

# **Documentary Films as a Medium of Intervention: Visualization and Mediation of New Immigrant Issues in Taiwan**

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## **Abstract**

This essay explores the significance of documentary films and their portrayal of new immigrants in Taiwan. It also examines how these films serve as a medium that visualizes and mediates the social issues that marriage migrants experience. New immigrants relocate to and settle in Taiwan through transnational marriages. China and Southeast Asia have been the two major regions that migrant spouses have migrated from since the 1980s. As an alternative medium, documentaries embody resistance, serve as sociopolitical interventions, and lend a voice to voiceless migrants to express themselves and increase their visibility in the public sphere. Addressing the representational politics of documentary filmmaking, this essay examines the following two questions: (1) How do social structures, such as tradition, patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and sovereignty, affect marriage migrants' adaptation as they become recognized and localized in Taiwan? (2) How does documentary filmmaking intervene in the representations of new migrants by the mass media and the government's nation-building project? It is suggested that documentary filmmaking concerning new immigrant issues serves as a visual social movement that advocates policymaking and mediates and publicizes social issues.

Keywords: Taiwan Documentary, New Immigrant, Visualization, Mediation

## **New Immigrants and Documentary Filmmaking**

Transnational migration, globalization, and the flow of goods facilitate global mobility, the formation of multiple citizenships, and the development of survival strategies. The representation of migrants and their cultures by both locals and the immigrants is important to understanding place-based cultural productions. "New immigrants" have been migrating and settling in Taiwan since the 1980s due to transnational marriages. The political and cultural incorporation of new immigrants into Taiwanese society has become particularly significant due to their growing population and their influence on the nation-building project and the reconstruction of Taiwanese identity.

Taiwanese mass media—particularly TV news and social media—portray new immigrants in a relatively negative manner and rarely report their stories in-depth. Immigrants are often labeled as greedy gold diggers and runaway brides because they marry into Taiwanese families out of economic need. Accordingly, such representations “conceal some real aspects so that the ‘construction of reality’ may leave gaps to our apprehension” (Huang, 2015: 336). An increasing number of new immigrants turn to various forms of cultural production, including literature, film, performance, and exhibition curation to produce cultural outputs that incorporate elements from both Taiwanese culture and their native cultures. They construct and reconstruct their identities, present their lived experiences, and express themselves. These literary and cinematic products also promote new immigrants’ empowerment and active participation in local society. Unlike their representations in mass media, such bottom-up productions by new immigrants are powerful and enable the audience to understand other aspects of their stories and experiences in Taiwan.

Since 2010, an increasing number of new immigrants have actively participated in local cultural productions through filmmaking and creative writing. For instance, the Taiwan Literature Award for Migrants was held annually from 2014 to 2020. According to the award’s official website, its aim is to “encourage migrant writers and record the history that is happening now.” The website also states that “through the literary productions of immigrants and migrant workers, we will see stories of living in foreign lands, the feeling of having two homelands, and having parents of two nationalities, open before our eyes.” It targets immigrants and migrant workers from Southeast Asia specifically and encourages them to write in their mother tongues or Mandarin. Moreover, it not only provides them opportunities to participate in cultural productions, but also presents a multilingual and multicultural space that accommodates various voices.

Apart from literature, documentary films are another important form of cultural production for

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new immigrants as they provide a voice to the voiceless, reflect the sociopolitical issues of the invisible and underprivileged subjects, and engage with society. Documentary films on new immigrants can be divided into three categories: (1) special topic programs produced by television stations and sponsored by the government, (2) feature-length documentaries by Taiwanese filmmakers, and (3) self-representing work by new immigrants and migrant workers. Episodes in special topic programs are relatively short, introduce a foreign immigrant (coming either through marriage or for work), and present their story of living in Taiwan. Most special topic programs portray Taiwan as an ideal and hospitable homeland and focus on the success stories of new immigrants. These presentations are shaped by a happy and harmonious tone that conveys the message that anyone can live a happy life and find a place for themselves in Taiwan. Yet, they overlook the negative aspects of immigration, such as discrimination, inequality, and marginalization. These films hardly touch upon the social and cultural issues that new immigrants encounter, including language barriers and domestic violence.

Accordingly, two groups of directors, including new immigrant documentarians and Taiwanese filmmakers, have devoted themselves to filming new immigrants' stories. Both groups strive to present new immigrants' experiences and conduct long-term fieldwork in local ethnic communities. New immigrants have been marginalized and overlooked for a long time in Taiwan. However, they gradually found a place over the course of the 2010s, and subsequently became involved in the migrant movement and cultural productions. The New Immigrant Development Fund of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of China, Taiwan, has sponsored and held workshops to teach new immigrants how to make documentaries and preserve a record of their lives in Taiwan. Some films shed light on their domestic space, marriage, family, and everyday life, whereas others demonstrate how they established their own businesses in Taiwan, such as hair and nail salons and restaurants.

*Let's Not Be Afraid* 姊妹，賣冬瓜 (2010) was the first self-produced film and collective production by a new immigrants' association—the TransAsia Sisters Association. The film presents their personal experiences regarding transnational marriage, protests, and public demonstrations to fight for their rights. Kim Hong Nguyen, who moved from Vietnam to Taiwan after her marriage in 2000, is a new immigrant documentarian who has produced several documentary films on new immigrants and migrant workers. Her cinematic works include *Out/Marriage* 失婚記 (2012), *Lovable Strangers* 可愛陌生人 (2013), and *See You, Lovable Strangers* 再見，可愛陌生人 (2017). Her films include several scenes and interviews shot in migrants' home countries, which contributed to the two-way communication between Taiwan and the migrants' homelands (Hsieh, 2020). She has continuously fought for new immigrants' citizenship, rights, and social protection and has established a local cultural space to enable marriage migrants, migrant workers, and Taiwanese locals to interact with each other in Taiwan's Chiayi City. This space also hosts activities that provide a glimpse into other Southeast Asian cultures, particularly Vietnamese culture.

Apart from the above examples, an increasing number of other filmmakers have contributed to the cinematic representations of new immigrants in Taiwan. Some Taiwanese directors' feature-

length documentary films address the difficulties related to transnational marriages. They also utilize their documentary filmmaking as a medium for advocating the introduction of policies to safeguard migrants' civil rights and social welfare. These documentaries produced by Taiwanese directors carry specific and strong sociopolitical messages that may help the audience understand issues faced by new immigrants through film screenings.

In addition to moving between the domestic and public spheres, new immigrants have undergone adaptation, localization, or assimilation in their attempt to settle in Taiwan. These experiences are highly influenced by multiple social structures and are closely associated with their gendered roles. As sociology studies show, female immigrants are expected to share household duties, give birth to children, and make a living for their families (Hsia, 2000). In fact, female immigrants have experienced traditional values and pressures similar to those of Taiwanese women in society. Furthermore, ethnic and national identities are other factors that affect their localization and assimilation in Taiwan. This shows that gender politics and ethnic relations heavily influence female immigrants' subject formation and identity construction in their host society. This essay examines how social structures, such as tradition, patriarchy, law, and cultural hegemony, have affected female immigrants' adaptation as they become recognized and localized in Taiwan through the analysis of two documentaries produced by Taiwanese filmmakers: *Dream Hair Salon* 夢想美髮店 (2011) and *The Immortal's Play* 神戲 (2016). By positing documentaries as a medium of intervention, a sociopolitical praxis can take place in two ways: (1) intervening in the existing representation of new immigrants in mass media, and (2) visualizing the issues faced by migrants and generating public awareness through the circulation of these documentaries.

### ***Dream Hair Salon: On the Way to Becoming a Taiwanese Citizen***

Wen-Zhen Tseng's *Dream Hair Salon* traces the migratory trajectories of three immigrants from China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, respectively. These immigrants serve as the main interviewees in the narrative, which explores their efforts to become localized in Taiwan through strategies such as adaptation, job seeking, and applying for citizenship. This film presents the typical narrative of transnational migration which involves departure from the homeland, adaptation to the host state, and localization. It presents the common challenges that immigrants face, such as cultural shock, loneliness, family relations, identity, and citizenship. However, this film also reflects new immigrants' difficulties with respect to their career, children's education, and citizenship in response to the immigration policies proposed and enforced by the government. Pushing beyond the domestic sphere, this film sheds light on the new immigrants' struggle in the public sphere and conveys how they negotiate their place in the face of multiple discriminatory social structures, which include linguistic hegemony and immigration laws. It definitively explores interviewees' empowerment and negotiation as a means of becoming Taiwanese.

*Dream Hair Salon* mainly focuses on two separate matters that divide the narrative into two parts: professional skills as a means of empowerment and the desire to gain citizenship. Unlike other contemporary documentaries that address immigrant women's suffering in marriage and

family relationships, this film highlights their experiences in the public sphere. The first half of the film captures the experience of two hairdressers (Ying-Shu Nguyen and Xiao-mei Yin) and the owner of a grocery store (Lina Lin). Most of the interviewees were either widows or divorcees and were thus single mothers; owing to their economic condition, these immigrant women needed to make a living to raise their children. For instance, Ying-Shu Nguyen's journey to becoming Taiwanese is rife with trouble and misfortune. She moved out of her in-laws' home and pursued a career in hair design because she could not take her son back to Vietnam and her brother-in-law warned her that it was illegal for her to work without an ID card.

This points to the patrilocal structure of the family that prevents Nguyen from returning to Vietnam. Becoming a hairdresser not only fulfills her economic needs but also empowers Nguyen in the public sphere and makes her eligible to apply for citizenship. By fighting against the familial patriarchy, Nguyen is able to live autonomously and raise her child.

Discrimination against immigrant women is practiced in different forms and at various places, such as in the process of applying for a national ID card, which is the first step to acquiring rightful citizenship in Taiwan. The second half of the film reveals how the discriminatory rule of the law creates a hierarchy of immigrants from different countries. Due to the complicated citizenship process and application forms, it takes over five years for Nguyen to prepare her documents. The filmmaker utilizes a medium shot to capture Nguyen's disappointment and helplessness (see Figure 1).

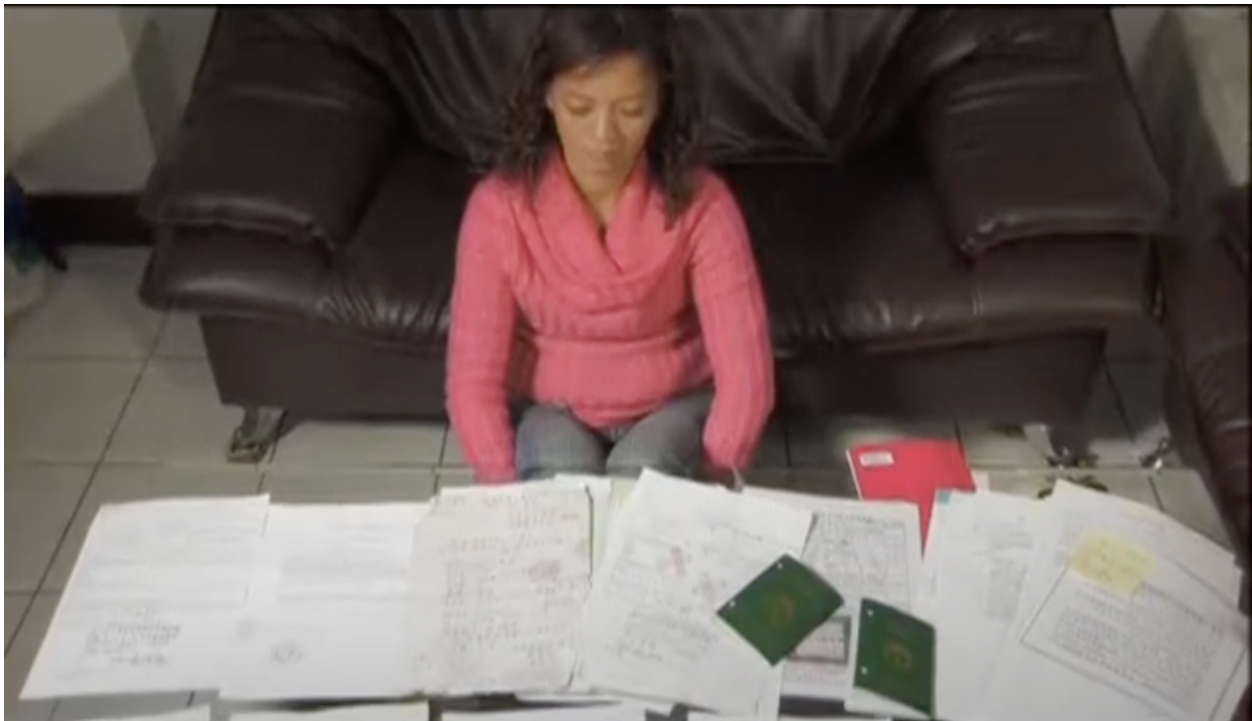


Figure 1. Ying-Shu Nguyen's struggle to acquire Taiwanese citizenship

We see Nguyen struggling with her citizenship application, which she must complete to stay in Taiwan with her son. The scene demonstrates the immigrant woman's negotiation with the government and the challenge of becoming Taiwanese. Subsequently, her application gets rejected by the Department of Household Registration because it is incomplete and lacks sufficient financial records. The film is critical of patriarchy, immigration law, and the discrimination faced by marriage migrants, and draws attention to the struggles these migrants experience in the process of localization.

*Dream Hair Salon* questions the existing immigration law and criticizes the imperfect application process that perplexes new immigrants and spawns a seemingly endless struggle and long waiting periods for approval or refusal. By visualizing the policymaking issue and migrants' experiences via documentary filmmaking, it draws the audience's attention to the invisible issues related to transnational migration and aims to stir people's consciousness of social and political praxis pertaining to immigrants and their issues, which include employment, education, and citizenship.

### ***The Immortal's Play: Newcomer and Traditional Culture***

Li-Chun Lai and Jia-Ru Peng's co-produced documentary film, *The Immortal's Play*, depicts the story of Annie Nguyen—a Vietnamese immigrant. The film can be considered Nguyen's biographical narrative, featuring her passion for Taiwanese opera and her training as a professional circus performer in Vietnam since childhood. Unlike arranged transnational marriages in Taiwan, Nguyen and her husband fell in love and married. She became an important member of her in-laws' Taiwanese opera troupe and accomplished her dream of becoming an opera performer. Traditionally, many Taiwanese opera troupes are composed of family members and are generational in nature. The stage is constructed as the "home" for performers and family members; the front of the stage is the workplace, whereas the backstage is the domestic sphere. Performers and family members cross public and private spheres every day and navigate multiple social roles and identities through crossing boundaries. *The Immortal's Play* focuses on the everyday dichotomy of the front and backstage, presenting Nguyen's challenges and experiences as a daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, opera performer, and new immigrant.

The production of this documentary is based on observation and participation. It follows the opera troupe as it travels to various places within Taiwan and films the family/troupe's everyday life and work. In the first scene, shot in Lugu, Nantou, the camera tracks the truck as it enters the temple court, and then shows the staff at work unpacking props, setting up the stage, etc. Once the day begins, the performers get dressed, say a prayer, and take the stage. As the opera performance is presented on the screen, a voiceover introduces the history of the Taiwanese opera. The narrator states, "In Taiwan, many temple fairs are held on the immortals' birthdays, and outdoor operas are always invited to thank the immortals. Before the play, the performers need to act like the immortals, because it is played for the immortals." The introduction to Taiwanese opera provided by the voiceover contributes to the audience's understanding of Taiwanese opera as a form of

Taiwanese culture and highlights the significance of family heritage. The introductory scene first explains the background of Nguyen's in-laws and her work and life in the troupe, and then attention is drawn to Nguyen being a responsible mother (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Annie Nguyen taking care of her sick child

Accordingly, when she gets off the stage, she immediately attends to her sick child. A folding partition separates the work and living areas of the family/troupe and demarcates Nguyen's role as a performer and mother. Nguyen works hard alongside her husband to make a living as a performer. However, she is also the mother of a sick daughter who requires daily dialysis, and she strives to take care of her children. Nguyen's depiction demonstrates her troupe life in Taiwan, which embodies her in-laws' expectations and the responsibilities imposed on her. The scene presents Nguyen as an immigrant woman who struggles with work and life and negotiates multiple social roles in the family and society. This particular sequence highlights gender politics in the families of transnational couples.

As a Vietnamese immigrant in Taiwan, Annie Nguyen's ethnic and cultural differences are noteworthy in comparison to how she is perceived and treated by the people around her, including her in-laws and other Taiwanese people. To become a better performer, Nguyen learns Taiwanese opera singing from a famous master, Yue-er Yen. The process is filmed through a close-up shot of Nguyen taking notes in Vietnamese. When talking about her impression of Nguyen, Yen states, "I thought that since she's Vietnamese, she would never be able to learn the seven-worded rhymes, but she learned them quickly. She is very smart. She could play after one to two years of coming to Taiwan." The master indicated that it is never easy for new immigrants to learn Mandarin, especially the traditional Mandarin rhythm. The impression that Yen held is quite common in



Taiwan, where new immigrants are perceived as incapable and less-educated outsiders who are unable to speak Mandarin fluently. Nevertheless, the camera captures Nguyen's earnestness and passion while singing. Through nonstop learning and practice, she learns techniques associated with Taiwanese opera. Nguyen and her husband, Fang-yuan Chang, practice singing by a pond. While Nguyen is taking notes, her husband Chang is interviewed by the filmmakers. In the discussion, he states, "Although you are from a foreign country, you should be a role model for others." Upon hearing this, Annie adds, "Actually I think it is not necessary to define someone as a foreign or native spouse... We are all the same, right?" This comment indicates that Annie hopes to be treated equally on stage, where everyone is expected to act and perform professionally. She expresses her wish to be recognized through her professional skills, which are not associated with her ethnicity. The documentary as a medium enables the juxtaposition of the Taiwanese and new immigrant perspectives and facilitates communication between the two groups.

Taiwanese opera, a traditional cultural industry, faces threats, such as its disappearance and a lack of new participants. This is especially the case in a troupe composed of family members that require the next generation to inherit the troupe. In the case of Nguyen's in-laws' troupe, *Shinlimei*, the question remains, who should be in charge of this responsibility? Interestingly, *The Immortal's Play* reveals the possibility that new immigrants might promote and accomplish cultural inheritance. On the one hand, Nguyen's Vietnamese ethnic identity can serve as a selling point to attract more viewers. On the other hand, it might encourage the commodification of the new immigrant's body. In one scene, a flag that reads "The Only Female Vietnamese Performer Nationwide" is hung when the stage is set up. The close-up shot of the flag highlights Nguyen's "exotic" ethnic identity, which is utilized to attract more viewers. Although the tradition of Taiwanese opera is fading, the documentary indicates that society expects new immigrants to preserve the culture. The film not only reflects the familial and societal expectations that Nguyen grapples with but also indicates that Taiwan as a host state perceives new immigrants in a stereotypical and discriminatory manner and attempts to force assimilation and cultural inheritance upon them.

In comparison to *Dream Hair Salon*, which addresses migrants' civil rights, *The Immortal's Play* shifts its focus to the cultural milieu and highlights how a new immigrant's engagement with the traditional opera has transformed the cultural landscape in Taiwan. The film not only touches upon her negotiation with multiple social structures but also explores how Taiwanese locals and society familiarize themselves with new immigrants through the consumption of both the female body and foreign culture. Moreover, the assimilation of new immigrants is also facilitated through the promotion of the preservation of cultural inheritance by new immigrants.

### **Film Screening and the Formation of Public Discourse**

Filming documentaries on new immigrants can be regarded as a medium for social movements (Li, 2016). Through the visualization and mediation of issues related to migration, these documentaries carry political messages that challenge the stereotypical representations of new



immigrants in mass media, criticize the existing immigration law, and advocate for the introduction of policies and legal reforms that safeguard new immigrants' citizenship and civil rights. In this regard, the circulation and reception of these films should be further investigated to evaluate the effectiveness of documentary filmmaking. This will enable us to understand how the audience responds to the messages that the filmmakers aim to convey through their work.

Since watching documentaries is not a mainstream activity in Taiwan, these films on immigrants hardly capture the interest of regular moviegoers. Screening such films at schools, cafés, and local community centers has become a strategy for their promotion and circulation, which in turn draws the public's attention toward migration-related issues. For instance, migration/migrant worker film festivals are organized by nonprofit organizations, universities, and local governments. The attendees receive the opportunity to watch these films and learn more about new immigrants' and migrant workers' lived experiences on the island. Film festivals and screenings are open spaces for interaction between locals and migrants; these activities broaden the knowledge of locals and call their attention to relevant issues. They also empower migrants who are either filmed subjects or participants in the event's activities. These film screenings resemble Jürgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere," where public opinions can be generated and formed (1991).

To explore film screenings as the public sphere, the post-screening discussion among the attendees and guests, including filmmakers, scholars, representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government officials can be examined in depth. The questions raised by the audience often center around migrants' civil rights—such as residency and citizenship—and predicaments related to transnational marriage, such as high divorce rates, domestic violence, and children's education. The attendees occasionally share their personal stories regarding living in harmony with migrants. It is evident that the attendees of these activities possess public awareness of transnational marriage to a certain extent. Moreover, in some post-screening questionnaires, several attendees mentioned that they learned more about new immigrants and were able to identify their preexisting misconceptions and biases after watching these films, particularly owing to the films' depictions of immigrant women's perspectives. Some requested more detailed information on policymaking and consultation channels, and urged local NGOs to participate in related activities, protests, and demonstrations in the near future. All the aforementioned evidence indicates the formation of public discourse on migration-related issues through such screenings.

In summary, this essay offers a brief introduction to contemporary documentary filmmaking on migration and opines that documentaries have been adopted by Taiwanese filmmakers as a medium to challenge the mainstream discourse produced by the mass media and the government's nation-building project. The circulation of these films puts migration-related issues into the public discourse and engenders further sociopolitical praxis.

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