Transnational marriage migration and the negotiation of precarious pathways beyond partial citizenship in Singapore

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ABSTRACT
While mixed marriage can act as a ‘facilitator of integration’ for migrants, feminist scholars have argued that in Asia, pathways to citizenship for marriage migrants are precariously ridden with negotiations around gender, ethnicity, nationality and class. In this context, the family sphere lies between the individual migrant and the state, and features as a strategic site where citizenship categories take effect on migrant lives on the one hand, and where citizenship claims are mediated, negotiated and contested on the other. Drawing on two ethnographic studies of Southeast Asian women marrying Singaporean men belonging to lower socio-economic strata, we show how the host nation-state’s hierarchical control interacts with family processes in producing marriage migrants as partial citizens with limited rights to work, residency and citizenship. We also demonstrate how marriage migrants find leverage in negotiating the paradox of being responsible affinal subjects of the family and partial citizens of the nation-state.

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Introduction
In a world that has grown accustomed to routinised cross-border mobility and transnational lifestyles, the notion of citizenship as a fixed form of belonging bounded by the nation-state is increasingly out of step with lived reality. Within the sphere of intimate relations, rising international marriage trends have exacerbated this disjuncture between legal citizenship tied to a single nation-state on the one hand, and the human capacity for multiple senses of belonging – experienced simultaneously or over the life-course – on the other. In Asia, international marriage has become a significant mechanism for family formation (Douglass 2006), and this growing phenomenon has spawned families constituted by members holding different citizenship and residency statuses that confer differential rights. In these mixed-status families, individual members often confront divergent contexts of opportunities and constraints, further complicating the pursuit of family aspirations and mobility projects (López 2015). Writ large, this can lead to an increasing disjuncture between the lived realities of the social reproduction of families and the boundary-making work of the nation-state on managing its population.
In recent decades, scholars interested in migration, nationalism and citizenship have begun giving attention to citizenship regimes in Asia, highlighting the effects of nation-building policies on institutionalizing citizen-noncitizen hierarchies in the distribution of socio-political rights and welfare entitlements (Chung 2020). This is an important step towards rebalancing the global scope of citizenship studies, as extant scholarship has tended to focus on immigration to Europe, North America and Oceania (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). While Western-centric literature has yielded considerable insights into the ways state policies and non-state practices work to reify notions of who is deserving or not in the allocation of differential rights to citizens and migrants, most of this work has considered questions of access to citizenship rights at the individual level. Training the analytical spotlight on Asian countries with deep roots in systematic patriarchy and familialism brings to the foreground the significance of the family as a key social organization for the consideration of citizenship rights. In these contexts, the mobilization of individual rights often cannot be divorced from embeddedness in the primary relations of the family.

Using a case study of capital-poor female marriage migrants who navigate precarious and tenuous pathways towards residency and citizenship rights in Singapore, this paper examines how the nation-state’s graduated citizenship regime works out at the level of the family. Focusing on marriage migrants allows us to give attention to the tensions that ensue when familial membership based on affect, intimacy and social obligation is out of alignment with national non- (or partial) membership based on limited rights to welfare, productive work and residency. In this light, the paper is interested in unpacking the disjuncture between the intimate incorporation of marriage migrants into the work of reproducing the family on the one hand, and their enforced partial citizenship (Sheu 2007) vis-à-vis the nation-state on the other.

To accomplish this aim, our paper first draws critically on the literature on international marriage, migration and citizenship to highlight the family as a strategic site where citizenship claims are mediated, negotiated and contested. Next, we explain Singapore’s citizenship regime as it applies to migrant spouses, and outline our methodological route in gathering interview data for the paper. In the penultimate two sections, we discuss, respectively, two interrelated questions: First, how does the institutionalization of hierarchical control as part of citizenship and nation-building policies interact with family processes in (re)producing marriage migrants as partial citizens? Second, how do marriage migrants as responsibilised familial subjects cum partial citizens find leverage in negotiating precarious life-paths and asserting their capacity for claims-making? Finally, we reflect on the conceptual contributions of the research.

**Marriage migrants, pathways to citizenship, and the family as the locus of struggle**

In most Asian countries where citizenship is inherited and ascribed primarily through ‘blood’ descent (Asis and Battisella 2012), the main route for marriage migrants to gain access to citizenship is through legal application (‘naturalization’). For transnational inter-ethnic marriage migrants originating in countries lower down the socio-economic development ladder, pathways towards naturalization in destination countries are often slippery and ambiguous. From the host nation’s perspective, their lack of
social, economic and (sometimes) linguistic capital is seen not only as an obstacle to integration (Charsley, Bolognani, and Spencer 2017) but also as negative assets that would weigh down national safety nets for welfare provision. In this light, access to citizenship is contingent on demonstrating legitimacy in the face of widespread suspicion that marriage migration is a morally suspect, opportunistic channel exploited by those seeking citizenship, work or material gain (Cheng and Choo 2015). For marriage migrants, the terrain of struggle for citizenship rights at destination countries is markedly uneven, and inextricably entangled with the inequalities of class, gender and ethno-racial background.

As Bloemraad and Sheares (2017, 839) point out, ‘paying attention to race, class, and other status markers shifts our conceptual attention from citizenship as legal status to its social construction as privileged membership’. Conceiving of citizenship as both fixed legal status and social practice has, in turn, brought to light gaps between legal status and on-the-ground practices around rights, participation and identity. Exploring these gaps has opened up space for ‘a claims-making approach to citizenship, one that is a relational process of recognition, includes actors outside the individual/state dyad, and focuses on claims to legitimate membership’ (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017, 823). Such an approach takes into account the relational capacity to act on the part of both the state and the migrant, while also opening up conceptual space for considering other interdependent actors such as the family.

More than a decade ago, Turner (2008) observed that the literature on citizenship pathways is marked by an ‘absence of any systematic thinking about familial relations, reproduction and citizenship’. The fact that the majority of the world’s population are ‘born into citizenship’ suggests that ‘the family is an important but often implicit facet of political identity and membership’ (ibid). Focusing on the complex arena of transnational marriage migration allows us to draw explicit attention to the myriad ways the locus of struggle for citizenship impinges on the sphere of the family. For marriage migrants, citizenship matters, as both status and practice, in shaping family relationships and functioning; and at the same time, the family sphere is an important site that mediates, limits or aggravates the effects of the state’s categorical control and the efficacy of the migrant’s claims-making. Attending to marriage migrants’ pathways to citizenship hence requires scholars to go beyond the state-individual nexus and foregrounds the family as a contested arena for citizenship claims.

In this emerging scholarship, attention has mainly focused on the nation-state’s control of marriage migrants’ citizenship pathways, showing how the accordance of citizenship and legal status results in deepening their socio-economic disadvantage and precarity, effectively entrenching them as marginal or partial citizens. As Sheu (2007) argues, Taiwan’s spousal sponsorship regime exemplifies the increased vulnerability of immigrant spouses and infringements of their human rights by leaving them entirely dependent on and highly controlled by the dictates of their husbands. Similarly, in the context of cross-Straits political tensions, Friedman (2010) argues that Taiwanese state policies ‘create a second-class citizenship status for naturalized Chinese spouses’. In contradistinction to the view sometimes found in Western-centric literature that ‘mixed marriage’ is a ‘facilitator of integration’ that enables ‘privileged access to residence and citizenship status for family members of citizens’ (de Hart 2015, 171), the literature
on Asia is more inclined to view marriage migrants’ pathways to citizenship as precariously ridden with negotiations around gender, ethnicity, nationality and class (Cheng 2013; Kim 2013).

A related dimension of this literature points out that ‘the status of citizen is analytically important, not just as a legal status to access rights, but also as a membership concept of identity, legitimacy, and participation’ that shapes roles and relations (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017, 855). Feminist and other critical scholars have shown that marriage migrants who are denied full citizenship rights are further compelled to attain and legitimize membership of the marital family by fitting into retrogressive gender-specific roles. Scholars studying marriage migration in Korea, for example, point out that the creation of the marriage migrant visa that is derivative of the citizen-spouse’s status ‘established the blueprint for [female marriage migrants’] contingent incorporation into Korean society as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law’ (Chung 2020, 12). By inducting female marriage migrants into the nation-state to play social and biological reproductive roles, Korea’s ‘multicultural family’ policy framework provides a means of securing reproductive capacity in a nation-state experiencing ultra-low fertility among its citizen population (Kim and Kilkey 2018). Immigrant wives are hence expected to fashion themselves as ‘ethnicized maternal citizens’ within state projects that ‘paradoxically promote cultural assimilation while relegating marriage migrants as gendered dependents and ethnic others’ (Kim 2013, 455; see also Kim-Bossard 2017). These ideas also echo Turner’s (2008) observation of the concept of reproductive citizenship which underscores the significance of parenthood as a key determining factor used by states to allocate citizenship and its related entitlements to prospective citizens.

With some important exceptions (e.g. Kim and Vang 2020), the scholarship on marriage migration and citizenship in the Asian context is largely focused on the policy effects of restricting citizenship gains and has given less attention to how marriage migrants negotiate the paradox of being admitted into gender-specific (and often maternal) membership of the family vis-à-vis non- or partial membership of the nation-state. While there is a broader literature on migration, motherhood and citizenship (mainly situated in western contexts) that foregrounds migrant mothers’ agentic capacity to disrupt hegemonic notions of citizenship and group belonging through their ‘carework’ and ‘culturework’ (Erel 2013; Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013), the literature drawing on marriage migration in Asia tends to focus on women’s constrained roles within the family and limited purchase in making citizenship gains. As Kim (2010, 723) summarized, studies on marriage migration in Asia tend to ‘connect women’s agency and sources of empowerment mainly to paid work or community activities, while reducing women’s reproductive labor [within the marital family] to a site of confinement’. Women participating in marriage migration are co-opted into the marital family through a ‘transnational patriarchal bargain’ whereby they submit to relative disempowerment while men ‘parlay citizenship rights into patriarchal privileges within the conjugal relationship’ (Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013, 365). The outcome of this form of bargaining with patriarchy does not guarantee upward social mobility for women in line with ‘global hypergamy’ (Constance 2005) but may have the opposite effect (Kim 2010; Zhang, Lu, and Yeoh 2015). In this context, the family sphere has featured more prominently as a site of gender and generational oppression, while marriage migrants’
citizenship claims-making and activism occur outside the family and kinship-based power through civil society organization and co-ethnic networking (Wang and Belanger 2008; Hsia 2012).

More recently, emerging scholarship on marriage migration and citizenship has highlighted the significance of the family as a terrain against which marriage migrants negotiate the boundaries of citizenship practices (Kim 2013). In building upon this lead, this paper foregrounds the family as a site of struggle for citizenship as a complex formulation of both legal status and substantive practice. Creating the marriage migrant as a category of partial citizenship is dependent on the interaction between the state’s hierarchical control of citizenship rights, and family processes in shaping familial roles and relations. In turn, these family processes condition differential access and claims-making to gain citizenship rights. At the intersection of nation-state and family, marriage migrants are not passive victims but constantly finding leverage to negotiate new positions within the paradox of being responsible affinal subjects of the family while being partial citizens of the nation-state.

The rocky road to partial citizenship for marriage migrants

In Singapore, the changing context for marriage decision-making has seen a widening gap in marriage expectations between the two largest groups of singles – financially-independent graduate Singaporean women with general expectations of hypergamy as compared to working-class Singaporean men with low levels of education and a preference for women willing to uphold traditional gender roles and values (Yeoh, Chee, and Vu 2013). Facilitated by increased cross-border mobility, this mismatch in expectations has led to the expansion of the regional marriage market as Singaporean men turn to ‘foreign brides’ from less developed economies in Southeast Asia as alternative spousal choices (Cheng 2012). This phenomenon is exemplified by the rising proportion of transnational marriages involving non-citizen spouses, from about 15% of all marriages in the mid-1980s to a peak of around 41% during the mid-2000s, subsequently stabilizing at around 35% in recent years (Singapore Department of Statistics 2020). In 2019, women constituted about 70% of the total number of foreign spouses, and were overwhelmingly (over 95%) from the Asian region (National Population and Talent Division, Strategy Group, Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore Department of Statistics, Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, and Ministry of Manpower 2020). This phenomenon is not unique to Singapore as similar demographic trends are observed in other Asian countries, most notably Taiwan and South Korea.

Marriage to a Singaporean does not automatically qualify a foreigner for long-term stay and employment in Singapore (Figure 1). The tenuous pathway begins when marriage migrants – especially those who are capital-poor – typically enter Singapore first on a one-month social visit pass (SVP) that does not permit them to work and is renewable for another 90 days. If the renewal is rejected, applicants must exit the country for at least five days before being allowed to re-enter on another SVP. To stay in Singapore for up to three years, foreign spouses of citizens may apply for a long-term visit pass (LTVP) or an enhanced LTVP+ if eligible (introduced in April 2012) which will take at least six months to process. In the early 2000s, around 14,500 LTVP applications were processed each year.
From 2015, prospective foreign spouses of Singaporeans have the option of undergoing a pre-marriage long-term visit pass assessment (PMLA) which provides greater clarity on their eligibility for an LTVP before registering their marriage (Tham 2019). This does not guarantee a positive outcome but significantly shortens the processing time for a subsequent LTVP application from six months to six weeks.4

Until recently, foreign spouses on the LTVP scheme faced considerable obstacles to access work rights as they must first secure a job offer from a prospective employer willing to sponsor a work pass or a letter of consent (LOC) from the Ministry of Manpower. These conditions were liberalized following the introduction of pre-approval for foreign spouses on an LTVP (from 2015) or LTVP+ (from 2012) to take up employment in Singapore without needing to seek prospective employers’ sponsorship.5

For foreign spouses, access to permanent residency (PR) and Singapore citizenship (SC) is fraught with further uncertainty. From 2009 to 2015, only half of about 8,000 PR applications from foreign spouses were approved.6 While it is generally known that much depends on factors such as ‘the ability of the sponsor to support his or her foreign spouse financially, whether the marriage is legally in order and [the] good conduct records of both applicant and sponsor’ (Tan 2011), specific criteria for a successful application are deliberately kept opaque in order to ‘prevent attempts to game the system’ (according to the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority [ICA]) and as a safeguard against sham marriages (Tham 2019). Given the obscure and tenuous nature of citizenship pathways, immigrant wives are highly dependent upon citizen-husbands (who in turn have to demonstrate productive citizenship) to secure their rights to stay and build a family in Singapore. As observed by a feminist NGO, without secure residency rights, the state seems to expect that ‘the couple should choose not to marry, to live elsewhere, or to accept a compromised family life in Singapore … effectively penalis[ing] them for exercising their right to enter a marriage of their choosing’.7

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Figure 1. Citizenship pathways for foreign spouses Singaporeans.
While such gatekeeping measures are also employed in Taiwan and South Korea (see Tsai 2011; Song 2015), Singapore is arguably more stringent and opaque in granting foreign spouses long-term residency and/or citizenship. It is also comparatively less supportive in facilitating their subsequent integration into society. While support groups for foreign spouses are only just emerging in Singapore, the Korean government has since 2006 instated comprehensive policies – pertaining to family services and better social protection – in what Lee (2008, 116–8) termed as the ‘Grand Plan’ for the social integration of marriage migrants into Korea. These include, for example, dedicated family service centres to assist migrant wives with their social reproductive roles as well as facilitate their career training and connections with employers (see also Kim 2013).

**Research methods**

This paper draws on findings from two studies on predominantly capital-poor Southeast Asian women who have migrated to Singapore to become spouses of Singaporean men. The earlier study (2008–2011) focused on Vietnamese women who married Singaporean men through commercial matchmaking agencies and informal brokers. The more recent study (2018–2019) widened the focus to Southeast Asian women who met their Singaporean husbands through personal encounters and social networks, although a small minority were commercially matched.⁸

In the pre-2011 project, we interviewed 26 Vietnamese wives and 22 Singaporean husbands, of which 18 were paired couples (interviewed separately to obtain independent viewpoints). The wives were aged between 18 and 40, with the majority in their twenties and early thirties, while the husbands’ ages ranged from 30 to late fifties. Most of the couples had been married between a few months and five years at the time of the interviews, and had between one to three children from the marriage, although a few were then childless. The couples communicated in Mandarin, as the Vietnamese picked up the language quickly, and most of them lived in the lower range of public housing, which is indicative of a generally lower socioeconomic status (SES). The majority (18) were on a SVP or the one-year LTVP, while seven had been granted PR and one had SC. While the migrant wives were mostly housewives (even though they were previously working in Vietnam) and financially dependent on their husbands, the men were mainly in service work (e.g. taxi driver, salesman), the construction industry (e.g. crane driver), self-employed (e.g. hardware business, hawker stall) or insecure work (e.g. odd-job labourer).

In the post-2018 study, 26 migrant wives and 14 Singaporean husbands were interviewed; 14 were paired interviews. Among the migrant wives, the majority were Vietnamese (14) but the study also included Indonesian (4), Filipino (2) and Thai (6) women. The duration of the marriage ranged more widely from 2 to 36 years compared to the earlier study, and the women were mainly in their late twenties to early forties, while the men were in their late thirties to late fifties. Eleven of the migrant wives were 25 and younger when they married. The majority have children from the current marriage (only three of the migrant wives had no children). Two were on the LTVP, five had been granted the LTVP+, 13 were PRs and six were SCs. The increased numbers of wives holding long-term visas in the post-2018 study is possibly reflective of their length of stay
in Singapore as well as policy changes in the last decade. As with the earlier study, the men’s occupations ranged from blue-collar jobs, service work, to running small businesses. What was distinctly different is the women’s job status: the majority (18) were engaged in paid work outside the home – from factory work, service work, to running food stalls, while four were actively engaged as ‘assistants’ in their husbands’ businesses or volunteering in the community. Only four of the migrant wives considered themselves full-time homemakers.

While we encountered considerable difficulty recruiting Vietnamese marriage migrants and their husbands in the earlier study primarily because of the stigma of commercial matchmaking (see Yeoh, Chee, and Vu 2014 for details), our fieldwork a decade later threw up fewer issues of access. Nonetheless, the study’s analysis on citizenship negotiations is limited by the difficulties in recruiting respondents who are navigating a failed marriage. We first drew on personal contacts (including some of our student-assistants who knew of or were from mixed-nationality families) and snowballed from these initial leads. We also frequented food centres and shopping malls in Singapore where migrant wives have found work. It also helped that the majority of the migrant wives were now working women with greater confidence in interacting beyond the family circle, and had some grasp of English and Mandarin, languages commonly spoken in Singapore. Working with a research team comprising members of different ethnicities, ages, and language capabilities, we tried to ensure that prospective participants were approached by team members they were most likely to be comfortable with.

In both projects, the interview guide covered the different phases of, and critical junctures in, the respondents’ migration journeys (for the wives) and married lives (for both wives and husbands), the difficulties and opportunities encountered, and their plans and aspirations for themselves and their children. All the collected material was transcribed, translated, anonymised, and analysed through inductive thematic scrutiny to highlight different cases reflecting the range of lived experiences and family situations, and focusing on the relationship between family processes and migrant wives’ citizenship considerations.

**The interaction of state and family processes in the making of partial citizens**

In the terrain of struggle for legal status and substantive rights, the right to remain in Singapore often features as the first hurdle for migrant wives, particularly those married to lower SES men. For those accorded SVPs of a few months or the one-year LTVP, their continued residency status is solely dependent on their husbands’ willingness to sponsor residency applications, as well as financial and family circumstances. In the case of Dau (twenties, Vietnamese, LTVP, pre-2011 interviewee) who was pregnant at the time of the interview, her relationship with her husband had deteriorated to the point when he had asked her to abort the child and ‘sign for legal separation’. While Dau had few illusions left in the marriage and was prepared to go through with both the abortion and legal separation, she was apprehensive that her bid for PR would come to nought and she would have to leave Singapore. Even in marriages which, on the surface, appeared intact, wives fear that their citizen-husbands may withhold support for their PR applications. Ten months into her marriage, Thach (20-year-old Vietnamese, LTVP, pre-2011
Interviewee) realised that her husband (55-year-old widowed truck driver) was dragging his feet when it came to applying for PR for her: she had asked him ‘many times’ but he ‘doesn’t want to’. According to the commercial matchmaking agent whom we interviewed separately, Thach’s husband had ‘no long term plans’ for the marriage, and was dating another woman even after marrying Thach.

Among our interviewees, Dau’s and Thach’s cases – where their desire for more stable residency status was thwarted by their husbands – were in the minority. Most Singaporean husbands were willing to support their migrant wives’ application for PR, but in several cases, they did not have the financial wherewithal to meet the general criteria for a successful bid.10 In one case, the couple had been married for over two years, but Lieu (34-year-old, Vietnamese, pre-2011 interviewee) was still on a short-term SVP that needed constant renewal. Her husband, Soon (54-year-old hawker), speculated that her LTVP and PR applications had failed because the income he reported as a taxpayer was too low; he hoped to increase the reported amount, as well as his contributions to the Central Provident Fund, in order to enhance the chances of success in the next round of applications.

Like Soon, Aaron (35-year-old cook, post-2018 interviewee) struggled to secure an LTVP for his wife Betty (36-year-old Thai) who had been granted a month-long SVP upon marriage. Renewing the SVP monthly was not only a ‘headache’ but costly (the S$40 per renewal was substantial as Aaron only earned about S$60–70 a day). Multiple attempts to secure an LTVP culminated in a fracas with immigration officers when Aaron tried to assert his ‘right’ to a family, to no avail:

They told me, okay, if you want to extend [Betty’s SVP], you need to pay a sum of money. If [you] have no money to pay . . . they said, cannot extend . . . I don’t know what the charge is for. I [only] want to help my wife extend her visa. Why can’t it be done? I [want to] use my right . . . I’m fighting for my wife!

For over a year, the precarious nature of Betty’s residency status became a significant source of tension for the couple, and soon they were considering divorce should the situation not improve. The turning point only came when the couple heeded an immigration officer’s advice to increase their chances of securing the LTVP by producing a child from the marriage. Aaron expressed disbelief (‘That ICA officer told me one thing, “eh, you try to make a baby lah”. Really? Must do a baby, then we can have the Long Term Pass or the PR? Huh? . . . Like this, you are forcing me!’), but the couple complied and Betty received her LTVP+ soon after their son’s birth.

Echoing Kim’s (2013, 455) concept of ‘ethnicized maternal citizenship’, the pathway to longer-term residency for marriage migrants in Singapore is partly predicated on producing citizen-children from the marriage. Betty already has a non-Singaporean child from her first marriage in Thailand (as well as a Singaporean step-child from Aaron’s first marriage), but these would not facilitate moving up a rung in the citizenship ladder. Conjoined to notions of maternal citizenship which reduces marriage migrants’ rights to claims-making based solely on motherhood, Singapore’s marriage-migration-citizenship regime further illustrates a sort of ‘fecundity [bargain] for citizenship’ wherein pathways to residency are also made more accessible through the biological reproduction of citizen-subjects.
The pathway to conditional ‘reproductive citizenship’ (Turner 2008), however, is ridden with other pitfalls. Compelled to produce a citizen-child to secure the migrant mother’s residency, Aaron and Betty found themselves struggling with the added costs of raising a child:

Aaron: Singapore’s [cost of living] pressure . . . is crazy. If you don’t believe, ask my wife. Everything requires money . . . With no [better paying] work, how to have money? And the child, he needs milk. Nobody helps . . . I’ve to help myself.

Betty: We live paycheck to paycheck. We’ve to raise a child. We’ve debts, have to send money [remittances to support her natal family in Thailand], and whatever we get, we don’t get to keep. We pay this bill, pay that bill, and our child has to drink milk. Every month, [expenditure is] about S$2,000+.

In this case, the lack of extended family support has also deepened the sense of precarity: Aaron’s stepmother whom they were living with had asked the couple to move out within three months as she wanted to make space in her apartment for her own biological son and his family. Without the cushioning effects of extended family support, securing the LTVP+ by committing to raising a child has moved the couple from one realm of precarity (tenuous residency status) to another (insecurity of finding affordable housing).

Prior to 2015, gaining PR was a crucial precondition for accessing other substantive rights, such as the right to work. For many migrant wives, the right to paid work was of paramount importance for generating an independent income to support both their natal and marital families, but achieving this goal was ultimately dependent on their husbands’ financial standing and capacity to sponsor their PR applications. Ironically, those who needed to work to supplement family income were more likely to be among those with no easy pathway to access paid work. Binh (38-year-old Vietnamese, six-month SVP, pre-2011 interviewee), for example, had come to Singapore to ‘find a husband’ in order to support her three daughters from a previous marriage. Upon marriage, she found that her husband, a fishmonger, earned a small monthly income ($3,700) with which he had to support, beside themselves, his elderly mother and his youngest teenaged son from a previous marriage. Binh herself made a small sum of money through offering tailoring services, but her home-based business was limited as she neither had a regular clientele nor a proper workspace. She considered renting a small retail space, but could not pursue this as she had no capital, and more crucially, was wary of the illegalities of conducting businesses on short-term SVPs. Marriage migrants like Binh thus found themselves in a difficult bind: they needed to work as their husbands were struggling to support the family, but their husbands’ financial inadequacy in turn stood in the way of their right to long-term residency and paid work.

In another case, Nhan (32-year-old Vietnamese, LTVP, pre-2011 interviewee) had married Michael (32-year-old salesman) on the understanding that he earned a good monthly income ($3,000), owned an apartment, and was able to provide her with ‘a better life’. Upon marriage, Nhan found that her husband was in financial difficulties: his income, based on commissions, had dropped by a third due to the recession, and he also had to pay child support after his recent divorce. Michael’s apartment now belonged to his ex-wife and the newlyweds had to share a rental flat with another Singaporean-Vietnamese couple. Under these circumstances, Nhan had little hope in progressing to PR, even though she yearned to be able to resume work (she owned and managed a hair
salon in Vietnam) as ‘staying at home and doing nothing was a torture’. She could work if an employer was willing to sponsor her work permit, but the lack of social networks and linguistic capital meant that she had little access to the local job market. Nhan had also considered working illegally but Michael refused to allow her to do so for fear of jeopardizing her PR application.

While the introduction of work rights for LTVP/LTVP+ holders in 2015 has lowered the barriers to paid work, it did not completely liberate marriage migrants from the nettle of reproductive citizenship. The arrival of children often confirmed the marriage migrant’s primary role as a mother and homemaker while undermining her productive worker identity. The patriarchal bargain at the heart of the ‘fecundity for citizenship’ exchange takes on new complexities as the terms of bargaining morph into another family tradeoff, this time requiring migrant wives to forego paid work for full-time caregiving and homemaking. Having fought for and succeeded in securing Betty’s residency status, Aaron – despite being in dire financial straits – asserted his patriarchal rights to keeping Betty at home to provide caregiving:

No matter what, we as husbands, we don’t want our wives to come out [to work] … I’m working. I come out to work. You, best help me [by] looking after my child well … while I slowly earn [money].

In turn, Betty had little choice but to acquiesce to the terms of the bargain, and suspend, at least in the short-run, her own desire to work:

I’ve to look for opportunities to work when my child goes to school. Whenever I can work, I will. But now my child is [too young].

Like Betty, most marriage migrants, including those who had secured the right to work, did not engage in paid work when their children were young. In some cases, husbands (like Aaron) were explicit in ‘preferring’ their migrant wives to stay home and devote themselves to the children. Deliana (41-year-old Indonesian, PR, post-2018 interviewee), who worked as an accountant before marriage, explained that while she wished to continue working, she complied with her husband’s wishes for her to stay home until their son reached school-going age. In other cases, the patriarchal bargain was an unstated assumption: migrant wives who climbed the citizenship ladder by producing children should fulfil their end of the bargain by demonstrating exemplary motherhood in providing full-time care for their children. In Kristy’s (39-year-old Vietnamese, PR, post-2018 interviewee) case, despite a ten-year career as an accountant and then a tour guide in Vietnam, paid work was impossible in the early years of the marriage: she was already pregnant on registering her marriage in Singapore, and found herself overwhelmed by care duties and housework when her daughter turned a month old:

I’d to do all the household chores, such as washing clothes, cleaning the house, sweeping the house … holding my child with one hand, and cooking with another hand … [One day], as I was lulling her [baby daughter] to sleep, my mother-in-law entered the room, kicked me and told me to wash the clothes. ‘Your kid’s already sleeping, why are you still lying here instead of waking up and washing clothes?’ So I felt very, very sad, felt very … hurt [voice cracking].
Despite having a supportive husband, Kristy knuckled down to her mother-in-law’s view of women’s roles vis-à-vis men’s:

My husband did help me with the housework. However, [when my mother-in-law found out], she shouted at him and didn’t allow him to help. She said that my husband worked outside the whole day and was very tired. And as [I] just stayed home and looked after the kid . . . So [I] have to do all the housework.

Stepping stones along the pathway of reproductive citizenship are not only dependent on powerful others (such as husbands and mothers-in-law) within the context of family-making, they also reflect a paradoxical process of moving up and down a slippery slope. While producing a child propels the marriage migrant closer to securing citizenship, it may also become an obstacle to accessing the substantive rights of her citizenship – in particular access to employment and a worker-identity in her own right. For marriage migrants, partial citizenship is hence a result of the state’s hierarchical control of citizenship rights on the one hand, and family processes that confirm migrant women’s primary subjectivity as wives, mothers and homemakers on the other.

In sum, the narratives illustrated how women marriage migrants are reduced to partial citizens through the layered and interactive effects of restrictions imposed by state policies, and family processes and circumstances. State policies expect women marriage migrants to be dependent on their husbands for their residency applications, which exacerbates their vulnerability when spousal relations sour. However, even when spousal relations are unobstructive, state policies restricting employment for marriage migrants have the effect of constraining pathways towards seeking independent identities or generating family income. Marriage migrants are thus confined to partial citizenship with low status in the family and diminished citizenship rights pertaining to residency and employment.

**Leveraging on the family for substantive claims-making**

While the intimate sphere of the family is paramount in framing the conditions under which marriage migrants negotiate pathways to citizenship, women who have committed to travelling this road also actively leverage on familial processes to widen the degree of latitude they have in claims-making beyond the bounds of reproductive, partial citizenship. Substantive claims-making in acquiring a worker identity by accessing external employment proved to be crucial in paving a way toward contributing to increasing household income, greater decision-making power, and a higher status in the family. In order to grasp the complexities of negotiations in the interstices of family processes, we focus on one woman’s experience in navigating the pathway towards citizenship before giving attention to other intersecting accounts.

When Nhi (29-year-old Vietnamese, PR currently applying for SC, post-2018 interviewee) was twenty years old, she married a Singaporean man 31 years her senior, with two school-age children from a previous marriage, through a commercial agency. It was a decision that hung on a knife’s edge as she vacillated amidst many tears and anxieties, but ultimately committed herself to marrying the ‘fat and old’ man. Her father had insisted that she need not force herself into being ‘sold like fish’ but her mother told her to be pragmatic. Having already spent a hefty sum (S$5000 to cover airfares and agency fees) on two trips to Singapore to find a match, she would be the ‘laughing stock’ of the
village if she returned empty-handed. The agency also made it clear that she would be missing the boat if she did not take up her prospective husband’s offer of marriage, as he was a factory-owner in comfortable circumstances and quite a ‘catch’.

For Nhi, her marriage began inauspiciously: she was fearful of living in a ‘super messy’ house with altars in every room, she could not communicate as she had little Mandarin, and worst of all, she felt extremely isolated as she was unable to step out of the house unaccompanied for the first three months of married life. However, within a few months, Nhi found ways of altering the patriarchal bargain to create more degrees of autonomy while continuing to prove herself a responsible member of the family.

Despite her husband’s concerns that not having a child from the marriage might jeopardize her PR application, Nhi insisted on delaying childbearing and giving priority to finding work to gain independence and generate remittances for her natal family:

[My husband] wanted a child but I didn’t want one. I said I was still young, why give birth first? Let me work first to earn money to support my parents. Then after that, I can give birth. So that’s what I did.

While her husband was willing to back down from insisting that Nhi produced a child (he already had two children from his previous marriage), he tried to maintain patriarchal control by ‘paying’ Nhi not to work. But Nhi resisted her husband’s offer and was adamant that she took on a job to earn her ‘own money’:

He didn’t want me to work initially but I insisted . . . he did give me $200 a month actually, but I insisted. He said, don’t work and he would give me $500 a month. I didn’t want that and still fought with him, that I wanted to work, so in the end he had no choice, he signed the papers to allow me to work.

In order to recalibrate the patriarchal bargain in her favour, Nhi continually built up her social and linguistic capital. Six months after marriage, she found work at a food centre through her Vietnamese network of friends. Starting as an assistant serving behind the counter of a food stall, a role that required minimal language facility, she persevered through constant scolding from her supervisor and graduated to a more active role interacting with customers and collecting money:

I first started at the ‘economy rice’ stall, it was easier since you don’t need to talk right? [Customers] just point at the dishes they want right? You don’t need to talk . . . I was always scolded by my [Malaysian] supervisor, every day, I was scolded: ‘Why do you work here when you can’t speak Mandarin? You don’t know Mandarin!’ I just smiled. I understood what was being said but I couldn’t reply. So, I started to learn Mandarin very quickly as I was really angry. I sold economy rice for 10 days and then [moved] to the duck rice stall where I worked for three years. I was [serving at tables] and collecting money. Soon, I was [able to retaliate]. I said: ‘Look, my Mandarin is good now, I can even scold you!’

While she had begun learning Mandarin from a phrasebook upon marriage, it was her work at the food stalls that strengthened her facility in communication, and this in turn gave her ammunition to argue her case with her husband. When asked how she managed to have her own way, Nhi laughed and summed it up: ‘I’m not afraid of him . . . I learnt Mandarin in six months!’ For marriage migrants, linguistic capital is not only a marker of social integration but an important condition that shapes claims-making both within and outside the family sphere. 
When Nhi finally had a daughter six years into the marriage, she had already progressed to becoming an informal partner in a small business selling Singaporean snacks at food centres. Despite strong reservations at the start, her husband realized how entrepreneurial Nhi was and even came round to support her business venture by contributing some capital. However, establishing her right to work still meant that she had to resolve care deficits within the home. As her entrepreneurial role was not entirely compatible with the expectations thrust upon reproductive citizens, Nhi had to marshal replacement domestic labour to hold up her end of the patriarchal bargain. To do so, she brought her parents over from Vietnam through consecutive SVPs (eventually followed by a one-year LTVP under her husband’s sponsorship for her mother) to help with the childcare, and also convinced her husband to hire a foreign domestic worker to take over household chores. By reworking the tradeoff between carework in the family and paid work in the public sphere, marriage migrants – with either tacit or active support of their husbands – who have moved from ‘wife’ to ‘worker’ are able to emulate the way Singaporean working women escape entrapment in the patriarchal bargain: by roping in unpaid grandparental labour or paying (other) migrant women as cheaper sources of substitute care labour.

In turn, proving herself a successful entrepreneur who also contributed to household expenses strengthened her position in family decision-making. When her husband felt that enrolling their young daughter in a private childcare facility was too expensive, Nhi, who wanted nothing but the best for her daughter’s education, was able to fork out her own money:

Every time I bring up the topic of pre-school, we would quarrel . . . I’ve told him, ‘If you don’t want to pay, I will do it’. Since she’s my daughter, I want to give her the best.

While Nhi faced considerable delay in negotiating the pathway to legal citizenship (her PR application was successful only when she became pregnant after six years in Singapore), she was able to assemble support from family (both natal and marital) and co-ethnic networks (her business partners were also Vietnamese migrant wives) to gain what she considered the most important substantive right to secure – the right to work. Eschewing the set order seemingly prescribed for marriage migrants (marry, have a child, gain long-term residency, then work) due to her unwavering focus on independence and earning money, Nhi was able to leverage family processes to place work before children. While she eventually fulfilled her part of the patriarchal bargain and produced a child, her early access to work allowed her to expand her social circle, accumulate economic, social and linguistic capital, and eventually attain PR. In other words, while Nhi was cognizant of the advantages of having PR (‘you can work anywhere [for any employer], the salary is higher and you can start your own business’), she was not willing to trade her rights to paid work for a PR status that seemed umbilically tied to having a child, as the latter would confirm her status as only a reproductive citizen. By the time we interviewed Nhi, she had gained a sufficient sense of economic and emotional security in Singapore to have the confidence to apply for SC.

For others, resisting being straightjacketed as a reproductive citizen was not possible in the beginning, and the patriarchal bargain only began tilting in their favour over time. Kristy, for example, expressed some bitterness that her own career plans were never discussed prior to her marriage and migration to Singapore. While her citizenship
journey progressed relatively smoothly (she was accorded LTVP+ status upon marriage and PR three years later), she faced considerable struggles on the home front (as earlier accounted). Although she accepted staying home to take care of her young daughter as her maternal responsibility, she also yearned for work outside the home. The turning point came when her husband’s company went bankrupt and he had to take on a low-paying job. To supplement household income, Kristy found work at a factory (which paid more than her husband’s earnings) and placed her three-year-old daughter in a government-run kindergarten. She traced a significant change in her mother-in-law’s attitude towards her to the day when, feeling the stresses of home and work, she had a relapse of a longstanding medical condition and had to be sent to the hospital in an ambulance. Afraid of losing her, her mother-in-law began from that point onwards to take on a share of the childcare and housework:

Ah ... suddenly she was very scared, suddenly she changed. When I get back home (from work), everything is in order ... she'll sweep and clean the house ... previously I always needed to cook, but now, when I come back home, she's already cooked!

In her newfound role as a significant breadwinner cum caregiver, Kristy's status in the family improved, so much so that she now deserved to be cared for by the older non-working woman in the family.

In other cases, the rebalancing of the patriarchal bargain occurred even more gradually. Ai Khue (35-year-old Vietnamese, PR, post-2018 interviewee) began married life as a homemaker on an LTVP, receiving 'pocket money' from her husband who ran a food stall for daily expenses. She soon realized that her husband gambled heavily and ran up debts. He was also careless in watching over his workers. She felt that she had no choice but to step up, initially as his assistant, to help manage the business:

I was pregnant, with a big tummy, about to give birth ... yet, I came out to help my husband. I took the chopper and chopped (the meat) ... I didn’t know Mandarin, I didn’t know anything ... [but] within one month, I learnt to take orders, I learnt everything. I caught two workers stealing money and chased them away. So everyone was very impressed by me ... Very strong woman, everyone says so, very strong.

Ai Khue picked up Mandarin, Hokkien and English, and eventually became adept in handling customers’ orders. Ten years later, the mother of three is now also the 'boss' in charge of the business and family finances. A telling sign of how the patriarchal bargain had been recalibrated lay in the fact that it was Ai Khue who now provided her husband with 'pocket money', having found it necessary not only to control his expenditure, but to also buy cigarettes on his behalf to moderate his smoking habit.

The acquisition of PR was important in facilitating job searches for migrant wives such as Kristy, but less so for those who ‘assisted’ their husbands such as Ai Khue. More crucially, their capacity to exercise the right to work was inextricable from the dynamic power relations within the family.
Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted the importance of conceptualizing citizenship as both legal status and social practice, and given attention to the way the legal and the social are mutually constituted. On the one hand, states can effect hierarchical control by imposing differentiated legal categories of membership with graduated rights in different combinations and permutations. On the other hand, migrants can exercise agency in everyday practices of claims-making so as to ‘transcend status categories and reconstitute the substantive meaning of citizenship’ (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017, 852). For marriage migrants, this dynamic is located in the family sphere as the principal arena of control and struggle.

Inducted into the nation-state as ‘reproductive citizens’ (Turner 2008), marriage migrants’ position within the host nation-state is premised on their gendered roles and identities within the marital family, as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law and homemakers. In Singapore, this mode of partial citizenship has two interrelated aspects. First, as a form of reproductive citizenship, fecundity pathways to citizenship valorise migrant women’s bodies as fertility machines, while reinscribing reproductive relations as central to family norms and forms. In return for gaining a foothold on the citizenship ladder, marriage migrants are expected to demonstrate their value to the nation-state through reproduction, child-rearing and family-making. Second, marriage migrants become subjects of gendered power hierarchies within the family, where their mobility towards securing residency and citizenship depends on the sponsorship of their citizen-husbands and the support of their in-laws.

At the same time, while progress along pathways of reproductive citizenship is both slippery and dependent on more powerful familial others, marriage migrants are not necessarily entrapped reproductive subjects of gender and generational oppression. Women can navigate familial processes in order to find leverage for claims-making. In some cases, asserting their right to exceed reproductive citizenship by putting paid work before childbirth allowed them to assume worker identities synonymous with independence and economic productivity. This in turn strengthened their positioning within both natal and marital families, and advanced their residency claims (to a level allowing them the rights to work and stay for longer periods). In other cases, while the asymmetries of the patriarchal bargain that lies at the heart of conditional reproductive citizenship (alongside an unequal possession of human and social capital) had to be endured at the start, marriage migrants, over time, found ways to recalibrate the trade-off to move the bargaining in their favour through incremental steps.

As a primary site that mediates marriage migrants’ claims-making, the family sphere is critical in determining how and when they can effectively exercise the graduated rights of partial citizenship. Within this sphere of intimate relations, migrant women find varying degrees of freedom to negotiate the paradox of being responsible affinal subjects of the family on the one hand, while being partial citizens of the nation-state on the other.

By tracing the complex negotiations and struggles that marriage migrants undertake in order to achieve citizenship and residency rights, and centring the family in the analytical frame, we have highlighted the disjuncture between the lived realities of family
relationships on the one hand, and the boundary-making work of reproducing the nation-state on the other. While the interaction between state control of citizenship rights and family processes in shaping familial relations has created the marriage migrant as a category of partial citizenship, marriage migrants are nonetheless able to exercise agency to varying extents in navigating their way through gendered familial hierarchies to further their citizenship claims and reach beyond the confines of being partial citizens of the nation-state.

Notes

1. ‘Responsibilisation’ is a concept developed in the governmentality literature to refer to individuals who are active subjects responsible for managing their own welfare, security and the risks to these (Rose 1996; Wakefield and Fleming 2009). In this context, responsibilised marriage migrants are individually responsible for negotiating and securing their own citizenship pathways.
2. See https://www.ica.gov.sg/pass/LTVP/pass_LTVP_apply_ssc.
3. See https://www.guidemesingapore.com/in-the-news/2014/2014https://www.guidemesingapore.com/in-the-news/2014/2014—relaxed-rules-for-singaporean-foreign-spouses-brings-smiles-to-families-and-businesses-owners — relaxed-rules-for-singaporean-foreign-spouses-brings-smiles-to-families-and-businesses-owners.
4. See https://va.ecitizen.gov.sg/CSS/uploads/PMLA.pdf.
5. Companies employing LTVP/LTVP+ holders are not subject to foreign worker quotas or required to pay foreign worker levies, thereby reducing costs while augmenting the supply of labour (https://www.singaporecompanyincorporation.sg/blog/relaxed-work-visa-rules-for-foreign-spouses-of-residents-in-singapore-companies-set-to-benefit/).
6. See https://aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Home-truly-respect-the-rights-of-foreign-wives.pdf.
7. See https://aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Home-truly-respect-the-rights-of-foreign-wives.pdf.
8. This reflects the gradual decline of the need for commercial matchmaking services and the increasing importance of personal networks and social media over the decade as a result of increasing regional mobility (Yeoh, Chee, and Baey 2017).
9. Similarly, reasons for this change are likely interlinked and possibly attributed to factors such as policy changes, foreign wives’ length of stay in Singapore as well as the recruitment of respondents from public spaces (often their workplaces). Being able to work is also a reflection of their longer-term visa status.
10. While the criteria for success remains a black box, most respondents thought that qualifying factors included the husband’s education, employment status and history, income level, Central Provident Fund balance, and tax records.
11. Appeasing the deities was important to her husband’s business.
12. Nhi was holding an LTVP then and needed her husband, as guarantor, to give formal permission for her to work.

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