

渴望與社會期待之間的主體發聲： 台灣女性日本移民經驗的回顧式敘事

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摘要**

本研究採用敘事分析方法，探討 1980 年代末至 1990 年代移居日本的台灣女性，如何透過留學與婚姻的生命敘事建構其身分認同，並分析其在台灣與日本社會中對性別期待、社會限制與個人志向的協商過程。

研究資料來自於 2021 年以日語進行的生命故事訪談，對象為兩位育有大學生子女的台灣女性。兩人皆於 1980 年代末赴日留學，之後升學、與日本男性結婚並定居日本。

研究結果顯示，她們在台灣民主化與海外留學風潮中形成出國志向，但同時面臨父母對經濟獨立與婚姻的期待；在日本則遭遇外國女性於職涯發展上的性別限制。兩人的敘事展現教育與經濟選擇上的能動性，但在婚姻領域則呈現對性別規範與有限職涯機會的妥協。這些經驗常透過笑聲一起敘述，作為一種話語策略，將限制重新框架為帶有幽默色彩的經歷。同時，她們也透過與其他女性的對比定位自身，以重新確認其能動性。最後，儘管兩人回顧性地將初到日本的生活描述為「艱辛」，她們仍將這些經驗重新詮釋為具有成長意義的歷程。脫離移民研究中受害者中心的觀點，本研究指出，能動性，並非單純的抵抗或順從的二元對立，而是鑲嵌於恆存社會結構中進行協商的一種動態且細緻的過程。

關鍵詞：敘事分析、台灣女性、海外留學、跨文化婚姻、民主化

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Voicing Agency Between Aspiration and Expectation: Taiwanese Women's Retrospective Narratives on Migration to Japan

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Abstract**

This study employs narrative analysis to explore how Taiwanese women who migrated to Japan in the late 1980s and 1990s construct and present their identities through retrospective life stories about study abroad and marriage. Situated within the context of Taiwan's rapid democratization, this study examines how these women negotiate prevailing gendered expectations, social constraints, and personal aspirations in both Taiwan and Japan.

The analysis draws on life story interviews conducted in Japanese in 2021 with two Taiwanese women whose children were college students at the time. Both participants followed similar migration trajectories: they came to Japan as language students, pursued further education, married Japanese men, and settled permanently in Japan.

The findings reveal that, growing up in a democratizing Taiwan, both women were inspired by expanding opportunities for overseas study and aspired to gain international experience. However, they also confronted strong social norms, including parental expectations regarding financial

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independence and marriage. In Japan, they encountered additional gendered constraints, particularly in pursuing professional careers as foreign women. Both narratives demonstrate agency in decisions related to education and financial independence; however, in the domain of marriage, the women describe compromises shaped by gender norms and limited career prospects. These experiences are often recounted with laughter as a discursive strategy to reframe constraints as humorous episodes. At the same time, both participants position themselves in contrast to other women in order to reaffirm their sense of agency. Finally, although they retrospectively characterize their early lives in Japan as “hardship,” they reinterpret these experiences as formative and meaningful. Moving beyond the victim-centered perspectives in migration studies, this study highlights that agency is not a simple binary of resistance or conformity, but rather a dynamic and nuanced process of negotiation embedded within enduring social structures.

Keywords: narrative analysis, Taiwanese women, study abroad, intercultural marriage, democratization

1. Introduction

Using the framework of narrative analysis, this study explores how Taiwanese women who migrated to Japan in the late 1980s construct and present their identities through their life story narratives. In particular, it focuses on the themes of study abroad and intercultural marriage, examining how these women either challenge or negotiate prevailing gender norms, social expectations, and personal aspirations in both Taiwan and Japan.

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, when the life stories of the participants of this study are situated, Taiwanese society underwent drastic social transformations following the lifting of martial law and subsequent democratization of society. Among these reforms was the abolition of the “Regulation on Overseas Study” (國外留學規程)¹, which had previously required government approval for overseas education. This policy change allowed greater autonomy for students to pursue studies abroad, making overseas education, including short-term language programs, increasingly accessible to young Taiwanese. According to official Taiwanese statistics compiled by 塩入 (136-137), the number of Taiwanese students studying abroad rapidly increased between 1988 and 1992, when the regulation was being revised. This trend reflects a surge of enthusiasm for overseas study among Taiwanese youth. Particularly for young women, the social reform brought them opportunities to redefine their educational and career paths beyond traditional domestic expectations.

However, few studies explore the personal experiences of Taiwanese overseas students. One of the few exceptions is 塩入, which examines the Taiwanese students’ perceptions of their experiences of living in Japan. The other study conducted by Yen and Stevens investigates the Taiwanese overseas students’ perspectives on education and life in the United States. While these studies focus on the overseas experiences of Taiwanese students in the 2000s or later, the migration experiences that this study aims to examine took place in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Furthermore, this study is distinctive in its focus on how these Taiwanese women narrativize their past experiences almost thirty years after the events occurred. Therefore, this study fills a critical gap by scrutinizing the life stories of Taiwanese women who migrated to Japan during this pivotal era of democratization, offering a unique opportunity to examine how they

¹ 植根法律網 <https://www.rootlaw.com.tw/LawContent.aspx?LawID=A040080120000100-0790411> (Retrieved October 22, 2025.)

construct agency through their retrospective narratives.

In light of these research gaps, this study investigates the life story narratives of two Taiwanese women in order to explicate the following research questions:

- 1) How do the life story narratives of Taiwanese women who migrated to Japan during the late 1980s as language students and later married and settled in Japan reflect and reveal prevailing social norms and gendered expectations in both Taiwan and Japan at that time?
- 2) How do these women narratively construct their sense of agency by articulating the negotiation between their personal aspirations for self-development and prevailing social norms and gendered expectations in both societies?
- 3) In what ways does narrating their life stories from the present—nearly three decades after the events—enable them to reevaluate their past choices and construct their sense of agency?

2. Literature review

2.1. Narrative analysis in studies on migration and identities

Since the methodological paradigmatic shift – so-called “Narrative Turn” (Riessman, *Narrative Methods* 14-17) – occurred in the 1990s, narrative has been regarded as a critical means through which individuals make sense of their experiences, negotiate their positions in the social world, and construct their identities (e.g., Bamberg, et al; De Fina; Freeman; Riessman). In other words, narrative is not merely a chronological recounting of events; rather, it is a meaning-making process in which individuals selectively organize and interpret past experiences in relation to the present and an imagined future.

In the field of migration studies, narrative approaches have made significant contribution by illuminating how immigrants construct and negotiate their identities in their new sociocultural contexts. For example, De Fina analyzed the narratives of Mexican undocumented immigrants’ border-crossing experiences in the United States, examining how they negotiate and represent their identities through talk. By paying close attention to the immigrants’ particular use of linguistic forms such as personal pronouns, speech acts, and categorical terms, her study reveals how they position themselves in relation to dominant ideologies and power structures. Regarding agency in particular, De Fina (112-138) found that the immigrants tend to employ more agentive expressions when narrating group actions, but fewer when describing individual actions –

thereby portraying themselves as less agentive in their own narratives.

Another migration study employing narrative analysis is Ladegaard, which investigates the identity struggles of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. Analyzing Filipino domestic workers' narratives collected at a church shelter providing temporary accommodation, the study demonstrates how their recurrent use of the self-categorizing term "helper" constructs a positive self-image: women who provide valuable service to the people of Hong Kong while also serving God and their families. At the same time, the term "helper" is used to voice employers' perspectives, thereby implicitly criticizing the hierarchical and essentially non-Christian worldview that underlies their working conditions.

While De Fina and Ladegaard illuminate how labor immigrants construct and negotiate their identities within unequal social and institutional structures, the present study, by contrast, focuses on Taiwanese women who initially migrated to Japan as students rather than as workers. That is, their mobility was not primarily driven by economic necessity but by the so-called "intrinsic dimensions of migration aspiration" (De Haas 20). Although their migration trajectories later extended to intercultural marriage and long-term settlement in Japan, their initial entry into Japanese society was framed within the socially valued discourse of "study abroad," shaped by the broad context of social reforms in Taiwan, which will be explained in the following subsection.

2.2. Internationalization of higher education in Taiwan

For decades under martial law in Taiwan, overseas study was heavily restricted by the Ministry of Education through the "Regulations on Overseas Study," which required state approval and limited the number of students permitted abroad. Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, the Ministry gradually revised these regulations and ultimately abolished them in 1990, effectively ending the requirement for prior approval and granting individuals greater autonomy in pursuing education overseas.

According to the data compiled by 塩入 (136-137) based on official Taiwanese statistics, the number of Taiwanese students studying abroad remained between approximately 5,000 and 6,500 during the martial law period in 1980s. However, in 1988 – when the regulation was being revised – the number increased to 8,178, and in 1989 it rose sharply to 16,879. Since then, the number has continued to grow, exceeding 20,000 by 1991. These statistical trends reflect the growing enthusiasm among young Taiwanese people for overseas experiences at that time.

Regarding Taiwanese students' motivations to study abroad, Yen and

Stevens interviewed five Taiwanese students during their first academic year at a university in the United States and identified the following factors that inspired them to study abroad: the idealization of America, the pursuit of a competitive edge, avoidance of competition in Taiwan, flexibility in choosing a major, and the desire to experience something new and different. In contrast, Chen and Zimitat conducted a survey of 514 Taiwanese students studying in Australia and the United States. Their findings revealed that Taiwanese students' intentions to study abroad were shaped primarily by individual beliefs about overseas study and their perceptions of its expected outcomes. While the attitudes and perceptions toward higher education played a greater role in motivating Taiwanese students to study in Australia, the influence of family and friends was more significant in shaping intentions to study in the United States.

However, these studies mainly address students who studied in Western countries during the 2000s – long after overseas study had become a normalized and accessible choice. In contrast, this study focuses on an earlier generation of Taiwanese women who studied in Japan during the initial wave of overseas education in the late 1980s, when studying abroad still carried distinctive meanings of aspiration, uncertainty, and self-exploration. Furthermore, whereas the previous studies examined the motivations of students who were currently studying abroad, the present study analyzes the retrospective narratives of Taiwanese women, exploring how their past decisions to study in Japan have influenced their present lives and how they make sense of those experiences from their current perspectives. In doing so, this study also considers how gendered expectations shaped these women's decisions and experiences, leading from education migration to marriage and settlement in Japan.

2.3. Gendered expectations in Taiwan and Japan

Recently, Taiwan has become widely recognized as one of the most gender-equal societies in Asia. According to the report released by Taiwan's Executive Yuan Department of Gender Equality, Taiwan ranked sixth globally and first in Asia in the 2023 Social Institution and Gender Index (SIGI), and similarly achieved high scores across other major global indices of gender equality.²

From a historical perspective, Taiwan – like many other Asian

² "Taiwan Tops Asia in latest SIGI rankings by OECD." [https://www.roc-taiwan.org/then/post/6444.html#:~:text=The%20report%20highlights%20government%20policy,leave%20in%20the%20survey%20period.\(Retrieved October 19th, 2025\).](https://www.roc-taiwan.org/then/post/6444.html#:~:text=The%20report%20highlights%20government%20policy,leave%20in%20the%20survey%20period.(Retrieved%20October%2019%202025).)

societies –has been shaped by Confucian patriarchy, which reinforced male dominance by defining women’s roles primarily within the family and limiting their individual aspirations. In the late twentieth century, unprecedented economic growth across Asia expanded educational opportunities for women, while modernization and globalization opened new possibilities for their participation in public life (Chiang 3). Although Chiang’s study is somewhat dated, her description of women’s social status in Taiwan provides valuable insight into the social background of the participants of the present study, who migrated to Japan in the late 1980s:

Taiwan has gained notable economic and political influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Women’s status has improved but the Confucian cultural norms still pose certain challenges to women. Women still perform traditional roles in the family and fulfill limiting gender specific social expectations with regards to behavior and employment... (Chiang 5)

Regarding Japan, in contrast, Chiang points out that “home and domestic responsibilities have been the center of Japanese women’s activities since the 1980s” (5), which has consequently discouraged women from being active in public life and pursuing career achievement.

Gender inequality and femininity in the Japanese society are also discussed in 塩入, who examines the “locational” experiences of Taiwanese students studying in Japan in the 2000s and 2010s. One of her chapters specifically addresses how female students were treated by older Japanese men in ways that constituted sexual and power harassment. 塩入 (143-148), concludes that such experiences reflect different perceptions of gender and sexuality between Japan and Taiwan, shaped by colonial and orientalist assumptions.

As described above, various social constraints and expectations were imposed on women in both Taiwan and Japan when the Taiwanese women in this study migrated to Japan nearly three decades ago. In the analysis section, I will examine how they challenge and negotiate such gendered expectations in pursuing their aspirations to study and marry in Japan.

3. Data and methodology

The data for this study consist of audio recordings of semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2021 by LINE audio calls. The participants are two Taiwanese women (O and Y) who married Japanese men and raised

their children in Japan. I contacted these women through their children, who were students at the Taiwanese university where I worked (either foreign or overseas Chinese students)³.

I explained to the participants that the purpose of the interviews was to explore Taiwanese mothers' experiences of intercultural marriage and child-rearing in Japan. Although the participants met me for the first time during the interviews and referred to me as their children's professor⁴, our shared experiences as foreign mothers raising children in each other's countries helped us establish rapport and a sense of mutual understanding. This shared positionality as transcultural mothers was crucial for facilitating open communication.

The interview questions addressed the following five topics:

- 1) Reasons for going to Japan and experiences during the early period of migration.
- 2) Reasons for and process of deciding to marry.
- 3) Family language policy and practices.
- 4) Perspectives on child-rearing in Japan.
- 5) Views on Taiwan-Japan relations, past and present.

The interviews were conducted in Japanese. Since the participants were not native speakers of Japanese and the questions concerned the events more than twenty years earlier, I provided them in advance with both the informed consent form and the list of questions to minimize potential difficulties related to language and memory. However, the actual course of interviews was not rigidly determined by the order of questions but rather unfolded as natural conversations. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and twenty minutes (O) and one hour and forty minutes (Y).

Table 1. The participants' profiles

Participant	Year of first migration	Age at first migration	Purpose	Life path after language school
O	1989	24	Studying Japanese	Graduate school in Japan

³ This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of National Taiwan University. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interview.

⁴ Throughout the interviews, the Taiwanese mothers called the interviewer "sensei," meaning "teacher/professor" in Japanese.

				→ Marriage upon graduation
Y	1988	22	Studying Japanese	University in Japan → Marriage upon graduation

As shown in Table 1, both O and Y migrated to Japan at around the same time and age. They studied Japanese at private language schools in Tokyo for one year and subsequently pursued higher education in Japan. Both married a Japanese man immediately after graduation. This parallel pattern suggests that they experienced similar social and generational circumstances in both Taiwan and Japan, which makes them suitable as the focal participants of this study.

In terms of analysis, this study primarily focuses on O's and Y's narratives concerning the periods from their initial migration to Japan for language study to their subsequent decision to marry. This stage of their lives involved multiple crossroads and critical life decisions. The excerpts presented in this study were selected because they contain moments in which the participants narratively describe negotiating, challenging, or struggling with social norms and parental expectations surrounding studying abroad and marriage. Through a close examination of how they deliver their narratives – particularly their use of specific linguistic expressions and nonverbal cues – this study investigates how they position themselves both within the story world and within the interactional context to construct and present their narrative identities.

The interview conversations were transcribed, and the transcripts were lightly edited to remove disfluencies while preserving their original meaning. They are formatted such that each line corresponds roughly to a clause or a meaningful unit of speech. Words and phrases that are the focus of the analysis are indicated in bold, and symbols such as “@” are used to indicate laughter. Regarding the presentation of the narrative data, the Japanese excerpts are followed by English translations prepared by the author. The English translations aim for natural expression while maintaining fidelity to the grammatical structures and specific phrasing of the original Japanese narratives. However, grammatical errors in the original narratives are retained as long as their meanings remain comprehensible.

4. Analysis: Life stories of the Taiwanese women's study abroad and marriage

In this section, the life stories of O and Y are examined respectively, with special attention to how their aspirations, agency, and social norms are expressed in different ways.

4.1. O's life story

O majored in science and engineering at a university in Taiwan. During her senior year, she became acquainted with a Japanese exchange student, from whom she learned a great deal about the country. This experience inspired her to pursue graduate studies in Japan.

Excerpt 1

- 1 O: 大学4年生の時ちょうど半年 下学期の時うちの親に「日本に留学行きたい」って**言い出した**んですよ。
- 2 でなんか親がびっくりして、
- 3 「え？もうやっと大学卒業するのにまた勉強しに行くの」って。
- 4 でもその時 自分が 家庭が裕福ではないのに
- 5 日本でほら生活費高いじゃないですか。
- 6 「うん、大丈夫ですよ。私日本で勉強しながらバイトします」とかなんか**言い出して**、
- 7 「もうぜひ行かせてください」とか。
- 8 でも親も「じゃあまあ行ってみてダメだったら帰って来てください」って言ってくれて。

- 1 O: When I was a senior, in the second semester, I **suddenly spoke up** to my parents and said "I want to study abroad in Japan."
- 2 And my parents were surprised,
- 3 "What? You're finally about to graduate from university, and yet you will still study again?"
- 4 But at that time, even though my family was not wealthy,
- 5 as you know, living expenses in Japan were high,
- 6 I **spoke up with** something like "It's fine. I will study while working part-time in Japan."
- 7 and something like "Please let me go by all means."
- 8 Then my parents kindly said to me, "Well, if it doesn't work out, please come back."

It was obvious that O's decision to continue studying after graduating from university was completely unexpected and constituted a great

financial burden for her parents. In her narrative, O uses the verb *iidasu* twice (bold in lines 1 and 6), a compound verb consisting of *iu* “to say” and *dasu* “to bring out.” Compared with the simple verb *iu*, *iidasu* conveys the nuance of being the first person to say something or of suddenly bringing it up unprompted⁵. By choosing this verb, O portrays herself as the one who independently initiated the decision. Furthermore, the narrative illustrates how she enthusiastically negotiated with and persuaded her parents, highlighting her strong motivation and determination to study in Japan despite the lack of financial support from her family.

After graduation, O worked at a company in Taipei while simultaneously attending morning Japanese classes at a private language school. In the meantime, she also prepared for her relocation and even made a short trip to Tokyo to submit her application directly to the school. Approximately six months after her graduation from university, O relocated to Japan and commenced her studies at a language school in Tokyo. The following is the final part of her narrative about her migration process.

Excerpt 2⁶

- 1 O: …そんなに喋れない。
 - 2 ただあいうえおは覚えてて。
 - 3 で「もう行くか」って
 - 4 「もう時間がないから 自分が時間がないから東京の日本語学校で勉強するしかない」
 - 5 そういう覚悟で それで手続きして日本に来ました。
 - 6 I: すごいです 行動力がすごいですね@@
 - 7 O: いや@いや@いや@@@ や でも今考えてみれば無謀だった@@@@
 - 8 そ 自分がすごい苦労した@@@
-
- 1 O: ... I couldn't speak (Japanese) very well,
 - 2 I only memorized (the Japanese alphabets) “a i u e o.”
 - 3 Then, I thought “I must go now.”
 - 4 “I don't have time, I myself don't have time, so I have no choice but

⁵ According to the digital Japanese language dictionary, *Digital Daijisen* (https://kotobank.jp/word/%E8%A8%80%E5%87%BA%E3%81%99-430317#goog_rewarded), the meanings of *iidasu* are defined as: 1) To begin to say, to say out loud; and 2) be the first to say. (Translation by the author.)

⁶ “I” stands for the interviewer.

- to study at a Japanese language school in Tokyo.”
- 5 With such a **determination**, I completed the procedures and came to Japan.
- 6 I: Amazing, your ability to take action is impressive @@
- 7 O: No@ no@ no@@@ no, but **looking back, it was reckless** @@@@
- 8 Yeah, I myself went through a **very hard time** @@@

Clearly, six months was not sufficient for O to fully prepare for studying in Japan. Under such circumstances, her use of the word 覚悟 “determination” (line 5) emphasizes her identity as someone who actively faces adversity with strong will and resolve. However, O retrospectively evaluates her own initiative as 無謀 “reckless” (line 7) and its consequence as 苦労 “hardship” (line 8). Despite the negative literal meanings of her evaluation, her bursts of laughter (indicated with @) instead frame the entire episode as a humorous anecdote. In doing so, O positions herself as someone who affirms this past adversity and transforms it into a positive aspect of her life story.

While studying Japanese at the language school for one year, she passed the Japanese language proficiency test and was admitted to a science-related graduate program at a national university. While her first year in Tokyo had been hard and lonely, her life as a graduate student was fulfilling and enjoyable, partly because there were many Taiwanese students in the university where O studied. During this period, she also met her boyfriend, who later became her husband.

As graduation approached, O faced a critical crossroads: whether to return to Taiwan or to remain in Japan through marriage.

Excerpt 3

- 1 O: で卒業 大学院卒業した時、もう自分が 結婚するか、結婚すれば絶対
日本に残る？
- 2 で台湾 に帰るか、それすごい迷ってたんですよ。
- 3 で台湾に帰ればその時たぶんいい就職が待つ
- 4 なんかね、あの日本から帰ってきて しかも環境科学がその当
時が
すごいまあ一番いい就職できる学科ですね。
- 5 でその時すごい迷ってたんですよ。
- 6 でも日本に@@@ 結婚して日本に残りました。
- 7 I: そうですか。それはかなり悩みましたでしょうね。
- 8 大きな決断ですもんね。

- 9 O: そうです、はい。んん
- 10 I: やっぱ日本でその分野で ま外国人で女性が就職するっていうのは当時
はやっぱり難しい?
- 11 O: んん難しいです。そうですね理工
- 12 そうですね。あの まあ外国人は就職はそうでもないけど、
- 13 だけど外国人の女性? でしかも理工科?
- 14 理工系 理工系の就職は女性には優しくない。
- 15 I: ですね。そもそも日本人も
- 16 O: そう。で面接する時もはっきり言われて。
- 17 「いや、あの入っててもお茶汲みですよ」って言われたんです
よ@@@
@@
- 18 I: ええ 信じられない
- 19 O: そうそうそう。で あのう でまあうちの主人は優しいから
- 20 「ああ別に就職しなくてもいいよ。もう結婚しよう」 @@@@
@
- 21 I: @@@ ふうん ね? せっかく勉強したのに。
- 22 O: そう。で諦めて、
- 23 普通の事務系の会社 貿易会社?
- 24 もう自分の専門がもう諦めて、
- 25 もう女性には本当に難しい。
- 26 もう入っててもお茶汲みになるだったら もっとほら楽なところ行こう
って@@
- 27 諦めたんですよ @@@@
- 1 O: When I graduated from the graduate school, whether I marry—if I marry,
I would definitely remain in Japan—
- 2 or I return to Taiwan? I was really torn between the two.
- 3 If I returned, I would probably have a good job waiting (for me).
- 4 Well, coming back from Japan and moreover, (having studied at) the environmental science, which was the most promising field for employment
at that time.
- 5 So, I was uncertain/conflicted then.
- 6 But in Japan @@@, I got married and remained in Japan @@@.
- 7 I: I see. You must have agonized a lot over that, right?
- 8 It was such a big decision.

- 9 O: Yeah, yes. Uh-huh.
- 10 I: As expected, in Japan, in that field, was it difficult for a foreigner, especially a woman, to get employed at that time?
- 11 O: Yeah, difficult. Well, as for science and engineering,
- 12 well, for a foreigner alone, employment was not that hard.
- 13 But for a foreign woman? And in science and engineering?
- 14 The employment in the science and engineering field was not favorable to women.
- 15 I: Indeed. Even for Japanese people it was...
- 16 O: Right. At the job interview, I was explicitly told
- 17 "Well, even if you enter our company, you'll just serve tea." @@@
- 18 I: What? Unbelievable!
- 19 O: Yeah yeah yeah. Then, well, because my husband was tender,
- 20 he said "You don't have to work. Let's just get married." @@@
- 21 I: @@@ Humm. Despite the effort you put in studying, right?
- 22 O: Yes. Then, I **gave up**,
- 23 and (entered) an ordinary clerical work, a trading company.
- 24 I **gave up** pursuing my specialty.
- 25 It was really difficult for women.
- 26 If I would just be serving tea, I thought "I might as well take an easier job" @@
- 27 So I **gave up**. @@@

The narrative above illustrates how the gendered expectations of the Japanese society compelled O to face a difficult and crucial life decision: whether to marry and remain in Japan or to return to Taiwan and pursue a career. Specifically, O's intersectional position (as a foreigner, a woman, and a science engineering major) hindered her ability to establish a professional career in Japan. According to her account, it was her husband's proposal of marriage that ultimately shaped her decision. Consequently, she abandoned the pursuit of a job in her field of specialization and instead sought a more accessible clerical job in Japan. In this part of the narrative, O employs the verb 諦める "to give up" three times (lines 22, 24 and 27), which literally conveys her sense of helplessness. However, because she recurrently inserts laughter, the entire story does not resonate with regret or a sense of failure, but rather retrospectively frames this life event as a humorous anecdote.

A few years later, O became pregnant and left her full-time position at the trading company. After giving birth, she assumed primary responsibility for domestic duties and childcare, and since then she has

only worked part-time. That O does not regret her decision can be inferred in the following narrative, produced when I asked her about the Taiwanese mothers' community in Japan.

Excerpt 4

- 1 I: じゃ そう言う台湾人の親同士でなんかこう日本の 日本の生活はこう
2 なんでしょうね? なんて言ういうかな
3 よく一緒に愚痴を言うとか@なんか@@こう
4 O: ああ それはありますね。そうですね、ありました。
5 まあそういうのはありました。
6 意外と 私は留学生から 私が一番長いですよ日本が。
7 で意外と好きで日本好きで日本住んでる?
8 だから他のお母さんはほら なんか結婚してから日本に来たとか
9 日本語あんまりわからないまま結婚したとか
10 色々あとまあ文化の違いで 色々夫婦問題とか
11 うんそうですね色々聞きましたね。
12 でも私自身は日本好きだから
13 うん。あまり日本はどうのこうのは言わないですね。
14 それだったら自分の選択が正しくないって否定されちゃうから@@@
15 I: なるほどね。でもなんかわりと周りの台湾人の人たちがよく言うよう
 な 共通して言うような なんていうか愚痴ってそう言うのってあり
 ますか。
16 ありましたか。
17 O: うん ありますあります。
18 ただ私はその輪には入りません。

- 1 I: Among Taiwanese parents, well, about Japan, about life in Japan is like...
2 well, what should I say? How should I put it in words?
3 (Did you) complaint together (about living in Japan)@ or @@ things like...
4 O: Oh, we do. Yes, we did.
5 Well, something like that happened.
6 Actually, I came to Japan as a student, so I have lived in Japan the longest.

- 7 And, actually I like Japan, so I live in Japan.
 8 And other mothers, you know, came only after marriage or
 9 married without knowing much Japanese,
 10 because of cultural differences, (they often faced) various marital
 problems.
 11 Yes, I heard a lot those stories.
 12 But as for myself, since I like Japan,
 13 yeah, I don't really speak ill of Japan.
 14 **If I did, my choice would be denied as not right @@@**
 15 I: I see. But are there any kinds of common complaints that
 Taiwanese people
 around you often shared?
 16 Were there anything?
 17 O: Yes, yes, there are.
 18 **But I never join in that circle!**

In this narrative, O positions herself in contrast to other Taiwanese women in Japan who complain about their husbands and lives. By emphasizing that she does not complain, O frames her life in Japan as the outcome of her own decision. As she states, if she were to criticize Japan, "my choice would be denied as not right" (line 14), suggesting that refraining from complaint allows her to maintain this sense of personal agency. Even when the interviewer attempts a second time to solicit common complaints shared by Taiwanese women in Japan (lines 15-16), O only provides a minimal response ("yes, there are") acknowledging the existence of such complaints (line 17). However, she firmly declares that she would not join such a circle of complaint (line 18). Thus, O positions herself not only in opposition to other Taiwanese women in her narrative, but also resists the interviewer's repeated invitation to articulate shared complaints about life in Japan. In doing so, O presents her identity as someone who retrospectively frames her life as the outcome of her autonomous choice, thereby distancing herself from discourses of dissatisfaction and regret.

In sum, O constructs her identity by underscoring her agency in life decisions, even when confronted with financial, gendered and cultural constraints in Taiwan and Japan. She positions herself apart from other Taiwanese women by refusing to complain or express regret, thereby affirming her life as the outcome of her own choice.

The following subsection turns to Y's narrative to explore how similar tensions between agency and social norms are negotiated distinctly.

4.2. Y's life story

Y first became interested in the Japanese language at the age of 21, when she encountered it for the first time. At that time, her father, who often traveled to Japan for business, hired a tutor for her younger brother to study Japanese. When Y requested to join the lesson, her parents refused.

Excerpt 5

- 1 Y: で「なんで女性は日本語勉強ダメですか？」っていうふうに聞いたところ
ろが
 - 2 やっぱりね「女の子が嫁に行っちゃうから必要がない」と。
 - 3 それでなんかなんとなく気持ちがよくないというところだったので、
 - 4 それでそういうところのきっかけだったんで…
-
- 1 Y: Then, I asked (them) “Why can’t women study Japanese?”
 - 2 as expected, (they replied) “Because girls will eventually marry and leave, there is no need.”
 - 3 I felt somehow uncomfortable/negative,
 - 4 and that was the trigger/impetus ...

Y's desire to study Japanese was constrained by her parents' gendered expectation. This personal constraint, however, occurred simultaneously with a wave of social reform and liberalization that influenced young people in Taiwan, including Y, to pursue studying abroad.

Excerpt 6

- 1 Y: そういう時は私たちは 20 歳の時に、なんか外国に行くのブームがあっ
たんです。((中略))
- 2 その時同級生の方と喋ったりとかしたので
- 3 それで「いいね いいね」っていう話になって。
- 4 でもその時はやっぱりまだ学生だし、
- 5 あのちょっと金銭なかなかまだ厳しいという状態だったので、
- 6 その時は一旦まあ夢見たいな感じで思ったりしてたので、

- 7 たまたまじゃちょっと塾でも行ってみようかなって同級生とい
ろいろ
話して、
8 その時は塾はそんなに高い料金ではなかったみたい
9 ま1週間1回か2回ぐらいという感じ ((中略))
10 その時はたまたま教えていただいてる先生が日本人だったんで
す。
11 それでその日本人の先生が「あ、二人興味があればうちの父さ
んが新宿
で塾がやってるよ。」
12 要するに日本語学校あると。
13 「紹介しましょうか」って
14 「えーそうなの？」って
15 なんか急に**夢があ**の降ってきたという感じでした。
- 1 Y: Around the age of 20, there was a boom of going abroad (among
us). ((omit))
2 I was talking with my classmate and
3 (we agreed) the idea was good.
4 But we were still students and
5 money was still quite tight, so
6 at that time, (studying in Japan) was momentarily felt like just a
dream, so
7 just by chance, I discussed it with my classmate and thought we
could try
going to a cram school,
8 at that time, cram schools didn't seem to have very high fees,
9 well, maybe once or twice a week. ((omit))
10 By chance, the teacher who taught us at that time was Japanese.
11 And that Japanese teacher said, "Oh, if you two are interested (in
studying in
Japan), my father is running a cram school in Shinjuku."
12 In other words, he owned a Japanese language school.
13 "Shall I introduce (it to you)?"
14 "What? Really?"
15 It felt as if **a dream had suddenly fallen from the sky.**

Based on Y's narrative, her parents valued only the education of boys but not that of girls, since the latter were conventionally expected to leave

home after marriage. This was likely a shared social norm among Taiwanese adults at that time. However, Y's narrative presents herself as a daughter who resists her parents' gendered discrimination and strategically seeks a path to pursue her dream of studying Japanese (in Japan). Although the actual opportunity to study in Japan emerged somewhat by chance (夢が降ってきた "a dream had fallen from the sky" in line 15), it was Y's agentive actions that enabled her to move closer to realizing her aspiration.

According to Y, she did not know much about Japan and had no concrete plan when she first arrived. With the help and support of people around her in Tokyo, her first year went relatively smoothly. However, she and her friend lived together in a very inexpensive apartment without a bathroom, studying at the language school while working part-time. Such a lifestyle, combined with the severe winter in Tokyo, made her friend ill, leading her to return to Taiwan after one year. In contrast, Y felt that one year of study was insufficient, so she consulted with her language school teacher about whether she should go to a vocational school or a college. The teacher recommended her to apply for O university, which had just begun accepting foreign students, suggesting that Y would have a good chance of being admitted.

Excerpt 7

- 1 Y: でその時は あのまあそうだね、じゃ受けてみようかなと。
- 2 あとは ここで帰るどうしよかなって
- 3 そこまでやっぱりちょっと物足りない という感じで
- 4 O 大学の方に ま受かって。
- 5 その時には じゃあちょっと帰って、
- 6 でもやっぱり大学の学費が高いなので、
- 7 私も ごめん、私も長女と言っても私けっこう やっぱり
- 親から
- お金もらうのはすごくやだなと。
- 8 自分で来るのが自分で決めてたものなので。
- 9 やっぱり親にお金かけてもらうというのが私はすごくやだ
- し、
- 10 その時は本当にアルバイトで しながら通いました。
- 11 I: そうですかあ。すごいですねえ。
- 12 Y: まちょっと今思えば
- 13 正直そのインタビューを@ほんと@昔のこと@いろいろ@ち
- よっと

- 思い出した@というところ
 14 まもちろん苦勞したということもあるんですけども
 15 今 苦勞してたから今の私はあったんじゃないかなと。
 16 でも私はみんなよりはそこまでは苦勞してはいなかったかな
 という
 ところで...
- 1 Y: Then at that time, I thought, "Well, that's right, shall I try applying
 (to
 the college)?"
 2 And then, whether or not to go home at this point,
 3 it felt a bit unsatisfactory/lacking.
 4 Then, I was accepted by O university.
 5 At that time, I went back (to Taiwan) shortly,
 6 but you know, university tuition was very expensive,
 7 so I'm sorry, even though I was an eldest daughter, I really disliked
 to receive
 money from my parents.
 8 Since coming to Japan was my own decision/choice,
 9 I strongly disliked relying financially on my parents.
 10 So, that time, I attended university while working part-time.
 11 I: I see. That's amazing.
 12 Y: Well, looking back now,
 13 honestly, this interview @ has actually @ reminded me @ of many
 things
 from the past @.
 14 Well, of course, I had **hardships**,
 15 but I feel that **those hardships made me who I am now**.
 16 Still, compared with others, I didn't suffer/struggle as much as
 they did...

Although Y's decision about which university to apply for was shaped somehow passively by her teacher's pragmatic advice, the subsequent part of her narrative highlights her as an independent daughter. She demonstrates this independency by taking responsibility for her own choices and actively resisted the social norm that parents are expected to support the eldest child's academic career (lines 7-9). Consequently, she worked part-time to cover her tuition herself, and retrospectively frames her life as a foreign student in terms of 苦勞 "hardships" (line 14). At the

same time, she interprets these hardships as formative experiences that contributed to making her who she is today, thereby illustrating her resilience (line 15).

During her college years, Y began dating a Japanese man who eventually became her husband. At first, she planned to return to Taiwan and find a job after graduation. However, after visiting her boyfriend's hometown and meeting his family, she realized that everyone around her regarded their relationship as heading toward marriage.

Excerpt 8

- 1 Y: 変な話 自分で愛するよりはたぶん愛されたの方が私は捨てられない
かなという風に
- 2 ま その時はほんとに単純で それだけしか思ってたんです。
- 3 やっぱあの一人で日本にいるから。
- 4 I: そうですね、頼る人いないし。
- 5 Y: そう。周りをみんなやっぱり不幸な人結構いっぱいいるんですよ。
- 6 やっぱなんか要するに暴力を受けられたりとか
- 7 あとほんとに金銭面で 自分でも働かないといけないとか
- 8 けっこうさまざまのやな話とかたくさん聞きました。
- 9 だからそうすると じゃ私ほんとに就職したかったの@
- 10 でもお父さんお母さんが「もういいよ。女の人が 逆にもう結婚しか
ないんだろ」という風に言ってたので。
- 11 仕事いつでもできるんじゃないかなと。
- 12 じゃあまあいいかなその、
- 13 けっきょく子供できちゃっ@たので@@
- 14 もうじゃしょうがないかなという感じ。
- 15 ましょうがないというのじゃないんだけど...

- 1 Y: To put it in a strange way, rather than me loving him, I wouldn't be
abandoned if I were loved by him.
- 2 Back then, I was really simple-minded and that was all I
thought.
- 3 After all, I was living alone in Japan.
- 4 I: Right. You had no one else to rely on.

- 5 Y: Yeah. Around me, there were actually quite a few unhappy people.
- 6 You know, in other words, some suffered from domestic violence,
- 7 while others struggled financially and had to work (to survive).
- 8 I heard a lot of various unpleasant stories.
- 9 Therefore, in that case, I honestly wanted to get a job@,
- 10 but my father and mother told me “That’s enough. Women, conversely, really have no choice but to marry.”
- 11 (Then I thought) “I can work anytime I like.”
- 12 “So, maybe (marriage) is fine then.”
- 13 In the end, I became@ pregnant @@,
- 14 and so **I felt I had no choice.**
- 15 Well, it’s not exactly “no choice” though...

Y got married at the age of 28. Her narrative demonstrates that her decision to marry was negotiated not only between her personal aspiration to pursue a career in Taiwan (line 9) and the social and parental expectation that women should marry by a certain age (line 10), but also within the broader social circumstances that placed foreign women in a vulnerable position (lines 5-8). At the same time, Y frames her choice as an active decision to marry a man who truly loved her, positioning herself not as a passive victim of circumstances but as someone who strategically sought reliability and security in her life in Japan. She further reframed the situation positively by convincing herself that “work can be pursued anytime” (line 11), reflecting her effort to maintain agency and optimism in the face of constrained choices. Ultimately, her pregnancy became the decisive factor leading to her marriage, which she describes with somewhat a sense of resignation, stating *しょうがない* “I had no choice.” (line 14). However, the preceding laughter (@ in line 13) reframes the entire event as a laughable anecdote.

5. Discussion

5.1. Social norms and gendered expectations revealed through Taiwanese women’s narratives

Through O and Y’s narratives on migration and study abroad, it becomes evident that young Taiwanese people in a democratizing society were

deeply inspired by the liberalization of overseas study and aspired to gain experiences abroad. Although the clarity of their goals and the strength of their motivations differ –Y’s goal being less concrete and her motivation relatively passive– both O and Y had to negotiate with social norms and parental expectations in order to realize their aspirations to study in Japan. The findings below address Research Question (1).

First, they both faced the challenge of limited financial support from their families. Their stories reflect a prevailing social norm in Taiwan at that time: children were expected to become financially independent after reaching a certain age. Both O and Y appear to have internalized this norm. Thus, according to their narratives, it was not that their parents refused to pay their tuition, but rather that O and Y themselves rejected the idea of depending on parental financial assistance.

As for gendered expectations, Y’s narratives reveal that some Taiwanese parents placed less value on their daughters’ education and careers than on those of their sons. Instead, daughters were expected to marry and leave home. This reflects the traditional Confucian view that prioritizes sons as family successors and regards daughters as temporary members who will eventually marry out. O’s narratives, on the other hand, highlight gender inequality in Japan, particularly in the pursuit of professional careers. Although these gendered expectations did not prevent O and Y from migrating to Japan and attaining higher education, they nevertheless exerted a strong influence on their later decisions to abandon their professional ambitions and choose marriage.

5.2. Constructing and reconstructing agency through life story narratives

This subsection addresses Research Questions (2) and (3) presented in the introduction. Both O and Y express their sense of agency in various ways through their narratives (see Table 2 for a systematic comparison).

In O’s case, the use of particular terms such as 言い出す “to be the first person to speak up” and 覚悟 “determination,” as well as her description of a persuasive dialogue with her parents, clearly demonstrate her agency in deciding to go to Japan. In contrast, Y’s narrative about her migration to Japan demonstrates her agency in a more subtle way, particularly through how she frames her motivations and choices within broader social expectations. Nevertheless, her own initiative to seek ways to learn Japanese despite various limitations ultimately led her, often by chance, to realize her dream of going to Japan. Y’s strong sense of agency becomes more apparent later in her story, when she decides to continue

her studies at a university and refuses financial support from her parents.

As for marriage, neither O nor Y resisted prevailing gendered expectations and discrimination in Taiwan and Japan, and both eventually gave up pursuing their professional careers. Even though they describe these compromises using non-agentive expressions such as 諦める “to give up” or しょうがない “I had no choice,” their delivery of these stories – interspersed with laughter – mitigates the sense of regret or failure. As Jefferson suggests, laughter in “troubles talk” can function as “troubles-resistance,” signaling that the speaker is not overwhelmed by their circumstances but is instead managing them and is able to take the trouble lightly (Jefferson 351). Likewise, by laughing, O and Y discursively distance themselves from the trope of the “oppressed woman.” In fact, O’s presentation of herself as a Taiwanese woman who does not complain about Japan reconfirms her agency in choosing marriage over career. In contrast, Y highlights her sense of agency by positioning herself apart from other foreign women in Japan who experienced domestic violence or financial difficulties, emphasizing that she actively chose a reliable husband.

Table 2. Comparative summary of narrative strategies in the construction of agency in O’s and Y’s narratives

Analytic dimension	O	Y
Agency strategies in deciding to study in Japan	Strong, explicit agency expressed through self-assertive terms (e.g. 言い出す “speak up”, 覚悟 “determination”) and persuasive dialogue with her parents.	More implicit agency expressed through contextual framing and less agentive expressions (e.g. 夢が降ってきた “a dream fell from the sky”), with stronger agency emerging later in her refusal of parental financial support.
Reframing strategies of early life in Japan	Reframing 無謀 “recklessness” and 苦労 “hardship” as humorous anecdotes accompanied by laughter.	Reframing 苦労 “hardship” as formative experiences that shaped her present identity.

Agency strategies in marriage rationales	Accepting discriminatory gender norms and limited professional career opportunities in Japan, using non-agentive expressions such as 諦める “to give up”, while reframing the situation humorously through laughter.	Accepting gender norms and parental expectations, using non-agentive expressions such as しようがない “I had no choice”, while reframing the situation humorously through laughter.
Reframing strategies of marriage decision	Emphasizing marriage as her own decision by positioning herself in contrast to other Taiwanese women who complain about Japan.	Presenting herself as actively choosing a reliable husband by positioning herself in contrast to other foreign women who experience marital problems in Japan.

A comparison of their narratives of studying abroad and marriage suggests an asymmetry in the operation of social norms at that time: while social constraints on women’s access to higher education were gradually loosening, expectations surrounding marriage remained more persistent and restrictive, exerting a stronger influence on their life choices. This suggests that their marriage decisions cannot be defined by a simple binary of agentive choice or passive internalization of persisting gendered expectations. Rather, their narratives reveal more nuanced forms of agency – one that is exercised through the pragmatic negotiation of, and eventual alignment with, enduring social structures.

Interestingly, both O and Y express their past experiences of migrating to Japan as 苦勞 “hardship.” However, both similarly treat their past hardship as formative experiences that shaped their current identity. This process of transforming hardship into formative experience is a critical function of retrospective narrative (Riessman, *Narrative Methods* 8-10). By casting their past struggles as necessary steps toward identity development, O and Y effectively reframe their past constraints as moments of personal growth. Through this narrative strategy, their current sense of self—as resilient and adaptable women—is discursively

constructed and validated. Thus, the articulation of 苦勞 serves not to diminish but rather to reinforce their sense of agency, confirming their ability to overcome challenges and make the best of their choices, thereby addressing Research Question (3).

6. Conclusion

Employing the framework of narrative analysis, this study analyzed the life story narratives of two Taiwanese women who migrated to Japan as language students in the late 1980s and eventually married and settled there. The analysis revealed how these women strategically constructed and negotiated their sense of agency through narratives when making critical decisions regarding their study abroad and marriage in Japan, despite facing various social and gendered constraints in both societies. It further suggests that the agency in these narratives cannot be understood as a simple binary between active choice and passive conformity, but rather as a nuanced process of negotiation with enduring social norms and structures.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how young people in post-martial-law Taiwan navigated rapid social change and redefined their life trajectories while negotiating persisting social norms and expectations. By tracing the women's migration and life choices, this study illustrates how individuals exercise agency to forge new possibilities for education, marriage, and self-realization amid Taiwan's democratization and globalization.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged: the analysis focused specifically on narratives concerning overseas study and marriage. However, the interviews contain rich stories from later stages of their lives, such as child-rearing and working experiences in Japan. Future studies will explore how they negotiate social norms and cultural differences through these subsequent life stages.

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