday Joys

Probably the least anticipated but maybe the most interesting aspects of the findings pertain to the smaller-scale, non-instrumental joys or hobbies described as central to their sense of having "picked themselves back up". Lin provides perhaps the most detailed explanation in this respect in answering the direct question of what enables her to be herself when times are tough.

“My children have grown up. They are bigger now, so they don’t need me to take care of them 24 hours a day anymore. [...] Now I have some time for myself. I can have my hobbies, I can do things that I like, and I can learn new things. [...] Recently, I started studying Japanese. That is also why I visited Japan. [...] I feel very happy and proud that I started learning Japanese”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

What Lin relates in terms of a period of years spent almost exclusively raising children, the gradual reclaiming of personal time and then finally the careful decision to engage in an activity solely for the purpose of pleasure constitutes a compelling contrast to the exclusion and control described in chapter 3. As a matter of fact, one should not overlook the fact that in the previous paragraphs (4.1, 4.2), Lin expressed disappointment at the neglect of her professional achievements and experience. In this context, the same woman talks about consciously choosing to start again, deliberately starting from zero in a language she has no professional need to learn, purely “because I like it” (Lin, interview, 22 May 2026). This is a pursuit whose value lies precisely in its uselessness, in its freedom from the logic of necessity that structures so much of the rest of her life. The decision to devote her time to something “useless” is an attempt to seek refuge completely independent of the laws of profitability. The vast majority of immigrant women are forced to use their feelings and traditions to create small businesses as a means of survival through exclusion from the labor market, a practice called “emotional microcapitalism” (Zani, 2020). However, Lin does not follow this pattern: by declaring that she has the right to some useless free time, she opposes the ideology of “emotional capitalism” (Illouz, 2007).

A similar daily routine is provided by Carmen who has constructed a smaller daily routine of self-care through a walk in the local park:

“Every day I go for a 30-minute walk in the park. People smile at me, and I smile back, but I cannot really have a conversation with them because I do not know how to express myself in Mandarin. I can only say simple words like ‘Ni hao’, ‘Xie xie’ and ‘Bye-bye’”.

(Carmen, interview, 10 May 2026)

This particular moment is worth revisiting: on the one hand, it captures a certain reality of isolation, the inability to communicate on a deeper level, using only a few ready phrases. However, on the other hand, it captures a certain practice that is consciously being performed on a daily basis: the creation of an intimate circuit of recognition (smiling at each other) in the absence of language, a minimal, but real form of social engagement created by Carmen herself. This silent exchange of bodily gestures is precisely what is explained by Zani and Momesso (2021) as the “affective micro-practice” of self-care. Carmen’s daily walks can instead be understood as a small form of self-directed activity through which she maintains a sense of connection with the surrounding community despite her linguistic limitations.

A similar practice of reclaiming public space as a sanctuary is evident in Lin’s account. Concerning her years of taking care of her ill mother-in-law and raising her kids, a period described by her as “probably the hardest time of my life”, she recalls memories of daily walks: “my children were very little, and I often took them to the garden. Sometimes we went for walks together with my children and my husband’s mother, and we stayed in the park for the whole day” (Lin, interview, 22 May 2026). To Lin, these regular outings were a key strategy for getting herself out of the trap of unpaid reproductive labor and resisting the structural process of “re-domestication” that can imprison married immigrant women in the privacy of their homes (Yeoh & Willis, 2005; Lan, 2008). It was through this same daily routine, incidentally, that Lin built one of her closest friendships in Taiwan, meeting a Malaysian mother at the same

neighborhood park because “our sons went to the same daycare” (Lin, interview, 22 May 2026). Such an unplanned event underscores the fact that physical presence within ordinary spaces helps foster the development of translocal affective networks among women whose lives are marked by displacement (Lan, 2006; Zani, 2022).

Travel emerges as yet another recurring theme in self-redemption as found in many interviews conducted, especially once these women have children who can be taken care of by others and they have some time for themselves. This is best illustrated in Nena’s case where, although already nearly fifty years of age, she claims that she now has time for herself, as follows:

“Now I already have my own life, and I feel that I can do many things. I’m almost 50 years old, but now I finally have more time for myself. I really love traveling. Traveling makes me very happy because I can see different places, meet different people and experience different cultures. I feel like my dream is to travel”.

(Nena, interview, 23 May 2026)

Lin also enjoys travelling. Her trip to Japan with her sons (Lin, interview, 22 May 2026), as well as Ratna’s travels back to Indonesia, alone or with her husband (Ratna, interview, 23 May 2026), illustrate the same point: for these women, travel represents a reward for the work they have undertaken over the years to gain greater freedom and independence in their lives. By crossing borders as and when they wish, the above-mentioned women perform an act of “orbital mobilities” or “in-betweenness” as described by Zani (2022). By doing this, they turn their geographical journey into a resource for subjectivation. By undoing their subaltern position and using their historical immobility to become self-realized cosmopolitans (Zani, 2022; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

4.5 The Space of Faith: The Church as a Network of Resistance and Care

Religious congregations are one of the main contexts where migrant women may find and deploy agency for themselves. Beyond their religious role, the church is one space that may provide opportunities for social connectedness and resourcefulness.

4.5.1 The Role of the Church and the Religious Community

Although previous paragraphs have separately explored economic, emotional and identity aspects of migrant women's daily resistance in Taiwan, it is necessary to provide a specific space for the consideration of a theme that emerges so frequently and so forcefully in the fieldwork phase of the research that it cannot be considered merely a subtheme: the role of the Christian Church. Of the thirteen interviews, seven make explicit and extensive reference to the religious community as the only support network outside the family.

Recent estimates show that Christians comprise 7% of the total population of Taiwan, a religious minority in a country that is predominantly Buddhist (about 28%), Daoist and other faiths²⁹ (in total exceeding a third of the population), with many atheists (27%) (Pew Research Center, 2023). In terms of this research, this is an important factor, since the churches referred to by the interviewees are not the mainstream religious places for the larger Taiwanese society, but rather spaces constructed specifically by migrants.

More specifically, these women declare they are predominantly Protestant and, more specifically, "born-again" despite the Catholic upbringing of many of the women prior to immigration. For example, Grace gives an exact account of her congregation: "We

²⁹ Combination of religions (5%), follower of local or Indigenous religions (4%) , other/don't know/refused (4%).

are in a born again Christian church. So we, our church is located in Lukou” (Grace, interview, 9 May 2026), Lukou is a district in New Taipei City hosting a considerable number of Southeast Asian migrant workers.

Josefina’s own experience shows very vividly how this transition happens, as, being brought up Catholic, like most Filipinos, she recounts her conversion as something that she initially resisted and which happened through a rupture: “And we became a Christian [...] because of the case of my sister, we born again” (Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026), and after it she started her Filipina-led congregation.

As for Faye, her congregation is specifically multinational, consisting of immigrants coming from China, Vietnam and Indonesia (Faye, interview, 23 April 2026). The fact that the church serves as a safe place for these interviewees’ entire lives is not an unusual case in Taiwan: one example is St. Christopher’s Catholic Church, located in Taipei’s Zhongshan North Road, which has for decades been serving as the center for the Filipino community within the capital city of Taiwan. It is a church with a capacity for 600 persons that must have five different Sunday masses in order to cope with the demand. Beyond their religious function, churches also serve as regular spaces for migrants to gather, socialize and maintain connections with others who share their language and cultural background.

Firstly, what appears to be the church’s primary purpose, as indicated in interviews, is to serve as a place for exchanging information and emotions, in many ways complementary and sometimes even alternative to that of one’s family of origin and one’s stepfamily. Faye provides a detailed account of her community’s weekly programming: fellowship meetings at home during the week, Sunday services and then moments of sharing where women “study the Bible” but also exchange practical advice on topics ranging from parenting to managing family conflicts, “and many of us, we share, and then we get the good answer, good example of people’s good experience they will share” (Faye, Interview, 23 April 2026). Moreover, when asked who to turn to in case of problems, Faye puts the church community immediately after

her husband and before her family of origin, adding that even though she has a good relation with them, “when you ask something they cannot give you much advice. While with my church sisters, it is easy because they are also living here and we can understand each other” (Faye, Interview, 23 April 2026).

Similarly, Ratna receives her main source of support from her religious community in cases when she faces challenges in her life, whether related to work or personal affairs.

“If I have problems at work or in my personal life, I usually turn to my church community. I have friends there, brothers and sisters in faith and they always support me. We have a community group where we communicate every day [...] We send messages, encourage each other, and give advice whenever someone needs help and when we can we meet”.

(Ratna, interview, 23 May 2026)

Ratna’s reference to the digital chat group every day reveals how this emotional solidarity has extended beyond the physical space of the church. In the digital era, moving to the mutual state of emotions is continually guaranteed by the screen-mediated “culture of ties” (Diminescu, 2008), in which virtual co-presence and constant communication enable migrant women to overcome geographic and domestic isolation. In this way, they transform the church from a physical place, that they can visit once a week, into a permanent digital infrastructure of affective care (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020; Zani, 2020).

Secondly, there is the role played by the religious network in mobilizing real resources (economic, healthcare and legal) in times of great difficulty. As discussed in section 4.2, Josefina’s testimony about the fundraising campaign conducted by her own

community for a sick and undocumented Filipino migrant demonstrates how religious ties go beyond spiritual consolation and actually become a genuine connection with the Taiwanese healthcare and social welfare system. Another example, this time perhaps even more important in terms of personal initiative, is offered once again by the testimony of Josefina regarding her own path to economic independence: for seventeen years without any help from her husband, she received more material support from the network of contacts she developed through the church than from the State. “I was so grateful for this church” which allowed her, among other things, to start a private tutoring service that supported the university education of both her children (Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026).

The ability of Josefina to generate tangible material support within her church community illustrates how migrant-built religious spaces function as indispensable “informal safety nets” that can fill the gap created by the absence of state structures (Lan, 2006; Liang, 2021). In this position, the church acts as a surrogate for welfare provision (Lan, 2006). The above situation reflects the idea of “bounded solidarity” which is described in sociological theory (Portes, 2003; Zani, 2022) as a closely-knit network of trusting relations and resource exchanges, based on a common feeling of marginalization and subalternity. Here, in this sacred place, the spiritual dimension merges with the pragmatic one and spiritual connections turn into tangible economic benefits, legal aid, and medical help. In this way, this is consistent with the fact that religious communities represent essential infrastructure for collective survival (Lan, 2006; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

Thirdly, probably the most original function identified through the interviews is that of the church as a space for female leadership. In other words, a place that has the potential to transform vulnerable women into influential public figures for the entire migrant population. The case of Josefina once again seems to be the most exemplary: from a poor wife threatened by violence because of her religious conversion, the

interviewee has become the initiator and leader of a faith community for Filipino women in Taiwan that has been operating for fourteen years. Nowadays she is even recognized by Taiwanese authorities as an effective mediator for issues of domestic violence, obtaining residency documents and medical care (Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026).

Even Rosemarie envisions herself taking on a pastoral leadership role within the next ten years, as she explains in response to the final question of the interview: “Maybe standing there. Yes. Preaching the word of God, I guess. Yes, we are sisters” (Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026), an ambition that is conditioned, in her own words, by the survival of her employer and her caregiver, who is now seventy-seven, demonstrating that even the most private ambitions are still inexorably linked, for a migrant caregiver, to the affairs of the family she works for.

4.5.2 Faith in Times of Acute Crisis

Another point of view, different from the daily informational assistance previously described, concerns faith as a source of personal strength in the most critical moments. The most powerful illustration of this use of faith can be found in Janet’s story, already discussed in paragraph 4.4, which provides a detailed account of the incident that led to the end of her marriage. Returning from a Sunday service, Janet found her husband drunk. Following an argument over her alleged infidelity, he beat her in front of their eight-year-old son. Her call to emergency services, the assistance provided by a hospital social worker and her eventual decision to request a protective order, marked the beginning of her separation and the process of rebuilding her life. Throughout this process, the religious dimension played, in Janet’s own words, a decisive role.

“Eventually, I signed the divorce papers without asking my husband for any financial settlement. I did this because, in that moment, I felt a deep sense of faith. It was as if

God was asking me, “Don’t you trust me?” I answered that I did, and I decided to let go of the financial aspect”.

(Janet, interview, 10 May 2026)

Subsequently, during a legal dispute regarding ownership of the house, she describes how a legal term suddenly came to mind while silently praying in the presence of lawyers who provided her with free legal assistance. She said:

“I silently prayed and asked God to help me because I did not know what to say. Suddenly, a specific legal term came to my mind. I cannot remember exactly what the word was, but I immediately said it to the lawyer. The lawyer looked again at the documents, then said, “You’re right”. That word completely changed the discussion and strengthened my case. I truly believe that God helped me in that moment”.

(Janet, interview, 10 May 2026)

Regardless of how one might interpret such an experience from a historical or sociological perspective, what is fundamental here is the psychological role of faith in this interviewee’s narrative.

Faith appears to accompany her transition from a condition of extreme legal and economic vulnerability (facing an abusive husband and a legal dispute while alone and lacking sufficient knowledge of legal language) to a renewed sense of autonomy. Moreover, it is also important to highlight that Janet herself concludes her story by explicitly placing the church community above any other community she turns to for help when facing adversity.

“The church community has become one of the most important things in my life, even more important than many other aspects of my daily life. It has given me support, strength, and a place where I feel understood and accepted. When I face difficulties or problems, the church community is usually the first place where I seek help. I come here and talk with my church sisters because I know I can find emotional support, advice, and encouragement from them”.

(Janet, Interview, 10 May 2026)

Janet’s emphasis on the centrality of the church compared to any other form of social institution is a consequence of the fact that, in Taiwan, formal state support for immigrant wives who were abused by their spouses remains something extremely limited and highly surveilled (Cheng, 2013; Lan, 2008). Given this systemic isolation, it becomes clear why Southeast Asian Christian communities turn out to be the necessary “outsiders’ sanctuaries” and ethnic enclaves (Lan, 2006). Apart from being spiritual spaces, they serve as indispensable grounds for the process of transitioning from the “implosive” mode of privatized and isolated suffering to the “mutual” mode of collective solidarity and mutual support (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Through sharing her trauma with her “church sisters”, Janet converts her private biographical wound into a collective one, thus creating a “social infrastructure from below” as a performativity of the dual exclusion of her domestic world and the host state (Cheng, 2013; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

4.5.3 Beyond Confessional Faith: The Church as Social Infrastructure

Another confirmation of the importance of the church as a form of social infrastructure, not reducible solely to the purely confessional aspect of religion, is provided by Lin. She is the only interviewee who explicitly states that she does not

follow any religion. Nevertheless, she regularly participates in the community life of the church with her Malaysian friend.

“So when I go to church, I can pray, but I also enjoy spending time with them. I know they are good people. I think people gather there because they have faith, but also because they can truly be themselves. They don’t need to worry about how others see them. They don’t have to think about prejudice. There are also many interesting activities in the church. I really like these activities. Because when I came to Taiwan, I didn’t have many friends. So whenever there are activities, especially activities for children, I try to bring my children there”.

(Lin, interview, 22 May 2026)

This observation permits to understand more precisely the function of the religious community discussed in this paragraph: what interviewees seek in the church is not merely a set of shared beliefs, but rather a social environment where they are free from external judgment: from national prejudices, from social competition, from the constant need to prove their belonging. There they can “truly be themselves”.

Lin’s secular involvement clearly shows that the church functions mainly as an “affective sanctuary” than as a mere “dogmatic sanctuary” (Lan, 2006; Zani and Momesso, 2021). In this case, the space constructed by migrants allows the suspension of rigid biopolitical monitoring and the pressures for assimilation of the host society (Cheng, 2013). For an interviewee who is not religious, the church becomes redefined as a very important social institution in which the feeling of being displaced, rather than a common confession, becomes the basis of solidarity. It shows how “mutual state” of emotions is achieved through mundane practices of co-presence and mutual recognition (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Thus, by reclaiming the space of leisure and

play within a church for her children, Lin manages to avoid isolation caused by domestic captivity (Lan, 2006; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

4.5.4 The Limits and Ambivalences of Faith

In addition, there is also an ambiguous aspect that arises directly from the content of the interviews themselves and deserves to be mentioned as part of a comprehensive analysis. Religious faith is not necessarily and exclusively a supporting factor: it can instead become another point of contention between migrant families and stepfamilies, when the conversion of migrant wives, most commonly Catholics or followers of other religions different from their countries of origin, contradicts the Buddhist tradition of their husbands' families or even their religious conservatism. Josefina recounts precisely this, saying that she was “scolded” and even “threatened” by her husband precisely because of his religious choice and that she had to go through “a difficult process” before her husband himself converted to Christianity after seventeen years of marriage (Josefina, interview, 10 May 2026). The domestic conflict in which Josefina is involved shows how transnational migration creates “interior frontiers” in marriage and domestic spaces as described by scholars (Lan, 2008). In this domestic domain, the conflict about religion becomes a part of the struggle for cultural conformity. Indeed, as stated by Cheng (2013), the host family and in-laws impose a form of culture and religion on immigrant women in order to force them to give up their native ones and become members of local family and spiritual cultures. In this context, the conversion of Josefina to Christianity may appear to be an extremely dangerous violation of the patriarchal power that results in her being subjected to intimidation and threats (Zani and Momesso, 2021).

For this reason, the church should not be idealized as a harmonious space for interaction but rather interpreted as a space for negotiation itself. In other words, it can be seen as an arena for exercising a specific form of female agency, in this case the

religious choice, which is capable of strengthening their position within the stepfamily but also of complicating it. By enduring this structural pressure for seventeen years and ultimately converting her husband, Josefina successfully mobilizes her religious choice as a vital resource of subjectivation (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Her trajectory suggests that spiritual devotion is not a passive retreat, but a performative arena of long-term negotiation through which subaltern women can gradually contest, destabilize and ultimately “undo” their subordination within the patriarchal household (Lan, 2008; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

A second testimony further complicates the relationship between faith and institutional community life, revealing that these two aspects are not necessarily overlapping. Nena’s testimony illustrates her religious experience (a conversion from her mother’s Buddhism to Evangelical Christianity prompted by a miracle that occurred while her brother was still a teenager) and, at the same time, her account relativizes the importance of participation in religious community life, emphasizing instead the intimate and personal dimension of faith:

“That is why I think women should open their eyes before marriage and really think carefully about their choice. After marriage, sometimes it is too late because you already have responsibilities. I believe women are strong enough to live by themselves. We can do many things alone. We don’t always need to depend on someone else. We should not be afraid because we have faith in God, and God can guide our lives. My relationship with God is actually more important to me than church itself. Church is only once a week, usually on Sunday, but our relationship with God continues every day, from Monday to Saturday”.

(Nena, interview, 23 May 2026)

Although rooted in the same religious context described by the other women discussed in this paragraph, Nena's position differs in its emphasis on individual spiritual autonomy rather than on the collective and relational dimension of religious life, which is central to the experiences of Faye, Ratna, Janet and Josefina. With this in mind, Nena performatively transforms her faith into an "emotional resource" that is intensely individual (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Moreover, faith is turned into a personal technology of subjectivation through which she exercises her independence and autonomy, thus circumventing the limitations imposed on her by family institutions as well as the church (Zani and Momesso, 2021).

Looking back at her past, this predisposition was partially modelled on that of her mother, a woman who raised two children alone after being abandoned by her first husband.

"My mother is also a very strong woman. When I was very young, my father left us for another woman. I was one year old, and my brother was two years old. My mother raised us by herself. She is a person who likes traveling and working. Before coming to Taiwan, she went to Japan to work because she wanted to experience a different life. She really loved Japan. Later, because she could not find a husband there, she eventually came to Taiwan and married a Taiwanese man. I think my mother's experience also influenced me. She is a strong woman. Of course, everyone has emotions and sometimes gets angry or feels tired because we are human beings. But being strong means continuing forward".

(Nena, interview, 23 May 2026)

The migratory career of Nena's mother shows a highly complicated process involving negotiation of vulnerability in space and time (Martiniello and Rea, 2014). The inter-generational transfer of resilience indicates the genealogy of migration explained by

Zani (2022). Nena acquires an important mobility capital from the biography of her mother, a “motility” (Kaufmann et al., 2004), which gives her the cognitive and emotional tools to become independent in the host society (Zani, 2022). Nena’s testimony shows that agency is neither a fixed attribute nor the opposite of constraint, but emerges in various situations from the resources and biographies each woman brings to the structures described in this chapter. It is precisely the interviews that make this visible: legal texts and secondary sources describe the structures that constrain migrant women, but only their own accounts reveal how these structures are navigated and how agency is expressed.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to demonstrate that the limits of the civic community in Taiwan do not lie in the realm of elections or the constitution; rather, they are mapped out daily through the management of migrant women’s reproduction, sexuality and sociability. The central claim made in these four chapters is that these boundaries are not set in stone by laws forevermore, nor are they imposed and just accepted passively. Instead, these boundaries seem to have been drawn, redrawn and sometimes even quietly contested through the aggregation of small administrative, familiar, medical and communal acts that individually may not stand out but together construct who is seen as belonging to the full community of Taiwan and who belongs to its margins.

All four chapters considered the above issue from different perspectives. Chapter 1 provided the historical and theoretical background of the research. It was argued that one should not consider Taiwanese identity as a primordial and ethnically given category (Corcuff, 2002; Zemanek, 2011; Pelaggi, 2020). Instead, one should realize that it is the result of the sedimentation process of various state and colonial constructions such as Japanese colonial government (Ka, 1995; Zemanek, 2011), the democratic transition and the creation of a civic rhetoric of inclusion (Chen, 2008), expressed in the discourse of the “New Taiwanese” (*xinzhumin*, 新住民) (Chao, 2004;

Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Chapter 2 focused on the consideration of how civic rhetoric was transformed into law and regulation of marriage and labor migrations in terms of various regimes of marriage and labor migration (Southeast Asian wives, wives from mainland China, contract workers) which distribute rights, time schedule and obligations of immigrants according to their nationalities (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013; Chien, 2026). Chapter 3 focused on the issue of how reproduction, sexuality and accent were used as the terrains for the negotiation, contesting and re-definition of national belonging (Chao, 2004; Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013; Zani and Momesso, 2021). Chapter 4 concentrated on the actions undertaken by migrant women in order to survive within this framework (Wang, 2007; Zani, 2018, 2020, 2022; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

This research aims to connect two distinct lines of inquiry: on the one hand, the analysis of civic identity in Taiwan and on the other hand, migration studies, specifically regarding migrant women in Taiwan. This perspective helps refine existing models of state control by highlighting how reproductive, sexual and ethno-political boundaries are not only enforced through formal policies, but can also be reproduced through practices presented as forms of assistance. When control is embedded in the language and practices of care, it becomes less visible and, consequently, more difficult to identify and challenge.

Chapter 1

Within the thesis, the first chapter occupies a rather different position compared to the three that follow. It is therefore worth explicitly reiterating, in this conclusion, why a study focused primarily on the contemporary experience of migrant women begins with several centuries of history regarding settlement, colonial administration and ethnic classification. The chapter's central argument, that ethnic divisions in Taiwan are not primordial but rather the stratified result of successive colonial and state

projects (Corcuff, 2002; Chen, 2008; Pelaggi, 2020), does not merely serve as background because it defines the interpretive lens through which the subsequent chapters address the discourse on “New Taiwanese” (Gold, 2003; Rigger, 2003) and, more broadly, the question of who can be considered part of the island’s civic community.

After demonstrating how the construction of Taiwanese civic identity in modern times developed against an external and geopolitically defined “other” (the PRC) (Stockton, 2002; Sendyka, 2021), this chapter proceeds to introduce a completely new concept of “other”: namely, migrant women who have arrived in Taiwan since the 1990s through marriage and labor migration (King, 2011; Schubert & Damm, 2011). The presence of these migrants on the island raises the issue of inclusion within Taiwan’s borders in a way that is different from the problem associated with its ties to Mainland China. The relationship with China defines Taiwanese identity primarily in negative terms, by opposition to an external actor: it says what Taiwan is not, without necessarily specifying who, among the people actually living on the island, counts as fully belonging to it. In the case of migrants, however, this question is much more practical as it requires the state to define who should be included. This is achieved not only through administrative actions (naturalization and residency policies) but also through how the migrant women themselves are perceived (Hsia, 2007; King, 2011).

The interviews conducted during the research for this thesis do not provide an answer to this historical question nor does the thesis itself address it. However, it can be stated that these interviews illustrate the practical consequences of the conflict between the civic inclusiveness of the “New Taiwanese” narrative and the differentiated treatment of migrant women in their daily lives. Thus, this conflict can be viewed as an extension of the process of Taiwanese identity formation (Schubert & Damm, 2011).

Chapter 2

The demographic backdrop discussed in the previous section is fundamental to understanding not only the legal architecture of naturalization, but the analysis that follows. Taiwan's reliance on immigrants, not only for its workforce but also to bolster annual birth rates, is situated within a legal framework that aligns the structural needs of immigrants with the interests of both the majority population and the immigrants themselves, making the situation more attractive to all parties involved (Chapter 2). Against this background, the different treatment of foreign spouses can be understood as the result of two different forms of suspicion, each reflected in a different legal pathway.

The distinction between Southeast Asian and Chinese women mentioned in section 2.2 is a good example. Southeast Asian ones are considered foreigners by law (Nationality Act) and the naturalization process normally takes four to eight years (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Chinese spouses, on the other hand, fall under the jurisdiction of the Cross-Strait Act, a completely different legal document that has to do with the complicated relation between Taiwan and China (Chao, 2004; Friedman, 2010). In other words, it means that even if they are neither foreigners nor Taiwanese citizens they are obliged to reside for a considerable period of time: when they obtain permanent resident status they still cannot extend their rights for 12 years, double the time with respect to Southeast Asians.

What this comparison suggests, read alongside the interviews, is that the two groups are not subject to a single, graduated hierarchy of otherness, but that they refer to two distinct premises: Southeast Asian wives are perceived primarily through a logic of cultural and economic inferiority (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013), while Mainland spouses are recognized primarily through a logic of political unreliability because of their proximity to the People's Republic of China (Chao, 2004; Lan, 2008; Friedman, 2010).

Financial means, language proficiency and the renunciation of prior citizenship are other naturalization requirements analyzed in Section 2.3. These conditions apply to both types of spouses, Southeast Asian and Chinese origin but they do not affect all women equally. Despite the fact that these conditions are presented as neutral by law, the interviews indicate that their practical application depends on other factors not mentioned in the law itself (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Economic requirements, for example, formally placed responsibility on the husband's household but it did not remove women's dependence on the host family (Lan, 2008). Similarly, the language proficiency requirement caused significant educational disruption for many interviewees, even preventing one woman from obtaining citizenship (Cheng, 2013). Furthermore, the requirement to give up one's previous citizenship creates another form of vulnerability (Cheng, 2013). As can be seen from the interviews, it is much less of an abstract issue of political alienation and much more a very concrete one. This weakness corresponds with certain rights which exist formally but can be exercised only if one knows the local culture and has the time (Chao, 2004; Cheng, 2013).

This is also true at the local level. Depending on the city, naturalization and integration policies are overseen by different municipalities: the Civil Affairs bureau in Taipei, the Education bureau in New Taipei and the Social Services bureau in southern Taiwanese cities (Cheng, 2013). This means that the same woman can be administered as a citizen or as a person who needs to receive education or a social service recipient depending on which city she belongs to (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Ultimately, this implies that the lives of these individuals are shaped not only by the broad national contexts distinguishing Southeast Asian and mainland Chinese spouses but also by more subtle dynamics created by everyday bureaucracy (Lan, 2008).

Finally, this regime applicable to migrants entering the country through marriage stands in contrast to the absence of a pathway to citizenship for contract workers, as

discussed in section 2.4. While marriage-based migration is, at least on paper, consistent with the national history of family formation described in Chapter 1, labor migration was designed from the outset to be temporary and employer-dependent (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026). This was achieved through mechanisms such as limits on the duration of stay, employer-tied contracts, debt owed to intermediaries and regulatory exclusions, resulting in constant workforce turnover regardless of the length of stay (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026).

In this light, and in contrast to the dual immigration scheme for marriage migrants, it is evident that Taiwan's immigration regime does not merely include or exclude migrants but instead, it assigns them to various distinct categories that define them, rather than allowing the migrants to define themselves (Ong, 1999; Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026).

Chapter 3

The third chapter can be seen as the analytical heart of this thesis and the data generated through interviews makes it possible for the three frontiers (reproductive, sexual and political-ethnic) to be examined with much more precision than would be suggested by the introductory framework alone.

Analysis of the interviews reveals a control mechanism operating through the notion of a "reproductive frontier" (Lan, 2008), mentioned in Section 3.1, though its presence is not easily detected directly. What is clear is the combination of care and differential surveillance within the same practices such as postpartum home visits and prenatal classes (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). While many of the interviewed women perceived these as expressions of an attentive and caring society, actually this is a logic, based on foreign status, that reflects the idea of the migrant body as one requiring correction (Lan, 2008). It is this ambivalence, rather than simple coercion, that best describes how reproductive surveillance functions in practice: the impossibility of distinguishing

between an act of care and an act of discipline renders this border vague for the women experiencing it (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026).

For example, the interviews reveal significant differences in the pro-natalist pressures experienced by women. These ranged from in-laws explicitly demanding a male child, regardless of the woman's wishes, to cases in which women reported no such pressure and described the outcome as a matter of luck rather than entitlement (Wolf, 1972; Lan, 2008). This variation suggests that the enforcement of this boundary is far from uniform, instead, it is mediated by interactions within each family (Lan, 2008; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

This does not undermine the structural framework but adds complexity. Most striking is the fact that at least one woman expressed regret at not having had more children (Faye, interview, April 23, 2026): this indicates that the boundary delineated in Lan's model (2008) functions not only as an external imposition but, for some women, as an internal aspiration in its own right (Foucault, 1982; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

Moreover, it is fundamental to mention the link between motherhood and legal residency that emerged from the interviews: a child born in Taiwan becomes, quite literally, the sole basis for a woman to remain in the country following a divorce (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Under Article 31 of the Taiwan Immigration Act, marital dissolution automatically entails the revocation of the residency permit unless the foreign mother secures legal custody of her minor child (Cheng, 2013). This situation suggests that the reproductive front extends beyond concerns regarding maternal competence into the critical arena of legal survival (Chao, 2004; Lan, 2008). The consequences of this can prove severe and largely irreversible, as evidenced by the ten-day deadline to leave the country reported by one of the interviewees (Cheng, 2013; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

The sexual dimension examined in Section 3.2, regarding live-in domestic workers, entails a very different mode of operation: a form of domination exercised through

imposed invisibility (Lan, 2008). Interviews reveal that desexualizing the worker's body, achieved through clothing, behavior and the suppression of any signs of femininity, serves simultaneously as a prerequisite for their integration into the family and as a means of personal protection against potential harassment, a risk workers are aware characterizes their work environment even before the pre-departure phase (Constable, 1997; Lan, 2006, 2008). The explicit warning given in the orientation programs to expect the worst from future employers is, in fact, a significant admission: it implies that the burden of coping with abuse falls squarely on the individual worker from the very start (Lan, 2008; Chien, 2026). This shift in the burden of responsibility, as evidenced by the interviews, also applies to the physical workplace, where the formally established right to terminate an abusive contract can only be exercised when the abuse appears to have exceeded the threshold of tolerability defined in the domestic worker's training program (Lan, 2006, 2008) (Rosemarie, interview, 10 May 2026).

In this context, a general climate of mistrust, fueled by both the media and common perceptions, where incidents of theft or misconduct are immediately generalized to all foreign domestic workers, extends this mindset into the public sphere (Grace, interview, 9 May 2026). This demonstrates that the caregiver's body is under constant scrutiny, regardless of their location (Lan, 2008)

Section 3.3 analyzed the politically and ethnically contested border. In the Taiwanese context, the awareness of proximity with the People's Republic of China, is a factor that breeds suspicion (Chao, 2004; Lan, 2008). While spouses from Southeast Asia are viewed as having cultural and economic deficiencies (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013), interviews suggest that spouses from mainland China face a different logic. The issue is not a deficiency that can be corrected, but a loyalty that can never be fully proven (Lan, 2008). It is precisely this attribution of responsibility to women for the Chinese government's actions, or for a family member's reluctance to travel to China, that shows how a woman's body can become a site where state-level relations are imposed

upon her (Chao, 2004; Zani and Momesso, 2021). The comparison with Western partners that emerged from the interviews shows that cultural and linguistic distance alone does not explain different levels of mistrust (Lan, 2008). Rather, mistrust becomes stronger when cultural distance overlaps with a political question of sovereignty, as in the case of spouses from mainland China (Chao, 2004; Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013).

Furthermore, Section 3.4 adds an important historical consideration to the discussion of the three boundaries mentioned above. The interviews conducted for this research do not contain information regarding the mandatory medical screening that was abolished in 2015, a fact mostly attributable to the nature of the selected sample rather than any lack of historical relevance regarding the issue (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Nevertheless, the interviews do reveal information about the surveillance mechanisms that persisted after the aforementioned practice was discontinued: the pre-departure matching procedure, which involves assessing and selecting the immigrant's body prior to arrival in Taiwan (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013); the mandatory pre-marital interview, which examines the personal relationship between partners to determine the marriage's authenticity (Chao, 2004; Cheng, 2013); discriminatory pricing for medical examinations, practices that appear to have lingered for years after the official abolition of the screening (Lan, 2008); and home inspections by immigration officers, who verify the marriage's "authenticity" by checking living conditions (Cheng, 2013). Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that while abolishing the pregnancy test was a significant legal success, it failed to put an end to the surveillance of reproduction and marriage (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013). Instead, such surveillance has become dispersed across a broader network of individuals and situations, a network that, being rooted in less tangible mechanisms, is far more difficult to identify, challenge and reform than the previous ones (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013).

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 can be seen as the counterpart to Chapter 3. It revisits the interviews discussed there through four dimensions of agency: conceptual, economic, emotional and religious.

Section 4.1 proposes a concept of agency that represents a middle ground between two extremes: viewing migrant women either as mere victims of social institutions or as fully autonomous agents (Lan, 2008; Wang, 2007; Zani and Momesso, 2021). This intermediate position not only aligns with theoretical expectations but also appears to accurately reflect the women's personal accounts of their lives (Wang, 2007; Zani, 2018). For example, the case of Faye, a woman who accepts the duty of caring for her in-laws while explicitly refusing to impose the same expectation on her daughter-in-law, serves as a perfect example: far from rejecting the principle of caring for relatives outright, she appears to be negotiating it (Faye, Interview, 23 April 2026) (Lan, 2008; Huang, 2020).

Hoa's story of her arranged marriage offers further confirmation of this idea: although the meeting where she was supposed to choose a husband from a hundred candidates seems to have been entirely determined by the husband's own will, in reality she made a point of telling that she had, in fact, exercised a degree of agency in that situation (Hoa, interview, 22 May 2026) (Wang, 2007; Zani, 2018).

However, at the same time, one must take into consideration the limitations that an interview study might have. In light of Spivak's warning against not only silencing the subaltern subject but also stressing too much on its voice, one can state that this account does not represent the whole picture of the experiences of women (Spivak, 1988; Zani and Momesso, 2021). This is also confirmed by the social workers' observations that there is a contradiction between what women talk about in the individual interview and what comes out during the course of support (Zani and Momesso, 2021).

In Section 4.2, informal economic practices were explored as creative ways of responding to labor market marginalization (Wang, 2007; Zani, 2018, 2022). The cross-border business networks described by Lin and others, established via WeChat and Facebook groups to sell food products and goods from the women's countries of origin, serve a dual purpose (Zani, 2020, 2022): on the one hand, they offer a modest way to earn money independently (Zani, 2018); on the other, they provide an “emotional asset” that helps maintain ties to the home country through specific tastes and objects (Zani, 2018). It is important to note that these networks have frequently been described not merely as economic activities but also as spaces where women facing similar migration experiences can find mutual recognition, regardless of their nationality (Zani, 2020; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

Chapter 4.3, which examines emotions as a social resource, provides one of the strongest theoretical insights of the chapter (Illouz, 2006; Zani and Momesso, 2021). The interviews largely confirmed the tripartite classification of emotional states: imaginary, implosive and receptive (Zani and Momesso, 2021). Following this analysis, the emotional journey of migrant women unfolds from an initial state of hopeful imagination to an implosive state of isolated suffering, ultimately arriving at a state of mutual connection (Zani and Momesso, 2021). It is precisely in this final phase that individual pain, shared among 姐妹 (*jiemei*, “sister”), transforms into a powerful collective resource for support and agency. The emotional trajectory of migrant women moves from an imaginative state of initial optimism (Lin, Interview, 22 May 2026) to an implosive state of isolated hardship (Xue, interview, 14 May 2026), ultimately culminating in a mutual state. In this final phase, as demonstrated by Josefina and peer support workers, individual suffering is converted into collective solidarity, turning emotional vulnerability into a powerful resource for agency (Zani and Momesso, 2021).

As stated in Section 4.4, one dimension that has received little attention in the literature to date is the process of rebuilding one's life and moving beyond mere survival. Through professional reinvention, autonomous learning pursued just for pleasure and small acts of self-care, migrant women find their dimension inside Taiwanese society. Faye's journey that permits her to become a Malay language teacher, interpreter and cultural mediator appointed by the Taipei City Government and Hoa's gradual path from ferry ticket seller to director of the new center for newcomers are two examples that demonstrate what began as an economic necessity for some women can evolve into a life possessing its own value and dignity (Wang, 2007; Zani, 2018). Conversely, the situations of Xue, who can no longer attend Mandarin classes due to pregnancy and childcare responsibilities and Janet, who decided to abandon the teaching profession, illustrate how such paths can be abruptly interrupted by family obligations (Lan, 2008; Cheng, 2013; Huang, 2020). In this way, even when professional advancement occurs, it cannot erase the underlying inequalities highlighted in this thesis (Lan, 2008). In this context, the small, non-instrumental activities mentioned, such as Carmen walking in the park despite knowing little Mandarin or Lin studying Japanese purely for fun, must be recognized for what they are: evidence that these women are seeking time and space free from the expectations of others (Wang, 2007; Zani and Momesso, 2021).

The final Section 4.5 addresses the role of the church. By synthesizing the analysis of all the data presented in this chapter, it becomes evident that the religious community serves not merely as a spiritual space but also as a place for information exchange. This is a situation well illustrated by Faye, who described the weekly gatherings where 姐妹 (*jiemei*, "sister") discuss issues regarding childcare and family disputes. However, the church is not just that, it is also a provider of material and legal assistance (as shown by Josefina's experience of fundraising for the community) and a site of leadership and public recognition (as evidenced by Josefina's role as religious community leader). Lin's involvement in church activities, despite not being religious

herself, suggests that these spaces may serve a purpose that goes beyond religion. She values them mainly for the social space they provide, which offers an alternative to the forms of control discussed in the previous chapter.

However, Josefina's account of the threats and violence she endured from her husband's relatives after her religious conversion, demonstrates that the church cannot be viewed as an institution without conflict. This points toward a more complex understanding of the religious community, viewing it not merely as a refuge from marginalization or an arena for agency, but as an ambivalent space where both processes appear to unfold simultaneously.

Finally, there is another aspect to highlight in order to gain a complete picture of the situation. The responses given during the interviews revealed a degree of consistency regarding the improvement of the situation compared to the past. This advancement can be attributed to the significant efforts undertaken by the Taiwanese government to promote and implement integration policies. It is worth noting that their experiences are perceived as part of an ongoing process over time, in which tensions surrounding public services, administrative procedures and the rhetoric surrounding "new Taiwanese" (*xinzhumin*, 新住民) are gradually reduced. This should not be understood as the disappearance of these problems, but rather as part of the process through which they are gradually transformed. This represents a genuine progress that appears to manifest primarily through the language of welfare and care, the focus of this study. Thus, acknowledging Taiwan's efforts does not seem to weaken the thesis's argument: on the contrary, it is perhaps precisely because these efforts are framed as "care" that the forms of control involved are difficult to distinguish.

In conclusion, this study has addressed the issue on two interconnected levels: first, the ways in which the boundaries of Taiwan's civic community have been defined and recreated through concrete mechanisms of control (legal, administrative, physical and communal); and second, the measures adopted by the migrant women themselves, in

response to such control, to define their own status within Taiwan's social landscape. Across the four chapters, this dual issue has been explored by moving from the structural-historical level to the material level, and finally to the level of individual agency. Collectively, the chapters substantiate the research's main hypothesis: that control and care are not opposites but can represent the same practice viewed from different angles. The more the management of migrant women's lives is framed in terms of welfare and assistance rather than restriction, the harder it becomes to identify it as control. This premise finds unexpected confirmation in the statements of several interviewees, who report an actual improvement in their circumstances compared to the past. This better condition is also a result of the Taiwanese authorities' practical efforts to enhance integration policies. It is important to note that this should not be viewed as a refutation of the study's main thesis, but rather as a clear demonstration of it: such positive changes occur primarily through the very discourse of care that this research identifies as requiring closer scrutiny.

Acknowledging this aspect does not mean rejecting the previously presented critical approach, but rather developing it to envision a relationship between the State and migrant women in which both control and genuine care coexist and evolve together, without either element disappearing. Ultimately, this thesis implies that the question of belonging in Taiwan requires looking at far more hidden sites where belonging is constructed on a daily basis: in a clinic, during a border interview or in a single spoken word within a legal proceeding. It is precisely in these spaces that, as revealed by fieldwork, migrant women in Taiwan appear to be engaged in ongoing processes of constructing a sense of belonging that transcends the categories imposed upon them by immigration laws and the traditional modes of their recruitment and control as wives, homemakers and workers.

To conclude, it is possible to confirm that the boundaries of Taiwanese identity are neither legally fixed nor passively accepted. On the contrary, they appear to be drawn,

redrawn and at times contested through a combination of administrative, familial, medical and community-level practices. These actions may seem insignificant in isolation but whose cumulative effect determines whether a woman is viewed as part of the Taiwanese community or as marginal.

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