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## **Marital Power Relations and Family Life in Transnational Marriages—A Study of Asian-French Couples Residing in France\***

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### **Abstract**

In-depth interview data are used to analyze family life and marital power relationships among Asian-French couples residing in France. All informants met their spouses/partners through personal networks or chance encounters at schools, workplaces, or social gatherings—none met through marriage agencies. All agreed that their conjugal relationships made them feel at home and a sense of belonging. In addition to social and economic resources, some of the individuals reported feeling empowered by their cultural capital or children. Some foreign spouses expressed a willingness to terminate their relationships if they could achieve financial independence, retain legal residency in France, or felt that their children

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could handle the trauma of divorce. The informants' narratives indicate that conjugal relationships may have been established and sustained due to mutual dependence. No significant value conflicts in terms of religious beliefs or traditional social norms were observed. Most of the foreign spouses appeared to enjoy a mixture of cultural values in their daily routines.

**Key Words:** transnational marriage, marital relationship, Asian-French couples

## I. Introduction

Interracial marriage has long been considered as both contributing to, and an outcome of, racial equality in multicultural societies. However, transnational marriages, especially those involving foreign spouses moving from a poor country to a wealthy one, tend to be analyzed as examples of hypergamy for the foreign spouses, regardless of socio-economic background. In his study of Vietnamese-American transnational marriages, Hung (2005) found that for some Vietnamese, the opportunity to acquire citizenship in a wealthier country is of enormous value as an avenue to a more comfortable life: more valuable than other traditionally revered routes, such as education. In earlier studies of transnational marriages in Taiwan, the Netherlands, and the US (Ko, 2009, 2010), I found that some young women from less developed countries either chose, or were persuaded, to marry foreign men from more affluent countries who were older and/or less educated in order to improve their own financial situation, or that of their natal families. Lu (2005) and Wang (2007) posit that foreign wives endeavor to sustain their transnational marriages even if they are unhappy in their relationships, due to their desire to retain such benefits as residency permits and better living standards.

In this paper, I consider the question of whether foreign spouses from undeveloped or developing countries are treated fairly in their relationships. All of the Asian-French couples interviewed for this study were asked five specific questions: 1) What were the main motivations for entering transnational unions, and what sustained the relationships? 2) Were the foreign spouses satisfied with their relationships? 3) What strategies did they use to empower themselves? 4) What value conflicts did they regularly encounter in terms of daily routines? 5) How do they combine the values of two cultures?

## II. Literature Review

Early family studies researchers generally supported the

argument that “the balance of power will be on the side of that partner who contributes the greater resources to the marriage” (Blood & Wolfe, 1960: 12). They found that partners who bring more income, education, status, or social capital to their marriages tend to exert greater control in terms of decision making, and have less responsibility for household labor tasks (Chen, Yi, & Lu, 2000; Cromwell, Corrales, & Torsiello, 1973; Fox, 1973; Hsu, 2008; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Katz & Peres, 1985).

In their study of 516 matched-pair couples residing in Taiwan in the late 1990s, Lee, Yang and Yi (2000) found a positive association between a husband’s participation in housework and the wife’s relative income, the couples’ level of education, and egalitarian gender role ideology. Of the three factors, the third was identified as the most influential on marital satisfaction. That same year, Chen, Yi and Lu (2000) reported that educational levels exert positive impacts on family decision-making power among married Taiwanese women, yet husbands nonetheless tend to make major decisions on investments, house purchases, and social gift-giving, while wives tend to control child care, support for elderly parents, and family budgets. Similar findings were reported by Katz and Lavee (2005) for married couples residing in Israel where husbands were dominant in decisions regarding family finances, car purchases, and jobs for both spouses, while wives were dominant in family decisions regarding childcare, education, and family leisure.

Scholars have gathered significant evidence indicating that in patriarchal societies, husbands are encouraged to assume primary responsibility for generating monetary resources, while wives hold part-time jobs or act as full-time child raisers and homemakers. Hence, husbands tend to use their income-generating power to withdraw from household tasks and/or exert greater decision-making power (Nakhaie, 1995; Ross, 1987; Seccombe, 1986). In his study of American couples during the 1980s, Greenstein (1996) found that although most wives performed the bulk of household tasks, relatively few described the division of labor as unfair.

According to Greenstein, the key factor is subjective perception of fairness moderated by gender ideology, which provides a referent that married women can use to evaluate fairness or justice within their relationships. Based on their data on marital quality, perceived fairness, and division of household labor among three ethnic-religious groups in Israel (Moslem Arabs, Christian Arabs, and Jews), Lavee and Katz (2002) also found that a segregated division of labor and the assumption of additional burdens were not necessarily perceived as unfair by married women. Instead, gender-role ideology served as an important moderating factor between the household division of labor and perceived fairness/marital satisfaction. Moslem Arabian couples (who maintain the most segregated roles) had the highest scores on perceived fairness in labor division and marital satisfaction, while Jewish and Christian Arabian couples (who maintain more egalitarian roles) scored the lowest on both measures.

Although a preference for equality in relationships is generally assumed, Sarantakos (2000) failed to find any association between marital power and marriage quality in her study of Australian couples in the 1990s, meaning that egalitarian relationships do not guarantee a relatively higher quality of life. In addition, for the majority of couples in Sarantakos' study, marital quality was more dependent on proximity to a power system ideal than marital power type (i.e., egalitarian or non-egalitarian). In her study of family power allocation and gender ideology among married women in Taiwan, Chung (2007) found that some women purposefully yielded their decision-making power to their husbands based on two beliefs: "women should not be stronger than their husbands" and "I gain more respect from him if I respect him first" (99). Together, these findings indicate that perceived ideals of power relations and proximity to those ideals are reflected in subjective perceptions of marital fairness and happiness.

In studies of transnational marriages between women from less developed countries and men from more developed countries, foreign wives are frequently portrayed as powerless, exploited, and

lacking agency in their host societies. It is generally believed that escaping poverty and restrictions associated with their natal families, as well as a desire for a better life in a developed country strongly motivates women to seek a foreign spouse. In order to satisfy these motivations, foreign spouses must maintain and preserve their marriages, whether or not they are happy in their relationships. Breger (1998) notes that due to language barriers and limitations regarding host country work permits, most foreign wives are economically and culturally dependent on their husbands for the first few years following their arrival. Their husbands thus serve as the sole resource providers and “culture brokers” for their wives, speaking for them and taking care of all matters outside the domestic sphere.

In previous research on transnational marriages in Taiwan, I found that foreign spouses tended to project innocence or a lack of linguistic understanding as a strategy to avoid conflicts with their mothers-in-laws (Ko, 2009). Similarly, Shen and Wang (2003) found that the female marriage migrants they interviewed frequently used their pregnancies (especially morning sickness) as excuses to avoid certain foods or to reduce housework loads. In his study of Indians married to Western nationals, Cottrell (1973) concluded that cross-national marriages are extensions of an established international lifestyle rather than resulting from engagement with other cultures, thus mitigating the extent of marital conflict resulting from competing social norms or values. Furthermore, Hari (2007) and Okin (1999) have observed that many migrants abandon the norms of their countries of origin (e.g., pressure to marry, criteria for mate selection, filial obedience, gender inequality) in order to enjoy the liberal benefits of their host cultures.

### III. Sample and Method

The snowball sample consisted of 24 individuals involved in

transnational marriages or long-term cohabiting relationships who were residing in France between May and July of 2010. The 22 informants residing in southern France were interviewed in person, while the other two (both residing in Paris) were interviewed by email. Interviews were conducted in English, Chinese and French (with a French-Chinese translator). The average length of each in-person interview was approximately two hours.

As shown in Table 1, the sample consisted of six males (four French, one Chinese, one Vietnamese) and eighteen females (six Chinese, five Taiwanese, four Vietnamese, two Thai, and one French). Of the informants, five were married couples (07A/07B, 08A/08B, 10A/10B, 11A/11B and 17A/17B); wives and husbands were interviewed separately. Mean age for the eighteen female informants was 42.5 years, 7.3 years younger than their husbands on average. The mean age for the six male informants was 49.0 years, 6.8 years older than their wives on average.

The mean number of years residing in France for the foreign-born informants was 15.9, and average length of partnership was 11.7 years. All of the informants had at least a high school education. None of the informants stated a clear intention to not have children, but three were considering delaying parenthood, and three stated that they could not have children due to age or health concerns.

The marital satisfaction scale used in the present study (1 to 10, low-to-high) is similar to the overall life satisfaction measure used in the European Values Studies and World Values Surveys. Most of the informants stated that they were happy with their relationships, giving an average score of 8.0. With two exceptions, all of the informants who were married at the time of our interviews cohabited with their then-future spouses prior to marriage. Two of the informants stated that they had no plans to get married, even though marriage is required to acquire a long-term residency permit. The four informants who unmarried at the time of our interviews described their relationships as stable and long-term (having last three years or more).

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Data for the Participants

ID	Name	Sex	Country of Origin	Ethnicity	Family Status/ Number of Children	Age	Spouse's Age	Years in France	Years in Relationship	Years of Education	Spouse Years of Education	Scale of Satisfaction
01	Brigitte	f	Taiwan	Taiwanese	married/1	41	41	12	10	19	11	7
02	Minlee	f	Vietnam	Chinese	cohabiting/2	45	55	32	14	16	18	5
03	Lai	f	Taiwan	Taiwanese	cohabiting/1	46	56	6	4	16	11	7.5
04	Danise	f	France	Vietnamese	cohabiting/1	31	38	by birth	8	12	11	8
05	Wanthanee	f	Thailand	Thai	married/2	48	54	20	20	22	20	10
06	Any	f	China	Chinese	married/2	30	40	12	7	14	15	5
07A	Vivid	f	Vietnam	Vietnamese	married/1 (Note 1)	50	60	6	4	12	12	8
07B	Thomas	m	France	Italian	Note 2	60	50	by birth	4	12	12	8
08A	Laura	f	Thailand	Thai	married/3	50	56	23	21	12+	17	?
08B	Michael	m	France	French	married/3	56	50	by birth	21	17	12+	8
09	Mei	f	China	Chinese	married/1	38	41	3	3	14	16	10
10A	Jennifer	f	Taiwan	Taiwanese	married/0	33	32	3	3	16	20	8
10B	Bruno	m	France	French	married/0	32	33	by birth	3	20	16	10
11A	Nicole	f	France	French	married/0	61	67	by birth	33	16	16+	good
11B	Eric	m	Vietnam	Vietnamese	married/0	67	61	46	33	16+	16	9.5
12	Nguyen	f	Vietnam	Vietnamese	married/1	38	67	15	13	20	6	10
13	Chao	f	Mauritius	Chinese	married/4	45	60	18	18	15	16+	4
14	Ping	f	Taiwan	Taiwanese	married/1	49	47	12	12	14	15	5
15	Feng	f	China	Chinese	married/0	24	28	1	1	16	16	10
16	Kou	m	China	Chinese	cohabiting/0	27	25	1	3	16	16	8
17A	Blyu	f	Taiwan	Taiwanese	married/0	40	52	2	6	15	15	9
17B	Paul	m	France	French	Note 3	52	40	by birth	6	15	15	9
18	Cambo	f	Cambodia	Chinese	married/1	50	49	36	13	13	13	8
19	Marie	f	Vietnam	Vietnamese	married/2	46	53	38	21	16	20	10

Note 1: One child from a previous marriage.

Note 2: One child from a previous marriage.

Note 3: Three children from previous marriages.

Source: Table compiled by the author.



Less than half (ten) of the foreign-born informants met their partners outside of France. Just one of the couples used French to communicate at the beginning of their relationships: their primary language was English. Marriage and migration occurred at or very close to the same time, meaning the Asian spouses had the dual tasks of adjusting to marital life and to life in France.

#### IV. Findings

##### A. Why This Person, and Why Still in This Relationship?

Most of the female informants in this study stated a preference for partners from equal or higher socio-economic backgrounds, in a pattern similar to mate selection patterns in many patriarchal societies. However, some chose to marry/live with partners with lower socio-economic statuses.

None of the interviewees used marriage agencies; all met their spouses/partners through personal networks or chance encounters at schools, workplaces, or social gatherings. A 46-year-old Taiwanese woman named Lai said that she met her partner, Richard, on the street: "I was looking at a map for directions in a small town in France. He walked up to me and guided me to the place where I wanted to go." After two relationships with French women, Richard stated a specific interest in forming a long-term relationship with a Vietnamese woman because he believed them to be loyal, thrifty, and less materialistic than French women. Lai is not Vietnamese, but has features that fit a general profile of Vietnamese females: black hair, light-brown skin, and flat facial features. They felt an immediate attraction, and started living together four months after meeting. Lai made a comment echoed by the majority of informants: "I didn't plan to live with a Frenchman, it just happened." At the time, Lai's sister was married to a Belgian and living with their children in his home country. Lai had already been exposed to Western culture, and therefore was aware that cohabitation did not automatically indicate future

marriage or legal residency.

Lai graduated from a prestigious university in Taiwan and previously had a relationship with a well-educated Taiwanese boyfriend who had a good income. When this relationship faltered, Lai decided to move to France for further study. Her current partner, Richard, is French and neither rich nor well-educated, but she considers him attractive, and appreciates his willingness to form a family with her, even though he refuses to marry her. "I finally realized that feeling right is more important than socially-approved characteristics such as education, income, and status in searching for a suitable mate. . . . In addition, waiting for a Mr. Right is not a wise decision at my age (42 years). I may not find a better man back in Taiwan." Lai's comments echo those made by several other informants. Richard frequently complains that Lai spends too much time studying and not enough on housework, but Lai identifies his reluctance to marry as the central problem: she must maintain her student visa in order to legally reside in France. Neither one is willing to leave the relationship, in part because of their one-year-old son.

Similarly, Vivid did not know, nor expect, that she would marry a Frenchman. She said that as a divorced woman with a child in Vietnam, it was very hard for her to find a nice man to marry and help raise her child, and that it was even harder to find a decent job to support herself and pay for her child's education. Her older sister, who had lived in France for many years, introduced Vivid to Thomas, who was eager to have an Asian wife. Thomas was once married to and had a child with a French woman, and he had a long-term relationship with another French woman after his first marriage ended. According to Thomas, his French partners spent more money and worked less, hence deleting his savings. He searched for a Vietnamese wife based on his belief that she would be loyal, thrifty, hardworking, and less materialistic. According to Vivid, Thomas is neither handsome nor generous—she has no access to his bank account. Still, she says he provides a decent life for her and her child, which she likely would

never have found in Vietnam.

Ping met her husband at their workplace in Taiwan. She said, “We were fond of each other, but I knew from the beginning that our relationship had to end when his business duties were over in Taiwan, since his wife was waiting for him in France.” Ping’s then-future husband invited her to move to France (using tourist and student visas) to continue their relationship. After one year, just as her visa was about to expire, her lover decided to end his first marriage, marry Ping, and help her gain legal residency. “We may have never married if I never had problems with my visa,” she said. They had a large wedding banquet in Taiwan once the divorce decree was finalized by a French court. In the early days of their marriage, Ping viewed herself as being in an enviable position compared to her female friends and relatives, especially since she had strong and negative memories of her life with her natal family. Ping now says that while she does not regret marriage, the couple have encountered problems since the birth of their daughter: “Although I am not happy in this marriage, it has granted me shelter, a feeling of home, and a lovely daughter.”

Minlee, an ethnic Chinese who grew up in Vietnam with five sisters and two brothers, was 12 years old when her family fled from Vietnam to France in the 1970s. She moved out of her parents’ home in Paris to attend school when she was 14 years old, working part-time to support herself until she finished her vocational education—a very unusual situation for a traditional Asian daughter. She told me that she did not want to marry an Asian man, since “females are inferior to males in Asian families.” Like most of the Asian women interviewed, Minlee said that she did not mind accepting greater responsibility for housework, as her mother had taught her that family must always come first for women. In addition, she told me “I just want to be respected. French men are better, they respect women.” Minlee started living with her partner one week after they met; he was her landlord, and had just ended a relationship with a French woman. Minlee wanted to have a family, but he only agreed to have children if

they remained unmarried, thinking that marriage (and divorce) required too much money, time, and energy in order to properly adhere to government rules. They have lived together for 14 years and have two children.

According to Minlee, her partner is attractive, well-educated, financially secure, and kind: “He initiated this relationship, I didn’t expect to have such a nice man in my life.” Minlee does not pressure her partner to share household tasks, even though she has a full-time job to share living costs. “It’s my choice,” she said. “My partner said from the beginning, I have to take full responsibility if I want to have children.” Minlee wants her partner to smoke less and to spend more leisure time with her and their children. “I will end this relationship if he does not make these changes within eight years, when our youngest child turns eleven.” According to Minlee, at that age, a child is more capable, emotionally, of dealing with a major change such as a divorce or breakup.

Eric fled to France from Vietnam during the Vietnam War, when he was 21 years old. He eventually married a French woman whom he met at school. Eric said it was easier to form a romantic relationship with French women “because they were transparent for me . . . they were easy to understand from their physical expressions.” According to Eric, it is not easy to know the thoughts of Vietnamese women in France; however, he reckons that some can be as open as French women, while others are as conservative as traditional Vietnamese women. He also said that it was very difficult for him to express the “correct” attitude for approaching Vietnamese women, and he believes it would be better to have a French wife to help him adapt to French culture as he does not wish to return to Vietnam. Eric and his wife lived together for nine years before marrying. According to his wife, “We decided to get married so that Eric could legally reside in France, and I don’t regret it at all.”

Although Laura, a 50-year-old Thai, did not set out to marry a Frenchman, she said that as a child she always dreamed about having a foreign husband with a big nose and light skin. As the

oldest child in her family, she felt obligated to work to support her younger siblings. She met her husband, Michael, at a car exhibition in Thailand, though at first, "He didn't pay any attention to me at all." As a young and (briefly) successful French businessman, Michael was constantly accompanied by an attractive Asian or Western woman, hence Laura never pictured herself forming a family with him and living in France ten years later. Laura proposed marriage without telling him that she was pregnant as wanted Michael to marry her for love, not because of the unborn baby, but did not know that Michael's business was on the verge of bankruptcy at the time. When she learned of his financial difficulties, she believed that the failure would be temporary, and that romantic love would make the relationship successful. She sighed, "It must be my fate, I married debt." With considerable help from Laura, Michael was eventually able to pay off his bank loans.

Amy was 30 years of age with two children at the time of our interview. She decided to go abroad for a better life twelve years after graduating from high school in China. France was her preferred destination because she had an uncle who had been living in France for many years who could be of assistance. In order to become a legal resident, Amy had to use a student visa to enter France, even though she had no interest in studying. She believed she could find a decent job after taking some basic language courses, but eventually accepted the fact that to stay in the country she would need to marry a French citizen. Amy describes herself as her husband's "life-saver": "He had been dumped by his Taiwanese girlfriend and was deeply depressed. I rescued him." Amy's husband is an artist with an unstable income, therefore she must work part-time while taking on most of the responsibilities for raising their two children (aged six and four). "I have suggested that he take any job to bring in some more money, or just stay at home to take care of the children. But he insists on being a full-time artist, waiting for offers to come."

Cambo, a Chinese who has lived in France for more than 30

years, said that when she was young, her preference was to marry a Chinese man with the surname “Chen”—the name that her parents had given up during the Southeast Asian War. But she was introduced to a Frenchman who was eager to have an Asian wife. “I didn’t mind marry French, France is the place where I have resided the longest. I have no homeland to identify with anymore.” Cambo spent her childhood in Cambodia, moved to Hong Kong in the 1970s, and spent two years there before resettling in France as a refugee.

Cambo acknowledges the happy times she shared with her husband before the birth of their first child. But their daughter was born with a genetic disorder, and requires intensive care, and she says, “My husband just cannot accept the fact, and blames our daughter for ruining his life.” In order to give her daughter a normal family life with both biological parents, Cambo works a full-time job, takes care of her mother-in-law who lives nearby, does the bulk of housework, and monitors her daughter’s medications and daily routines. “I am willing to make sacrifices for the sake of my daughter. I will never terminate this marriage unless my husband insists.”

## B. Marital Power Relationships in Transnational Marriages

As shown in Table 2, among the nineteen non-ethnic French informants, nine of the women had fewer socio-economic resources than their partners in terms of education or finances, two had greater, and eight were approximately equal. None of the female informants complained about sexual discrimination in their relationships, but those with fewer socio-economic resources than their partners tended to express less marital satisfaction. The small sample size resists any attempt to calculate associations among these factors, but narrative evidence indicates that in addition to socio-economic resources, marriage partners could be empowered by acquiring cultural capital and/or childbearing. For example, most

Table 2 Data for Relative Socio-economic Resources and Marital Satisfaction Among the Participants

ID	Name	Husband's Education	Wife's Education	Husband Main Income Provider?	Marital Satisfaction	Age Difference (years)	Full-Time Job?
2	Minlee	MA	high school	yes	5	10	yes
10	Jennifer	Ph.D.	B.A.	yes	8	-1	no
13	Chao	M.D.	high school	yes	4	15	no
19	Marie	Ph.D.	B.A.	yes	10	7	yes
7	Vivid	high school	high school	yes	8	10	no
6	Amy	M.A.	high school	yes	5	10	no
9	Mei	B.A.	B.A.	yes	10	3	no
17	Biyu	B.A.	B.A.	yes	9	12	no
14	Ping	high school	high school	no	5	-2	yes
4	Annie	high school	high school	no	8	7	yes
11	Steve	incomplete B.A.	B.A.	no	9.5	6	yes
15	Feng	B.A.	B.A.	no	10	4	no
16	Kuo	B.A.	B.A.	no	8	2	no
18	Cambo	high school	high school	no	8	-1	yes
8	Laura	M.A.	high school	no	?	6	yes
12	Nguyen	primary school	Ph.D.	yes	10	29	no
3	Lai	high school	B.A.	yes	7.5	10	no
5	Wanthanee	M.A.	Ph.D.	no	10	6	yes
1	Brigitte	high school	M.A.	no	7	0	yes

Source: Table compiled by the author.

of the foreign spouses interviewed had poor French language skills and lacked familiarity with social norms upon their arrival, and were, therefore, almost entirely reliant on their French spouses to deal with French bureaucracies and introduce them to social networks. Hence, the French partners became “culture brokers” possessing enhanced power. Similarly, some of the foreign spouses I interviewed empowered themselves via their own “cultural capital” in the form of language or knowledge of social norms, especially when their French spouses/partners were studying Asian languages or doing business with Asian firms. In the following sections I will look at how conjugal relationships and marital power in transnational marriages intersect with economic resources and social factors.

#### (A) Husbands Have Considerably More Socio-Economic Resources

The causes of lower marital satisfaction in this group include personality differences, child-raising behaviors, and division of housework. For example, Minlee stated: “I am grateful to have this man to form a family with me, we have two wonderful kids and my father-in-law is kind to me. . . . But I don’t like my partner’s habit of keeping everything inside. He should speak out and share with me his sorrows and worries.” Minlee said she was not afraid of terminating the relationship if her partner continued to maintain an emotional distance. In claiming economic and emotional independence, she said, “I can raise my children by myself because I have a full-time job, and I can find another man if I want to.” Minlee’s partner is a business counselor who works only fourteen hours per week. When he is off work, he is not expected to share in any housework duties. Even when he is home alone, Minlee prepares his lunch before she goes to her own job. He does not expect her to do so, but Minlee believes that he might eat less healthy food if she did not.

Minlee brought fewer socio-economic resources to her relationship. She works full-time and does all of the housework.



She does not complain about the disparity: “There is no need to quarrel about sharing housework, I can easily do it all.” Minlee’s mother taught her that marriage and family are the top concerns for women, and that “taking care of housework is a basic virtue of women.” Her self-empowerment takes the form of creating a sense of dependency in terms of housekeeping, cooking, and childraising. Furthermore, she is ten years younger than her partner, and clearly makes an effort to maintain her attractiveness. Therefore she sees little potential for her partner to leave the relationship.

Biyu told me that she had considered ending her marriage a few years earlier due to her husband’s domineering personality—for instance, severely criticizing her for changing the interior décor of their home without discussing it with him beforehand. As a professional interior designer, Biyu has full confidence on her own aesthetic sensibilities, yet her husband insists that his tastes, inherited from French culture, are superior. Biyu took this as both a personal and cultural insult, and fled to Taiwan. Her husband flew there, apologized, and brought her back to France a few weeks later. “My husband has been spoiled by his Chinese colleagues. He thinks that he is always right, and that French culture is superior to all others.”

When Biyu met her husband, he had been living and working as an expatriate in Taiwan and China for more than ten years. According to Biyu, her husband was used to being flattered by his Chinese employees, and believed that his decisions should never be challenged. Biyu eventually acknowledged that her husband was providing her with a good life in France and that she should avoid serious conflict in order to maintain the quality of their marriage. But she insists on maintaining certain practices with which she was raised. For example, Biyu prefers to wet-mop the floors in her home every day, or at least twice a week. She does not ask her husband to help, but she does insist that he take off his shoes when entering the house. At first he refused, but Biyu waited patiently until he changed his mind. She claims that he eventually admitted: “It is more pleasant to live in a well-kept house.”

Although Biyu's husband has a better-than-average knowledge of Chinese culture and the importance of *guanxi* ("social relationships") in doing business with Chinese, he still regularly consults with Biyu regarding cultural matters. She claims: "As long as my husband is involved in international trade with Asians, my Asian thoughts have value."

Chao, who reported the lowest marital satisfaction in this study, complained that her husband neither helped with housework nor supported her during conflicts with her teenage daughter. She said, "I don't mind taking full responsibility for housework, but my husband should support me in disciplining our daughter." Chao does not like her daughter dating boys at such a young age and expects her to focus more on her studies, yet her husband seems to pay no attention. "My husband spoils our daughter, which makes her disrespect me." Acknowledging the major cultural changes in her life, Chao has decided to return to school to get a bachelor's degree in hopes of achieving greater economic independence. She says, "I cannot count on my children. They are French, they will not maintain filial responsibilities as Asians do." Chao also considers that as her husband is fifteen years older, she needs to plan to support herself independently should he die before her.

Ping was a full-time housewife until her husband was laid off from his job. She had to find a full-time job to support the family, and she expected her husband to look after their daughter. However, she claims that he "neither took care of the housework nor prepared proper meals for our daughter. He even complained that the child had ruined his life." Ping eventually quit her low-paying job and started a small business with the help of her Asian network. The business allows her to work at home and still take care of her daughter. Her husband describes her business success as luck, yet he also expresses pride in his daughter and appreciates the decisions that Ping made on behalf of the family. "When he had a high-paying job in international trade I insisted on purchasing a bigger apartment, both as a more comfortable living

space and as an investment.” The apartment doubled in value, and Ping views it as an important factor in preserving their marriage: “I own half of the apartment, which makes my husband hesitant about ending the marriage.”

A French informant named Paul argued that it is unfair to criticize French husbands as lazy, or as treating their Asian wives as “domestic workers.” He describes his own relationship in terms of labor divisions, and points to the French bureaucracy as a source of many problems. He calls France a “country of paperwork,” in which it takes a great deal of time and energy to deal with government agencies when paying taxes, applying for marriage or other licenses, arranging for the education of children, making simple banking transactions, and so on. Since most of these tasks must be taken care of by a French citizen or by a long-term foreign resident who thoroughly understands the system, new foreign spouses are unable to provide much in the way of practical assistance.

As noted in previous studies, legal residency is one of the most important factors influencing the decisions of foreign spouses to remain in unhappy marriages. None of the foreign-born informants in this study reported feeling that they were suffering in order to maintain their marriage visas. Ping and Lai stated that their worries were reduced by the births of their children. According to Lai, “I was hoping to receive long-term residency and work permits through marriage, but I have earned both because I am the parent of a French citizen.” Ping stated that the birth of her daughter, at one time considered burdensome by her husband, has brought joy into her husband’s life and healed parts of their relationship. Ping and Lai are examples of how children can be a burden or a source of empowerment for marriage migrants.

#### (B) Husbands with Approximately Equal Socio-Economic Resources

Kuo, a Chinese man, complained of feeling inferior in terms of status compared to his French partner, who majored in Chinese

literature at a French university. She lived in China as an exchange student, and the couple decided to establish a long-term partnership and move together to France when her Chinese classes were over. Kuo expressed concern about his partner looking down on him upon their return to France: “She treated me better when we were in China because I took care of everything to support her life and study.” In France, he is much more dependent on her because “my French is poor and I do not understand this society well. She should be more considerate.”

Kuo acknowledges France’s benefits in terms of personal freedom, technology, and material culture, yet he said, “I came here to continue our relationship and to get a master’s degree in fine art. I did not come to beg for citizenship.” Kuo admits to male chauvinism “sometimes,” but he does help out with food preparation and housekeeping. He has concluded that French women are independent, but not good in housekeeping; Chinese women are good at housekeeping, but are not independent. He stated a preference for an independent woman, “But Chinese men should be alerted that French women are not suitable for a male chauvinist.” Kuo is optimistic about their partnership, as “she loves me and I can help her with her Chinese study.”

Feng matches the traditional model of an Asian wife who prefers to stand behind her husband when searching for a brighter future, believing “his success is my success.” A professional gymnast in China, Feng met her husband while he was attending the same school to learn Chinese and martial arts. They practiced kung fu together and became language exchange partners. After four months of dating, they decided to live together and to establish a fitness club to serve local residents and foreign visitors. They could have stayed in China and worked to expand their business, but Feng encouraged her husband to return to France to get a graduate degree in international relations with a specialization in negotiation. Feng argued that her husband should further his education while he was young and childless. Her husband was a full-time postgraduate student in France when interviewed, and she held multiple jobs as a waitress, babysitter, and private exercise

tutor to support their household. She claimed that she did not feel the relationship was unbalanced: "He has to study hard for our future, and I work hard for our current life. In addition, I can send part of my income to my natal family back in China." Feng is optimistic about their future, since she believes that she will eventually use her Chinese cultural capital to help her husband find a job in foreign affairs or with a transnational company.

### (C) Husbands Have Fewer Socio-Economic Resources

Neither of the two female informants with higher socio-economic statuses than their husbands expressed major complaints about their marriages. Wanthanee, who worked in Thailand as a chemist, came from a middle class family. She met her husband at the wedding of her sister, who married a Frenchman in 1989. She continued her postgraduate study in France after she got married in 1990. "I did most of the housework even though I kept a full-time job," she said. "I had no complaints about that. As a foreign wife, I have to be tough and independent." Wanthanee said that her husband is a good communicator, and that they share thoughts with each other as good friends. "We both appreciate each other's cultures, and we expect our daughter to combine the beauty of French and Thai values in her life."

Brigitte, who met her husband in Taiwan, started her family in France ten years ago. She said, "I am always running out of time because I have a full-time job and have to take care of house chores." Brigitte admitted that she feels significant stress, but she accepts her decision to work at a full-time job while her son is still young. She encourages other foreign wives to learn French and to try their best to find outside employment because the best way to maintain power balances in cross-cultural marriages is to resist isolation and marginalization. She believes that foreign wives need to master the local language and social norms in order to establish their own social networks, and that the stronger those networks, the greater social protection they will enjoy . . . support that can be translated into increased bargaining power with their partners.

### C. Compromising or Resisting Cultural Gaps

Almost all of the foreign-born informants stated that their French spouses/partners were very proud of French cultural norms and preferred them as guides to the activities of daily life. Those same informants were almost universal in describing French citizens as individualistic, self-centered, and addicted to recreation and holidays. As an office worker in Asia, Lai used to window-shop after work and eat a light supper. But her partner, Richard, is very critical of such activities. He considers shopping without any specific purpose a waste of time, energy, and money, and thinks that Chinese do not know how to eat: "They eat quickly, with no specific order." Richard believes that a proper meal should go slowly, with an appetizer followed by salad/soup, the main course, dessert and/or cheese and coffee. According to Richard, it is not right to eat steak and salad at the same time. To maintain peace, Lai says that she tries to avoid conflicts about daily routines, including French eating customs.

Ping claims that she has set aside parts of her cultural upbringing in order to maintain peace in her family. "My husband refused to have dinner with me at 6:30 p.m. when we were on vacation at an exclusive recreation club. He argued that decent French don't have dinner before 8:00, even though I was starving." Coming from a working class Taiwanese family, Ping had to work part-time to support her college education: "I fully understand the importance of saving, and I am cautious about the risks of investments." Ping encouraged her husband to work hard and spend less in the interest of future security, but his preference was for buying expensive cars, clothes, gourmet food, and vacations rather than put money into savings or investments. However, he lost his high-paying job in the early 2000s, and lost a great deal of value in his investments in the ensuing years. Ping proudly told me, "Now my Asian values are gaining more respect."

Another interesting cultural difference concerns tableware and personal cleaning habits. Amy complained that she has to clean lots

of tableware when entertaining French guests. She said it seems that Chinese only have one mouth, but French have at least three. When a Chinese meal is served, each guest is given one bowl, one pair of chopsticks, one spoon, and one cup for tea. When a French meal is served, each guest has at least three glasses and cups (for water, different wines, and coffee or tea) and two or three sets of forks, knives, and spoons. Amy used to follow the French custom and clean all of the dishes afterwards, but now refuses: "I do it my own French way" (i.e., one set of utensils for all foods, and one glass for different kinds of wine).

All of the Asian female informants agreed that French males take the time to bathe and prepare themselves for social occasions, but are not likely to shower or bathe on a daily basis due to the relative dryness and cool temperatures found in France. In contrast, many Asians are raised in hot and humid climates, and are accustomed to bathing before going to bed. Laura agreed that bathing habits are associated with weather conditions, yet she insists that it is always healthier to bathe before sleeping. Hence, she declared, "No one can get in my bed without a clean body." Laura noticed that young people prefer morning showers, and she does not object when family members bathe in the evening and morning. In contrast, Wanthanee changed her bathing habits after moving to France: "I used to take showers both in the morning and evening when I was in Thailand, but now I wash my face and feet before going to bed, and take a morning shower to help me wake up." According to Wanthanee, her husband did not take a shower or bath on a daily basis before they got married: "He changed, and now takes a shower in the morning as well, but my daughter takes showers twice a day."

Lai finds it hard to convince her partner to bathe at night, but she also admits that he does not have a strong body odor, and therefore it does not bother her if her partner does not take a bath or shower before going to bed. In addition, she says, "I go to sleep easily. As long as it does not wake me up, I can live with it."

Jennifer describes herself as having "half-surrendered." Her

husband used to take her advice and make himself “clean and comfortable before going to bed.” However, sometimes he just “forgets to do it” or is “too tired to do it.” Jennifer does not want to quarrel about this issue, and therefore accepts it, “as long as he takes his shoes off and cleans his feet.” Jennifer’s husband says that he prefers taking a shower in the morning because it makes it much easier to shave afterwards.

#### D. Mixing French and Asian Values in Daily Routines

Although most of the Asian informants stated a belief that the French are self-centered and indifferent, they also expressed relief over being free of the restrictive social bonds associated with personal relationships in Asian cultures. They all agreed that they enjoy more freedom and greater privacy in French society—in Wanthanee’s words, “It’s so good to be in France, I can wear anything I like.” She observed that in Asia, women have long been required to dress according to standards associated with socio-economic status and age, but in France there is much more room for what is considered “proper.” It is notable that all of the Asian wives interviewed had adopted French clothing and makeup practices—for instance, eye mascara and blouses with lower necklines—and were not worried about having their skin tanned from walking in the sun.

All of the Asian female informants also expressed happiness about not having to deal with in-laws on a regular basis. Four of the nineteen non-ethnic French informants I interviewed felt that they were not accepted by their in-laws due to their ethnic backgrounds, but as French parents do not have much control over their children’s marital decisions, these negative attitudes did not affect their marriages. According to French social norms, married adult children are not obligated to live with elderly parents, and are not expected to show filial obedience or to provide financial assistance. One Asian female informant stated outright, “It is good to be a French wife. I don’t need to please my parents-in-law, as



most daughters-in-law have to do in Asian societies. I don't need to call them 'father' and 'mother,' either." Calling parents-in-law by their given names apparently reduces generational distance, thus establishing feelings of equality between Asian women and their in-laws. One French informant asserted that calling seniors by their given names suggests intimacy, but does not necessarily imply freedom from obligations. He said that instead of calling him "Papi," his little grandson calls him "Mipi," which is a combination of his given name, Michael, and Papi. Most of the Asian women I spoke with do not prohibit their children from calling their French grandparents or aunts and uncles by their given names, but they do insist that their children use traditional titles with their Asian grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

An informant named Eric suggested that to make an interracial marriage work, the couple must be free from value conflicts derived from religion and traditional cultural practices, which he believes are bases for most social norms. Among the nineteen non-ethnic French informants in this study, only three described themselves as Buddhists. Most of the French spouses/partners grew up in Catholic families, but none of them are currently active in any church activities. This explains why the transnational couples did not complain about conflicts due to religious beliefs.

Eric and his wife are not religious, and their respective parents—the primary transmitters of traditional values—died when they were young. "We are free of the bonds of religion and tradition. Our life is a combination of French and Vietnamese cultures." Eric and his French wife eat Asian rice and drink French wine. Their tableware includes rice bowls, chopsticks, forks, and multiple wine glasses. Eric has adapted to French culture, and his wife has made concessions to Vietnamese culture.

## V. Conclusion and Discussion

A snowball approach was used to locate twenty-four

individuals in Asian-French transnational marriages or long-term cohabiting relationships in France. These individuals were interviewed to collect information on family life and conjugal power relationships. All informants had met their spouses/partners through personal networks or chance encounters. Some of the female informants stated that their French spouses/partners were interested in Asian women because they viewed them as loyal, thrifty, hardworking, and less materialistic than French women. None of the female informants complained about sexual discrimination in their relationships; one claimed that she preferred a French partner due to her expectations of marital equality.

Among the nineteen non-ethnic French informants, ten had equal or greater social and economic resources than their French partners, and nine had fewer resources. Informants of lower socio-economic status scored lower with regards to marital satisfaction. The main causes of marital dissatisfaction were identified as personality differences, childraising behaviors, and housework labor divisions. All of the informants agreed that full-time housewives should accept greater responsibility for housework, but several expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time their spouses/partners gave to family matters. It was found that having more social and economic resources did not prevent some of the female informants from performing the large majority of housework and/or childraising tasks. Also, gender ideology and mutual dependence played important roles in mediating the perceptions of fairness and the continuation of the relationship. Some of partners cited examples of using cultural capital and/or childbirth to empower themselves.

Almost all of the non-ethnic French informants stated that their French spouses/partners were very proud of French culture, and preferred it for most daily life activities. However, most of the foreign spouses/partners were capable of mixing cultural values so as to prevent major conflicts in daily routines. Observations have shown that interracial couples must overcome value conflicts

derived from religious and cultural traditions in order to make their marriages work, but no significant value gaps were mentioned in terms of religion, since the large majority of informants were not seriously involved in religious activities. Potential value gaps based on traditional social norms were minimized because none of the informants co-resided with their elderly parents or in-laws.

According to the data, conjugal power relationships among transnational couples cannot be explained solely according to relative socio-economic resources, gender role ideology, or mutual dependence. Instead, they need to be analyzed in a broader context that includes age, legal residency, and support from natal families or other social networks. Most of the informants in this study formed their long-term relationships due to mutual attraction. Some stated a willingness to terminate their relationships if they could achieve financial independence, win long-term legal residency, or if their children were mature enough to cope with family separation. This implies that the conjugal relationships in this study are sustained by the principle of least interest—that is, the person who has the least interest in a relationship has the greatest power (Sprecher, Schmeekle, & Felmlee, 2006; Waller & Hill, 1951). Future researchers of conjugal power relationships should look at both objective socio-economic resources and subjective perceptions regarding romantic involvement, gender role ideology, and perceived fairness.

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## 跨國婚姻中的權力關係與家庭生活： 以法國的亞-法婚配伴侶為例

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### 摘 要

本文引用深度訪談資料，分析居住在法國的亞裔與法裔婚配(或同居伴侶)的家庭生活與婚姻權力關係。所有的受訪者均是透過學校、工作或其他個人社交網絡而認識對方，也都認為這樣的夫妻／伴侶關係提供了家的溫暖與歸屬感。除了社會與經濟資源以外，部分受訪者利用自己原生國的文化資產與子女作為夫妻關係中的賦權工具。絕大多數的受訪者均滿意於目前的關係，但有部分受訪者認為如果自己可以經濟獨立、取得在法國的合法居留權，或者子女身心成熟到可以接受父母離異所帶來的生活改變，他們也願意終止目前的婚配或同居關係。訪談資料顯示，維繫這段跨國婚配或同居關係的主要關鍵，在於日積月累共同生活中所衍生出之錯綜複雜的共生與相互依存關係。絕大多數的亞裔受訪者滿意於能將亞洲文化與法國文化共融於日常生活中，雖然難免有價值觀點歧異之處，但是導因於宗教信仰或傳統價值觀的嚴重衝突，並未在他們的關係中出現。

**關鍵詞：**跨國婚姻、婚姻關係、亞-法婚配