

Sociocultural Contexts and Learning: Vietnamese Immigrant Women in Taiwanese Vocational Training Programs

Abstract

This study examines the learning experiences of vocational training among Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan according to a sociocultural approach to adult learning. Based on interviews with Vietnamese spouses, the findings indicated that based on the family's permission, the women participated in culinary training to develop the human and cultural capital to fulfill their responsibilities. Despite remaining silent and marginalized while receiving the Taiwanese-centric training, the women exercised their agency to complete their training and obtain cooking certificates. The completion of the training and the acquisition of a professional certificate empowered these women. Clearly, these women's learning in vocational training was affected by culture and their sociocultural experiences in the home and host countries and was negotiated in the face of challenges that cross the lines of gender and culture.

Keywords: immigrant women, vocational training, learning experiences, sociocultural approach

1. Introduction

Many East Asian countries have experienced a massive increase in international marriage immigration over the past two decades (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2008). Socioeconomically disadvantaged men in wealthier Asian countries seek spouses overseas, whereas women in less economically developed countries often move abroad to find a better life. Since the 1990s, a rapidly increasing number of immigrant women have arrived in Taiwan from Vietnam through commercially arranged marriages (Bélanger, Lee, & Wang, 2010). The more than 85,000 Vietnamese women married to Taiwanese men up to 2011 constitute not only an important part of marriage migration flows in East Asia but also a sizable portion of the new disadvantaged population in Taiwan (Tang & Wang, 2011). As a way of fulfilling their life aspirations in Taiwan, Vietnamese immigrant women typically seek vocational training programs (Ministry of the Interior, 2011).

For immigrant women, vocational training obtained in the host country is associated with possibilities for empowerment, upward social mobility, and economic advancement through labor market participation (Ghosh, 2000). Thus, participation in vocational training is an important aspect of these immigrant women's integration into host countries (Wong et al., 2001).

Despite the volume of scholarship on immigrant women, the topic of vocational training among these women has been explored by only a few recent studies done in Canada and Australia and have not considered this issue among Asian women who migrate to other Asian countries through cross-border marriages. This neglect may be due to the myth that Asian societies share similar cultural beliefs and practices. Although Taiwan and Vietnam are both influenced by Confucian philosophy, they have different social and historical cultures, which play important roles in shaping the lives and learning of immigrants (Alfred, 2003). Thus, a contextualized analysis of the experiences of job-related training in Taiwan among Vietnamese women who have immigrated through cross-border marriage is necessary.

Previous efforts to understand adult learning have often devoted considerable attention to the individual learner (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000). In fact, social and cultural factors permeate every aspect of learners' experiences. A sociocultural approach to adult learning emphasizes that learning is a personal process that interacts with the context of adult life and the society in which an individual lives (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). This approach also assumes that all adult learners who are members of multiple defined cultures bring a myriad of sociocultural values to learning environments (Perez, 1998).

The participation of Vietnamese marriage immigrant women, who have experienced their early socialization in Vietnam, in vocational training as adult learners in Taiwan, crosses social, cultural, and national boundaries. Therefore, drawing on a sociocultural approach to adult learning, this study aims to understand the learning experiences of vocational training among Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan and the meanings that they have constructed with respect to these experiences.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 19 female Vietnamese immigrants residing in southern Taiwan who had successfully completed Chinese and/or Taiwanese cooking training of vocational training programs especially offered to immigrant women (VTPEIW) over a period from six months to one year. Thus, these immigrants had training experiences upon which they could reflect. The average age of the informants was 31.3 years, and twelve of them only had Vietnamese junior high school diplomas. At the time of the interview (2011), the interviewees had lived in Taiwan for an average of 5.3 years. Seventeen of the female trainees had met their husbands through commercial marriage brokers. All but one of them had at least one child. Only one participant, Nina, was a single parent. After completing the training, all of the participants obtained a professional basic Chinese cooking certificate by passing professional technological examinations either shortly after training or several months later.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through life history interviews. The women were encouraged to talk about the following topics: 1. their early learning and life experiences prior to immigration, 2. the events facilitating their immigration to Taiwan and their early adaptation in Taiwan, 3. their learning and experiences during vocational training in Taiwan, and 4. their reflections on their personal growth. All of the conversations were voice-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The texts of the interviews were coded, categorized, compared, and proofread with comparable traits for common patterns and emerging themes by the researcher and the assistant.

3. Results

The analysis of the participants' interviews revealed several themes in their learning experiences of vocational training. First, the early socialization in Vietnam and their life experiences in Taiwan motivated the immigrant women to participate in the cooking training as improving their human and cultural capital. Second, during the training process, these women learned by perseverance at the margins of the classes. Finally, vocational training empowered the women.

3.1 Vocational training as human and cultural capital

3.1.1 Aspirations of acquiring professional skills and obtaining employment

The participants believed that within Vietnamese families, men and women received the same encouragement to pursue employment for supporting the household economy (Barbieri & Bèlanger, 2009). They also felt that in Vietnam, women's socioculturally defined role as filial daughters made them responsible for caring for their natal family as the lifelong duty (Tang & Wang, 2011). Moreover, most of the women concerned the poor economic situations of both their natal and current families. These sociocultural expectations and economic factors motivated these women to acquire some professional skills by participating in vocational training and then to enter the labor market to earn money. As Dora noted, "In Vietnam, I grew up with eight siblings in a poor family. Since I was young, I have learned to work and struggle with the family's economic difficulties... My sisters and I, as Vietnamese women, were all asked to make money for the family and to take care of the parents... Now, in Taiwan, my handicapped husband doesn't have stable earnings to meet the family's needs. Therefore, I must learn a skill to get work through vocational training to support the Taiwanese family's finances and to send money back to my parents in Vietnam."

3.1.2 Expectations for gaining skills of caring for their families

Both Vietnamese and Taiwanese societies expect married women to be able to care for a family; in fact, this duty is commonly considered to be their core responsibility. As Fay stated, "My parents in Vietnam told me that a married woman has to work to support the household economy and take good care of the family." In the Taiwanese patriarchal family system, "Married women are expected to be good at maintaining the household, especially taking daily care of the family ... This is particularly true for the commercially arranged marriage immigrant women, who are encouraged to stay at home to nurture the whole family," Betty said.

Most of the interviewees believed that cooking is one of the basic abilities involved in caring for a family. The consumption of meals is a daily ritual that maintains family ties. Preparing meals for the family involves not only the purchase of food but also concern for and understanding of family members' tastes and nutritional needs. The process of preparing meal functions as a means of facilitating family cohesion and as the emotional labor of constructing family (DeVault, 1991). However, "there is a great difference between

Taiwanese and Vietnamese meals and dietetic hygienic habits,” Gill noted. Therefore, both employment considerations and family-related responsibilities affected these women’s choices to participate in Chinese and/or Taiwanese cooking training.

3.1.3 *Combating Taiwanese’s discrimination against immigrant women*

In Taiwan, most of the participants experienced racial and gender-based discrimination toward their marriage, socioeconomic status, and minority background. “Some Taiwanese think that we (immigrant women) are illiterate from poor countries without cultures and that we come to Taiwan just for our husband’s money,” said Queena. To oppose these stereotypes and to avoid being targets of discrimination, these female immigrants chose to attend vocational training programs to acquire professional skills and to obtain technological certificates that demonstrate their professional potential and hardworking character.

3.2 *Learning by perseverance at the margins*

3.2.1 *Training in a Taiwanese-centered way*

Despite receiving training in the VTPEIW, the participants expressed concern that the programs did not consider their cultural experiences and that very few of the instructors were familiar with their cultures. In the training process, the immigrant women received little special assistance except for the instructors’ personal encouragement. For example, professional skills and knowledge are important parts of the professional technological certification exam. In the Taiwanese vocational training system, instructors focus on explaining and demonstrating professional skills, whereas trainees must learn most of the professional knowledge through independently studying their textbooks. Accordingly, the VTPEIW training centers asked these female immigrant trainees to conform to expectations for Taiwanese trainees by studying a Chinese-edited textbook themselves to gain the required professional knowledge. This reveals that the instructors, and course content and delivery of VTPEIW were very similar to those of the training programs for general Taiwanese, which seek to prepare trainees for employment.

Surprisingly, almost all of the participants accepted the mainstream-centered training experience as a given. As Hilda emphasized, “Life in Taiwan is more modern than that in Vietnam. I stay in Taiwan, so actually I just want to learn Taiwanese culture, including cooking. Integrating Vietnamese culture into the Chinese cooking training program may make the learning more complicated so that we may fail in the professional technological certification exam.”

3.2.2 *Being silent trainees*

Although the participants were able to speak and read basic Chinese, the intense curriculum, tight schedule, and rapid instruction, which included large quantities of culinary terminology, made it difficult for them to initially understand the instruction and led them to lose self-confidence. Compared with loquacious immigrant women from Mainland China who were proficient in Chinese, the Vietnamese women felt greater stress regarding speaking in public in the classroom setting.

When studying in Vietnamese schools, the participants were accustomed to absorbing what the teachers taught without expressing their opinions and uncritically obeying the teachers’ commands. Because of their early schooling experiences, most Vietnamese wives felt that asking questions in the classroom would reveal their ignorance and voicing their opinions would constitute a challenge to the instructor’s authority. These approaches were not considered appropriate vehicles for learning. These women were socialized to be silent learners.

The low self-confidence of the Vietnamese women and their early schooling socialization for silent learning made it particularly difficult for these women to verbally express their opinions or to ask questions in public during training. Thus, they became silent trainees during the vocational training, and their silence often further made them marginalized and invisible in the programs. As Sara noted, “The instructors almost always interacted with talkative Chinese immigrant wives and helped solve their problems. They seldom paid attention to the quiet Vietnamese trainees. We usually practiced silently in the corner of the classroom.”

3.2.3 *Learning by perseverance*

The lack of proficiency in advanced Chinese and the considerable difference between Taiwanese and Vietnamese cooking made it difficult for most of the participants to understand the instruction well and to

achieve the expected course progress. Although they initially felt frustrated and afraid that they could not pass the professional technological certification examination after their training, the immigrants never thought of dropping out and struggled to learn professional Chinese and/or Taiwanese cooking. This perseverance primarily originated from the women's struggles against their living difficulties in Vietnam. The immigrant trainees' experiences of poor natal family economies since childhood encouraged most of them to try hard to complete their training. As Nina stated, "I have learned from my parents how to survive by struggling hard against a bad family situation since I was a child. This helped me develop the persevering personality of bearing hardships and continuing to achieve the desired goal. Despite much difficulty at the beginning of the cooking training and no support from my ex-husband, I persisted in completing the training due to my persevering character."

Specifically, with regard to learning professional cooking skills, the participants concentrated their attention on the instructors' demonstrations and taking notes in the classroom. They also practiced the professional skills diligently in groups in the training centers. After class, they repeatedly reviewed the course notes, purchased the ingredients and repeatedly practiced cooking, and they also sought the advice of their husbands and in-laws regarding their cooking. With respect to learning the professional cooking knowledge, a lack of proficiency in reading Chinese made it very difficult for the immigrant women to study the provided textbook without explanations from the instructors. However, most of the women proactively requested their husbands' assistance in explaining the meanings of most of the Chinese characters and the cooking-specific terminology. "In those days, I always studied the cooking textbook for three hours every day with a Chinese dictionary. I made efforts to study the previous exams and even to memorize some items with answers that I did not understand," Rita said proudly, exhibiting her cooking textbook full of notes.

3.3 Gaining Empowerment

3.3.1 Becoming "somebody": Enhancing self-confidence and gaining a voice in the family

Successfully completing the training program and obtaining a professional certificate were significant achievements for most Vietnamese immigrant women and contributed significantly to their positive feelings of self-worth and gaining a voice within their family. For these women, obtaining a professional technological certificate, which meant achieving a certain level of literacy, Chinese language proficiency, professional competency, and employment potential, helped them to develop a strong voice that would encourage others, particularly their husbands and in-laws, to listen to them in family affairs.

As Kay noted, "Before, as an immigrant bride, I usually felt that I was a nobody in the family. However, completing the training and then even getting a professional certificate both made me become somebody with certain literacy and professional cooking competency, which did increase my self-confidence and made others not discriminate against me... I also found that my in-laws showed greater respect for my opinions about domestic affairs."

Notably, although a small number of participants gain more voice in the family after training, their husbands and in-laws quarreled with them more often than they did prior to the training. According to Kay, her husband even asked her, "Why did you follow my expectations in the first years after you arrived, but now you aren't after finishing obtaining the professional certificate?"

3.3.2 Increased integration into Taiwanese society

Completing training and then obtaining a professional certificate also contributed to the life happiness of the participants' families, especially by improving their relationships with their husbands, mothers-in-law, and children. In addition to having a greater voice in the family, these women gained greater competency in caring for their families, including professional cooking and dietetic hygienic knowledge. Pearl noted, "Now, the relationship between my mother-in-law and me is better. She usually talks to me about cooking. My children also like my yummy cooking."

Most participants also mentioned that they expanded their social network after training. Additionally, most of the women gained more income from full-time or part-time employment. Jane noted that she finally received the same wages and fringe benefits as Taiwanese workers in the workplace after obtaining her certificate. These family, social, and economic forms of integration into Taiwanese society facilitated the

integration of these immigrant women into Taiwan.

3.3.3 *Having the courage to pursue life goals*

Most of the immigrant women believed that completing the vocational training greatly enhanced their chances of achieving their goals. Similar to most other Vietnamese wives, Kay had a life goal but never thought she would realize it until she received greater income by completing the training and obtaining the professional certificate. “Now, I can gradually save money to pursue my goal of owning a Vietnamese restaurant on the basis of my cooking certificate.” After training and then obtaining a job, several immigrant wives planned to buy their own homes to achieve a more stable and independent life rather than living with their in-laws or renting a home, which was one of their goals for their lives in Taiwan.

4. Discussion

The study found that although these Vietnamese immigrant women attended training programs especially for immigrant women, they received training in a Taiwanese-centered way that attempted to prepare immigrant trainees for work without considering the specificity of their conditions. This finding reflects the fact that culture is a neglected issue in vocational training in Taiwan. It also suggests that vocational training for immigrant women appeared to serve the instrumental purposes of assimilating these women into Taiwanese culture and developing their vocational skills in Taiwanese marketplaces rather than serving as a resource to facilitate the autonomy and collective power of these women (Robinson-Pant, 2004). Unfortunately, the female immigrants tended to be silent trainees at the margins of the classes because of their early schooling and low confidence. Language and voice are at the heart of many cultural differences that affect individuals' learning experiences and identity (Hayes, 2000). Hence, the vocational training system may significantly limit female immigrant trainees' capabilities, make them invisible, restrict their engagement in full citizenship in Taiwan, and reinforce existing inequalities (Cuban & Stromquist, 2009).

It is noteworthy that these immigrant women took for granted that they would receive occupational training in a Taiwanese-centric way and did not think that it was necessary to integrate their original cultural issues into the training. This finding indicates that these immigrant wives were eager to integrate into the host society and even devalued the culture of their home country. This result is inconsistent with the findings of studies that suggest that immigrant women receiving higher education in their host countries are dissatisfied with and critical of racialized, mainstream-centric learning experiences that hinder their full participation (Alfred, 2003; Sadeghi, 2008; Shan, 2009). One possible explanation for this difference may be the different educational levels, reasons for immigration, and types of learning between the marriage immigrant women in this study and other immigrant women in higher education. The less-educated Vietnamese immigrant women in this study, who immigrated to Taiwan for better economic prospects through commercially arranged marriage, participated in vocational oriented learning as a way to enter the Taiwanese labor market and to integrate into Taiwanese society. Thus, they may value and take for granted the Taiwanese-centered approach of the vocational training. However, female immigrants who immigrate for a higher level of education and better lives usually attend universities for greater self-empowerment and economic independence. Liberal higher education of critical and alternative ideas usually facilitate their critical thinking. Hence, female immigrants in higher education may examine their learning experiences more critically.

Notably, even as a disadvantaged group in the host country, these Vietnamese women exercised their agency to achieve different meanings for their lives. They attended vocational training to help their families and to overcome discrimination. Although they faced many barriers, these women persisted in completing the training by procuring various types of resources. These findings indicate that although the marriage immigrants were oppressed in certain ways during the training process, they were not totally subjected to the Taiwanese-centered training. Instead, they used their agency to shape their own learning experiences.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In this study, Vietnamese marriage immigrant women in Taiwan participated in culinary training to develop

human and cultural capital that enabled them to fulfill their responsibilities and to overcome discrimination based on their family encouragement and permission. Although they learned silently at the margins during the training process, they exercised their agency to persist in completing the training and obtaining a professional certificate that empowered them through gaining a voice in the family, facilitating their integration into Taiwanese society, and advancing the pursuit of their life goals. Clearly, the culture and early socialization in their country of origin as well as their sociocultural life experiences in Taiwan influenced these immigrant women's dynamic learning and meaning-making in vocational training, which were intertwined with issues of gender, ethnicity, and class.

In fact, vocational training, as one type of adult education, aims to equalize the wrongs of society and to empower all disadvantaged adult trainees (Johnson-Bailey & Cerverto, 2000). Therefore, female immigrant trainees should be provided with culturally responsive vocational training. Specifically, cultural-competence interventions are needed to facilitate training instructors to reflect on the value of vocational training for female immigrant trainees, and to understand their cultures and histories. Instructors should also be capable of designing and delivering multicultural training that recognizes and utilizes immigrant trainees' cultures, histories, and identities. It is necessary to create safe training environments to encourage female immigrant trainees to voice their cultures and opinions. Additionally, these trainees should be encouraged to interact with training community members from other countries to understand and capitalize on each other's social and cultural capital.

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