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# “I Vote so I am”: Marriage Migrants’ Political Participation in Taiwan

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cca](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cca)Lara Momesso 

## Abstract

Migrant political participation is a central challenge to many Western democracies. This article, by building on the case of marriage migrants’ political participation in Taiwan, offers food for thought on East Asia, a region of the world that has been neglected in most academic debates on this theme. Applying “flat ontology” and drawing from a mixed methodology, involving content analysis of press releases published on political party websites and in-depth interviews with marriage migrants, this article offers a timely account of how migrant political integration and participation is a complex process. It depends not only on broader political opportunities, social, legal, cultural factors shaping political integration processes and individual political values, but also on the specificity of migrants’ identities and subjectivities, including gender, perception of security, a migrant’s family background, their parental status, life stage, and their perception of self in society.

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## Keywords

Migrant political participation, marriage migration, Taiwan, East Asia

## Introduction

With the increasing presence of foreign residents in most societies around the world, their political rights has become an important matter for many governments. The extent to which migrant communities are integrated and participate in the public affairs of their

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University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

### Corresponding Author:

Lara Momesso, University of Central Lancashire, Adelphi Building 133, Preston, PR1 2HE, UK.

Email: [lmomesso@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:lmomesso@uclan.ac.uk)



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new home country reveals many features of that same country. Firstly, migrant political integration is a way to assess the extent to which the receiving society is able to transform its cultural diversity into a resource for its democracy-building process (Mantovan, 2013: 254). For instance, in Europe, many governments have been debating how to encourage migrant attachment to mainstream political institutions in light of concerns about alienation and failed integration, which could lead to social instability (Maxwell, 2010: 45). Secondly, in societies characterised by ethnic and cultural diversity, migrant political integration is also crucial to the development of a dynamic democratic polity. Aware of this, many governments, willing to promote their democratic values, have included migrant political rights in their agenda (Zapata-Barrero and Gropas, 2012). Finally, migrant political integration also has a bottom-up feature, as it can become an opportunity for migrants to influence the decision-making process, to enhance their democratic know-how, and to develop feelings of belonging, and shared identities (Lindekilde, 2009: 5).

Despite the growth and diversification of these debates, some important gaps have yet to be filled.

For instance, there is a strong focus on North America and Europe, regions characterised by established democracies and with a long-term presence of migrant populations. This means that very little is known about how other democracies with a significant presence of foreign residents deal with migrants' political integration and participation. Furthermore, there seems to be a tendency to recognise ethnicity as a category of differentiation without paying too much attention to internal differentiations within migrant communities, such as female and male experiences. As a consequence, scarce information is available with regard to the specificity of migrant women's political participation.

To fill these gaps, this article will bring into the discussion the case of migrant women's political participation in Taiwan. Taiwan constitutes a significant case with regard to migrant women's political integration and participation in East Asia. As with other neighbouring countries, there have been significant immigration flows from the region into Taiwan since the 1980s. The arrival of economic and marriage migrants has changed the social composition of the island and their integration has been a matter of concern for the Taiwanese government. Taiwan, similarly to other East Asian societies, is characterised by exclusionary immigration policies, apt to control and scan the arrival of migrants, limit the length of their stay in the island and hamper their access to citizenship rights. In this context, conventional forms of political integration and participation are hampered. Yet, foreign spouses, by virtue of their marriage to a Taiwanese citizen, are one of the few categories of foreign-born residents who are entitled to naturalisation, hence full access to citizenship rights. Despite the legal and social discrimination that these migrants are subjected to (Friedman, 2010; Hsia 2007; Liu, 2019; Shih 1998; Yang, 2015), the fact that they could eventually acquire Taiwanese citizenship has also led to specific patterns of political integration and participation. The literature has engaged with this dimension of their lives. Earlier scholarship explores their political participation by means of non-conventional political actions, such as protests, rallies, and petitions (Chang, 2004; Chao, 2006; Hsia, 2008; King, 2011; Momesso and Cheng,

2017). Yet, more recently, the literature has alerted us to formal practices of political engagement through electoral and party politics (Chen and Luo, 2014; Cheng, 2014; Cheng, 2016; Cheng and Fell, 2014; Cheng, Momesso and Fell, 2018; Momesso, 2020a). This scholarship, similarly to broader debates on migrant political participation in the Western world, focuses on social, economic, and legal factors in shaping marriage migrants' political integration and participation, such as acquisition of citizenship rights, class and ethnic background, transnational connections. Acknowledging the importance of these investigations, this article aims to bring into the debate a series of other subjective factors that could also have a role in shaping migrant political integration and participation.

Applying "flat ontology" (Laclau, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014), and inspired by Jabareen and Eizenberg's (2020) conceptualisation of social relations as a mix between real and sensual elements, this article aims to expand existing discussions on migrant political integration and participation in two ways. Firstly, it will shed light on the fact that migrant political integration and participation are a form of discursive social relations, and, as such, they are, as Kuhn (1996) suggests, in constant flux and evolution. Secondly, it will articulate how subjective factors are also important features of the political process: if social, legal, and economic factors contribute to different political engagements, this article argues that perceptions, desires, sensations, attachment, and affect also contribute to further problematise the way migrants perceive, conceive, and construct political participation. In light of these reflections, and building on the case of migrant women in Taiwan, this article asks: how do subjective factors intersect with social, economic, and legal ones to shape different opportunities for political integration and participation amongst migrant women?

As the phenomenon under study will demonstrate, broader political opportunities as well as social, cultural, and legal factors are important features when investigating migrants' political rights, their political integration and participation. Yet, subjective factors, such as sensation, desire, affect, and perception, are crucial in shaping specific understanding of political debates and unique responses to existing political opportunities. Hence, migrant political integration and participation are not only mutually constitutive but also deeply subjective processes. In order to understand the importance of a relational and subjective approach to migrant political engagement, in the next section I will explore how migrant political rights have been conceptualised in academic debates so far.

## **Conceptualising Migrant Political Rights**

Political rights refer to the following rights: the right of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs; to vote and to be voted for; to participate in the public administration of one's country; to join a political party; to run for office; and to participate freely in political rallies, events, or protests (Conte and Burchill, 2009: 97; Conge, 1988: 247).

Seen as an indiscernible part of citizenship rights at the heart of democratic societies (Conte and Burchill, 2009: 97), political rights are not universal. For instance, throughout history, feminist scholars have challenged the idea of universal political rights by arguing that women have been excluded from some of these rights (Burrell, 2004; Rinehart, 1992). Indeed, women, traditionally associated with the intimate and emotional realm of the home, were not expected to participate in the rational space of the polis attributed to men (Burrell, 2004: 1–2; Dolan et al., 2007: 1). In contemporary times, the same argument could be applied to migrant communities: lacking access to citizenship rights, they are not expected to contribute to the political process of the receiving country.

In this regard, earlier literary debates focused on the legal, social, and cultural factors that contributed to migrants' political marginalisation and disengagement, such as lack of citizenship rights, lack of language skills, and different ethnic backgrounds (Bilodeau, 2008; de Rooij, 2012; Eckstein, 1988; Ortensi and Riniolo, 2020; White et al., 2008). Yet, considering the fact that immigrants contribute to society, like all other citizens, by paying taxes, working, owning businesses and homes, and sending their children to school, their lack of political engagement, imposed or chosen, seems to be a contradiction. As Lindekilde (2009: 6) holds, formal rights and opportunities for political participation are only a first step in the political integration of ethnic minorities and migrant populations. Along this line, more recent empirical literature has opened up alternative views suggesting political participation as a process rather than a fixed condition (i.e. Bergh and Bjørklund, 2003; Fennema and Tillie, 1999; Hammar, 1989; Hayduk, 2014; Merelo, 2016; Morales and Giugni, 2011; Pietsch, 2017; Zingher and Thomas, 2012). For instance, migrants, rather than being simply passive or uninterested in the politics of the receiving country, could decide to postpone political participation to future times or when specific political opportunities emerge. Furthermore, low participation in formal and national politics could be counterbalanced by participation in other spheres, such as local and informal politics (Lindekilde, 2009: 17). Also, migrants' multiple identities and transnational ties may lead to multiple loyalties and participation in different polities (Bauböck, 2006: 12; Boccagni, 2011; Gherghina and Tseng, 2016; Martiniello, 2006; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2013). Finally, their negotiation with the institutional frameworks that shape their political actions could lead to different forms of political participation over time and across countries (Bauböck, 2006: 11). Clearly, there are two components that need to be considered when exploring migrant political rights: the institutional framework shaping their political integration and migrants' responses to this. Focusing on one or another would lead to partial understanding of migrant political rights.

Reflecting this complexity, Martiniello (2006: 84) identifies four dimensions to the political integration and participation of foreign residents: the granting of political rights to immigrants by the host society; immigrants' identification with the host society; the adoption of democratic norms and values by the immigrants; and immigrants' political participation, mobilisation, and representation. The first dimension reflects broader political opportunity structures and immigration policies: as migrants are not full-members of the receiving community, their access to political rights is shaped by the inclusion–exclusion mechanisms developed by the state and its political system

through citizenship rights entitlement. The other three dimensions, immigrants' identification with the host society, their adoption of democratic norms and their actual political participation, refer to the multiplicity of individual experiences, positionalities, subjectivities, and beliefs.

Despite the significant steps forward in academic understanding of migrant political integration and participation, often informed by holistic approaches that look at the interrelation between broader institutional mechanisms shaping opportunities and constraints and social actors' reactions (i.e. Mantovan, 2013; Martiniello, 2006), most of the debates remain anchored to legal and social attributes. In this regard, citizenship rights, demographic and social factors, language skills, political awareness are prioritised to understand migrant political integration and participation. What about the subjective processes of identity making peculiar to the condition of being a migrant? What is the role of affect, attachment, emotions, feelings, in shaping migrant political engagement?

As Maxwell (2010) also stresses, it is important to shed light on the subjective factors shaping political integration and participation, the perceptions, desires, sensations, attachment, and affect that could contribute to further problematise the way migrants perceive, conceive and construct political participation. When considering the emotional and perceptual peculiarity of the subjective self that "distort, confuse, and interfere with objective apprehension of phenomena" (Hawkesworth, 2006: 94), contradictions and oddities may emerge to challenge the understanding of external reality. This picture suggests that migrant political integration and participation are mutually constitutive and discursive fields (Jabareen and Eizenberg, 2020) generated through specific relations embedded in migrant subjectivities, both as a collectivity and as single individuals.

These reflections are particularly important when looking at marriage migrants' political integration and participation. Integrated into Taiwanese society through their gendered identity as wives and mothers of Taiwanese citizens, marriage migrants also experience unique patterns of political integration and participation.

Often, the literature tends to look at gender as a constraint to migrant political integration and participation (i.e. Ortensi and Riniolo, 2020; Togeby, 2003). Instead, in this article, gender does not only constitute an opportunity of political integration, it also represents a sphere to investigate how identity formation and processes of becoming contribute to shape the making of new political subjectivities. As this study will show, in this process, social, cultural, legal factual mix and merge with subjective ones while shaping the making of new political subjectivities. In an effort to understand the multi-faceted, complex relations between political integration, political participation, and gendered biographies of migration, this paper offers a more nuanced and flexible investigation of how political integration and participation are mutually constitutive, multiple, changing, and subjective processes.

## **Data and Methods**

The research benefits from a mixed methodology. To explore changing political opportunities, I collected official data published on the websites of Taiwan's two main political parties, the

Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), by searching for the keywords “new resident” (新住民, *xinzhumin*), “new immigrant” (新移民, *xinyimin*), “foreign spouses/brides” (外籍配偶/新娘, *waiji pei'ou/xinniangu*), “mainland spouses/brides” (陸配/大陸新娘, *lupei/dalu xinniangu*), reflecting the public debate terminology in Taiwan. The KMT search scored sixteen entries, whereas the DPP website scored eighty entries. This difference is a consequence of the dissimilar time span available on each website: the KMT only has press releases from January 2015, whereas the DPP has had a record starting from January 1994. In this regard, the DPP website offers a better idea of when and how the theme of new residents/foreign spouses started to become a popular topic in the party’s press releases. Despite a few articles published in the early 2000s (ten entries), a big majority of the articles were published in the 2010s (seventy entries), out of which fifty-seven were published between 2015 and 2019. As I will show in the following sections, early press releases focused on new residents’ social and cultural contribution to a multi-cultural Taiwan. The political rights of new residents has only been a theme of debate since 2015. This reflects broader trends, as I will show: the KMT and the government started to engage with this theme at around the same period.

To investigate how migrants react to, and perceive, political opportunities, I carried out fieldwork activities involving in-depth interviews and participant observation with migrant civic groups, political parties representatives, and migrants. Between 2008 and 2019, I went to Taiwan seven times for periods that ranged between three months and one year. In those years, I carried out in-depth interviews with more than 150 marriage migrants, along with some of their children and Taiwanese spouses. I also interviewed Taiwanese governmental officers, political party officers and activists specialised in new resident issues. During the earlier fieldwork, I accessed my informants through marriage migrants’ civic organisations. Subjected to discrimination and social stigmatisation, marriage migrants used the sphere of civil society in Taiwan to search for support with their everyday issues and their legal problems, and to negotiate an improvement of their legal rights with the government (Hsia, 2006, 2008; Momesso, 2015, 2020b; Momesso and Cheng, 2017; Zani and Momesso, 2021). In the last years, however, it has become clear that migrants have been experimenting with new ways of enhancing their negotiation power in Taiwan. For instance, since the second half of the 2010s marriage migrants have appeared in electoral campaigns as political party supporters, being acknowledged by most parties as a growing constituency. They have been involved in consultative committees within the main political parties and some have even founded their own independent political parties. Migrants from mainland China have also been targeted by Beijing as potential messengers of a unified China in Taiwan, nurturing the emergence of pro-unification political parties initiated by marriage migrants (Momesso, 2020b). Witnessing this transition from non-conventional to conventional political actions, in summer 2019 I spent three months in Taipei, where I focused my fieldwork on migrant voting preferences and behaviour. On this occasion I interviewed twenty-four respondents from mainland China, Vietnam and Indonesia. The respondents were from different age groups (between thirty-five and fifty-six years old), education levels (from high school to university), and areas of residence in Taiwan (Taipei,

Hualien, Kaohsiung). Twenty-three of the total had Taiwanese citizenship, hence they were entitled to vote. Summer 2019 marked an important phase in Taiwan politics because it preceded the general elections of January 2020. In this pre-election phase, political parties, in their race to attract new voters, made important steps to involve new residents in the political process.

The interviews, carried out in Mandarin Chinese, comprised one-to-one chats in the majority of cases. They lasted between twenty-five minutes and three hours. On one occasion I carried out a focus group interview with a group of six marriage migrants, allowing me to witness a more dynamic conversation between migrants with different political opinions and values. The in-depth interviews were organised along a series of open-ended questions, starting from personal experiences of political participation back home and in Taiwan, and then exploring the respondents' beliefs with regard to Taiwanese parties' ideology, cross-Strait and international diplomacy, family/women-specific policies, and policies targeting immigrants. I recorded all interviews, transcribed the content into an English translation, and coded the narratives of my informants. Although this article benefits from more than ten years of engagement with new resident groups in Taiwan, it is focused on this last round of interviews. This investigation is not interested in identifying general trends and patterns amongst new residents in Taiwan. Instead it aims to shed light on how different lived experiences, positionalities, life stages, and sensibilities may shape dissimilar political beliefs, values, and responses to political opportunities. In line with ethical standards, participants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality was informed and maintained throughout the study. To protect the privacy of my respondents, all the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

## **Marriage Migrants' Political Integration in Taiwan**

A first step to approach migrant women's political participation is to contextualise it in light of institutional mechanisms that favour the political integration of certain groups over others. This last point requires us to reflect on how migrant women are integrated into the political sphere and how they participate in it as a consequence of their gendered identity.

As of November 2019, marriage migrants in Taiwan reached a total of 554,706 individuals. Out of these, more than 200,000 hold Taiwanese citizenship (Ministry of Interior, 2019), meaning that they were in a position to participate in the electoral and political process of the island. As the number of those who acquired citizenship has become significant for electoral purposes, the government has taken a series of steps to facilitate their political participation. Reflecting the somewhat patronising approach it had embraced in previous decades with regard to migrant social and cultural integration (Cheng and Fell, 2014; Wang and Belanger, 2008), the Taiwanese government took on the task of educating new residents on how to vote. A booklet on the voting process, translated into six languages, has been made available for new residents (Wu, 2018). The Central Election Committee website also included an informative section on its webpage (Central Election Commission, 2021). Voting simulation sessions were held



across the island along with voting awareness promotion campaigns specifically targeted at immigrants (Taiwan News Staff, 2019). Clearly, this approach reveals the assumptions held by Taiwanese officials that new residents did not have sufficient knowledge of democratic processes, such as vote casting. In one of these sessions, the Minister of the Interior, Hsu Kuo-yung, emphasised the importance of the voting process in a democratic and free country, and encouraged all new immigrants with Taiwanese national identification cards to take part in the elections (Taipei Times Staff, 2019). This approach was revealing in a number of ways. By displaying its openness and willingness to allow migrants to be part of the voting process, the Taiwanese government could foster an image of Taiwan as a hub for regional migration, able to transform its cultural diversity into a resource for its democracy building process, reinforcing the idea that Taiwan is multi-cultural and democratic.

Political parties have also reflected these values, but it is possible to identify a slow process of change in their narrative. Throughout the first half of the 2010s, on different occasions, party representatives praised new residents' contributions to Taiwanese society and culture, but not their political participation. Their different food, cultures, and languages have been presented as a positive asset for Taiwan multi-culturalism (DPP Official Website, 2011a, 2011b, 2018a; KMT Official Website, 2016), their children as a talent pool that would allow Taiwan to link to the globalised world (DPP Official Website, 2012, 2018b; KMT Official Website, 2015a). In December 2016, Hong Hsiu-Chu, then chairman of the KMT, went so far as to thank new residents for participating in Taiwanese society and allowing it to become more inclusive and diverse (KMT Official Website, 2016).

The narrative started to change in the second half of the 2010s. In 2016, new residents who had acquired the right to vote comprised 1.33 per cent of the entire electorate, exceeding the other major minority ethnic group, Taiwanese indigenous population. Political parties were aware of this and gradually made it explicit in their electoral campaigns. A report published on the KMT website in 2015 sheds light on this reality. In the middle of the electoral campaign, legislative candidate Lin Wei-chou, addressing immigrant spouses, thanked them for their contribution to Taiwan and urged them to vote for him, saying that, if elected, he would promote the implementation of laws and welfare policies in their favour (KMT Official Website, 2015b).

Even at that point, parties had been showing interest in new residents for some time. For instance, during electoral campaigns, I happened to see KMT representatives visiting civic organisations during my earlier fieldwork. Yet, in the second half of the 2010s, this process intensified and a series of steps were made by both political parties to integrate new residents formally into the political process. In this regard, it is important to make a digression. Despite both parties acknowledging in their public narrative that all new residents were part of the national community, the way they have promoted their political integration has been different. This has also been argued with regard to their social and cultural integration (Cheng and Fell, 2014). In a country in which the political debate is polarised over the issue of independence and unification, with the DPP leaning towards the former and the KMT towards the latter (Achen and Wang, 2017), new residents'

countries of origin could shape different opportunities and constraints in the Taiwanese polity. Marriage migrants from mainland China, associated with the oppressive power of Beijing, have been viewed in Taiwan as a possible threat to national security and sovereignty. Compared to the DPP, the KMT has showed a friendlier approach to marriage migrants from mainland China, allowing concessions on their legal status when in power and often identifying them as potential voters, along with their families (Momesso and Cheng, 2017). Conversely, the DPP has reached out to Southeast Asian migrants. Marriage migrants' political preferences are also divided along this axis. Hence, mainland spouses, usually driven by Chinese patriotism and nationalism, are expected to be "naturally" in line with KMT ideology, whereas Southeast Asian spouses, not having any emotional and family connection with mainland China, are believed to be more likely to align with the DPP.

This ethnic divide was clearly visible in the opportunities for political integration offered by the two parties. In 2015, the KMT established a New Resident Working Committee (新住民工作委員會, *xin zhumin gongzuo weiyuanhui*), with the purpose of showing its commitment towards the rights and interests of new residents (KMT Official Website, 2017) and implementing policies of inclusion towards this group (KMT Official Website, 2015b). Clearly its focus was on migrants of Chinese origin, although implemented in an indirect way. In 2016, the KMT chose Lin Li-chan, an immigrant spouse of Cambodian origin and of ethnic Chinese descent, to enter the elections as a candidate for the KMT in the proportional representation ballot. She became the first immigrant to win a seat in the Legislative Yuan. Although these achievements allowed the KMT to boast that it was the first party to nominate a new resident in its electoral lists and established a body to serve them (KMT Official Website, 2017), as I will explore in the next section, they were broadly criticised by the mainland Chinese marriage migrant community, who did not feel represented within the party. This must have pushed the KMT to make a more radical choice and choose a spouse from the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the 2020 elections.

The DPP had to catch up. In February 2017, it established the New Resident Affairs Committee (新住民事務委員會, *xin zhumin shiwu weiyuanhui*), which, unlike the KMT's New Resident Working Committee, could boast a significant presence of immigrants from Southeast Asian countries, and also included a representative from the second generation of children born from cross-border marriages (DPP Official Website, 2017). The DPP took a more cautious position than the KMT with regard to participation and only allowed new residents to contribute through consultative politics. We had to wait until the 2020 elections to see a naturalised Taiwanese citizen in the DPP's proportional representation list.

It is important to stress one feature. As the number of naturalised new residents increased, political parties could not avoid engaging with this group. Yet, rather than being due to the group's direct political influence, it was seen to be a matter of cultivating an appropriate image. According to a DPP representative I spoke to, new resident turnout to party promotional events did not necessarily reach significant numbers. Yet, as she explained, new residents were seen as a special group, worthy of being cultivated

because they could have broader influence on the overall perception of the party, both domestically and internationally (Taipei, 12 July 2019).

Finally, it may be important to reflect on the fact that, since the second half of the 2010s, Beijing has also formalised a series of exchanges with marriage migrants from mainland China who were residing in Taiwan. In a phase in which this social group acquired strategic importance in Beijing's cross-Strait politics, new opportunities of transnational political participation have also emerged for migrants from mainland China, a matter that I have broadly discussed elsewhere (Momesso, 2020b).

Clearly, in the last ten years, a series of opportunities has opened up for new residents to participate in party politics in Taiwan. How did new residents respond to this changing political environment?

## **Marriage Migrants' Political Participation in Taiwan**

In a phase of political opportunities in which inclusion mechanisms were put in place by state and party apparatuses to promote new resident integration in public affairs, migrants responded with a mixture of interest, scepticism and, at times, indifference. If several respondents thought that it was important to be included in the political process in one way or another, others argued that these actions were just ways for parties to gain more votes, with little impact on migrant welfare. Migrant women's views and practices with regard to vote casting, participation in party politics and political preferences, though, revealed much more than acceptance or criticism.

### *Views on Vote Casting*

Amongst my informants, there was a degree of unanimity with regard to the notion that voting is an essential right in a democratic system. It was also seen as a way to make their voices heard in a democratic society. Hence, a majority of my respondents agreed with the idea that they should vote, as a personal and collective responsibility. Though, not necessarily all voted. Meinu, a woman from Chengdu (PRC), explained: "So it works like this: democracy looks at votes, and parties look at who can vote. So, if we can vote, the government will listen to us! So, we need to vote" (Anonymous 1, 2019). A similar reasoning was shared by Shuilin, an Indonesian woman who worked in a restaurant in Kaohsiung: "It is important to vote, because if you vote you have a voice, they will listen to you and they will do things for you!" (Anonymous 2, 2019). Also, Meimei, a Vietnamese woman, reinforced the same principle: "I vote because it's a form of democracy. Vietnam is not democratic. Here we have the right to vote and it is important for our future" (Anonymous 3, 2016).

The similar views of these three women, though, should be looked at in light of their different backgrounds. Shuilin was focused on achieving life's basics: having a home, looking after her family and earning some money. Married to a man who did not care about politics, she had little exposure to the political debate at home and little involvement in civic and political organisations outside her home. Shuilin understood voting as a way to

express the interests of her peers, yet she didn't see it as an important thing in her life, to the point that she did not always vote and didn't care too much about who was in power. At the end of the day, she argued, "The feeling is that they need us, so they tell us that we need to vote, that we need to vote for them" (Anonymous 2, 2019).

Meimei arrived in Taiwan with no understanding of politics. Yet, through her husband, a DPP supporter, she learnt the tragic history of Taiwan when the KMT imposed martial law and persecuted political opponents. She also became a supporter of the DPP. When I interviewed her, she had just set up, with her husband, an organisation for new residents. Yet, this organisation did not only have cultural and social aims. It also promoted the DPP's values and agenda across its network. The novelty and the privilege of being involved in the political process, something Meimei did not have a chance to do back home, fed her militant approach to politics and her views with regard to the importance of voting. Political parties needed people like Meimei, full of enthusiasm and ideals, as they were a channel to reach the community, gain trust, and gather new voters. Pang, Zeng, and Rozelle (2013) note that voter turnout can be enhanced when women are told that their vote matters. Meimei, like many other women I talked to, appreciated the new attention her group received from the DPP, and she looked at it in an optimistic way. As she argued,

If the government allows us to participate in political affairs, it's because it hopes to hear our voice! And you know, a few years ago only a few of us had the right to vote, but now there are many more of us, and the government listens to us. (Anonymous 3, 2016)

Meimei saw the DPP's engagement with new residents not only as an opportunity to enhance the rights of new residents, but also to raise the visibility of her civic organisation.

Meinu also believed in the importance of voting. Yet, she shared a more disillusioned view with regard to this matter. A highly educated woman who lived in Taiwan for more than two decades and who had a long record of participation in non-profit organisations and governmental committees as a representative of new residents, Meinu believed that politicians were interested in gaining voters, rather than listening to them:

Do you think that they consider us important because they like us? Ahaha... no!! It's not because they like us, it's because we are a big number. And if our number is not enough, we can include the number of our second generation! (Anonymous 1, 2019)

Meinu was agitated when she shared her thoughts, showing a clear personal struggle between her belief that it is important to vote and her disappointment with the fact that many issues related to marriage migrants had not been solved yet, despite politicians' many promises to the point that she was considering not to vote in the approaching elections.

### *Views on Participation in Party Politics and Beyond*

The setting up of a committee for new residents within the DPP and the KMT was welcomed by many of my informants in different ways. Those who looked at it positively saw it as an opportunity, for themselves, to be involved in the political process and, for the community of new residents, to gain a degree of respect and representation within party politics. Meishi, a Vietnamese woman who was doing a PhD in a Taiwanese university when we met, saw participation in party politics as part of a new, more respectful approach towards new residents. Since she arrived in Taiwan in 1998, Meishi experienced first-hand the change in the way the Taiwanese government and parties looked at new residents: from a category to be looked after, to a category deserving of respect and recognition. This, according to Meishi, led to a change in perception of the value of new residents in Taiwan, which, eventually, fed new residents' self-esteem. Meishi also believed that the opening up of opportunities to participate in the political process of main political parties had fostered migrant political participation:

Since we have had this committee, many sisters have decided to join the party, because they feel like they are respected. Before it wasn't like this. Some sisters say, in Vietnam I never talked to the president. Instead, here, she comes and talks to me! It's unbelievable! (Anonymous 4, 2019)

Different opinions emerged with regard to how representation was implemented by each party. In this regard, the DPP was broadly criticised because it allowed new residents' participation only through a consultative group without any decision-making power in the Legislative Yuan. In contrast to the KMT's decision to include a new resident on its proportional list in the 2016 elections, in summer 2019, DPP members were still debating whether there would be any marriage migrants nominated for the 2020 proportional candidate list (Hu, 2019). Some of my informants looked at this approach in a positive way. For instance, Meishi was supportive of this cautious approach:

We are not ready yet, so I accept this. And the DPP is pushing us step by step to be ready to take a bigger step in the future. For instance, Lin Li-chan, she is not mature yet. She is not able to achieve all the things she wants. (Anonymous 4, 2019)

Yet, other respondents did not agree with this somewhat patronising approach. They believed that they were being used as puppets by the DPP as a way to boast publicly about new residents' participation in the political process, whilst in reality only being allowed a basic degree of access (Taipei, 22 July 2019). Most probably in response to these critiques, the DPP had to concede, choosing to include an overseas Chinese migrant of Malaysian origin, Luo Mei-ling, in the proportional candidate list for the January 2020 elections (Zhang, 2019). On the other hand, this decision made the public wonder about the issue of representation: how could an overseas Chinese from Malaysia, who

arrived in Taiwan as a student and only later married a Taiwanese man, represent marriage migrants in the Legislative Yuan (Huang, 2019)?

Nor did the KMT's decisions pass without criticism. Although it allowed greater political participation for new residents by nominating Lin Li-chan, a marriage migrant of Cambodian origin, in its party list for the 2016 elections, a choice that was seen in a positive light by most of my informants, representation was seen as a problem. Indeed, the selection of a woman of Cambodian origin was broadly criticised by the two major ethnic groups amongst new residents, namely migrants from China and from Vietnam. Furthermore, the fact that Lin Li-chan was not known amongst migrants raised concerns about trust and legitimacy. Even Alexander Tsai, a former legislator in the KMT, acknowledged the fact that, despite Lin Li-chan's positive performance, her Cambodian background did not help her to earn recognition amongst the two main ethnic groups of mainland Chinese and Vietnamese spouses (Huang, 2019). As a consequence of this choice, the KMT lost trust and support amongst mainland spouses. As Xieli, a woman from Fujian province, a KMT supporter since she arrived in the island, explained:

In general I tell sisters to join the KMT, because it does many good things for mainland sisters. I tell them that, if we all join the KMT, then we will also have the right to decide who governs this country. [...] More recently, when I try to persuade younger sisters, they don't recognise the KMT any more. And do you know why? Because of the Lin Li-chan issue. Do you know about it? They appointed a person as a representative of new residents. And whom did they decide on? Listen, in Taiwan there are about 600,000 new residents. More than 400,000 are from mainland China. The others are Vietnamese, Indonesians ... and they decided to appoint someone who is not a mainland spouse. So, many people asked, why did the KMT nominate this woman? We are not happy! Firstly, because she is just a proportional candidate. Secondly, 600,000 mainland spouses and 8000 Cambodians in Taiwan. Thirdly, that Cambodian, she represents her Cambodians. And mainlanders? We don't have someone who represents us. Many mainland sisters decided not to vote KMT this time! (Anonymous 5, 2016)

Lack of representation was one of the reasons that led some mainland spouses to operate outside of mainstream parties, by establishing independent political parties (Cheng, Momesso and Fell, 2018; Momesso, 2017). Although these actions had a minor political impact, they represented an important example of what a group of migrant women and men managed to do when felt unrepresented in mainstream politics in a context of favourable political opportunities both in Taiwan and in China. Aware of these sentiments amongst its electorate, the KMT made a different choice for the 2020 elections and opted for a marriage migrant from mainland China, Niu Chun-ru (Yang, 2019). Though, this time concerns were raised, amongst the public, about her connections with China, and the potential threat that she may constitute to the future of Taiwan.

The criticism raised by new residents with regard to the parties' decisions, and the adjustments that both parties eventually had to make in order to meet the expectations

of their voters, reveal how migrants' political integration and participation are discursively co-constructed in a process that includes the launching of top-down initiatives by parties to allow migrant political inclusion on the one hand, and migrant collective and individual responses on the other hand.

### *Political Preferences*

Party affiliation and ideology is described by Lau and Redlawsk (2001) as one of the most common approaches employed by voters. When they voted, a majority of my respondents reflected broader patterns specific to political identification in Taiwan. Hence, for many, the issues of unification/independence and Taiwan's closeness to China were crucial in defining political preference.

Hence, marriage migrants from mainland China were clearly more inclined to vote for the KMT, motivated by the fact that the KMT had a good connection with China, did not explicitly push for independence, and promoted cross-Strait exchanges. Yet, these points mixed with a series of other considerations related to their personal, family, and professional connections with China. Mainland spouses, born and raised in China, and whose family members were still there, would hardly see China as an enemy and a threat. Hence, they would hardly support a pro-independence party. This thought, raised by a male migrant spouse, was actually shared by many mainland Chinese migrants I have met during my fieldworks:

Obviously we have a political stance! Since we were little we received this education that says that Taiwan is a beautiful island of China. A part of China that can't be divided. So since then, we all know that cross-Strait is one country. So, when we come to Taiwan, we still have this perspective. (Anonymous 6, 2019)

This perspective, though, could have different meanings. Older women, who grew up during the Mao era, often held strong pro-Beijing nationalistic views. One such case was Gaoli: in her mid-fifties at the time of the interview, she arrived in Taiwan in 1995. She was a proud member of the KMT, which, to her, counted as an alternative to the communist party outside of China. She argued: "I am from China, I was educated with Mao's teachings and ideals. [...] For me the most important thing is unification. All the other things are not important" (Anonymous 7, 2019). Younger migrants were often less driven by Chinese nationalism. In this regard, an extreme was Ailing, a young woman born in the early 1980s, who grew up in a China that was opening up to the world and was going through significant changes. Despite her Chinese origin, Ailing was a strong supporter of the DPP. As she argued, she grew up thinking that Taiwan is part of China, but when she arrived in the island, she discovered a different reality and she accepted it. As she explained:

I can't answer the question of what is Taiwan clearly. If I say that Taiwan is independent I still do not solve the problem, nothing will change. So this issue does not lead to anywhere.

But I am in Taiwan and I am a citizen of Taiwan, so I want to work for it. [...] All I want is that Taiwan does well. (Anonymous 8, 2019)

Ailing decided to focus on her life in Taiwan and to take up the challenge of openly joining the DPP New Residents' Affairs Committee. Her aim was to give voice to her community within the DPP, a party that historically was not friendly towards PRC marriage migrants. As she argued:

Most mainland spouses follow the KMT, but if we just rely on one party, there is the risk that the other party will neglect us. My point is that I want to have a conversation with the DPP, especially for mainland spouses. When the DPP is in power, who is going to represent us? If no one is there to represent us, they will do whatever they want against us! (Anonymous 8, 2019)

As she continued, Ailing explained that there were many other mainland spouses with her view. Yet, many did not dare to speak out, scared of being ostracised by other spouses from China. Ailing was courageous in this regard, and she went against the mainstream trend amongst marriage migrants from mainland China.

Migrants from Southeast Asian countries had no attachment to China, hence the DPP stance could be acceptable for many of them. Furthermore, they looked with interest at the connections that the DPP had developed with Southeast Asian countries through the New Southbound Policy launched in 2016. This brought new opportunities for Southeast Asian migrants, strengthening their loyalty to a party that had targeted them as potential voters.

Clearly, factors such as political ideology, transnational ties and strategic interests, shaped patterns of political preferences amongst marriage migrants. Yet, these intersected with emotional aspects, above all security and the perception of security. In a context shaped by the rise of China as a political and economic hegemonic power in the region and globally, security was often framed in light of perceptions, expectations, and hopes with regard to China's rise. Mainland Chinese marriage migrants were not concerned about the rise of China. They were preoccupied about the DPP's stance on cross-strait politics and the potential reactions that this would engender on the other side of the Taiwan Strait. Gaoli, for instance, feared a drastic reaction from Beijing, such as a war. Younger women who had businesses in China or with Chinese people feared the idea of losing their livelihood if the diplomatic relations between Beijing and Taiwan worsened.

Beyond concerns on security issues in relation to a worsening of cross-strait relations, many informants were worried about their personal security in Taiwan. Many were worried about their personal security in Taiwan too. Those who arrived in Taiwan in the 1990s and early 2000s experienced at first hand the worsening of mainland Chinese marriage migrants' legal rights in Taiwan (Friedman, 2010). In those years, the DPP was in power and Tsai Ying-wen was minister at the Mainland Affairs Council. The fact that Tsai Ying-wen has been president of the country since 2016



was not reassuring for many of my informants. Xuefei, a male spouse from Liaoning Province, backed up by a female friend, also a spouse from China, expressed these concerns concisely:

Tsai Ying-wen is very bad for mainland spouses. You know about her decision to punish those who take part in patriotic activities in China. So if she does this now, what will it be next time? If we go home to visit our relatives will we be sued? I don't like this! [...] we are scared! What will it be next? What excuse will she use to send me back? So it's in our own interest to vote [KMT]! For our own safety! (Anonymous 6, 2019)

Conversely, migrants from Southeast Asian countries were often concerned about the ascending power of Beijing, which has created tensions not only in Taiwan but also in the region. For instance, Meimei, associating the current KMT with the authoritarian period and horrified by the idea of being part of China, explained:

My way of thinking is simple. Whoever can protect Taiwan and won't let Taiwan become part of China, I will vote for them! We come from Southeast Asia, I come from Vietnam, so when we vote, we want someone who can protect Taiwan, because we think that Taiwan's democracy, education, civilisation, is great. We don't want Taiwan to be part of China. China is a communist country, it's scary. Like Vietnam. If Taiwan joins China, it will be scary. And China will become even stronger. And Vietnam is also getting stronger, so they will compete against each other. But these are communist countries. But at least in Vietnam we can use Google and similar things, but in China, it's all banned. I don't want Taiwan to become part of China, because this will make the Communist Party of Vietnam even stronger and more powerful! (Anonymous 3, 2016)

Finally, political ideology, transnational ties, strategic interests, and perception of security also intersected with migrants' evolving identities. Indeed, as marriage migrants can experience many identity changes in their migration experience, from migrant to citizen, from single to married person, from wife to mother, they also have the opportunity to reflect on and reconsider their political thinking in relation to these important transitions. These would not necessarily lead to a drastic change in their political stance, but can definitely lead to new attitudes towards, and awareness of, the significance of politics.

In this regard, a husband's political values could have significant influence on the migrant's political views. For instance, Kim (2017) argues that in South Korea, a country where voting is seen as a family affair and women are expected to follow their husband, Filipino marriage migrants could decide to "showcase their political compliance with the key members of the family" (Kim, 2017: 66). Similarly, in my informants' narratives, the political background of their Taiwanese spouse revealed an important aspect affecting their political preferences. Yet, it is important to note this wasn't an immutable condition. I previously mentioned Shuilin's case: married to a man who did not engage with politics, she lacked an exposure to political debates which contributed to her lack of political interest. Nevertheless, thanks to other friends, she attended some events

organised by the DPP for new residents and she voted on a few occasions, showing a degree of ownership of her political choices. This could be better appreciated in light of the experience of other informants. Many of my respondents explained that their husbands could be a source of influence, especially at the beginning, when they lacked knowledge about Taiwanese political debates, or when they already shared similar views to their husband. Yet, this could change. What I noticed from my informants is that, although the understanding of the political debate may have different levels of sophistication across individuals, they would gradually develop their own ideas. Hence, as women became more savvy about Taiwan politics, they also would start to form their own opinions, and reduce their dependence on their husband's political position.

Parenthood also emerged as an important feature shaping migrants' political awareness. The literature explores how having a child and taking on the role of parent may bring about changes in one's political outlook and priorities, and how these effects may be mediated by gender (Elder and Greene, 2008). Indeed, parenthood is correlated with attitudes on a range of social welfare issues, most of which directly touch on child rearing, including education, government services, childcare, and health care. Most of my respondents had children and they showed concern about the impact of politics on their children's future. For instance, Miaoli, a woman from Guangdong province, explained what it meant for her to vote, not only as a migrant, but also as a mother: "I vote not only because I acquired this right by becoming a Taiwanese citizen, but also because I want a better party to come to power and let our children have a better future" (Anonymous 9, 2019).

Parenthood and family responsibilities definitely made many of my informants feel closer to other Taiwanese mothers. Weini, a woman from mainland China in her mid-forties, had lived in Taiwan for more than a decade when we met. She had her family there and she regarded Taiwan as her home, and she didn't see herself much different from other Taiwanese women: "What I represent is a woman in her middle age. I am also a mum, a parent. So for us the family is important. We need to look after the elders and the children." Frustrated towards Taiwan mainstream parties' approach towards new residents, she stressed, "I think that new residents shouldn't be regarded as a political group. New residents do not vote for the same party all together" (Anonymous 10, 2019).

As these narratives suggest, political participation involves a series of considerations that are not only unique to the condition of being a migrant but also entail the many other identities that migrants may hold. In the process of becoming not only a Taiwanese national, but also a spouse, a parent, an employee, or an entrepreneur, as well as a political actor, my informants explored many other identities beyond that of migrant. Those identities, all together, shaped their political preferences and practices.

## Conclusions

This article, by building on the case of marriage migrants' political integration and participation in Taiwan, a young democracy in Asia, has brought important insights to a

timely academic, social, and political debate. Shedding light on the multi-faceted, complex relations between political integration, political participation, and gendered biographies of migration, this article offered a more nuanced and flexible investigation of how political integration and participation are mutually constitutive and subjective processes. This study contributes to empirical and theoretical debates.

Empirically, in contrast to the many case studies focused on foreign residents in Western societies, this analysis offered an alternative view of a region of the world that has been overlooked so far by major academic debates. In this regard, this study demonstrated that, in a region characterised by short-term exclusionary immigration regimes, certain forms of migration allow different patterns of integration that eventually lead to significant levels of migrant political incorporation and participation. Even more importantly, this study demonstrated that gender may play a crucial role in opening up specific opportunities for political integration and unique forms of political responses, values, and preferences.

Theoretically, this study demonstrated how migrant political integration and participation are mutually constitutive processes whose complexity cannot be appreciated only in relation to social, legal, and economic factors, such as a migrant's country of origin, access to citizenship rights, transnational practices, political ideology, and ethnic background. A series of other subjective and emotional features, such as perception of security, parental status, life stage, and self-perception in the society, are also important in shaping migrants' political engagement. In light of these findings, emphasising the changing, transformative, and subjective nature of migrant political integration and participation, this article calls for novel approaches apt to grasp this complexity.

Finally, this analysis also offers important policy suggestions. In the context of Taiwan, where political parties have framed new residents' political integration in terms of their migrant identity and, partly, their gender one, this study suggests that this approach may be short-sighted because migrants, in a constant process of becoming, can also develop new political identities and values. Although it is true that many new residents benefitted from these policies and took advantage of the political opportunities that emerged for new residents in Taiwan, it is also important to notice that this approach was not appreciated by all, especially those who saw themselves as Taiwanese nationals rather than immigrants. As time passes and migrants increasingly integrate in the receiving society, they develop a more sophisticated consciousness of political processes. Political parties should acknowledge these dynamics when relating to migrant communities.


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## ORCID iD

Lara Momesso  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4042-9384>

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### Author Biography

**Lara Momesso** is a senior lecturer in Asia Pacific Studies at the University of Central Lancashire, Deputy Director of the Northern Institute of Taiwan Studies and co-deputy director of the Centre of Migration Diaspora and Exile at the University of Central Lancashire. Her research interests include marriage migration across the Taiwan Strait and in East Asia, gender and family formation in contemporary Chinese societies, migrant political participation, migration and borderlands, migrants' political participation. Her research has been published by *International Migration*, *Asia Pacific Migration Journal*, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, and LIT Verlag and Routledge.