

# Participatory Design on New Immigrant Women in the Fishery Community of Nan-Fang-Ao

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New immigrant Women, also known as “foreign brides,” has now become a large-number emerging group in Taiwan. Their life in Taiwan has also been an important issue recently. In 2006, three graduate students from the institute of building and planning of NTU (NTUBP), in the name of studio class, entered the famous fishery community “Nan-fang-ao” to help to establish a community service center for new immigrant women. This is a project about considering ethno/cultural differences in community participation. Through this case, we try to explore how design or planning shall deal with the politics of difference in a postmodern age to realize the ideas of multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism in the spirit of grassroots democracy.

## New Immigrant Women in Taiwan

In Taiwan, foreign brides mostly imply to women from Southeast Asia countries moving to Taiwan through marriage; recently a significant number of marriage women from Mainland China are also included. These marriages are usually arranged by marriage agencies while Taiwanese men pick up the girls they like and then bring them back to Taiwan after a long official process of registration, investigation and interview, which may last over a year.

Such kind of “bride trade,” or we may say “commercialized transnational marriage,” doesn’t only happen in between Taiwan and Southeast Asia nowadays. Just like the once popular “mail-order brides” in western countries, it has everything to do with the push and pull powers resulted from uneven economic developments. Since the 1980’s, the gradually increasing number of foreign brides in Taiwan can also be understood as a consequence of the emerging “Semi-periphery – Periphery” relationship between Taiwan and Southeast Asia (Hsia, 2002).

After the 90’s, we may claim a significant growth on the foreign brides in Taiwanese society. Different from the 80’s, while rural Hakka men marrying overseas Hakka Chinese women from Indonesia occupied a large proportion; emphasizing on the character of “tendency,” Vietnam women has replaced Indonesian Chinese women as new mainstream since the mid 90’s. At the same time, marrying foreign brides became a more general phenomenon in Taiwanese society, not only bounded with rural or Hakka villages anymore. In recent years, Mainland China brides who share the same culture blood and have mere

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language barriers are rapidly increasing (so far they have been amounted to two-thirds of the total population of foreign brides).

By the end of April 2007, there are totally 363,573 foreign brides in Taiwan. Taiwanese society is now paying more and more attention to this emerging group. Instead of foreign brides, the name of “new immigrant women” has been claimed in terms of respect.

Rank	Places	From Foreign Countries	From Mainland China	Sum
1	Taipei County	20,423	46,549	66,972
2	Taoyuan County	13,283	23,700	36,983
3	Taipei City	7,748	28,576	36,324
4	Kaohsiung City	5,909	18,119	24,028
5	Taichung Contuy	8,259	13,576	21,835
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
17	Yilan County	2,573	3,357	5,930
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
Total of Taiwan		125,439	238,134	363,573

NOTE: The numbers are calculated by the end of April, 2007

## New Immigrant Women in Nan-fang-ao

Yilan County is located in northeast Taiwan. For many years it has been regarded as the most livable place in Taiwan for good living environment. Second and third industries are relatively not highly developed so the population of the county is also very stable (about 460,000 residents). Comparing with other counties and cities, the population of new immigrant women in Yilan County is not much (see Table 1). However, very different from the others, the densest place of new immigrant women within Yilan County is not the main urban areas, but a fishery community with less than ten thousand populations – Nan-fang-ao (see Table 2).

<sup>2</sup> Data Source: Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.moi.gov.tw>).

Table 2 The Scaling Comparison of New Immigrant Women Populations<sup>3</sup>

Scale	Population of New Immigrant Women	Total Population	%
Taiwan	363,573	22,886,902	1.6
Yilan County	5,930	460,265	1.3
Suao Township	1,078	43,136	2.5
Nan-fang-ao	362	8,917	4.1

NOTE: The numbers are calculated by the end of April, 2007

Nan-fang-ao is one of the biggest fishing ports in Taiwan. Administratively it is a collective place of six neighborhoods under the Suao Township. The history of Nan-fang-ao is not long: it was initially explored and planned by Japanese people in the late colonial period; after the World War II, while the fishery of Taiwan had improved and grown rapidly, Nan-fang-ao also became a wealthy hot spot for huge amount of domestic migrants. In the 1960's, the population on this 2.5-square-kilometer little land had once reached up to 25,000 people (Siao et al., 2004).

However, after the 60's, while Taiwan's economy started booming, the no-longer good income to be a fisherman, plus this high risk of fishery has kept young people from devoting into the industry. The harvest in general has also obviously reduced due to over fishing. The fishery in Taiwan gradually goes down. Even in a big port like Nan-fang-ao, while most residents still make their living in the fishery or related industries, urban decay seems to be an unavoidable destiny.

Today, the bottom labor power of the fishery in Nan-fang-ao highly depends on contract labors (and even illegal labors) from Southeast Asia and Mainland China. The local fishermen hardly encourage their next generation to join in the industry. People with better ability usually go to other urban areas to make a living. Those who stay at local are usually considered of less ability. Therefore, they tend to "consume" a transnational marriage via agencies. This explains why Nan-fang-ao has high proportion of new immigrant women.

In the early years, new immigrant women in Nan-fang-ao mostly came from Indonesia and Philippine. Now Vietnam and Mainland China women are the new majorities. Statistically, without any doubts, Nan-fang-ao has the highest proportion of new immigrants women within the county, which is about three times than average.

The variety of Nan-fang-ao residents doesn't decline with the fall of local economy; in the contrary, it is even enriched by these newcomers (both labors and marriage women). Taking a walk on the streets, you can see foreign labors riding bicycles and hear young mothers carrying their children chatting with different mother languages. On every mobile phone shops, there must be advertising signs saying "Phone Cards: Cheapest Price Making

<sup>3</sup> Data Source: Ministry of the Interior (<http://www.moi.gov.tw>) and Lansin Women and Children Service Center

Calls to Southeast Asia.” Looking at the landscape of everyday life, Nan-fang-ao is definitely the most internationalized place in Yilan County.

## **The Condition of Being “Others”**

Most new immigrant women in Nan-fang-ao, with no exceptions, have to deal with two key issues in their daily lives: Fostering babies and earning money.

For most traditional Taiwanese families, marrying a foreign bride, first of all, is to complete the mission of passing the family lineage. This explains why new immigrant women generally give higher births than other Taiwanese women. Almost all of them would have their first baby in very early years coming to Taiwan and eventually have more than one child. In the only elementary school in Nan-fang-ao, there are nearly one-fifth students who are the second generation of new immigrant women (89 out of 488) that is, again, the highest proportion within the county.

On the other hand, most households are usually willing to have the immigrant wives go out and work to make more money. Furthermore, as for the new immigrant women themselves, while some still have obligations to support maternal families in their home country, the motivation to work indeed is strong. In Nan-fang-ao, no matter where they were from or when they came, joining in the local economy is very common. Only few of them run small business themselves (food bars, betelnut bars, barber shops, ...etc.); others usually take part-time jobs in seafood restaurants (especially on weekends and holidays) or odd jobs like nets repair, bait or food processing, and other handworks.

These are the double pressures in the lives of new immigrant women in Nan-fang-ao, which would eventually arouse a vicious circle. The immigration policy in Taiwan set up many restrictions to new immigrants. It takes a Southeast Asia woman three years or a Mainland China woman eight years to be qualified to get the full citizenship (which means to have a ID card). Besides, they have to attend at least 100-hour Mandarin classes or life adaptation programs. However, considering the lives of new immigrant women in Nan-fang-ao, since they are deeply trapped by the double pressures soon after they came, it is hardly possible for them to take use of the social services regularly. This makes it tougher for them to adjust to new lives or even to overcome struggles.

New immigrant women, especially those from Southeast Asia, no matter their original education level are high or low, always struggle from the incapability of speaking Mandarin or Taiwanese. The language barrier has them be treated like illiterates: People doubt if they can be self-independent or if they can educate their children well. In Nan-fang-ao, just like other fishery communities, men are very often absent from their roles in the family while they usually work offshore or away from home most of the time. The proportion of single or grandparents-reared households in Nan-fang-ao is high in general, however, when the mother happen to be a new immigrant woman, she tend to be blamed for the situation more than usual. These women in the general image are considered less responsible and emotionally less connected to their husband families. Furthermore, some would even claim new immigrant women have higher potential to escape from home so that they have to be “guarded” or “disciplined”. All of these, of course, are socially constructed biases.

Where do the biases come from? The immigrant policy explains everything. It is the most realistic reflection of our attitude toward these new immigrants. By dividing them from professional or skilled immigrants, we actually overlap these marriage immigrants from countries lagging behind Taiwan (economically) with those contract laborers from the same areas and mark them as undesired. We believe we are advanced and we tend to think all of them come for only economic purposes. We consider them as less civilized due to the language and life habit differences so that they better learn and obey to live like us and to behave as we expect. We take it for granted that they can only receive benefits from us but have mere contributions in return. Eventually, they are still most likely to be “others,” not “us.”

## **Building “Sin Niangjia”**

From February 2006, we, a student team<sup>4</sup> from NTUBP, started a field investigation in Nan-fang-ao in search of possibilities to launch a community project for new immigrant women. In the beginning, we contacted with local political leaders, the fishermen’s association, community organizations, local culture/history workers, and the schools. However, even though they also sensed the growth of new immigrants to be an issue to deal with, most of them didn’t think it had much urgent priority compared with the keen anxiety of local economic and industrial redevelopment. Fortunately, later we found the government had a program aiming to establish community service centers for new immigrant women at the level of every townships and villages, and then we met Lansin Female and Children Service Center who were planning to set up the first community center in the county in Nan-fang-ao.

Although Lansin is not a local organization of Nan-fang-ao, it has cooperated with local elementary school and running extended services in the neighborhoods for more than three years. Therefore, it even owns stronger social networks among these new immigrant women than any other local organizations. Since a spatial project had already been discussed, we soon made a promise to help with the community center establishment.

Through this community center, we aimed to have these new immigrant women walk out from households and meet with each other. The space should stand for their subjectivities to have them feel most relaxed and free from the daily routines. Furthermore, the space should also actively play as a platform to have them express themselves and to inspire mutual learning between the local community and them. All these have to be achieved through their participatory discussions and actions. As a process of empowerment, we seek to transform the top-down government program into a bottom-up community design project.

Thus, the action of “Building Sin Niangjia” begun. In Chinese, “Sin” implies a double meaning of “new” and the name of Lan”sin”; Niangjia means married women’s maternal families. As a whole, Sin Niangjia conveys the idea that the community center shall belong to all the new immigrant women like their second home in Taiwan.

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<sup>4</sup> The team members include Katty Chen, Peiyin Shih, and me.

## Interactions through the Process

To move on, first of all, we convinced Lansin to give up renting an office space near the piers as the site, which definitely is a much more convenient way of doing. Instead, we searched for empty houses inside the neighborhoods. Luckily, we had a couple of choices and finally rented a two-floor old house with a good location of the neighborhoods at a half price we expected.

Since the site had been decided, we then started to publicize the issue through big events. Joining with Lansing in the yearly community sports day and school fair, we used an interactive building model to have the parents and kids play. They could arrange different use of each interior space themselves and shared simple ideas with us. After that, more people knew about the project and could recognize us as “students who work for Lansin.”

The next step, in the name of gathering new immigrant women’s life stories, we visited new immigrant women’s homes for interviews. In this way, we involved with Lansin’s networks deeper and created our own relationships person-by-person, groups by groups. After several closer contacts, we soon realized some difficulties: First, the immigrant women actually vary a lot from inside. Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Mainland Chinese, each of them has their own social territories that they don’t necessarily get along with others very often. Second, the immigrant women are highly embedded with their households. The social life they have mostly happens on the corridors in front of the houses. Everywhere they go, they have to carry the children, look after them, take care of them all the time. There is no spare time as long as the children are awake.

Pic: Interactions with Local Immigrant Women. (Edited by Katty Chen)

In spite of that, we still tried a couple of times to invite some Indonesian and Vietnamese groups to the site, asking them to tell more life experiences in Nan-fang-ao in attempt to translate the spatial experiences into a more concrete imagination of a public space. However, there aren’t too many feedbacks. The only suggestion most of them have in common is that there must be a playground for kids. Soon we had come into an agreement that the traditional “Banlou”<sup>5</sup> on the first floor should be opened up and changed into the kids’ playground. Beside this and some rough arrangement ideas, we failed to progress any further on more detail designs with these mothers.

It seemed we had reached a limit to get our target groups involved deeper. There weren’t any good reasons to have them leave their works and children aside to contribute on our project. However, that didn’t match our original intention of having more participation. To break down this predicament, we decided that since it is not easy to have the mothers participate in, we turned to invite their children! Therefore, we held a series of weekend children workshops. Surprisingly, this idea turned out to be very successful. It not only eased the mothers’ pressures but also pleased the kids with the new weekend leisure. Dozens of kids looked forward to come to the “secret base” every weekend. Here they

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<sup>5</sup> A mezzanine space that is very common in traditional street houses in Taiwan.

could do their homework, read their books, play with their friends, and join us to clean up the house and to paint on the doors, windows, and walls. More importantly, as long as the kids came, the mothers would have to come to take them home. Therefore, they had a good reason to come here and had time to feel and think of this place. In the end, a couple of these new immigrant women still contributed some decorative works in the following constructions later.

資料夾 X 0506.0513的廣泛家訪

- May
  - \* 0506.13廣泛家訪
  - 0512尖叫連連·蟲之屋
  - 0519錄音記
  - 0520漆窗行動式宣傳
  - \* 0526環境自傳 / 挖故事
- June
  - 0603彩繪花台種花草
  - 0606.09施工記
  - 0610秘密基地計畫



(印尼)在瑞珠家聊天 (越南)在阿錦家看相片  
(大陸)with海英、俊娜

0526環境自傳 / 挖故事



Pic: Weekend Children Workshops. (Edited by Katty Chen)

We finished most of our missions before the summer came, and the community center finally had opened on October 2006. Due to the lack of manpower, at present, Lansin only meets the government's minimal requirement that the community center opened twice a week. Although Lansin does have the plan to recruit local new immigrant women as voluntary workers, there is still a long way to go. However, recently when I went back to visit the place, I did see a emerging phenomenon that more and more new immigrant women come here to hang around with each other, even though so far the place is still more like a service-oriented office than a female public space.





Pic: The community service center in use now. (Taken by Jiahe Lin)

## The Stage of Newborn Participation

Reviewing the whole process of building “Sin Niangjia,” we frequently ask ourselves: “Did we fail to have the participatory actions?” Some may argue the resources of this project were still offered by government and NGO (Lansin) from the top, which didn’t come out from local immigrant women’s will, so that bottom-up participation didn’t function well. Furthermore, the result of participation seemed to be too shallow while no body was talking about public life and collective values. Most immigrant women involved didn’t even think about if they need a public space or not.

Partly, that is true. However, if a single imaginary model of ideal actions can be applied to evaluate all participations, then we don’t have to discuss about different stages of participatory democracy (Hester, 2005) any more. For most new immigrant women in Taiwan, whether they are from Southeast Asia or Mainland China, the western “democracy” is almost absent in their life experiences. None of them know how to speak for themselves by nature. I suppose the participatory stage for immigrant women in Nanfang-ao is still at a “newborn participation.” The project of building “Sin Niangjia,” in the long term, may be the key trigger to start their life cycles of participatory democracy.

For a newborn participation, nothing is for certain. Every move that can encourage to independent thinking or actions is worth trying. Our successful experience of children workshops reminds me of the story of the most powerful immigrant organization in Taiwan – Trans-Asian Sister Association Taiwan (TASAT). In the mid of 90’s, it rooted as the very first Mandarin class for immigrant women around the island in a southern Taiwan Hakka village – Meinung, then gradually expanded many innovative actions like day-care services or cooperative supporting networks in order to meet the local immigrant mothers’ and their families’ needs. Most importantly, the activists always encouraged the immigrant women to develop their own subjective consciousness and organized them to be the core members of a collective group. Before the formal organization of TASAT has officially founded in 2003, it has taken them nearly 10 years to develop a small group of new



immigrant women to dare act or debate for themselves on public issues. Now, TASAT has become one of the leader groups on many immigrant rights advocacy unions.

Consciously providing services and supports, accompanying by through a continuous process of learning, then the realization of social empowerment and participatory democracy can be possible. For the perspective of our studio class, there may not be any immediate effects on building of a physical space; however, for the perspective of local immigrant empowerment, I would say our actions in Nan-fang-ao, as the first step of a long journey, are on the right track.

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