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Gender discrimination in societal and familial realms: Understanding agency among Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland

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Abstract

To understand the agency of Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland in their everyday life, the present article examines the reasons why Chinese women marry European men and their post-migratory life in Switzerland. Based on interviews with Chinese marriage migrant women, the article discusses their gendered representations before migration (as "leftover women" or "divorced women") to being "foreign wives" after migration to Switzerland. Their migration from China to Switzerland also resulted to a change in their roles from "professional women" to "homemakers." The gender-related discrimination the women encountered from China to their post-migration life in Switzerland demonstrates a continuum of gender discrimination in which they highly exert their agency that has also been enhanced by acts of resistance.

Keywords

gender discrimination, agency, Chinese marriage migrant women, gender regime

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Introduction

A few years ago, one of my Chinese women friends in Geneva related that on the bus ride from the hospital with her newborn baby and her Swiss husband, a white woman seated next to her glanced at her husband and asked her: "Is he your husband? You are so lucky. The Swiss health insurance systems are the best in the world, you can get your fill! [. . .] I see many Asian women in Switzerland married to European men, they don't work at all! They just benefit from Swiss good living conditions. How ridiculous is that! [. . .]" After that, my friend, who came to Switzerland on a marriage visa, realized that in the eyes of some Swiss, she was a "parasite." The incident made her feel that she will always be labeled a foreign wife. It also raises research questions: Are Chinese women married to Swiss men treated in the same way by the Swiss public? How do Chinese women respond to the different kinds of discrimination they experience throughout the migration process? As a migrant group, there are fewer Chinese in Switzerland compared to other European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, or Italy. Although the number of Chinese in Switzerland is small, Chinese migration has gender dimensions. According to statistics from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in 2018, 60 percent of permanent Chinese residents in Switzerland are women, of whom 51 percent are married or living with a Swiss man (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2018a). Due to restrictive migration policies in Switzerland, marriage is one of the most accessible means for many migrant women to go around such limitations. It can be noted that 43 percent of newly registered marriages in 2017 were binational couples and most of these marriages were between Swiss men and foreign women (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2018b).

The reaction of the Swiss woman in the incident cited earlier suggests a perception of women in transnational marriages as having "married up." However, findings from research on marriage migration indicate that hypergamy is not universal, even if it usually involves the movement of women from less-developed to more-developed countries. Hypergamy in transnational marriage does not always bring advantage to migrant women. Instead, they may even encounter a decline in their social situation due to vulnerabilities resulting from unfamiliarity with the local language and culture, deskilling in the job market, and feelings of incompetence, helplessness, isolation and frustration (Constable, 2005; Williams, 2010). If the prejudice toward marriage migrant women is present in the society of settlement, the paradox of hypergamy could be discussed through the different kinds of discrimination suffered by marriage migrant women in their pre- and post-migratory life. As this article will show, discrimination occurs throughout the marriage migration process, in response to which marriage migrant women have developed strategies to overcome these difficulties.

Previous research on Chinese-European interethnic couples (and families) (Lieber and Lévy, 2011; Hu, 2016; Wang, 2017) have analyzed the gender identity and transformation of family norms. In her study of Chinese-European interethnic marriages in Paris, Wang (2017) analyzed how Chinese men and women with French spouses live with the gendered transformation of family and matrimonial norms in an international migration context, while the research of Lieber and Lévy (2011) examined how women from Northern China developed strategies to marry French men to guarantee their legal status and to get better work or higher pay in France. For migrant women, marriage was considered as the most effective way for them to deal with their precarious legal and economic position (Lieber and Lévy, 2011). For Chinese-British interethnic families, Hu (2016) emphasized that marriage migration has become the second major channel for the creation of Chinese-British families in the UK. Hu was the first researcher who analyzed the ethnic and gender identities of Chinese women during the processes of migration and marriage in the UK. A common element in these various studies is the consideration of gender relationships as a central principle in the organization of migratory flows and the daily life of these migrants. Building on Hu's research, this study focuses more on the balancing between the family and professional lives of Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland. The term "transnational marriage" is used here to refer to marriages between Chinese women and European men in Switzerland. Transnational marriages present cross-border aspects at the individual level (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017; Charsley, 2012) which accurately describes the situation of the women in this article.

The phenomenon of Chinese women's marriage migration in Switzerland remains unexplored. As one of the pioneering research about Asian women in Switzerland, this research aims to make Chinese women's migratory life in Switzerland visible in a multidimensional perspective and reveal the difficulties they encounter in everyday life in the course of their migration. This article will argue that the discrimination suffered by Chinese marriage migrant women are generally produced by social factors derived from gender regimes and social-cultural norms that impact on these women before and after migration. By identifying the different kinds of discrimination, the questions examined are as follows: *How do Chinese marriage migrant women navigate their agency to conform and resist dominant gender norms and ideologies in their society of origin and in the host society?* and *How do gender identity and social norms influence a woman's ability to reason and exercise agency?* It might also be important to know the reasons why these Chinese women decide to marry European men and immigrate to Switzerland. Moreover, we cannot ignore the social power relations set off by migration policies during the migration process. Therefore, an analysis of the social

impact of Swiss migratory policy on female migration is integral to the research.

Theoretical conceptualization of agency in migration

The concept of agency is a central argument which I rely on to analyze the phenomenon of female Chinese marriage migration to Switzerland in overcoming the different kinds of discrimination. The most used notion of agency defines it as the capacity of social actors to reflect on their position, make choices and take actions to achieve their intended objectives. Agency leads us to consider the subject in relation to the phenomena of power and resistance (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993; McNay, 2000). However, it is not a simple autonomous status but also a relational property (Sewell, 1992; Bakewell, 2010). It means that agency associates itself with acts of resistance opposing the forms of dominant power, makes possible the subversion and redefinition of social norms, and implies the ability to transform social relations in which one is enmeshed (Sewell, 1992: 20). Nevertheless, agency should not only be interpreted as synonymous with resistance, "[. . .] but also in multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (Sewell, 1992; Bakewell, 2010). Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963) conceptualized agency in a more trailblazing perspective as "a process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)." Both the capacity to resist and "inhabit norms" through "the interaction of habit, imagination and judgement" constitute agency in a "Chordal Triad" of interaction, projectivity, and practical evaluation (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 970). In parallel, agency is also influenced by the social identity, as well as the norms and expectations that are attributed to it (Giddens, 1984).

In migration studies, agency has been widely used in highlighting migration decision-making and planning (Hoang, 2011; Paret and Gleeson, 2016). It has also been interpreted as a "transformative power" (Briones, 2009; Vlase and Voicu, 2014) by taking to construct one's own life or claiming individual or collective cultural recognition. This article attempts to interpret the multilevel agency of Chinese female migrants in Switzerland during the pre-migration and post-migration stages and derive a relationship between gender and agency. I argue that gender relations influence the whole migration process and propel the individual's agency. Interactively, agency also influences migration choice and allows women to contest and renegotiate the gender structure in both the home country and host society. Furthermore, agency may not always be exerted in the same way, and that female migrants exert agency strategically. In this research, the analysis of

Chinese female migrants' exercise of "agency" is based on its relational characteristics and interaction between people.

Data and methods

This article is primarily based on qualitative data from ethnographic research. To date, 52 life stories of Chinese women from mainland China now living in Switzerland have been collected between 2016 and 2017 (Table 1). Although a sample of 52 cannot be representative of the total population of this group, it allows an understanding of the characteristics of female Chinese migration in

Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Characteristic	Number ($N = 52$)
Age at time of interview (years)	
25–29	4
30–39	27
40–49	16
50–56	5
Highest education completed	
BA	21
MA/MBA	27
PhD	4
Age at marriage to Swiss husband	
Below 30s	14
30s	33
40s	5
Year of arrival in Switzerland	
Before 1990	1
1990–1999	5
2000–2009	17
2010–2016	29
Number of children	
None	18
1	21
2–4	13
Employment status	
Part-time employment	22
Full-time employment	5
Self-employed	3
Full-time homemaker	22
Immigration status	
Resident	38
Citizen	14

a dynamic perspective of gender. Furthermore, the objective of this study is not to generalize the phenomena of Chinese women in Switzerland, but to analyze their migratory modality and strategy in a multi-dimensional level.

As Table 1 shows, the women are highly educated. All have completed tertiary education; more than half have postgraduate degrees. Most of them were in their 30s when they married their Swiss husbands. Very few arrived before the 2000s. The earliest arrival was 1982 and most arrivals transpired between 2010 and 2016. Despite their high educational attainment, only 5 were in full-time employment; 22 held part-time jobs, and another 22 were full-time homemakers. At the time of interview, 14 out of the 52 had acquired Swiss citizenship.

The initial interviewees were recruited following an announcement in several WeChat (WeiXin)[1] groups organized by Chinese people in Switzerland. Many of the interviewees in the research contacted me via WeChat when they saw the announcement. I used the snowball technique in reaching out to other women who also fit the respondent profile. The women who were referred by other interviewees also preferred to use WeChat. Messages were exchanged before the meeting for the interview. It was important to establish rapport with the interviewees given the personal nature of the interview questions. As a Chinese female researcher who had resided in Switzerland for several years, I consider myself an "insider" to the Chinese women's community in Switzerland. My personal experience served as a starting point in thinking about the research and what kinds of issues are worth exploring to understand their migratory life. Sharing the same culture, language and social heritage with the interviewees made it easier for me to get accepted within the group during the recruitment procedure. My researcher-insider status helped in making the interviewees feel comfortable in sharing their migratory life in detail, which in turn, addressed the research objectives of the study.

All interviewees were aged between 27 and 56 years old, which allows an examination of the different migratory experiences and gendered representations by generation. Interviews lasted from between one and two hours. All were interviewed in Chinese and transcripts used the verbatim method. All extracts herein were translated into English. All the names of participants here are pseudonyms so as to guarantee their privacy.

Discrimination within marriage: From China to Switzerland

Research has demonstrated that for women from developing countries, marriage migration could improve their economic situation and enable them to support their families through the sending of remittances (Oso Casas, 2013).

[1]WeChat is a Chinese social media application that can provide text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, video conferencing and group discussion functions.

It also allows them to secure a legal residence in the host society. Finding a Western husband may also offer a more autonomous marriage life (Ricordeau, 2012). What is often ignored is the discrimination women may face in the host society. The discrimination may begin in the country of origin and may push women into transnational marriages. After arriving in the host society, they may encounter another type of discrimination that is shaped by the gender regime in the host society.

Gender discrimination: The marriage market in China

In China, marriage is universal (Yu and Xie, 2015; Ji, 2015), and is considered to be solemn and important for most Chinese people. Traditional belief holds that marriage for women is the realization of one's self-worth; an unmarried woman fears being regarded as an "old virgin" (Bullough and Ruan, 1994: 387). The Chinese marriage market presents disadvantages for women despite the imbalance in the proportion between male and female in the population (Attané, 2013; Poston and Glover, 2005). In China, age discrimination is one of the main factors which produces difficulties for unmarried women: the older they get, the more difficult it is for them to marry. At the same time, social pressures stigmatize unmarried older women, who are considered "leftover women" (*Shèng Nǚ* - 剩女). The Chinese expression suggests that if they are still unmarried at 27, women are not likely to get married. Indeed, since 2007, "leftover women" became a new description recognized by the Chinese Ministry of Education to define women who are college educated and remain single in their late 20s and 30s (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2008). It then became commonplace to view unmarried women as selfish and picky on the one hand, and as happy, beautiful, independent and excellent women, on the other. Despite the positive slant, unmarried women, especially those in their 30s, continue to be regarded as anxious, frustrated and unwanted candidates for marriage (Ji, 2015). Since the Mao era, the Chinese government has promoted egalitarian gender roles and Chinese women have made remarkable progress in the public sphere—the same cannot be said about the private sphere (Attané, 2012). Urban women had achieved nearly universal employment by the late 1970s (Cooke, 2001) and women's educational attainment has extensively progressed and has northerly caught up with the men's level since the economic reform (Hannum et al., 2007). Women's social status is constantly improving, especially after the implementation of the one-child policy in 1980. For families who have just one girl-child, parents have devoted all their efforts and resources to bring up their daughter (Lee, 2012). Since then, Chinese society has become increasingly concerned about girls. More and more girls are growing up under equality, particularly regarding equal education (Attané, 2012; Lee, 2012) and work conditions. Chinese young women also negotiate

their gender obligation in contemporary China by attaining higher education and developing their professional career, because education can provide women with independent economic resources, which can increase their leverage in marriage (Ono, 2003; Tian, 2013). However, higher education has also a negative effect on the timing of marriage (Ji and Yeung, 2014). Most educated women may delay their marriage to develop their career and spend more time searching for a compatible partner than less educated women due to their relatively favorable financial situation. Moreover, following the social norm of status hypergamy (Xu et al., 2000; To, 2013), well-educated women have less opportunity to meet potential male partners in the local matrimonial market.

> My family and friends were very worried about my single status. They thought that I would be "left" [behind] forever[. . .] But you know, I spent a lot of time for my studies and then for my job. In fact, it was not that I did not want to get married, but I could not find anybody. The older you get, the harder it is to find someone. The better you are at work, the more people think you are too strong a woman. Then, fewer and fewer men are willing to get close to you, and it is more and more difficult to find the right husband. Gradually, I realized I was really left behind in the marriage market in China and I was at a disadvantage because of my age. (Wanjun, 38 years old, living in Switzerland since 2010)

Wanjun was successful in her studies and profession, and enjoyed her independent situation, but her status as a "leftover woman" made her feel of having failed in her life. For many Chinese women, if marriage or having a child does not take place, they consider themselves as "incomplete." This gender modality is influenced by social norms and traditional gender ideology (Ji, 2015; Ji and Yeung, 2014). She met her Swiss husband when she was working as the sales manager of a Swiss company in Beijing. She found him to be very serious and he helped her a lot during their work collaboration. Most importantly, he did not care about her age at all. In her own words, they got on well and built a tacit understanding. For her, he is "Mr. Right":

> I never thought of marrying a foreigner, but it seemed difficult to find a Chinese man in the same level as me. It is like something [. . .] you know, as if there are external factors pushing me to make such a choice.

In general, Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland, before getting married to a Swiss or European man, have very positive views of transnational marriage, especially those women who are well-educated, financially independent and disappointed with Chinese marriage norms. A transnational marriage can be a good choice for them to relieve the social pressure and start a new life. As Meiling underlined, her Swiss husband is both very open-minded and serious concerning marriage. She explained it was one of

her Swiss clients who introduced her husband to her when she worked in an international logistics company. She pointed out, that after first meeting her husband in 2007 in China, she came to Switzerland for the first time in 2008 to get to know this man and his family in more depth.

> I found him to have a very global vision of the world and he told me that he had never had a love relationship before. For me, he seemed like a very serious person when considering a marriage engagement. I think this is the Swiss character, so I do not worry about the possibility that he will deceive me or will have extramarital. You know, I am wary of Chinese rich men, they can practice *bao er nai* (adopting a concubine), which scares me. And many Chinese men are reluctant to want to know me deeply, they only care about age and appearance. I think I met the right person when my husband asked me to marry him. (Meiling, 36 years old, living in Switzerland since 2009)

Another factor related to gender discrimination in the Chinese local marriage market is divorce. More and more well-educated and highly paid Chinese women initiate divorce proceedings because of financial independence; they are not afraid to be divorced (Xiao, 2010). The divorce rate in China has been rising steadily since 2000s (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018), but the negative view of society towards divorced women remains. Xuebing, a 45-year-old woman who had been living in Switzerland since 2009, explained that she divorced her ex-husband because he did not respect her. She thought she would have more freedom after the divorce, but she was criticized by her family and friends. Her chances to remarry were slim because she was a divorced woman with a 4-year-old son. Others blamed her success in her career as contributing to the failure of her marriage. She said that these prejudices made her very frustrated. She then met her Swiss husband, as she was Professor of English in a Chinese university and she was working as a translator for him during his work in China. She appreciated his help and sympathy and admired his lifestyle and open-mindedness. He did not mind that she was a divorcee. Moreover, they have a lot of resonance at the spiritual level. She mentioned that is very important for her to rebuild a family. Xuebing's choice of transnational marriage showed her determination to resist social norms and her wish to escape the prejudice of Chinese society regarding divorced women.

> I decided to come to Switzerland with him, because I knew that he can appreciate my personality. I could also restart a new marriage. Furthermore, I wanted to prove that a divorced woman can also succeed in a new marriage. (Xuebing, 45 years old, living in Switzerland since 2009)

These different cases demonstrate that Chinese women resist all kinds of power relations induced by the local marriage market, whether it is age discrimination or divorce status. Even if they are not specifically looking for foreign husbands, they participate in the decision-making in a transnational marriage, they raise all kinds of issues within the family, marriage and the private sphere, and society in general. They manifest their ability to react against power relations related to public prejudices and criticisms, and the capacity to self-adjustment towards marital attitudes by interactions with family, friends and society. They can distance themselves from the gender traditions of marriage and then transform them in a positive manner if they want to get married. The choice of transnational marriage can be considered as a negotiation strategy for Chinese women to escape from gender discrimination in the Chinese marital system.

Furthermore, their positive image of transnational marriages and their disappointment with the local marriage market influenced their decision-making process, which can also be interpreted as a form of agency for Chinese women. As much marriage migration research shows, loyalty and responsibility, the promise of upward mobility and equality of gender relations are the three main qualities which motivate women to marry a Western (Constable, 2005; Ricordeau, 2012). For independent and highly educated unmarried women, the spiritual communication in marriage is very important. They envisage looking for a serious, open-minded partner, and Western men are often regarded as this kind of husband, as mentioned previously by my three interviewees.

Chinese marriage migrant women's exercise of agency during their process of pre-migration, especially in the decision-making process, demonstrates how much they would like to escape from the gender discrimination in the local marriage market and how they transform power to confront different social power relations. Their agency is certainly influenced by the local gender norms so that their resistance demonstrates obviously Chinese cultural and social characteristics. The choice of transnational marriage represents Chinese women as actors in their future life orientation and it is their responsiveness to pressure from families within their original society and conformity with some traditional norms like universal marriage.

Back to gender stereotyped role in Switzerland

In transnational marriage studies, foreign wives, especially those who come from developing countries, have often been considered to have the qualities of a good wife (Piper and Roces, 2003)—"as embodying notions of womanhood and 'wifely-ness' by combining traditional roles of care, mother, domestic laborers and intimate partner" (Williams, 2010: 187). Their Western husbands are often seen playing the role of breadwinner, and thus maintain the power

in household activities through financial contribution to the family. Nevertheless, many of these studies forget to question why foreign migrant women accept their role of full-time homemaker. In the context of Switzerland, most Chinese marriage migrants women had a very stable and favorable economic situation before arriving in Switzerland, but they may find themselves in a situation of dependence after settlement. There is some resistance from the women given their dependent situation and there is a longing for their previous professional and autonomous lifestyle. However social factors such as gender culture, low welfare spending on childcare and high taxation greatly affect their current situation. Giraud and Lucas (2009), in their article, underline different social, cultural and political aspects of Switzerland's delay in promoting gender equality. The traditional gender regime is the assignment of women's roles in the family as mother and as wife. Even though Swiss society has achieved gender equality between men and women in many aspects since the 1970s, traditional values such as marriage or motherhood, and the image of the mother at home persist. They continue to influence the distribution of the social roles of women, leading to the emergence of a re-traditionalized parenthood (Giraud and Lucas, 2009). Moreover, the disparity of the work participation of men and women in Switzerland has also created a sense of masculinity for men as the main family breadwinner, leaving childcare responsibilities to women (Epple et al., 2015). Moreover, the extra-familial childcare has long been neglected in Switzerland (Ballestri and Bonoli, 2003; Bertozzi et al., 2008). For the state, the organization of the household is seen as a private matter in which the state must not intervene (Fux, 1997). The conservative Swiss welfare scheme provides very limited support for child care in spite of increasing demand. Even though many kindergartens have been set up, the demand extra-familial childcare always exceeds the supply (Ballestri and Bonoli, 2003; Le Goff and Dieng, 2006). Therefore, childcare for preschool children is reserved for the family and many women give up full-time work and devote more time to family care. The lack of childcare services deters women from working and strengthens society's and the male's opinion on the female role regarding family care and motherhood.

Many of the women interviewed mentioned that they were gradually disillusioned with the Swiss job market due to the lack of childcare support. Wanjun explained the dilemma between finding work and staying at home to look after her son (her son's kindergarten was a half-day class):

> I was very confused at that time, I really wanted to go to work, but [. . .] you know, if I work, the money I earn will be not enough to cover the fees of my son's babysitting and extracurricular activities. When you go to work, it means that all the money you earn is spent in the care of your child. And later, I discussed with my husband and we considered that it is better for me not to

> go to work rather than finding someone else to take care of our son, I could then spend more time with him and accompany him to some of his favorite activities [. . .] Moreover, my husband told me when we got married that my best option was to stay at home if we have children. In Switzerland, he said, it is better for women to be a full-time mother. I did not fully understand then. There are also mothers in China, and I have never heard of anyone who is full time. In my opinion, I am always happy to work; I never thought to be a full-time homemaker. (Wanjun, 38 years old, living in Switzerland since 2010)

Wanjun's husband earns a high salary and prefers her to stay at home to look after their son. Similarly, Rongrong (33 years old, living in Switzerland since 2014) had not worked outside the home since she arrived in Switzerland. She was the one who raised her son because they could not get a place in the kindergarten. Her husband told her that childcare is expensive in Switzerland so they could not afford to hire a nanny.

> I know, it is very difficult to find a job in Switzerland because I never had work experience abroad. If I find a small job, my husband will say that my salary would not be enough to pay for a nanny or a creche and we would pay more taxes. He suggested that I stay at home[. . .]

Rongrong's problem not only reflects the lack of childcare, but also presents another social problem regarding taxation which negatively and indirectly affects women's enthusiasm to find jobs. As Sainsbury (1999) underlines, the tax system can greatly influence labor participation and thus have an impact on the gendered division of work. If Rongrong were to get a low-paid job, she will be taxed at a high rate just like her husband; a so-called marriage penalty increase (Epple et al., 2015). This high tax load will make the second income less desirable. Often, it is the wife who earns less. Swiss taxation thus tends to discourage the employment participation of women (Schwarz, 2012).

Many women, like Rongrong and Wanjun, choose to abandon their initial desire to look for a job because of the welfare systems concerning childcare and taxation in Switzerland and their deficiencies. Being a homemaker seems to be a choice they have to accept. They even reaffirm their qualities of being industrious and thrifty in managing a household by taking care of their children alone without spending extra for childcare. As a compromise, these women return to a stereotyped role by taking into consideration the needs of their husbands and families. However, this does not mean that they enjoy their life as a full-time housewife. Many of them complain that the post-migratory life in Switzerland deprives them of a certain degree of freedom and autonomy, and that they are less than happy with their current

dependent status. Rongrong shared her feelings about her economic dependence on her husband:

> Before, my husband gave me 2000 francs every month to do the shopping. And every month there was money left that I kept as pocket money. Apart from taking care of my two-year-old son and visiting my Chinese friends, I had no other activities. So, I bought membership for a fitness club with the rest of the money that I had saved. When my husband found out, he was angry because I had not discussed it with him before. Afterwards, he said that I was throwing money away and then he decided to stop giving me money. Now I use my own money that I earned when I worked in China. You know, when I was in Alibaba, my salary was higher than my husband's, and I earned more than 30,000 yuan per month. Compared to before, I really feel that my economic situation has declined and I cannot spend money as I wish. I miss my free lifestyle in China when I just did what I wanted.

Rongrong has ambivalent feelings about her role as a homemaker and her economic status. On the one hand, she wants to take good care of her family; on the other hand, she also wants to escape from the shackles of household responsibilities and be financially independent. Like Wanjun, she does not understand why her homemaker or mother's role should be full time. In China, she focused on her personal development and well-being. She, like other Chinese transnational marriage women in Switzerland, feel that they have taken a step backwards because of the confluence of social factors, such as gender norms, childcare responsibilities and taxation.

The agency in the life transition of Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland is reflected in their contradictory feelings between wanting to be autonomous and being a wife and a mother. Even if they are not happy with their social status, they assume their household responsibilities. Their understanding of Swiss society shapes their agency and capacity to adapt to living in Switzerland. Exerting agency, they redefine their gender role in a transnational marriage in a country where many social factors weaken women's independence. Changing their mentality, these migrant women adapt to the social environment and try to establish equal conjugal relations even as they undergo the transition from autonomy to dependency.

Downward professional mobility: Navigating the Swiss labor market

Research has shown that the low labor force participation of migrant women is due to multiple social factors, such as the non-recognition of diplomas and work experience acquired in the country of origin (Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007; Liversage, 2009; Riaño, 2011); the prejudices of employers (women migrants may be disadvantaged on the basis of national origin and gender); and

restrictions on their working hours due to their family responsibilities (Fibbi et al., 2003; Goguikian Ratcliff et al., 2014). Moreover, the host society does not consider them as potential workers and does not seek to integrate them by organizing language courses. This provides women little opportunity to access public sectors that could guide them or facilitate their integration into the labor market (Marin-Avellan and Mollard, 2011). The combination of gender, ethnicity and nationality create a system of inequalities which engenders discrimination in the labor market of the host society. In the context of Switzerland, Riaño (2011) stressed in her studies on skilled migrant women from Latin America, the Middle East and Southern Europe to Switzerland, that traditional Swiss ideas about gender roles, ethnic differences and discriminatory migration policies create boundaries that restrain women from attaining a high position in the labor market. Therefore, the unemployment of Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland is not entirely due to the undeveloped extra-familial childcare system. Native Swiss women also face the same problem and are often expected to stay at home to take care of their children when they are still young. However, native Swiss women may find jobs more easily than migrant women when their children are grown because they do not encounter the problem of non-recognition of diplomas and work experience that migrant women face in the Swiss labor market. Being kept out of the labor market not only affects the economic resources of migrant women; it also diminishes their self-worth.

This exclusion for skilled migrant women in the host labor market gives rise to brain drain. Most Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland, even though they have diplomas and work experience, encounter difficulties in finding a job commensurate to their education and experience. For example, Rongrong felt that her previous professional skills are getting rusty.

> I find that my professional skills are diminishing, unused. It is very unfortunate because I studied very hard in university and I had much work experience in order to be competitive in the Chinese labor market. And now, all is lost. (Rongrong, 33 years old, living in Switzerland since 2014)

Of the 52 interviewees,[22] were unemployed and those who found part-time work experienced deskilling. Some were offered jobs, but they turned these down when the jobs are not suitable. Otherwise, if they accept jobs that are unrelated to their education or previous work experience, it would be difficult to find work according to their training or previous work experience. As Meiling, a former research worker, explained:

> I did not accept the last temporary job's proposition I received as a cashier in a supermarket. I think if I accept it, later job choices will only be restricted to this area, and I am sure I will never be able to find a work in research. So, I would

> rather not work and stay at home to take care of my two children. (Meiling, 36 years old, living in Switzerland since 2009)

Almost all of the women in the study reported experiencing discrimination in the Swiss job market. They expressed feelings of loss, regret and dissatisfaction with their experience of the job search process. They think that the Swiss job market does not value them. Instead of facing the prospect of deskilling, they would rather give up the chance to work to combat the unfairness of it all. Although this approach keeps them unemployed, it is also a way for them to resist the unjust Swiss job market. This decision demonstrates their agency.

Not all Chinese marriage migrant women think in the same way. Some of them kept trying to find a satisfactory job, even if the process is very tedious. Xuebing (45 years old, living in Switzerland since 2009) explained that she spent six years trying to find a satisfactory job. When she arrived in Switzerland in 2009, she studied German and at the same time, looked for a job. However, she found it difficult, and she thought that she would never get a job in the Swiss labor market. One year later, she found a job teaching Chinese language—an evening course and just once per week—in a private language institute. She decided to accept this job offer because she really did not want to be unemployed and she needed the pocket money. Between 2014 and 2015, she worked as a Chinese teacher in different private institutions and the workload gradually increased to 30–40 percent. During this period, she applied for a post as a proctor at an authorized Cambridge English Platinum Center, because that work was related to her previous work in China as professor of English at university. She did not want to waste the good education she had received in China. She added:

> I can begin in a new field; I can learn as a beginner. I can do other jobs different from my previous work. But not in the catering services, I cannot work in this field. I was a professor; maybe I can do some office work, but not work in a restaurant or in a hotel. I prefer to find a job which is suited for me.

Unfortunately, she was not hired by the Cambridge English Platinum Center, and she thought that she did not give an appropriate reason to persuade the Human Resources Director to recruit a foreigner rather than a Swiss national. However, she did not give up her hope to look for a suitable job. Finally, in 2016, she applied for the post of secretary in the institute of Chinese culture and sociology at a Swiss university. After several rounds of screening, she was finally hired thanks to her Chinese language skills and cultural background. She also obtained the German language B1 level certificate at that time, which improved her chances for the job. Even if this job is only part time (60 percent), she found a job which seems suitable for her, which is the most important. She spent six years resisting the Swiss job market and then she

persevered to overcome discrimination in the job market. She was always assertive in demonstrating the advantages of her Chinese cultural identity. She developed her own strategy to deal with the job market, acquiring a wealth of experience in the process.

Indeed, several other women also indicated that they could not find suitable work in Switzerland. Some held temporary jobs. After acquiring local experiences, they are more likely to obtain a more suitable and better paid job. They demonstrated their agency balancing the opportunities offered by the labor market and their own wishes. The discrimination they encounter because of gender, nationality and ethnicity makes Chinese marriage migrant women's social integration more difficult and upsets their post-migratory life. Self-development for them has been limited. However, as suggested by the cases above, they do not always accept deskilling. Instead, they exerted their agency by mobilizing different strategies to navigate the host society according to their personal situation.

Conclusion

Based on the life stories of Chinese women who arrived as transnational marriage migrants in Switzerland, this article examines the gender-related discrimination the women experienced before and after migration. The analysis has unveiled a continuum of gender discrimination of marriage migrants, from the origin country to the destination country. Chinese women marry a Westerner for diverse reasons. External factors, such as the fact that the local marriage market in China discriminates against women in their late 20s and divorced women, played an important role in their decision to marry foreign men. In the eyes of the public, their "failure" in the local marriage market was blamed on their pursuit of self-independence. When they met Western men, they considered transnational marriage a strategy to escape discrimination and also to fulfil their personal life project. Their decision-making and the choices they made demonstrate their agency as social actors (e.g. Butler, 1990, 1993; Mahmood, 2011; Bakewell, 2010; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

Transnational marriage and their post-migration experience in Switzerland, however, raised new problems. In Switzerland, the limitations of the social welfare system increase the family responsibilities of women. In this situation, Chinese marriage migrant women recognized the need to fulfil their role as mothers, even though they knew that it would take away some of their autonomy in their individual lives. They transformed their agency—by performing the traditional female role as the primary carer in their families—to ensure the good of their families. In addition, because of various types of discrimination in the Swiss labor market, many of them were not able to find commensurate employment in their post migratory life. The deskilling situation seems to be a very common phenomenon and the gendering effects of

family responsibility make their job-seeking more difficult. Therefore, female immigrants must overcome a combination of discrimination due to gender, nationality and ethnicity to achieve their professional integration. Yet, they do not remain totally passive. They developed different strategies to resist the discrimination in the Swiss labor market either by refusing an inappropriate unskilled work or by accumulating different work experiences to find a suitable work later. Over time, they succeeded in overcoming obstacles in the initial years of their post-migratory life in Switzerland.

This article demonstrates how Chinese marriage migrant women in Switzerland mobilize their agency to resist the gendered discrimination during their pre- and post-migratory lives. It argues that these different stages constitute a continuum of the migrants' agency from the past to the present and toward the future. Female migrants' agency does not only reflect the resistance aspect, but also suggests that when resistance is accompanied by social capital, women's options are expanded. To conclude, the agency of Chinese marriage migrants shows their capacity to develop strategies to deal with different situations; and they are actors during the whole migration trajectory. How women migrants' new or reconfigured identity is shaped throughout the migratory process is a question that future research can investigate.

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