



Article

How the Subaltern Feels? A Dialogue on Emotions, Fieldwork and Subalternity

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I was almost falling asleep on a little mattress near her two children, when Haizheng, a young Chinese migrant spouse living in Zhudong (Hsinchu), shook my feet, suddenly asking: "should I divorce?". On the same day, we had a conversation about the condition of vulnerability she was facing after marriage-migration in Taiwan. "I cannot sleep, come, come, let's have a drink in the kitchen so that we do not wake up the children", she said. Feeling sleepy, I stood up and followed her, ready to listen to her doubts, perplexities and anxieties, engaging myself into a strong emotional ordeal. Haizheng narrated her experiences of sufferings and vulnerability as a Chinese migrant in Taiwan through a dense kaleidoscope of sentiments and emotions of unfulfillment, disillusionment, depression and misrecognition that I could not ignore doing fieldwork [Hsinchu, 14 December 2016].

This snapshot projects us to Taiwan: we enter the subjective, intimate world of a Chinese marriage-migrant, who daily experiences ordeals of vulnerability, suffering and misrecognition. Who is Haizheng? Why does she suffer? What can we learn from her highly emotional discourse about her life-cycle shaping and daily living conditions in Taiwan?

Marriage migration is a glocal phenomenon that refers to the interlink between marriage and mobility within a globalised world. During the last decades, Taiwan has become an illustrative site for global marriages: countries such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia are the main sending societies of females who decide to marry abroad. Restrictive and gendered migratory policies frame and shape women's marriage-migration paths, generating multi-situated social, economic and moral inequalities. When foreign spouses come from Mainland China, social contempt, hierarchies and disqualifications become stronger. Ethnically and linguistically speaking, Chinese migrants are similar to Taiwanese nationals, but since their society of departure—the People's Republic of China (PRC)—represents Taiwan's greatest enemy, they are perceived as a threat to national security, hence subjected to an even more restrictive mobility regime (In this respect, China's nationalist project of returning Taiwan to its motherland, and Beijing's increasing pressure, across the Strait as well as internationally, to hamper Taiwan's right to be a sovereign nation, have contributed to strengthening this misrecognition process).

In this paper, presented at EATS Conference 2019, we focus on the role of sentiments, feelings and emotions in framing and shaping marriage-migratory paths and women's existences. What are the consequences of such hierarchies, disqualifications and inequalities on migrant women's feelings and sensations? To what extent do sentiments and emotions contribute to the definition, or not, of contesting strategies to cope with such vulnerability? Surprisingly, there is a paucity of recent scholarship about marriage-migrants' production of emotions and feelings during migratory patterns. This lack is despite the highly intimate and affective dimension of a phenomenon which simultaneously involves intimacies, affections and family creation. In our experimental paper, we argue that feelings, emotions and affections play a crucial role in the construction of interactions and experiences by, and among, marriage-migrants. Empirically, they contribute to design the contours of the social, economic and moral landscapes these women inhabit during and after migration, generating new socializations and social positionings and re-positionings. Theoretically and methodologically, emotions constitute an important analytical tool to apprehend the lived practices of migrant women and the strategies they develop to cope with the condition of subalternity they are positioned in within Taiwanese society.

Hence, we treat emotions as a form of cultural politics that not only shapes individuals' positions

within society, but also allows researchers to understand how social hierarchies are constructed, perceived and, eventually, challenged by the subjects. By focusing on the case of marriage migration between China and Taiwan and discussing the emotional endeavour that these migrants experience as a consequence of their cross-border movement and politicisation of their lives in Taiwan, we shed light on the significance of emotions as a practice, a resource and a competence developed and performed during the daily lives of Chinese women. In effect, in Taiwan cross-border marriage-migrants face a plurality of ordeals of misrecognition due to ethnicised and gendered migration regimes that generate multi-situated hierarchies, economic inequalities and moral disqualifications. Concurrently, it is important to acknowledge the fact that this group is discriminated and constructed as subaltern in Taiwan, because they come from the PRC, the global superpower hindering Taiwan's international recognition. Engaging in ethnographic work within such a complex and contradictory context is rather a challenge for the researcher. Hence, emotions are revealed to be crucial not only for our respondents' lived experiences but also for our understanding of these multiple dimensions of subalternity: emotions generated intimacies, affections, sentiments of fear, misrecognition, humiliations, frustrations experienced by our informants, delineative of their subaltern position in Taiwan as members of the dominant power of China, main enemy of Taiwan. Eventually, these emotions also became a "fuel for action" (Lutz and White 1986) allowing our respondents to react to their condition of subalternity and the researchers to find new interpretative keys to understand the phenomenon.

Drawing on the case of female marriage-migrants from China to Taiwan, we aim to open a dialogue on emotions with the hope that other scholars will draw from our conversation on emotions in the context of marriage migration in Taiwan and apply it to other spheres, thereby continuing and expanding on our reflections. Rather than aiming at exhaustivity, our objective is to open a debate that looks at the epistemological, methodological and empirical dimensions of emotions and their crucial role in forging ethnographic work.