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To cite this article: Isabelle Cheng (2021): Motherhood, empowerment and contestation: the act of citizenship of vietnamese immigrant activists in the realm of the new southbound policy, Citizenship Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2021.1968688](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968688)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1968688>



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Published online: 25 Aug 2021.



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# Motherhood, empowerment and contestation: the act of citizenship of vietnamese immigrant activists in the realm of the new southbound policy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how immigrant activists interact with the host state in socio-political spheres where they exercise their citizenship. Located in Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP), this paper adopts the concept of 'act of citizenship' to analyse Vietnamese activists' interactions with the NSP. This paper finds that the NSP appropriated immigrant women's motherhood and family relationships in order to boost tourism and facilitate Southeast Asian language acquisition in the short term and to enhance Taiwan's relationship with Southeast Asia in the long run. In response, immigrant activists utilised the NSP to build their own capacity and to realise their acts of empowerment, compassion and contestation in the family and public domains. They not only improved individuals' wellbeing but also made the Taiwanese state accountable for gender bias and inequality. These findings offer a much needed gender perspective into immigrant activists' dialectical relationship with the migration state of Taiwan.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Manuscript first submitted: 4 July 2020  
Final acceptance: 20 June 2021

## KEYWORDS

Act of citizenship; marriage immigrant women; motherhood; empowerment; new southbound policy

## Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, Taiwan has featured as a major destination in East Asia for Southeast Asian women seeking marriage with local citizens. When their number rose rapidly in the early 2000s, there were concerns that they would pose challenges to Taiwan's ethnic composition, as indicated by the National Security Report (National Security Council (NSC) 2006, 61-62). More than a decade later, with the launch of the New Southbound Policy (NSP) in August 2016, the women's relationship with the Taiwanese state was reframed. They are now not only encouraged to maintain close contact with their natal families in Southeast Asia but are also imagined as being able to pass down their cultural and linguistic heritage to their mixed children in Taiwan. Thus, instead of being dismissed as 'private', 'domestic', 'local', or 'trivial' (Enloe 2014, 3), relationships amongst the women, their natal families and their mixed children, particularly mother-child intimacy as experienced through language and cultures, become political economic assets to be exploited by the Taiwanese state. If migration policy is

a sphere in which the structure of gender, ethnicity and class is institutionalised, then the NSP renders itself a fluid socio-political sphere where immigrant women's everyday practices are positively viewed by the state for their potential political utility.

Answering Piper's call to explore immigrant women's citizenship through their struggle in socio-political spheres (2008, 251), this paper explores how Southeast Asian women exercise their citizenship in the dynamic socio-political sphere constructed by the NSP. In the early 2000s, when the stigmatisation of marriage migration reached a new height, as reflected by the low public support for granting immigrant spouses citizenship (Chen and Yu 2005), immigrant activists participated in the campaign led by local activists to end the denunciation of immigrant women and reform the exclusionary citizenship legislation (Hsia 2009). More than a decade later, with most immigrant women who arrived in Taiwan in the early 2000s having acquired citizenship, the NSP's reframing opportunely facilitates a socio-political sphere in which immigrant activists may exercise their citizenship. Thus, this paper raises two questions. First, how does a host state appropriate immigrants' family – and particularly mother–child – relationships to implement its public policy? Second, how do immigrant activists interact with the state and enable the acts of empowerment, compassion and contestation? As the Taiwan–Vietnam relationship has grown considerably in three decades and Vietnamese women have become a major presence in the Southeast Asian community, this paper utilises the experiences of Vietnamese activists as a case study.

This paper presents rich findings to answer these two significant questions. For the first question, this paper shows that the NSP instrumentalises Southeast Asian women's roles as transnational daughter and mother. Specifically, by sponsoring children to visit their mothers' hometowns, the NSP seeks to use their family ties and motherhood to contribute, in the long run, to enhancing the relationship between Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Capitalising on immigrant women's cultural and linguistic heritage, the NSP uses these resources to raise Southeast Asian language proficiency in Taiwan and boost tourism from Southeast Asia. To answer the second question, this paper regards the activists' interactions with the NSP as their 'act of citizenship' (Isin 2007, 2009, 2017), a concept that conceptualises the exercise of citizenship as a dynamic enactment of citizenship in socio-political struggles wherein an immigrant becomes a rights claimant *in relation to* other actors. In this vein, this paper finds that Vietnamese activists utilised the NSP's funding and the legitimacy derived from its endorsement of Southeast Asian cultures to support the empowerment of and compassion for immigrant spouses, mixed children and migrant workers. In doing so, the private family domain became one of the sites of their act of citizenship. Beyond helping individuals in need on a personal scale, they not only contested the NSP's blindness to gender bias throughout the family domain and the labour market but also its lack of due diligence over migrant workers' rights. By examining their empowerment, compassion and contestation, this paper offers a critical and relational understanding of citizenship from a much needed gender perspective.

### Marriage migration, gender and 'act of citizenship'

Marriage migration in East Asia is not only *feminised* because women outnumber men as migrant spouses, but the phenomenon is also *gendered* (Hugo 2005; Jones and Shen 2008; Bélanger and Linh 2011; Kim 2012). In particular, immigrant women's citizenship is

gendered on many fronts, as revealed in the growing scholarship on the relationship between women's socio-biological reproduction and the host state's nation-building. Their foreignness is either the target of assimilation or the marker that contrasts the state's multicultural credibility (Bélanger 2007; Sheu 2007; Wang and Bélanger 2008; Kim 2009, 2013; Cheng 2013; Lan 2019). When citizenship stands for a group of rights that enables women to exercise agency, the notion of 'political motherhood' (Schirmer 1993; Werbner 1999) sheds light on the effect of women's caring, compassion and responsibility in the political domain. 'Political motherhood' becomes a *practice* undertaken by Indonesian mothers who assert their mixed children's right to inherit Indonesian nationality (Winarnita 2008), by foreign mothers in Malaysia who demand their right to citizenship in view of their parenting duties and thus contribution to Malaysian families (Chin 2017), and by immigrant women in Taiwan who vote and engage in community work in order to ensure their children's future (Cheng 2017). Scholarship on the effect of citizenship in facilitating integration has also given attention to immigrant women's participation in civil organisations, advocacy work and in rights-claim movements aimed at changing public discourse or reforming migration legislation (Lee 2003; Kim and Shin 2018; Choo 2016, 2017; Tsai and Hsiao 2006; Hsia 2009; Lin, J. H. Lin 2018a; Chang 2020). These studies also caution that when offering counselling or implementing integration programmes, service-providing organisations may deepen the internalisation of gender values amongst immigrant participants (Choo 2017; Lin 2018b; Chang 2020). Yet, such literature also points up the fact that immigrant women may become their own agents in negotiating the host state's gendering schemes (Kim and Shin 2018).

This reservoir of research on marriage migration linking gender and citizenship prompts us to explore how citizenship is experienced by women in the roles of daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law at different levels: at the micro level through their daily experiences; at the community level with regard to their integration; and at the state level as part of a nation-building project. The convergence between their private family relationship and their public participation suggests that their exercise of citizenship is *relational* to their roles as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law and citizens vis-à-vis their in-laws and the host state.

To understand how immigrant women position themselves in relation to both the public and private spheres, this paper adopts the concept of 'act of citizenship' advocated by Isin (2007, 2009, 2017). In order to reposition the study of citizenship away from the dichotomy that regards citizenship as either status or habitus (Isin 2007, 16) (or status and practice, as in Isin 2009, 369), Isin proposes the concept of 'act of citizenship' to meet the growing interest in understanding citizenship. globalisation, colonialism, nationalism and the welfare state slot the subjects of citizenship into the silos of insiders (citizens), strangers (women and blacks who are seen as lacking capacity), outsiders (migrants and refugees who are disposable or deportable) and aliens (terrorists or enemy combatants who are rejected for citizenship). These silos are created by the state's measurement of their permissibility for citizenship (Isin 2007, 16, 2017, 503–505); that measurement results in the formation of a web of rights and responsibilities that are conferred on them or withdrawn from them (Isin 2007, 15). However, maintaining these silos presupposes the existence of citizenship as a fixed entity. Failing to view citizenship beyond the silos overlooks not only the subjects' challenge to the rights and responsibilities assigned to

them by the state, but also their socio-political struggles that contest the thoughts and conduct habitually associated with citizenship (Isin 2017, 501–502). If viewed through their contestation of who is eligible for what kind of rights, we will not only see how the subjects of citizenship exercise their rights, but, more importantly, how, *across* the silos, different subjects make claims to these rights. Therefore, as urged by Isin, our focus should be on those ‘acts through which subjects transform themselves into citizens’ (Isin 2007, 18), whereby they define their relation to each other. That is, through these acts, they may offer solidarity with, or condone antagonism towards or alienation of, people in different silos. When focusing on their acts, Isin argues that it is necessary to also probe the ‘site’ (the fields where the contestation takes place and issues, interests and stakes congregate) and ‘scale’ (the scope appropriate to the contestation) whereby their acts may ‘creatively transform’ the meanings and functions of citizenship (Isin 2017, 501).

For this paper, applying ‘act of citizenship’ as proposed above will yield a fruitful investigation of immigrant activists’ exercise of citizenship in the realm of the NSP. This investigation will elucidate what they *do* with their citizenship (their acts) in different ‘sites’, such as family, civil organisations, or elsewhere, as emerging from their interactions with the NSP. Focusing on their struggles will show how they conduct their acts of empowerment, compassion and contestation in their different roles *along their life course* (daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, worker, citizens), across silos (immigrant spouses, migrant workers) and on different scales (individual, community, societal, state). It will highlight how they make claims to their rights and the rights denied to migrant workers. In all, this investigation will generate a dynamic and relational understanding of their exercise of citizenship.

## Research methods

Using government briefs released between 2016 and 2017, this paper demonstrates how the NSP promoted ‘people-centred’ interactions between Taiwan and Southeast Asia in the realms of mixed children’s ‘root-seeking’, language acquisition and tourism. These materials are published by the Executive Yuan, the Legislative Yuan, the Control Yuan, the Office of Trade Negotiation (OTN), the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Transport and Communication (MoTC).

In order to investigate how immigrant activists interacted with the NSP from the bottom up, this study draws on interviews with five Vietnamese activists between April 2017 and July 2020. These activists are Trinh Minh Ha, Ly Van Trang, Ngô Xuân Phương, Nguyễn Thị Minh Thu and Hồ Minh Mai. I also include my interview with Phạm Thanh Van in 2009 for her experience as an interpreter employed by a service-providing civil organisation founded and staffed by local Taiwanese. I refer to them by Vietnamese pseudonyms not only to conceal their identity but more out of respect for their in-between identity that belongs to both Vietnam and Taiwan. Some contextual information is concealed to further protect their identity.

I have maintained a long standing relationship with them through in-person meetings, texting and emailing in spoken and written Chinese since 2009. During our long association, I observed how they exercised their agency and overcame structural constraints of hardship and stigmatisation. Fluent in Mandarin, and having acquired a public role, they became immigrant leaders in their respective localities, whilst remaining true to

their identities as daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. This gender identity forms the basis of their public acts, whereas motherhood is their guiding morality. Humbled by their struggles and knowing the emotive power of their experiences to inspire others, this paper uses their experiences as a case study, which is grounded on the commonality between them and other Vietnamese activists as well as on their niche development trajectories. As detailed in the following pages, one commonality is their *rite of passage* from being young wives/mothers to becoming experienced activists, equipped with civic skills, Chinese language proficiency and social capital. Reflecting their networking and vision, their unique trajectories demonstrate how they utilised resources derived from the NSP for their acts to both empower and care for immigrant spouses, mixed children and migrant workers.

### **Stereotyping Southeast Asian women and their children**

When the NSP was announced in August 2016, a total of 140,941 women from Southeast Asia resided in Taiwan with the status of local citizen's spouses. Constituting more than 93% of the population of all foreign wives residing in Taiwan, they included 94,477 Vietnamese, 28,338 Indonesian, 7,992 Filipino, 5,852 Thai, and 4,282 Cambodian (National Immigration Agency (NIA) 2016). Up to 2015, there were a total of 112,729 children born to foreign-born mothers (Department of Household Registration n.d.), the great majority of whom were Southeast Asian women, with the Vietnamese being the largest group, as shown above.

Public discourse surrounding marriage migration from Southeast Asia to Taiwan was typified by the stigmatisation of migrant women and their children. Stereotyped as 'Foreign Brides' who barter marriage via commercial matchmaking for escape from poverty (Wang and Chang 2002; Wang 2007, 715–716; cf. Tseng 2015), they were seen as young and rural virgins who not only lacked education but also embodied 'backwardness' because of the lower level of development of Southeast Asia (Wang 2010). They were perceived as victims suffering human trafficking or domestic abuse (Hsia 2007; Sheu 2007; Tseng 2014; cf. Wang 2007; Tang and Wang 2011). Their children were alleged to be slow or late in their development (Keng 2016). Indicating that Southeast Asian women were not 'high quality' population Taiwan needed, the security apparatus cautioned against them and their children as posing 'challenges to Taiwan's economy, society, culture and politics' (National Security Council (NSC) 2006, 61), on top of the presumption of their incompetent motherhood and their children's poor academic performance (Chin and Yu 2009). Considered a remedy to such deficiency, Chinese language proficiency was added in 2005 to the prerequisites for naturalisation. Although this requirement applies to the naturalisation of all foreign nationals, it is particularly aimed at assimilating Southeast Asian women for nation-building (Wang and Bélanger 2008; Cheng 2013; Lan 2019). Assimilation is thought to be particularly important in the private family domain, where the speaking of Southeast Asian languages is discouraged, if not completely forbidden, by Taiwanese husbands or parents-in-law (Cheng 2021a). Public discourses surrounding 'New Children of Taiwan' (Yang 2004), a label given to their children, prioritised the children's patrilineal bond with Taiwan over their matrilineal link with Southeast Asia. As such, their children were expected to identify themselves as being rooted in Taiwan and to discard their maternal ties with Southeast Asia

(Liao and Wang 2013). As a result of protests led by the immigrants' movement, the derogatory label of 'Foreign Brides', which was at the centre of the disparaging discourse outlined above, was replaced with 'New Residents' in references to immigrant women by the media and in government pronouncements (Hsia 2009). Nevertheless, as illustrated by interviewed activists, this sort of stereotyping has lingered on in their everyday lives. Against this backdrop, as explained below, the NSP and its policy briefs have brought about a new discourse *in parallel with* this lingering stereotype.

### The New Southbound Policy: 'people-centred' interactions

Announced on 16 August 2016, the NSP aims to forge 'strategic partnerships' with 16 countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia, Australia and New Zealand, partly in the hope to ride on the tide of the US's promotion of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Ocean' region (Hsiao and Borsoi-Kelly 2019). Attempting to make Taiwan a global actor of regional significance, in 2017 the NSP tasked the government to collaborate with the private sector in order to contribute to agricultural development, medical and public health, industrial talent development, green energy and innovation in information and communication industry, and smart machinery for the region (Office of Trade Negotiations (OTN) 2017). Amongst the NSP's target countries, Vietnam has become a focal point. In 1993, prior to the NSP's implementation, Vietnam was the most popular destination of Taiwanese investment in Southeast Asia (Chen 1996) and, during the 2010s, was frequently mentioned in the media for its rapid economic growth (e.g. Commonwealth 2016; Global Vision 2016). After the NSP's launch, in 2017, 383,329 Vietnamese visitors entered Taiwan, an increase of 94.9% compared to the previous year (New Taipei City Government (NTCG), n.d.; News 2021). In 2018, with 12,983 students in Taiwan, Vietnam became the third largest source country of overseas students (National Development Council (NDC) n.d.). Up to 2019, Taiwanese investment in Vietnam was more than US \$32 billion, making Vietnam the largest recipient of Taiwanese investment in Southeast Asia (Bureau of Foreign Trade (BoFT) n.d.). Between 2017 and 2019, the bilateral trade generated the second largest surplus for Taiwan of all its Southeast Asian partners (BoFT n.d.).

Aspiring to enhance 'people-centred' interactions with the target countries, the NSP's ambitions extend beyond the economic arena. Criticising Taiwan's earlier attempts in the 1990s for narrowly focusing on profitability, the president vowed in her election manifesto to enhance 'people-centred' interactions between Taiwan and Southeast Asia (President Tsai Ing-wen Facebook, 6 December 2015). Soon after the President's inauguration in May 2016 and the NSP's initiation in August, the government announced in September the NSP Action Plan, which encouraged mixed children to become 'Southbound Seeds' and endorsed affirmative action to enable those mixed children who prove to have Southeast Asian language capability to go to university (Executive Yuan (EY) 2016). Related to this recognition of the importance of Southeast Asian languages, in December 2016 the MoE announced that, from the academic year of 2018 onwards, Southeast Asian languages were to be offered as a core subject in primary education and an optional subject in secondary education (Ministry of Education (MoE) 2016). In January 2017, under the heading of 'Natal Home Diplomacy' (*niangjia waijiao*), the MoE's Action Plan described the mixed children as 'Southbound Vanguard' and encouraged them to 'return home and seek their

roots'. To materialise their 'root-seeking', the MoE now finances short stays of primary and secondary school pupils in their mothers' hometown, expecting them to 'increase [Taiwan's] friendly social capital' in its relationships with Southeast Asian countries (Ministry of Education (MoE) 2017, 14, 21).

To increase 'people-centred' interactions, in October 2017 the OTN announced its promotion of tourism from Southeast Asia and education of Southeast Asian students for tertiary degrees or vocational skills (Office of Trade Negotiations (OTN) 2017). The acquisition of Southeast Asian languages was seen by the OTN as critical for encouraging cultural appreciation and attracting Southeast Asian students to Taiwan (Office of Trade Negotiations (OTN) 2017, 9). The OTN's vision was in tandem with the NSP's pledges that it would assist immigrant women to use their 'cultural and linguistic advantages' to obtain employment in tourism and teaching languages (Executive Yuan (EY) 2016). To boost tourism from the NSP's target countries, in July 2016 the government announced a visa waiver for Southeast Asian tourists, with those from Thailand, Brunei and the Philippines prioritised for the trial of this programme (Control Yuan (CY) 2017). This focus on promoting tourism from Southeast Asia prompted legislators' criticism in February 2017 over the very small number of licenced tour guides speaking Southeast Asian languages (respectively, 27, 47 and 18 guides able to speak Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese) (Legislative Yuan (LY) 2017, 1092). In response, in March, the MoTC reported that immigrant women could be trained to become tour guides (Legislative Yuan (LY) 2017, 1094–1095).

Southeast Asian mothers and their children are not only included in the NSP Action Plan but characterised as an asset. The old label 'New Children of Taiwan' given to mixed children has been discarded and their matrilineal ties with Southeast Asia are now highlighted. Valuing the women's natal family as 'home' and 'root', the NSP invests in maintaining the link between the women and their home via financing the children's visits. Dropping the stereotype of the women's perceived poor education, the NSP foresees the possibility of training them to become tour guides. Instead of dismissing them as a liability for Taiwan's competitiveness, the NSP reimagines the women as a pool of linguistic resources. Overlooking the fact that the women were restricted from speaking their own languages to their children in public and in private, it presumes the children to have linguistic advantages. In sum, the NSP instrumentalises the women's relationships with their natal families and children in order to realise its 'people-centred' aspiration (see Hsia in this special issue for how the NSP rescripted the women and their children from being 'social problems' to 'social assets').

Having explained the re-scripting of the NSP as 'people-centred' aspiration, this paper now turns to focus on how the five interviewed activists enacted their citizenship in their interactions with the NSP.

## **Vietnamese activists' act of citizenship**

### ***Capacity-building***

In enacting citizenship through participation in civil organisations, immigrants draw on civic skills, language proficiency and social capital to build capacity (Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante, and Steffy 2000; Yang, Lee, and Torneo 2012). Seeing capacity building as

a strategic goal, Trinh Minh Ha's organisation utilised the NSP's funding and employed Vietnamese, Thai, and Indonesian staff. The goal, as explained by its Taiwanese head, was to equip the immigrant staff with civic skills, including drafting funding proposals, delivering projects, managing public speaking, bookkeeping and completing project reports (interview, 14 April 2017). Building capacity in these skills is critical, since drafting funding proposals is identified as a major challenge for immigrant activists who undertook leadership training (Han 2021).

Trinh Minh Ha is one of the trainees who demonstrated the benefits of acquiring these skills. Her experiences have to be juxtaposed with those of the women in other 'capacity-deficit' organisations. It is argued that Taiwanese-staffed, service-providing organisations are liable to run the risk of reinforcing immigrant women's gender stereotype in the name of their integration (Lin 2018b). This was acutely pointed out by Phạm Thanh Van in 2009, after she left such an organisation where she worked as an interpreter. Based on her own observations, she criticised these organisations because they 'described us as miserable victims and used this image for their funding applications. We're not stupid or incapable, it's just that we didn't understand *how it works*' (interview, 15 April 2009, emphasis added). Knowing 'how it works', Ha was able to exercise her citizenship on personal and community scales, as explained in the following pages.

The utility of capacity building is further demonstrated by Ly Van Trang and the Vietnamese culture workshop that she runs. Trang was a primary school dropout in Vietnam and obtained Chinese proficiency by attending language courses in Taiwan. The NSP's positive publicity about Southeast Asian cultures fed an expanding appetite for multicultural events, a demand she was able to meet, thanks to her accomplishments in the cultural industry, her organisational skills, and her network of contacts with Taiwanese activists and civil servants. The premises of her workshop function as a friendly social space for Vietnamese spouses and workers in her neighbourhood to meet. Her evident capability saw her assisting universities to deliver the latter's 'social responsibility' projects, aimed at helping migrant communities. She also advised businesses on providing Chinese-language training for their migrant workers, since lacking Chinese proficiency deepens migrant workers' vulnerability vis-à-vis their brokers, employers and the Taiwanese state.

In short, civil organisations and public engagement became a site in which immigrant activists exercised their citizenship. An illustrative example is a public seminar convened by a Vietnamese activist in August 2019. At this event, invited Taiwanese activists and officials gave brief opening remarks to the audience of immigrant women and their families. Both Trang and Hồ Minh Mai, a Vietnamese language teacher, were invited to give featured talks. Trang condemned the Taiwanese government's indifference towards the inhumanity suffered by migrant workers at the hands of brokers and employers. Mai defended the right of immigrant mothers and their children to speak the mother's language and updated her audience on the rollout of the teaching of Southeast Asian languages at different levels of education. The presence of Trang and Mai made visible their networking within and beyond the migrant community. Their advocacy for the rights of immigrant spouses and migrant workers underlined their capacity in public education and agenda-setting, integral to their socio-political struggles.

### *Motherhood motivation and empowerment*

As mentioned above, the NSP promoted the acquisition of Southeast Asian language proficiency in Taiwan. This provided HỒ Minh Mai with critical resources for strengthening the self-esteem of mixed children. That is, although she was a university teacher, she offered to teach at her daughter's primary school, since commanding respect as a teacher in front of all pupils protected not only her daughter but also other mixed children at the same school from the discrimination experienced by mixed children (interview, 11 December 2017). In so doing, the school became a site of her motherhood-instantiated act in which she contested the stigmatisation of immigrant women as incompetent mothers. However, she also cautioned that the number of teaching hours was small hence it might not be a reliable source of income for immigrant women.

As discussed above, the mother-child relationship is at the centre of the NSP's re-scripted discourse. In response, the interviewed activists made this relationship a site of citizenship in which they transformed their motherhood from a private intimacy to an act of compassion for other women and their children. Critically, Mai reminded that 'grannies and granddads (parents-in-law) don't read those glossy business magazines [which reported the reframing of the women and their children]' (interview, 15 April 2017). This saw Ha organised immigrant mothers to read books to children at school and in the library. She also designed activities encouraging Taiwanese in-laws' appreciation of Southeast Asian cultures. Aiming to raise the sense of worth of the mothers and their children, Ha's outreach reduced their isolation and included them in the migrant community, whilst she offered herself not only as a trustworthy contact but also as a reputable role model for the women. In this way, the NSP's instrumentalisation of the mother-child relationship was proactively utilised by Ha to enact her care and empowerment as part of her exercise of citizenship at home, at school or in the community.

On the other hand, maintaining the relationship amongst immigrant women, their natal family and their mixed children is branded as 'Natal Home Diplomacy' by the NSP. The mechanism of this 'diplomacy' is to finance the children's visits to their mothers' hometowns. The announcement of such funding was a highlight at the aforementioned public seminar. Two primary school children and their mothers thanked the Vietnamese host and her organisation for helping them win the grant. To showcase the children's knowledge of Vietnamese culture acquired during their stay in Vietnam, one of the children recited *in Vietnamese* the 'five things Ho Chi Minh taught (Vietnamese) children': 'love your country, love your comrade, learn well, take really good care of your sanitation, and be modest, honest and brave'. This recital received enthusiastic applause from Vietnamese mothers, arguably, for its evocation of their childhood memories, whereas the two children were praised for their academic capability. Whether and how the child's familiarity with the content of Vietnam's civic education given to primary school pupils contributed to Taiwan's 'Natal Home Diplomacy' seemed to be side-lined, since neither the convenor nor the two invited activists commented on this 'diplomacy'. Therefore, although the interviewed activists engaged with the NSP's reframing of their motherhood in their acts of empowerment and compassion, they appeared evasive about the NSP's politicisation of their transnational family ties.

Beyond the NSP's instrumentalisation, Trang saw the publicity surrounding the children's potential as an opportunity to build capacity of mixed children. She recruited mixed children as volunteers helping at multicultural events organised by her. Her goal was to nurture the children's sense of mission, capability and skills (see Camino and Zeldin 2002 for the youth's civic engagement). She explained that '[my daughter] didn't like my absence from home, but I told her what we do is *meaningful*' (interview, 17 April 2017, emphasis added). Her only daughter (a university student) has joined her campaign to help migrant workers and, in the summer of 2020, another mixed child began to participate in their work (interview, 9 July 2020). Trang's act of empowerment was echoed by Trinh Minh Ha's organisation. The organisation mobilised mixed children to join the campaign to demand reform of decision-making in matters of migration (social media posts, 8, 10 September 2020). These socio-political struggles were intended to instil a sense of ownership of migration issues amongst the children and enabled them to continue the reform campaign initiated by their mothers' generation. In the socio-political sphere constituted by the NSP, the interviewed activists enacted their citizenship *in relation to* their children, fellow migrants and the Taiwanese state and laid claim to their cultural rights and their autonomous motherhood.

### **Contesting the exploitation of migrant workers**

In the socio-political sphere constructed by the NSP, the interviewed activists also laid claim to labour rights on behalf of their fellow migrants. Perceived as transient, temporary and disposable *outsiders*, Southeast Asian workers, who numbered 605,935 (Ministry of Labour (MoL) n.d.) when the NSP was announced, form the largest group of foreign residents in Taiwan. Paying a high recruitment fee to their brokers for their employment in Taiwan, they fill the chronic labour shortage in the manufacturing, construction, fishing, agriculture and care industries. Although contributing to Taiwan's production and reproduction, they suffer discrimination, debt bondage and 'legal servitude' (Lan 2007), a plight contested domestically and internationally (e.g. documented in the Trafficking in Persons Report published by the U.S. State Department). Even though they constitute an existing 'people-centred' link between Taiwan and Southeast Asia, halting the violation of their human rights is not included in the pronouncement of the NSP's 'people-to-people' aspiration.

Also experiencing the *othering* of outsiders as imposed by the host society, the interviewed activists reached out to migrant workers out of compassion for their situation of suffering exploitation and injustice. Ha's organisation published a quarterly magazine in Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Thai languages for their Taiwanese and migrant readers. The magazine included sections on 'Know Your Rights' and news from their home countries. These were intended to keep the migrant spouses and workers informed of their rights and maintain their cultural links with their home countries. Ha and her organisation also assisted individual migrant workers to retrieve salaries withheld by their employers and helped sexually abused workers to return home.

Whilst these acts defended individual workers, Ly Van Trang's campaign was a fundamental challenge to migrant workers' recruitment and employment as regulated by the state. In April 2017, invited to give a talk to university students, Trang argued that the violation of migrant workers' rights has tarnished Taiwan's human rights record. Her

audience asked what the Taiwanese government should do, citing the NSP's promotion of 'people-centred' interactions. She reminded the students that migrant workers '*do not have the right to vote*, therefore no Taiwanese politicians care about them' (17 April 2017, emphasis added). Mentioning that the Vietnamese government also did not respond to her petitions, she urged the two governments to cooperate to reform the exploitative brokerage system and combat corruption. At the abovementioned public seminar in August 2019, she called for the abolishment of recruitment fees. In sum, in the site of the labour market, the activists enacted their solidarity with migrant workers and, on their behalf, laid claim to the rights they had been deprived of. Trang's stress on migrant workers' ineligibility to vote specifically underlined the differentiation between citizens and non-citizens legalised by the Taiwanese state and the resultant socio-political and economic inequality exacerbated by exploitative brokerage and employment.

### **Contesting gender bias**

As analysed above, the NSP's appropriation of the mother-child relationship rendered the family a site for the activists to empower and care for immigrant mothers and children and defend their cultural rights. Nevertheless, the same discourse also reiterates immigrant women's role as mother and increases pressures on their maternity (see Chien, Tai, and Yeh 2012). For Nguyễn Thị Minh Thu, a long-term volunteer at a local public health station, maternity and motherhood is the most difficult challenge encountered by immigrant women, who are often pressured by their in-laws into early childbirth and over their son preference (see Sheu 2007; Lan 2008 for women's reproduction pressure). Therefore, her priority was to help Vietnamese women protect their health and ameliorate the tension between them and their in-laws. She accompanied social workers in their home visits to newly arrived women. Capitalising on the respect she enjoyed in the neighbourhood, she acted as a personal guarantor for these women and tried to persuade their in-laws to allow them to leave home and attend language training that was indispensable for their independence. In short, Thu assisted the women to protect their health and their mobility.

The NSP's gender bias is not only found in immigrant women's maternity but also in the labour market for tour guiding, as highlighted by Ngô Xuân Phoung's experiences. In addition to being an interpreter leading a self-help organisation, Phoung is also a licenced tour guide. Experiencing the physical, mental and financial constraints imposed by her in-laws on her spatial freedom and knowing the prevalence of such impositions amongst immigrant women, Phoung asked 'how many husbands or in-laws would allow their wives or daughters-in-law to leave home [to work as a tour guide]?' (interview, 13 April 2017). To answer her question, it is necessary to unpack women's gendered mobility (Martin and Dragojlovic 2019, 276).

Women's gendered mobility is derived from their role as home-bound carers. As mentioned above, when Trang's daughter was young, she reluctant to see her away from home for work, whereas Thu endeavoured to ensure that newly arrived women could leave home and attend language training. Gendered mobility is particularly pronounced in the tour-guiding profession. The tour-guiding market is globally known for its gender bias (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

2011, 9). In Taiwan, restricted by their caring duties, licenced female guides do not necessarily enter the market and male guides outnumber female guides, mainly because tour operators prefer to employ male guides for their physical strength and lower lodging costs (sharing accommodation with male drivers) (NTCG n.d.). In addition to being expected to stay at home and look after their families (see Chuang, Hsieh, and Lin 2010, 520), immigrant women were also challenged by their level of Chinese language proficiency (NTCG n.d.), a disadvantage illustrated by the fact that in 2018, only 44 Vietnamese women passed the licence examination (Taiwan News 2018b). Thus, it is immigrant women like Phuong who are more likely to pass the written exam, become licenced and able to join the market, due to their higher level of acculturation and Chinese language proficiency, as well as having adult children and thus being free from daily childcare. In this light, Phuong's question echoes the assertion that women's access to citizenship rights is hampered by their role as home-bound carers (Walby 1994).

On the other hand, the extremely small number of licenced tour guides is also a reminder that immigrant women's absence from home is perceived to cast doubt on their chastity. That is, absence from home is derogatorily associated with 'running away' (Lin 2018b), a tell-tale sign of abandoning their marriages or fraudulent marriages associated with sex work (Tseng 2014). The public's intrusive curiosity in their intertwined mobility and chastity put them under the watchful gaze of their elderly neighbours. Mai recalled this kind of intrusion: 'I don't need to tell my husband where I'm going, but I'll have to tell them. If I dress up, they'd ask where I'm going, or what I'm doing today. If I leave home for work early or late, or return home from work early or late, they'd ask what I did today' (interview, 15 April 2017). Behaving like 'de facto parents-in-law', these elderly neighbours were in effect conducting a 'neighbourhood watch' over immigrant women's mobility and chastity. In sum, the experiences of Phuong and Mai foregrounded gender bias embedded in the labour market and gendered mobility in the women's everyday lives. They made the NSP's utilisation of immigrant women for tourism revenue a site of contestation against the bias whereby they laid claim to women's employment rights as well as their right to socio-economic and spatial mobility.

## Conclusion

Regarding the NSP as a fluid socio-political space, this paper has examined how the five Vietnamese activists enacted their citizenship in the family domain and public sphere. This paper found that the NSP treated Southeast Asian women's family relationships and motherhood as political resources, through which a positive discourse towards the women and their children emerged. A manifestation of this purposeful reframing was the 'Natal Home Diplomacy' discourse and its financing of mixed children's 'root-seeking' politicised the private family domain as a public policy arena. The NSP aimed to use immigrant women to realise its goals in the acquisition of Southeast Asian languages and the increase in tourism from Southeast Asia. These political economic interests conflated the women's private role as daughters and mothers and their public roles as workers and immigrants of foreign culture. Taiwan is proposed as an example of a 'migration state' (Hollifield 2004)

which opens its market for economic benefits but closes the political polity for the sake of cohesion (Cheng 2021b). However, the NSP's 'discovery' of the political usefulness of immigrant women and their children and the resultant positive reframing underlines its self-serving inclusion of them for political and economic gains.

Analysing the activists' exercise of citizenship as their 'acts of citizenship', this paper found that, aided by the NSP, their acts were enabled by building their capacity for participation in civil organisations and public engagement. The *meaningful* acts that were carried out by them not only improved individuals' wellbeing but also contested structural bias and differentiation that perpetuate gender inequality and the inequality between citizens and non-citizens. The former included their empowerment of and compassion for immigrant women, mixed children and migrant workers. The latter was manifested by their protest against the gender bias embedded in their daily life and the exploitation of migrant workers. Unfolding along the change of their life course from being a wife to being a mother, citizen and worker, their empowerment, compassion and contestation took place in the sites of family, civil organisation, school, library and labour market on individual, community, societal and state scale. In their socio-political struggles, they laid claim to their rights to speak their own languages, free themselves and their children from discrimination, assert their autonomous motherhood against politicisation by the state, and protect their health and their mobility. Out of compassion, they also promoted migrant workers' rights against exploitative brokerage and employment. Their rights-claim demonstrated their subjectivity and independence.

Being sensitive to the gendering of marriage migration, this paper contributes to offering insights into immigrant women's exercise of citizenship in their multiple roles as daughters, wives, mothers, citizens and workers (Piper and Roces 2004) along their changing life course. Answering the call to emphasise immigrant women's resistance (Choo 2018), this paper foregrounded their grassroots-level acts and demonstrated their potential for making differences. That is, equipped with their daily experiences and practices, they set an example of making the state accountable for its indifference to gender bias and its indifference towards human rights violations. Although publicised as exercising 'warm power' to advance 'human values' (Yang and Chiang 2019), the NSP's 'people-centred' aspiration is criticised for being vague and difficult to measure in terms of efficacy (Chen 2020). From the bottom up, the activists' advocacy for migrant workers further discredited the image as a 'human rights defender' carefully constructed by the Taiwanese state (Cheng and Momesso 2017). Mostly, their dynamic, complex and contentious interactions with the NSP underlined its hypocrisy and neoliberalism (Lan 2019) which is a 'terrain of struggle' (Stasiulis and Bakan 1997) for them to realise their act of citizenship.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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