



BRILL

INNOVATION IN THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES 3 (2025) 1–22

INNOVATION IN THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES
brill.com/iss

“Searching for Meanings and Becoming Better Moms”

A Study on the Higher Education Experiences of Vietnamese Immigrant Women in Taiwan

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Received 21 August 2023 | Accepted 1 November 2023 |

Published online 23 January 2024

Abstract

This article explores the education-related experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan. The author adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews, followed by a constant comparative analysis. Three core themes are unearthed: the participants’ learning experiences, the process of meaning-making, and the multidimensional impacts of their education. Key findings include the effort invested by participants in obtaining familial support to pursue their education and the learning challenges posed by language barriers. Furthermore, the pursuit of education is found to extend to deeper aspects of self-identity, encompassing motherhood and empowerment. This article illustrates how higher education can facilitate better employment and enhance societal integration and intra-familial power dynamics for immigrant women. Its impact is not unilateral but spans multiple dimensions of their lives in their host society. The insights gained from this article indicate a need for broader, comparative, and diverse research to understand experiences across other immigrant communities in Taiwan.

Keywords

higher education – narrative – self-identity – Taiwan – Vietnamese immigrant

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/27730611-bja10020

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1 Introduction

Marriage migration from Southeast Asia to Taiwan began in the late 1980s and noticeably increased in the 1990s. This phenomenon can be attributed to Taiwan's remarkable economic growth during the period. Not only did it make Taiwan, alongside South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong, one of the "Four Asian Tigers," but it also made it a magnet for immigrants (Wang 2011). In this regard, the economic disparity between Taiwan and other Asian nations served as a significant pull factor, drawing mainland Chinese and Southeast Asians to contemplate immigration to Taiwan. Currently, Taiwan is home to more than 582,000 international immigrants. Among this international population, immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau constitute the majority of the community. As of April 2023, approximately 378,000 immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau live in Taiwan, making up almost 65% of the total immigrant community. This positions "mainland Chinese immigrants" as the predominant foreign group on the island. Following them, Vietnamese immigrants are the second-largest foreign community, with nearly 114,000 individuals, accounting for a fifth of the total immigrant population. It is noteworthy that the proportions of immigrants from other East Asian countries are relatively low. For example, around 31,000 Indonesian immigrants reside in Taiwan, comprising just 5 percent of the total immigrant populace. Additionally, there are communities from Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Japan, and South Korea. Yet, each of these groups represents less than 2 percent of the overall immigrant population in Taiwan. Including the roughly 450,000 descendants of these immigrants, the total population of both immigrants and their offspring approaches one million. This number exceeds the Indigenous population in Taiwan, positioning immigrants and their descendants as the fourth-largest demographic group in the country (National Immigration Agency 2023).

While many of these studies leverage sociological theories, focusing on issues like discrimination, household gender roles, integration and life adaptation, there is a noticeable gap in that few have delved into the educational experiences of Vietnamese immigrants, especially within higher education. Chiu and Ho (2008) highlighted this significant research lacuna concerning the educational experiences of different immigrant groups in the Taiwanese educational milieu. They further emphasized the need for research into the diverse experiences of immigrant women in higher education, particularly since the majority of the immigrant population in Taiwan consists of females.

To bridge this research gap, I selected Vietnamese immigrant women as the subjects for this article. My objective is to explore their experiences studying

in Taiwanese higher education institutions and gain insight into their self-perceptions and personal meanings throughout these educational processes.

2 The Characteristics of the Vietnamese Immigrant Community in Taiwan

It is important to underscore that the influx of Vietnamese immigration to Taiwan saw a significant uptick starting in the mid-1990s. According to statistical data, a mere 530 Vietnamese people migrated to Taiwan in 1994. Yet, by the turn of the millennium, this number saw a dramatic rise. In 2000, a whopping 13,863 Vietnamese individuals opted to leave their homeland for Taiwan. Throughout the first decade of the new millennium, the number of Vietnamese immigrants to Taiwan remained consistent, with thousands arriving annually. However, post 2010, Taiwan's appeal waned for many Vietnamese, largely due to the onset of rapid economic growth and development in Vietnam. Beyond the sheer numbers, certain characteristics of the Vietnamese immigrant community in Taiwan have piqued scholarly curiosity. Cultural differences, for instance, play a significant role in the adaptation and integration of Vietnamese immigrants into mainstream Taiwanese society. In contrast to immigrants from mainland China—who generally find a sense of cultural closeness with Taiwanese society thanks to shared linguistic elements and a mutual respect for Confucian teachings and traditional Chinese values and norms—Vietnamese immigrants grapple with more pronounced challenges. This is primarily due to the apparent cultural distinctions between Vietnamese and Taiwanese societies. Hence, in terms of life adaptation and cultural integration, Vietnamese immigrants face steeper hurdles than their mainland Chinese counterparts (Chen 2008).

Within the Vietnamese immigrant community in Taiwan, the majority are women (92.5 percent) with the predominant reason for their migration being marriage to Taiwanese men. However, multiple factors place these women in a socio-economically disadvantaged position within Taiwanese society. First, Taiwanese men who opt for foreign spouses are often perceived by mainstream society as less desirable in the domestic marriage market. A considerable number of these men are engaged in low-skilled or blue-collar jobs and reside in rural regions, leading to challenges in securing domestic partners. Thus, the prospect of paying to obtain a foreign wife becomes a viable option for them. In light of this, some researchers have coined the term “commodifying marriages” to depict the transactional nature of unions between Taiwanese men and Vietnamese women, especially prominent during the 1990s and early 2000s (Wang and Chang 2003). During that era, international marriages became quite the

societal trend. In 2003, international marriages—predominantly with Southeast Asian spouses—peaked, making up approximately 30 percent of all new marriages in Taiwan. However, this figure has consistently declined since then. By 2018, the number slightly exceeded 10 percent. This decline underscores the diminishing allure of international marriages for both Taiwanese men and Southeast Asian women. A possible reason, as posited by Qian and Tsai (2022), is the narrowing economic disparity between Taiwan and the region of Southeast Asia.

Secondly, the typically lower educational attainment of Vietnamese immigrant women further complicates their pursuit of well-paid jobs in Taiwan. This reality often leads them towards “*housewivelization*”—a term coined to depict their confinement to domestic roles (Gu 2017). According to Taiwanese government statistics, a significant portion of immigrant women in Taiwan possess only high-school diplomas or even less advanced educational credentials. Around 30 percent have only completed junior high school, while 34 percent have finished senior high school in their home countries. Yet about 10 percent do take the initiative to pursue higher education in the host society in Taiwan. It is noteworthy that among these Southeast Asian immigrants, 67 percent have been residents of Taiwan for over a decade. Despite such extended stays, many highlight the challenges they face in securing satisfying employment. This difficulty arises from biases against their immigrant backgrounds and the Taiwanese government’s non-recognition of educational credentials from their countries of origin. These barriers not only prevent most of these women from securing positions commensurate with their skills and prior educational background, but also result in over half of them earning below 30,000 NT\$ in the Taiwanese job market. This wage is considerably less than the average monthly salary in Taiwan, which stands at roughly 57,000 NT\$ (Taipei Times 2023).

Due to the barriers they encounter in the labor market and the non-recognition of their educational credentials, many Vietnamese immigrant women find themselves undergoing the process of “*housewivelization*.” This term encapsulates the phenomenon whereby these immigrant women, often against their will, transition into full-time housewifery, dedicating most of their time to unpaid domestic tasks and shouldering the bulk of family care responsibilities. Gu (2017) observed that undergoing this transformation often results in depression and a loss of self-confidence for many immigrant women. Thus, many of them grapple with constructing a purposeful life in their host society. Consequently, when circumstances permit, many Vietnamese immigrant women either seek employment or aspire to further their education in Taiwanese institutions. However, the existing literature on the educational expe-

periences of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwan predominantly centers on their journey from elementary through to high school, with a particular emphasis on Chinese language acquisition. There is a noticeable gap when it comes to research exploring these women's experiences within the higher education landscape of Taiwan (Huang and Chen 2016).

3 The Social Functions of Higher Education and Self-Identity Constructions

Higher education possesses distinctive characteristics and societal importance. It epitomizes the zenith of human knowledge production, but, in many countries, the opportunity to access higher educational resources for different groups of people are disparate. In countries affiliated with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), only an average of 30–35 percent of students aged 18 to 21 get the chance to attend college or university. However, in East Asian countries, influenced by Confucian values and the philosophy of credentialism, there is a pronounced emphasis on formal education and academic credentials. Such cultural and societal predilections drive higher enrolment rates in tertiary educational institutions. Nonetheless, even within these regions, access to higher education is not universal. Certain societal groups, including immigrants, often encounter heightened challenges when trying to tap into these educational resources (Marginson 2011).

In the past two decades, Taiwan's higher education sector has undergone a remarkable expansion. From a count of 57 universities in 2001, the number has surged to 126 two decades later. This growth has democratized access to higher education, with estimates suggesting that over 70 percent of senior high school graduates now proceed to colleges or universities for further studies. Moreover, Taiwan's higher education is not restricted to its domestic populace. The nation has been progressively opening its doors to international students. A testament to this is the fact that the number of international students in Taiwanese universities doubled over the past decade. In 2013, Taiwan hosted about 80,000 international students, a figure that swelled to 128,157 by 2019, and a significant proportion of the international student cohort hails from Taiwan's Southeast Asian neighbors. For instance, Vietnamese students represent approximately 23 percent of the total international student body. Significant cohorts also hail from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, mainland China, and Japan. These figures underscore Taiwan's appeal as a hub for higher education, particularly for students from neighboring Southeast Asian nations (Lin and Sung 2020).

Although nearly one-quarter of international students studying in Taiwan are from Vietnam, Vietnamese immigrants, comparatively speaking, tend to have fewer opportunities to access higher education resources in the host society. Government statistics and previous discussions reveal that over 60 percent of these immigrants had only attained a high school or lower educational credential before arriving in Taiwan. It should also be noted that even though most immigrants in Taiwan have lived in the country for more than a decade, only about 10 percent of them have the opportunity to return to school or university to pursue further education. The discrepancy in access to higher educational resources between Vietnamese international students and immigrants highlights the potential additional challenges immigrants might face in acquiring educational resources in a foreign country. This argument is further supported by the availability of comprehensive statistical data from the Taiwanese government regarding the number of international students studying in Taiwan. Conversely, there is no systematic information available about the number of immigrants currently enrolled in Taiwanese educational institutions, and particularly at university level, there is no data to represent this demographic. This data gap may possibly prevent a comprehensive understanding of immigrant students' educational journeys, from enrollment and academic performance to graduation rates and subsequent career trajectories. This shortfall could explain the limited research into immigrant women's educational experiences in Taiwan. Consequently, there is a pressing need for scholars to focus more intently on this issue.

Higher education is pivotal in catalyzing both individual and societal advancements. As Mok and Wu (2016) pointed out, completing higher education or attaining a university degree can significantly enhance one's prospects for upward social mobility. This is because universities offer individuals the opportunity to acquire advanced skills and specialized knowledge that might be inaccessible outside the academic realm or at lower educational levels. Yet, the allocation of higher education resources tends to favor specific demographics, often sidelining groups like foreigners, immigrants, and minorities. Several barriers hinder their access: Financial challenges, language barriers, non-recognition of previous qualifications, unfamiliarity with the local educational landscape, and, in some cases, outright discrimination or bias. However, when these marginalized groups are afforded the chance to pursue higher education, their motivation is often palpable. For them, higher education is more than just academic progression; it becomes a conduit for better career opportunities, societal integration, and an elevated quality of life. It serves as a transformative platform, enabling them to surmount socio-economic challenges and bolster their societal standing (Borgonovi and Marconi 2020).

Higher education environments, particularly in democratic nations like Taiwan, play a pivotal role in nurturing students' self-confidence and fostering independence. With robust protections for academic freedom, Taiwan actively promotes intellectual curiosity and critical thinking, and encourages spirited debates and discussions devoid of any forms of censorship or limitations. The 2021 Academic Freedom Index highlighted Taiwan's commitment to this ideal, awarding it a score of 0.874 out of 1. Such a commendable score positions Taiwan as a leading advocate for academic freedom in East Asia (Freedom House 2022). In such an environment, students enjoy the liberty to select their academic pursuits and delve deep into various fields of interest without any undue constraints. This atmosphere of academic freedom can be empowering, significantly boosting students' self-confidence. The freedoms afforded in the Taiwanese higher education environment can also be particularly beneficial for immigrant students, as they provide opportunities for these students to develop new skills, integrate into the local society, and broaden their career prospects; however, studies of the issues are far from enough (Hwang 2015).

Universities in Taiwan offer more than just academic instruction. They stand as critical arenas where students shape their self-identity. With the freedom to select courses and fields of study, students have the latitude to navigate varied interests, hone skills, and crystallize their professional aspirations. Giddens (1991) illuminated this exploration of the “self” as an ongoing narrative, crafted not only by individual agency but also sculpted by the surrounding environment and daily interactions. In Giddens' view, self-identity remains fluid, adapting and changing according to environmental cues and social engagements. Far from being a monolithic construct, identity encompasses a multifaceted spectrum—be it culture, gender, social roles, profession, or personality traits. In this aspect, universities play a critical role in the formation of the identity narratives which serve as “microcosms” of the larger society; they mirror broader society, immersing students in a milieu where identity exploration thrives. Within a campus, students engage with a rich tapestry of individuals, ideas, and ideologies, challenging their beliefs and reshaping their self-identities. For adult learners and immigrant students, the university setting catalyzes a journey of self-(re)discovery. They are offered the platform to reassess self-concepts, pivot career trajectories, and evolve their identities, especially within the socio-cultural contours of their new host society. Ultimately, universities serve as crucibles for identity (re)formation, playing an indelible role in defining how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the wider social world (Lairio, Puukari, and Kouvo 2013).

According to the discussions and literature above, the three main research questions are as follows:

1. What are the learning and educational experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women at higher education institutions in Taiwan?
2. What does study in a Taiwanese university mean for Vietnamese immigrant women?
3. What are the impacts on Vietnamese immigrant women of studying at higher education institutions, and after completing their studies or obtaining degrees in the host society?

4 Research Method

Given the aim of this article, which is to understand the educational experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in Taiwanese higher education institutions and their perceptions of these processes and outcomes, a qualitative approach has been selected for both the data collection and subsequent analysis. Qualitative research is often deemed more suitable and effective than quantitative methods for delving into individuals' unique experiences and understanding specific phenomena. Within the domain of qualitative research, the semi-structured interview emerges as the preferred method. It allows scholars to capture individual narratives or life stories directly from participants. This method enables participants to freely share their perspectives in response to specific interview questions that resonate with the research objectives, rather than being limited by pre-defined response choices (Kakilla 2021).

It is essential to outline the locale of my fieldwork undertaken in 2022. I conducted my research at a national university in northern Taiwan. This institution stands out for its dedication to offering students a comprehensive online distance-learning environment. While its teaching and learning styles markedly differ from other Taiwanese higher education institutions, students fulfilling all academic requirements still earn a bachelor's degree. A distinguishing trait of this institution is its inclusive and accommodating enrollment policy. The sole requirements for admission are possessing Republic of China (ROC) citizenship or permanent residency in Taiwan and being above 18 years of age, without additional educational prerequisites. Given these conditions, my chosen fieldwork site becomes particularly accessible for those in disadvantaged educational or social situations, such as immigrant women, to tap into higher education resources in their new society. During my fieldwork, I undertook an administrative position at the university, offering professional advice and consultations to a unique class predominantly consisting of immigrant women. Many students encountered challenges, particularly during their initial enrollment period, both academically and in adapting to life in Taiwanese

society. Notably, Vietnamese immigrant women made up approximately 80 percent of this cohort, with the remaining students hailing from mainland China and other Southeast Asian countries. This position granted me an invaluable vantage point, fostering close interactions with these immigrant women students. It enriched my comprehension of their circumstances and streamlined the exploration of their educational journeys in Taiwan.

Initially, I engaged with the class leader, who had been residing in Taiwan for over a decade. With a bachelor's degree in business and information management from the field site university, she is currently pursuing her master's at a private university in northern Taiwan. Our first interaction revolved around a classmate of hers who struggled with professional courses due to linguistic challenges and unfamiliarity with digital learning resources. My primary mission in this administrative position was to help these students navigate the academic hurdles they encountered. Subsequent to assisting them, I shared my research interests with the class leader, particularly my curiosity about their educational journeys in Taiwan. This discussion led to the class leader becoming my maiden informant. I leveraged her assistance, using a snowball sampling strategy, to connect with other potential participants interested in sharing their experiences (Noy 2008). Ultimately, I conducted interviews with twelve Vietnamese immigrant women students. The majority had lived in Taiwan for around a decade, though three had resided for a shorter duration. All the participants were married to Taiwanese men, with the majority living in the northern regions of Taipei, Taoyuan, Hsinchu, and Miaoli, while a few were based in southern Taiwan, specifically in Kaohsiung. Due to the Covid-19 constraints, except for the interview with the class leader, the interviews were facilitated online via platforms such as LINE, WhatsApp, or Facebook Messenger. These interviews typically ranged between 1 and 1.5 hours and were conducted in Chinese. It is noteworthy that, given the duration of their stay in Taiwan, most of these immigrant women could comfortably comprehend and articulate themselves in Chinese. However, their Chinese literacy skills, particularly reading and writing, posed a challenge.

After completing the interviews, I meticulously reviewed the audio recordings and proceeded to transcribe them, prepping the data for in-depth analysis. I employed narrative inquiry as my primary analysis method, focusing on the personal life stories and education-centric narratives shared by the Vietnamese immigrant women. This methodological choice facilitated a sequential utilization of both holistic content and categorical content analysis, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the individual narratives and their collective interplay. As delineated by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), the holistic content approach zeroes in on the overarching essence and embedded

meanings in a narrative instead of the micro sentence structures or forms existing in narratives. Guided by this, I diligently perused each transcript, absorbing the entirety of the shared experiences and stories. This broad-spectrum reading allowed me to sketch preliminary thematic contours, ascertaining recurring themes and capturing disparities. Upon establishing the initial themes, I delved into a secondary data analysis phase, invoking the principles of categorical content analysis. This entailed collating similar thematic threads from the transcripts and amalgamating them into broader categories. To encapsulate and coherently address the research inquiries, I employed an inductive approach, crystallizing these themes into coherent storylines (Denzin and Lincoln 2015). To ensure the fidelity of my transcriptions and the subsequent interpretations vis-à-vis the perspectives of the immigrant women, I applied the “member checking” technique, a pivotal facet of data triangulation. This step required sharing the transcribed material with the participants. Their feedback affirmed the credibility of my efforts as none raised concerns or challenges regarding the data interpretations (Patton 2002).

5 Results and Analysis

In the analysis section, discussions will revolve around three pivotal themes pertaining to Vietnamese immigrant women in the Taiwanese educational and societal milieu: The “experiences,” “meanings,” and “impacts” of their education-related journeys.

5.1 *Learning Experiences*

In terms of motivations to return to school and pursue a bachelor’s degree at a Taiwanese higher education institution, several participants pointed to practical considerations. Participant 3 (P₃), who has lived in Taiwan for more than ten years and has been working in the catering industry within the Vietnamese ethnic economy, expressed dissatisfaction with her current position. She hopes to secure a better job after graduation.

You know, as an immigrant woman, many of us end up working in restaurants, nail salons, massage parlors, or other small businesses owned by fellow Vietnamese immigrants. However, I don’t want to spend my entire life limited to working in a small restaurant. I have dreams, and I genuinely hope to find a job that I’m passionate about. Naturally, a higher salary would be better. (P₃ interview data)

Prior research on migration has underscored that immigrants often encounter barriers when trying to penetrate the mainstream labor market in their host country. Such barriers encompass non-recognition of their qualifications, language challenges, and, at times, discrimination. As a result, many immigrants find work in ethnic economies, which are the businesses and services that are owned and operated by people from the same ethnic group. While these enterprises offer crucial employment avenues, especially for new immigrants who might face struggles securing jobs elsewhere, they can also inadvertently circumscribe immigrants' upward mobility and constrict their career aspirations. Moreover, positions within ethnic economies typically come with lower remuneration, demand longer working hours, and present limited avenues for career advancement compared to opportunities available in the broader, official labor market. Additionally, being ensconced within an ethnic economy might curtail opportunities for immigrants to engage with local residents and the mainstream labor market (Wu 2022).

Participant 5 (P5), who immigrated to Taiwan five years ago, shared her experiences of finding a job during the early years of her arrival:

In the beginning, it was very difficult for me. My Chinese language skills were poor, I was unfamiliar with the local work style and expectations, and I struggled to convince employers to value my educational background and work experience in Vietnam. I remember feeling frustrated and undervalued at that time. (P5 interview data)

The difficulties shared by P5 in finding a professionally coherent job position in the Taiwanese job market illuminate the fact that the aforementioned difficulties often arise from structural barriers that may limit immigrants' access to job opportunities. These may include language barriers, which can further hinder Vietnamese immigrants from communicating effectively in the workplace and understanding the job regulations. They also face challenges in understanding the local work culture and expectations, which can create misunderstandings and conflicts between employees and employers. Additionally, most Taiwanese employers may be influenced by the government's skeptical attitude toward the value of Vietnamese education or may lack the knowledge needed to accurately evaluate immigrants' learning experiences in their home countries. As a result, immigrants are marginalized in the mainstream labor market and often have no choice but to work in ethnic economies, especially during their early stages of living in Taiwan (Cho, Chen, and Wu 2020).

Obtaining a degree in the host country can equip immigrants with the qualifications and skills they need to enhance their competitiveness in the main-

stream labor market. In this regard, returning to school to pursue higher education becomes a valuable strategy for these Vietnamese immigrants to overcome barriers and difficulties. Participant 7 (P7), who completed her bachelor's degree in business and information management, reflected on the challenges she and her "Vietnamese sisters" faced when deciding to return to higher education:

The decision to return to university was not an easy one for many of us. It was not just about wanting to better ourselves and our futures; it was also about navigating complex family dynamics, fulfilling our roles as wives and mothers, and contending with cultural expectations. Convincing our husbands and mothers-in-law to support our decisions was often one of the biggest hurdles we had to overcome ... since many of them only expect us to perform as the "good mother," "good wife," and "good daughter-in-law" at home, not outside or on campus. (P7 interview data)

For P7 and her "Vietnamese sisters," the decision to return to university is not solely an educational matter. Instead, it is intertwined with a broader societal context, including the expectations and norms within their immigrant families and mainstream society. This context significantly shapes the roles these immigrant women are perceived to be suitable for and are expected to fulfill, adding layers to the complexity of their decision-making process. Beyond personal ambition and educational aspirations, they must navigate a complex matrix of family expectations, societal norms, gender roles, and cultural contexts. The experiences and narratives reveal the "intersectional" nature of immigrant women's educational experiences in the host society, highlighting the myriad challenges and difficulties they face in securing support and recognition from their families concerning their ideas and decisions. Even when these decisions are not directly related to issues like household responsibilities or family power distributions, they still must expend significant effort negotiating the structural limitations embedded in the host cultural and societal expectations (Trililani, Rúðólfssdóttir, and Brunila 2023).

The narratives and experiences shared by P7 and her "Vietnamese sisters" align with the ideas of Collins and Bilge (2016). They categorized four different types of systemic powers, with "cultural power" being one of them, denoting that different cultures wield unique powers. These powers subsequently position individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds or ethnicities in varying social positions and power hierarchies, perpetuating social inequality. Thus, the narratives of P7 and her "Vietnamese sisters" underscore how mainstream Taiwanese culture and societal norms act as significant structural barriers, con-

straining their individual and collective agency and limiting their choices and possibilities. These limitations extend beyond the educational domain and permeate their daily lives as immigrants in Taiwanese society.

Regarding their learning experiences, most participants expressed genuine enjoyment and appreciation for having the opportunity to return to university and study again as immigrants. However, they found learning in Chinese to be the most challenging aspect. Participant 1 (P₁), who has resided in Taiwan for about 15 years and is currently in her first year of a bachelor's program in living science, said

I'm really happy to have the chance to return to the university and study again ... that is really something I want to do ... every week, I feel so joyful that I can study professional knowledge with my classmates, and our professors are really caring for us. They spend a lot of time explaining concepts repeatedly since they know we are foreigners ... Reading and writing are still difficult for us ... and I also hope that after graduating from the university, my experience of studying in Taiwan can further help me to improve my living circumstances and competitiveness in the job market. (P₁ interview data)

The narratives above reflect the fact that language barriers are one of the most significant challenges immigrant women students face on their educational journey in the host society. The study by Ko, Ku, and Lin (2015) underscores this issue, especially for Vietnamese immigrant women studying in Taiwan. Their limited proficiency in the Chinese language, particularly in reading and writing, places them at a considerable disadvantage compared to native speakers. They found that the vocabulary comprehension and literacy level of these immigrant women were comparable to second-grade Taiwanese students in elementary schools. This limited language capacity significantly impedes their ability to fully understand lectures, engage effectively in class discussions, and articulate their thoughts and ideas in assignments and examinations. It affects not only their academic performance, but also their overall learning experience. Accordingly, many immigrant women, despite facing language barriers and other challenges, exhibit immense resilience and determination in their pursuit of higher education. The limitations in language proficiency do not impede their drive to learn and earn a degree in Taiwanese society, as their journey in higher education is fueled by a profound motivation to improve their lives and expand their opportunities in both the educational arena and the labor market. Their high motivation and appreciation for the opportunity to return to university emphasize the value they place on education, viewing it as

not only a pathway to better job opportunities, but also as a means for personal growth and empowerment (Amin 2018).

5.2 *Meaning-Making*

The concepts of motherhood and empowerment are pivotal in understanding how these Vietnamese immigrant women construct meaning in their journeys of pursuing higher education in Taiwan. As mothers, these women often feel a profound sense of responsibility for their children's educational achievements and future success. However, their limited proficiency in Chinese sometimes challenges their sense of motherhood, particularly when this limitation becomes a tangible barrier in assisting with their children's schoolwork and homework.

Regarding this matter, P1, who has a thirteen-year-old boy currently in his first year of junior high school, often feels frustrated when attempting to assist with her child's schooling and homework due to her limited Chinese proficiency. This lack of understanding makes it difficult for her to comprehend the content of Taiwanese high-school textbooks.

I often feel disappointed in myself since many times I cannot understand the questions that my boy asks me ..., and I find that as he grows up ... understanding what he wants to say or ask becomes more difficult for me because I cannot fully read and understand his textbooks in school ..., and one time, I heard my boy say in a low voice that I'm a "stupid mom" ..., you know ..., it really hurt me and made me feel frustrated ..., after that, I made a promise to myself that if I have the chance, I would like to return to school and study more, not only to enhance my knowledge ..., but also to show my boy that I can be a "good and qualified mom" ... (P1 interview data)

The narratives shared by P1 highlight the struggles faced by immigrant women navigating motherhood in a host society with different languages and cultural backgrounds from their children. Limited language proficiency in Chinese can sometimes challenge their sense of motherhood. For instance, their children, and perhaps other family members, might question their ability to provide adequate support for their children's education, particularly if the education is conducted in Chinese. This could potentially lead to feelings of inadequacy or failure in fulfilling their perceived maternal roles. Moreover, the difficulties in comprehending her child's questions and feelings of inadequacy have led to a motivation to further her education. This narrative also exemplifies how motherhood can serve as a significant impetus for pursuing higher education among

immigrant women in the host society. In this context, education becomes a means not only to enhance personal knowledge and language skills, but also to redefine and validate one's role as a mother. By gaining more education, P1 hopes to dispel the notion of being a “stupid mom” and instead position herself as a capable, knowledgeable, and “qualified” mother. Zhu (2020) pointed out that living as an immigrant mother in the host society, under unfamiliar social and cultural contexts, compels immigrant women to become adult and lifelong learners, as they have to (re)learn at least five important areas of skills and knowledge after immigration, which include learning parenting skills, finding a job, learning the local language, learning to drive, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. This underscores how the pursuit of higher education by immigrant women is part of the broader context of lifelong learning; thus, education becomes a tool for aiding these immigrant women's adjustment and increasing the level of integration in the host society.

In addition, the consequence of empowerment is another crucial aspect that many immigrant women mention regarding their educational journeys and experiences. About this issue, P1 further shared her opinion as follows:

I have to say that returning to university and studying again not only make me feel like a better and more qualified mom ... but as I accumulate more professional knowledge in my major, living science, I feel like I have become much better since I know more than I did before ... This has also given me more confidence living in this place and studying in a higher education environment. (P1 interview data)

This excerpt from P1 underscores the transformative nature of education, particularly for immigrant women. Returning to university and pursuing a bachelor's degree provides them with opportunities for personal growth and empowerment that extend beyond the academic sphere. Educational experiences not only furnish P1 with professional knowledge in her chosen field of living science, but also fortify her self-esteem and confidence. In this context, her studies have not only bolstered her capabilities as a mother, but have also enriched her self-identity and self-worth. This enhanced confidence, in turn, empowers her to navigate both the academic environment and broader life in the host society with increased capability (Amin 2018).

5.3 *Multidimensional Impacts*

Regarding the multidimensional impacts, participants frequently mentioned three important themes: economic, social and cultural impacts.

5.3.1 Economic Impacts

Discussing the impact on immigrant women's competitiveness in the labor market, P7 shared her experience of earning a promotion at work after completing her bachelor's degree in business and information management.

Initially, I worked for this company as a contract-based worker ... It lacked job security since I had to be evaluated by the company every year ... and I did not know whether I could stay or would have to leave the next year ... I did not like those kinds of feelings; they made me feel unsafe ... I think my bachelor's degree really gave me more leverage to negotiate with my boss about converting to a permanent position ... After that, I succeeded Currently, I am working at this company with the title of "engineer" and have similar work conditions to other Taiwanese workers ... so, I believe that my studying experiences and Taiwanese bachelor's degree really helped me enhance my competitiveness in the Taiwan labor market. (P7 interview data)

In P7's case, her education served not only to enhance her professional knowledge and skills, but also played a significant role in securing job stability. The transition from a contract-based worker to a permanent "engineer" position exemplifies how higher education can open doors to better job opportunities and more secure employment conditions. This story underscores the transformative power of education as a tool for social mobility, providing individuals with more leverage in negotiating improved work conditions and attaining competitive positions in the labor market. Moreover, it underscores the elevated value of a local degree in the host society. For P7, earning a Taiwanese bachelor's degree appears to have bolstered her credibility and competitiveness in the Taiwanese labor market, smoothing her integration process. These findings align with numerous studies suggesting that higher education can significantly bolster immigrants' economic outcomes by enhancing their human capital, which can then be leveraged for better jobs and higher wages. However, it is crucial to note that such outcomes can vary, based on factors like the recognition of foreign credentials, language proficiency, work experience, and the dynamics of the local labor market between individual immigrant and host society (Cho, Chen, and Wu 2020).

5.3.2 Social Impacts

In addition to the economic benefits that higher education can bring, other participants shared their insights regarding the social impacts of education for them as immigrants. Participant 9 (P9), who immigrated to Taiwan five years

ago and works as a full-time housewife, spoke about how her experiences studying in a Taiwanese higher education environment have helped her adapt to life in her host society.

You know, returning to school and studying at a university in Taiwan has truly been a significant contribution to my life. The learning process not only provided me with numerous opportunities to interact with other classmates ... we discussed the contents of the textbooks ... shared our life circumstances ... and talked about the cultural differences between Taiwan and Vietnam that we face in everyday life ... The conversations and interactions with my classmates and peers have been invaluable, helping me acquire useful information for living here and understanding Taiwanese culture, customs, and lifestyle. (P9 interview data)

The insights shared by P9 underscore the extensive socio-cultural advantages of education, beyond the immediate academic and professional advancements. A higher education environment is not merely a platform for academic progression but also a vibrant ecosystem where diverse minds converse, exchange, and learn from one another's experiences. This transforms the academic setting into a crucial space where immigrants can accrue social capital in the host society (Tonkaboni, Yousefy, and Keshtiaray 2013). For immigrants like P9, immersing oneself in the educational milieu of the host country is a valuable avenue for cultural enlightenment and insight. Dialogues and discussions with peers around academic content open windows to the host country's culture, customs, and lifestyles, acting as cultural conduits and aiding in diminishing the cultural divide, thereby smoothing the acculturation process. Thus, higher education emerges as a pivotal instrument for cultural learning and social integration for immigrants, easing their adaptation into the host society. It transcends the boundaries of academic success and career advancements, nurturing a sense of belonging and an enriched comprehension of their new surroundings (Kim 2009).

5.3.3 Cultural Impacts

Several participants noted that their experiences in higher education significantly enhanced their status within their families and the broader society. Participant 11 (P11), an immigrant who has been in Taiwan for a decade, has not only secured a bachelor's degree in business but is also pursuing her master's in business management at another reputable university in Northern Taiwan. She conveyed how her academic journey reshaped the power dynamics and her societal position within her family and the host country.

When I initiated my Vietnamese restaurant, running it was a steep learning curve. My knowledge was limited in areas such as operational costs, promotional strategies, and employee management. I felt overwhelmed, prompting my decision to delve into business studies. Post-bachelors, I'm immersed in my master's program and might even consider a PhD. My education has not just enhanced my business acumen but also my self-belief and societal standing, reinforcing my capability to compete on an equal footing with the locals. (P11 interview data)

P11's journey underscores the transformative impact of higher education in amplifying an individual's societal and familial standing. Her entrepreneurial endeavors became a driving force, compelling her to pursue advanced education, which has played a pivotal role in reshaping her interpersonal dynamics and societal stature. The acquisition of pertinent knowledge and skills from her business studies has markedly elevated her proficiency in managing her venture, instilling a heightened sense of capability and self-confidence. Attaining advanced educational qualifications has not only augmented P11's self-confidence, but has also elevated her standing within her family, symbolizing a monumental achievement that potentially alters familial power dynamics. Traditionally, economic providers, predominantly men in many immigrant families, wield substantial influence and decision-making authority within the family structure. However, P11's flourishing enterprise has bestowed upon her a heightened degree of influence and a voice when it comes to family decisions. This progressive shift not only empowers P11 with enhanced autonomy and sway within her family, but also has the potential to recalibrate perceptions and norms around gender roles and immigrant status within her familial and societal context. It exemplifies the possibility of immigrant women breaking the mold, portraying them as successful entrepreneurs and economic pillars, thereby challenging and transforming entrenched gender norms and societal frameworks (Newendorp 2010).

6 Conclusions and Discussions

The recounted experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women in this article vividly illustrate the multi-dimensional impacts of their educational pursuits in Taiwan. Their journeys, while interspersed with challenges such as family negotiations, language barriers, and self-identity negotiations in a foreign land, radiate the transformative essence of education. Education not only becomes a vehicle for empowerment and validation in their roles as immigrants and

mothers, but also serves as a medium for identity construction and confidence enhancement. Higher education bestows upon them both tangible benefits—like bolstered competitiveness in the labor market and a deeper comprehension of the host culture—and intangible benefits—such as refined self-identity and a balanced status within the family and society. These narratives, hence, underscore the imperative of ensuring access to higher education for immigrant communities, given its pivotal role in fostering socio-cultural integration, personal growth, and empowerment in host societies. However, the narratives primarily reflect the experiences of one immigrant community, suggesting a need for comparative studies among diverse immigrant groups in Taiwan. Additionally, it is noteworthy that, in Taiwan, many immigrants from Southeast Asia still experience unfriendly interactions from the mainstream communities in their daily lives, and some even confront further discriminatory experiences while living in the Taiwanese host society. Therefore, future research could delve deeper into the relationships between the discriminatory experiences of Southeast Asian immigrants in Taiwan and their re-entry into academic settings to pursue higher education. Furthermore, incorporating quantitative research methods would offer a more encompassing understanding of diverse educational experiences and their consequent impacts on immigrants in the host society.

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Appendix

TABLE A1 Demographic information of research participants

Code	Age	Place of residence	Occupation	Years of immigration
P1	43	Hsinchu City	Manufacturing industry	15 years
P2	33	Miaoli County	Housewife	6 years
P3	38	Hsinchu County	Catering industry	10 years
P4	34	New Taipei City	Catering industry	7 years
P5	34	Hsinchu City	Vietnamese nail salon	5 years
P6	40	Taoyuan City	Service industry	12 years
P7	41	Hsinchu City	Manufacturing industry	13 years
P8	36	Kaohsiung City	Housewife	8 years
P9	32	New Taipei City	Housewife	5 years
P10	37	Kaohsiung City	Agricultural industry	9 years
P11	42	Hsinchu County	Manufacturing industry	10 years
P12	31	New Taipei City	Catering industry	4 years

SOURCE: AUTHOR