

Germany's integration politics in practice: Lived realities of Chinese-speaking skilled female family migrants

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Abstract

Germany imposes integration-oriented regulations before and after entry on third-country family migrants. However, little attention has been paid to how integration actually unfolds for the subjects of these regulations, usually women, who are situated in the private sphere of the family. This article examines how the concept of integration, a state-anticipated and state-stipulated goal, is connected to the early adaptation of skilled female family migrants who are married to German husbands. Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 21 Chinese-speaking women across Germany, I focus on how these women mobilize resources to overcome 'hurdles' of entry requirements, how they define and interpret their tasks and obligation of integration upon arrival, and how the dynamics of their intercultural marriage affect their integration. Viewing these female spousal migrants as subjects in an integration-oriented family migration regime that legitimates intensive integration also in the private sphere, this article highlights these women's 'wife' and 'migrant' roles in the family. Specifically, through interactions with their significant others and extended family members, role-related expectations are transferred. The results show that female spouses are consequently exposed to an alternative ideal of integration that is tied to their domestic role. This home-bound notion of integration differs from the social integration envisioned and coveted by the German government. This research broadly unveils how these skilled female family migrants' early acculturation can be seen as a rivalry between pre-established self-conceptions and new circumstances in the host society.

Keywords: gendered integration, female spousal migrants, intercultural marriage, self-conception

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1. Introduction

Germany has been espousing a politic of immigrant integration long before the 2015 refugee crisis. The target group in sight, however, was family or marriage migrants arriving to join their partners. Retracing back to the prevalent guest worker program in the 1960s and 1970s, family reunification has since become the steadiest and most visible channel of legal migration within the European Union (Kofman 1999, 2004). As family or marriage migrants have predominantly been women, female dependants have also become the main subjects of integration-oriented policy mechanisms implemented in several EU states (e.g., the Netherlands, France, Denmark) (Strik et al. 2010; Scholten et al. 2012). Despite this salient trend of regulating female family migrants' integration, few studies have concentrated on the actual early lived experiences of this cohort of female migrants, particularly those with higher educational or skill levels.

Germany's 1990 amended version of the *Ausländergesetz* (Aliens Act) emphasized the imminent need for foreigners to integrate into the 'legal, social, and economic conditions of the country' (Heisler 1992: 635) in the interest of both natives and foreigners. The 2005 *Aufenthaltsgesetz* (Residence Act or Immigration Act), replacing the former, reinforced the government's goal to 'control and restrict the influx of foreigners into the Federal Republic of Germany' (BMJV 2016a), and further administered integration courses among foreigners as an obligation or an entitlement. Subsequent measures to ensure 'a real readiness among immigrants to integrate' (BMI 2007), one of which notably requires trailing spousal migrants to demonstrate basic German proficiency prior to entry, were adopted in the amended Immigration Act on March 28, 2007 (Welte 2007: 12).¹ More precisely, the issuance of family migrants' entry visa is contingent on their provision of a language certificate commensurate to level A1 of German. It is against this backdrop of an immigration system that accentuates 'integration' (Schönwälder 2010; Green 2013) and its corresponding policies pertaining to family migrants that I explore how individuals live and experience their early period after arrival in Germany.

While the Residence Act promulgates the integration of all foreigners within the country in general, the population of interest is third-country nationals joining German spouses for the purpose of family reunification.² Third-country family migrants with a German spouse are subject to entry language proficiency requirements (unless the German spouse has previously exercised the right to move within the EU), otherwise exempt if their spouse were an EU citizen living in Germany, or if their foreign spouse were highly skilled and owner of an EU Blue Card (BAMF 2016).³ Upon entry, they are obliged to attend integration courses consisting of 600 hours of language instruction and 60 hours of orientation on German history, legal system, culture, and society. The successful completion of the course and an ensuing examination are mandatory for the extension of their residence permit. Along these two policy lines that bind third-country family migrants to self-initiated and state-sponsored integration efforts before and after entry, the concept of integration shadows family migrants from the outset and is augmented during the immediate months following their arrival in Germany. The experience of third-country family migrants with German spouses is for the above reasons closely tied to the practices of official integration policies and merits unraveling.

Another facet of family migrants' early life in the host country, besides the legal realm characterized by stipulations specific to their migrant status and category, is the sphere of their household and marriage (Kofman and Raghuram 2005; Scott and Cartledge 2009; Kofman et al. 2011; Bonjour and Kraler 2015). For family migrants whose spouse is German, much and most of their socialization in Germany takes place within the household and hinges on interactions with their spouses on a daily basis. 'Home' as a domain is thus where migrants' values, norms, and expectations, presumably brought from their country of origin, meet those of their spouses and in-laws, which are likely to be shaped by the German society and culture. Such homebound intercultural dynamics are key to how migrants interpret and practice integration. On the one hand, how their German spouses perceive and reckon the necessity of integration directly affect family migrants' incentive and motivation, as well as how they approach integration. On the other, these spouses witness and evaluate family migrants' progress on integration simultaneously as their most significant others and as natives. The 'family' sphere therefore can be considered as a primary and decisive locale where integration commences and advances among family migrants, particularly in the early period after their arrival.

This article situates the early experience of family migrants at the intersection of state-stipulated integration measures and homebound conceptions of integration. It further singles out highly skilled female family migrants, whom have been rarely studied since trailing wives are usually not distinguished by their skills and traditionally considered to be unskilled (Raghuram 2004). As Kofman (1999, 2000) suggested, these women are likely to be neglected subjects in skilled migration since related research is often mired in a male-dominant context. Recognizing that the intercultural marriage and household constitute their critical environs, I ask how skilled women with a bachelor's degree or more education, many of whom also with extensive professional employment history, encounter entry requirements that necessitate pre-departure integration efforts, how their concept of integration evolves as a result of interactions in both private and public spheres after arrival, and most importantly how aforementioned interactional factors influence their integration. Below I will first discuss the conservatism embedded in an integration-oriented family migration regime and propose that female family migrants are subject to a 'gendered integration' lens. I then review existing work on skilled female family migrants' acculturation and adaptation. I will provide a succinct overview of the data and methodology before delving into the realities these skilled female family migrants experience, which are much tied to the 'wife' and 'migrants' roles they occupy and an 'alternative' ideal of integration in the family.

2. An integration-oriented family migration regime

While statistics plainly indicates that the majority of third-country nationals were entering Europe for the purpose of family reunification or as marriage migrants (OECD 2017), the linkage between family migration and subsequent integration issues is a realization and observation of late. Once equated with a fast track to citizenship status and hence 'legal integration' (Bonjour and Kraler 2015: 1409), family migration came under fire and was pinpointed as the culprit of inadequate integration (Kofman 1999, 2004; Kraler et al.

2011; Bonjour and Kraler 2015). In particular, female family or marriage migrants, notably Muslim women, are often cited as 'victims' of 'backward' cultural values and gender norms (Roggeband and Verloo 2007; Bonjour and de Hart 2013; Kofman et al. 2013) that are in need of emancipation by the West's liberal convictions. They thus become easily identified targets that bore the brunt of enhanced measures of integration that are funneled into migration policies induced by heightened political debates.

The logic behind such a shift of attitudes toward family migration stems from a change in public sentiments, concerns over social cohesion, and a blatant dominance of Western-centric values. The 'retreat' of the once hailed multiculturalism (Joppke 2004: 237; Koopmans 2013) also played a role in this attitudinal deflection. Integration became detached from the acquisition of legal citizenship and instead more affixed to cultural and national identification and belonging (Bonjour and de Hart 2013; Bonjour and Kraler 2015). The problem of ethnic enclaves and isolated communities in Western European countries, much attributed to self-contained migrant families and communities, contributed to a sense of urgency in their policy response. Aiming to deter the entry of visibly 'problematic' groups of third-country nationals that practice lifestyles (i.e., culture, religion, and gender equality) far removed from standards approved by European societies (Bonjour and Kraler 2015; Kofman et al. 2013), several European countries turned to stringent integration-oriented pre-entry language proficiency and post-arrival obligatory courses and exams to regulate family migration (Strik et al. 2010; Block and Bonjour 2013).

In comparison with other EU member states noted for heated national debates on immigration, such as Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany is known for its ethno-nationalist integration model (Bertossi and Duyvendak 2018). Its language and culture-related integration measures envisioned to primarily answer the challenges posed by spousal migration (Scholten et al. 2012: 31–2) are also most restrictive (Strik et al. 2010). Demanding third-country spousal migrants to, respectively, attain A1-level proficiency before departure and reach an intermediate B1 level after integration courses is conceived by some as 'an offence against family life' (Strik et al. 2010: 38) that hardly serves the purpose of tackling forced or arranged marriages (Strik et al. 2010; Scholten et al. 2012). In addition, the discretionary, case-by-case possibility of some third-country spousal migrants being exempted from these compulsory integration mechanisms either for having the 'right' nationality (see Note 2) or if married to Germans who have lived in other EU countries raises the doubt of 'reverse discrimination' against static, as opposed to mobile, EU citizens when they are sponsoring third-country nationals for family reunification (Staver 2013; Berneri 2014). Put bluntly, Germany's shift to a drastically conservative family migration regime was the result of political and civic discourses that champion and prioritize integration (Scholten et al. 2012; Block 2016), which predominantly pertain to female family migrants (Scholten et al. 2012: 89; Kofman et al. 2013). Such a conservatism embedded in an integration-oriented migration regime, to which I turn in the following sections, is reviewed alongside a pattern of 'gendered integration' that is likely to occur in the private sphere of the family.

Conservatism in the migration regime can be distinguished on two levels, respectively, that third-country spousal migrants as a group have been pinpointed and the differential understanding toward the necessity and meaning of integration.

Visible as the mode of largest inflow to Europe at a time when labor migration dwindled, family migration has dwarfed other types of entry since the 1970s (Kofman 2004; Raghuram 2004; Block 2014, 2016). Regulations on family migration have, however, taken a more restrictive turn despite the EU 2003/86 Directive that aims to 'safeguard' the integrity of family migration among third-country nationals (Block 2014, 2016). That is, the Family Reunification Directive has not inhibited member states from devising and implementing policy mechanisms to constrain specifically the flow of family migration. Such constrictions are polemical on two grounds: restrictive instruments for one have not been universally applied to all migrant groups, and stringent integration measures have mostly been 'selectively' reserved for the group of 'female spousal migrants from third countries' (Morokvasic-Müller 2014).

On the other hand, as Anthias (2014: 15) has illustrated, integration in Europe has eluded the originally conceived 'two-way process' that requires mutual adaptation from the majority population and new arrivals. It is instead an assimilationist frame that is applied specifically onto third-country nationals (Anthias 2014; Kontos 2014: 137), 'sparing' intra-European migrants exercising EU-wide free movement, who are presumed to be culturally and socially incorporated (Anthias 2014). In stark contrast, female spousal migrants who are third-country nationals, portrayed with their ostensible 'integration deficits' (Block 2014: 246), have continually been the subjects of intense integration initiatives under the assimilationist frame.

This inevitably begs the question of how integration is conceived, which is much a concept in the eye of the beholder. Often, problematic and at times 'contradictory assumptions' behind integration are simultaneously imposed upon migrants, functioning 'as an instrument of power and domination over migrants' besides its original emphasis on social inclusion (Anthias et al. 2013a: 2). While scholars have recognized that migration patterns, discourses, and experiences can all be gendered (Kofman et al. 2000: 234; Anthias et al. 2013b; Anthias and Pajnik 2014b), the notion that integration itself can be gendered as well, which in turn affects female migrants' experiences, has been less nuanced. Thus far, when discussing integration as gendered, it refers predominantly to how female migrants are 'singled out' as the target group of civic and social inclusion at the policy level. Concerns over female spousal migrants' marginalization, their cultural and religious practices distinct from and assumed to be antithetical to that in the host society, and possible 'ethnic segregation' threatening social cohesion to some degree justify intensified integration measures toward them (Block 2016; Kofman et al. 2013). These policy practices sustained by integration discourses then subordinate immigrants as abject 'gendered subjects' (Korteweg 2017). Gendered integration could also point to an 'approved' institutional bias against female family migrants enshrined in the integration framework that is salient on the statutory level and in the public sphere. Migrant women's gendered access to and experiences in the labor market for example show how such a bias hinders their social integration in the host society and defeats ironically the ultimate objective of integration (Morokvasic-Müller 2014). What is, however, less identified and regulated is a divergent, though equally gendered, understanding of integration that is reflected at the micro-level and in the private sphere. Granted 'a distinction between the structural and the cultural [that] ... underpins the notion of *integration*' (Anthias 2013: 329, emphasis in original) and the importance accorded to structural integration in the form of

employment, the fact that dimensions other than structural participation can be gendered has received little attention. [Kirk and Suvarierol \(2014: 255\)](#) have adumbrated, for instance, how Dutch civic integration policy has led to ‘a division between training to work and training to care’ or a contradiction ‘between the public realm of work and politics and the private space of the home’. To wit, the much neglected ‘gendered integration’ in the private sphere needs to be further unpacked.

Hence, heeding the call of factoring in migrating subjects’ ‘different and intersectional social categorizations and their positioning within multiple and complex structures of hierarchy and belonging’ ([Anthias and Pajnik 2014a: 4](#)), I argue that female spousal migrants’ integration is first and foremost characterized by their ‘situatedness’ in the family realm and this alternative frame of integration highly gendered. Furthermore, I underscore that integration as an overarching policy frame has diffused to the micro-level interactions and been partially reworked and interpreted to signify ‘domestic’ or private sphere integration (as opposed to active participation in the public sphere) for female family migrants.

3. Skilled female family migrants’ acculturation and adaptation

Whereas there is much research dedicated to migrants’ life after arrival in the host society, the focus has largely been on long-term outcomes and endpoint scenarios that evaluate how similar immigrants have become to the native population linguistically, socioeconomically, culturally, and identifiably. Namely, scholars are interested in the assimilation process, as well as its directions and trajectories ([Rumbaut 1997](#); [Zhou 1997](#); [Alba and Nee 2003](#); [Waters and Jimenez 2005](#); [Gans 2007](#)). While few studies among them are directed toward family migrants among other migrant groups ([Bonjour and Kraler 2015: 1417](#)), empirical work that addresses the initial phase critical to migrants’ acculturation is even more scarce. I confine the scope of my discussions below to existing research that examines the situated experiences of migrant women who are simultaneously dependants and skilled in the destination country.

[Man’s \(2004\)](#) research on highly skilled Chinese women from Hong Kong and Mainland China who migrated to Canada with their coethnic spouses reveals their experiences of marginalization after arrival. Their migration decision-making and process are gendered given the husbands’ ‘lead’ role and rigid patriarchal values in Chinese households. Concurrently faced with institutional constraints that leave them excluded from the Canadian labor market, these qualified women’s lives are radically altered. [Yeoh and Willis’s \(2005\)](#) study on transnational elite Singaporean women who accompanied their spouses to China for work confirms the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms that affect not only the joint decision to move, but also these skilled women’s post-arrival identity negotiation. Their retreat to and concentration on ‘domestic duties’, however, defy the common notion of involuntary deskilling or withdrawal from paid employment. On the contrary, they stem from a conscious redistribution of productive (i.e., labor force

participation) and reproductive work (i.e., homemaking), which affirms their gendered identities in such transnational spaces.

Studies on highly skilled 'love migrants,' or migrants in binational marriages who move to their partner's home country, point to how power dynamics in intercultural couple relationships (Bonjour and Kraler 2015) could greatly influence migrant women's adaptation. Liversage's (2009a) research on highly skilled Eastern European women in Denmark reveals how most struggle to retain their work identity and sidestep 'gendered identities' exemplified through housewifery. Managing their identities and averting gendered trajectories inevitable to most female marriage migrants, as is shown in her other work on Turkish women in Denmark (Liversage 2009b; Jakobsen and Liversage 2017), are crucial to these skilled female family migrants' reorientation in the host country. Riaño's (2011, 2014, 2015) series of work on skilled Latin American women married to Swiss nationals illuminate how deep-seated patriarchal ideologies and gendered division of labor in Switzerland 'shatter' these women's illusion of relationships based on European egalitarianism. She highlights how conservative gender relations persist in these binational marriages and as a component of these skilled female family migrants' lived experiences. Aure's (2013) study on highly skilled love migrants in Norway signals how dependant migrants are more susceptible to societal gendered expectations where women are often automatically relegated to the private domain. She also iterates the potency of 'power relations in household' and how native spouses may act as their migrant partner's 'mentors in migration process' (Aure 2013: 282).

Extant work on skilled female family migrants' early adaptation demonstrates that these women are prone to be entrenched in their intimate relationships and sensitive to attitudes of their partners. Their lives and experiences during the initial stages in the host country, which are indicators of how their integration trajectories unfold, are no less gendered. Lastly, scholars also elaborate on how stringent family migration policies and integration-oriented measures could intensify family migrants' dependencies on sponsoring spouses by putting their lives 'on hold' (Bonjour and Kraler 2015: 1420) in order to first satisfy those stipulations. Moreover, tightened grip on family migration and integration also tilts the power dynamic between the migrant wife and the native husband, which inopportunately bolsters dependencies (Strik et al. 2010: 36).

4. Methods

With the goal of gaining knowledge about highly skilled female family migrants' early acculturation and the impact of their intercultural household in mind, this research focuses on migrant women's changing definitions, interpretations, and self-conceptions toward their situations. The results presented in this article are based on participant observation and qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted between February and December 2016. Hoping to clearly delineate the 'early period' after family migrants' arrival, I recruited those who were still participating in or had just recently concluded the obligatory one-year integration courses. This preliminary phase short after their arrival provides an ideal and relatively simple setting for observation. I visited individual respondents at their city of residence and spent usually three to six hours with them, often sharing meals,

other times strolling in the park or wandering in the city. Recorded interviews lasted one and a half hours on average. Qualitative semi-constructed interviews were guided by the objective to elicit these skilled women's ground experiences and how ideas of integration (official and homebound notions) clash during their early post-arrival period. My questions aimed to capture the following: (1) migrants' past socialization and socioeconomic background, (2) their migratory trajectories and experiences with official regulations, (3) the significance of language proficiency, (4) their interactions within the family sphere, and (5) migrants' self-conceptions and factors of influence. I then applied techniques of cluster and axial coding to interview transcripts for analysis using an interpretive and constructivist approach (Denzin 1978; Blatter 2016).

4.1. Sample

This research bears the goal of uncovering the early experience of skilled female family migrants, hence focusing on the 'process', and does not attempt to make generalizations about the entire universe of skilled female marriage migrants in Germany. I therefore set out to recruit an ethnically homogeneous group, focusing on Chinese-speaking female family migrants from Taiwan (Republic of China) or Mainland China (People's Republic of China) married to Germans and with at least a bachelor's degree. Restricting to one ethnicity and two nationalities is a means to control for overall norms, values, and the style of upbringing that are akin in these two Chinese societies, though with contrasting sociopolitical backgrounds. As the author shares the same mother tongue with the respondents, conducting interviews in Mandarin has allowed for more nuanced understanding and interpretation.

Having first identified social media platforms that Taiwanese and Chinese communities in Germany frequent (Facebook for Taiwanese; [dolc.de](https://www.dolc.de) and [kaiyuan.info](https://www.kaiyuan.info) for Chinese), I posted on major bulletins and social forums and recruited 14 interviewees via this channel.⁴ Together with active search and snowball sampling, I recruited a total of 21 Chinese-speaking highly skilled female migrants from Taiwan and Mainland China, 15 of them from Taiwan. The interviewees were aged between 25 and 48. Seven of them have a master's degree or above. Eight of them have more than 10 years of working experience. At the time of recruitment, 11 of the interviewees were within one year of arrival in Germany; the others were on average within 18 months of arrival. These interviewees were located in 18 cities and towns across Germany with a balanced representation of metropolitan and rural areas (see [Table 1](#)).⁵

5. Findings

5.1. Varied entry trajectories and fragmented information

Though at first glance all respondents seem to be subject to identical entry requirements and undergo undifferentiated procedures given the same regulations applied to their countries of origin—Taiwan (Republic of China) and China (People's Republic of China), variations exist depending on the nature of family reunification, whether marriage has been established at the time of entry, and family migrants' citizenship status.

Ying, 38 years old, lived in Taiwan for 10 years with her German husband and has a seven-year-old son. Upon deciding to move back to Germany as a family, she applied for a marriage migrant visa at the local representative office in Taipei and was told that she lacked a few documents; nevertheless, she was advised to instead pursue subsequent immigration as the parent and a dependant of a German national, her minor son in this case. Lora, 43 years old, had been an expat in China for seven years before she met her German husband. They lived in China for another seven years and have a seven-year-old daughter. She shared a similar experience of being informed at the German Embassy in Shanghai of another route of family reunification—as a dependant of the child. This alternative route not only streamlined the process and requested fewer documents, but it also exempted Ying and Lora from the A1-level language proficiency requirement.

Despite all interviewees' current status as family migrants, many of them first entered Germany on other visa categories. Tsai, 28 years old, Luo, 29 years old, and Tang, 32 years old, met their husbands outside of Germany (Tsai in Australia; Luo and Tang in Taiwan). They all first 'tested the water' by coming to Germany on working holiday visas and achieved German A1-level proficiency long before marriage. For Tsai and Luo, they returned to Taiwan again to apply for marriage visas before reentering Germany; Tang got married during her working holiday stay. Chao, 27 years old, met her then German boyfriend in Taiwan and came to Germany afterward to pursue her second master's degree. Ning, 38 years old, first met her husband in Taiwan, and was later employed and arrived in Germany as a postdoctoral researcher in 2013. Chao got married while holding a student visa, and Ning a working visa.

Lee, 33 years old, and Mao, 40 years old, both born and raised in China obtained New Zealand citizenship, respectively, due to student status and later employment, and previous residence in New Zealand. As a 'benefit' (*Vergünstigung*; BMJV 2016b) extended to third-country nationals of certain citizenships (see Note 4), citizens of New Zealand do not need to prove their linguistic ability before entering Germany as family migrants or for marriage.

For the rest 12 respondents, although theoretically *exempt* from the A1-level proficiency requirement given their high educational attainment (BAMF 2016), all invested time and financial or personal resources in learning German and passing the exam. When asked, many brought up that the 'exemption practice' was arbitrary according to social platforms, leading them to stay on the safe side. Most enrolled in the local Goethe or German language institutes; others taught themselves using online and recommended materials. Su, 29 years old, recalled visiting the First Library of Beijing Dong Cheng District every day for two weeks before the scheduled exam, caging herself inside the study room 10 hours a day with one book of simulation tests and samples, and starting from scratch with no previous German knowledge.

All respondents were proactive in gleaning information about regulations governing family reunification in Germany and relevant experiences, largely from social media and web sources. What became evident, nevertheless, was that while most of these women resembled each other in qualifications, their migratory trajectories varied often due to human factors, namely the officials with whom they liaised and the officials' distinct ways of approaching government policies. Human factors influenced family migrants' experiences from the start and well beyond their arrival in Germany.

5.2. The language hurdle

Language proficiency upon arrival, or the lack of it, becomes pragmatically consequential in these skilled female family migrants' dealings with the administration and daily life. For the issuance of residence permit following their entry, family migrants must visit local immigrant authorities (*Ausländerbehörde*) with their German spouses. They are also expected to provide documents proving insurance coverage, financial means to defray living costs, and sufficient accommodation, essentially 'sponsorship' from their German husbands. It should be noted that (1) almost all of these female migrants are fluent in English, 19 of them either with international professional experiences, or having resided or studied abroad; and (2) all but one (whose husband also speaks Chinese) have always spoken English with their husbands prior to moving to or settling down in Germany as a 'real' migrant. Owing to language barriers and partially to human factors, respondents had mixed feelings toward their first encounters with the immigrant authority. Most women, 20 of them, described similar situations where immigration officers addressed to both partners in German from the beginning, showed little intention to switch to English when the wife seemed to have trouble understanding or attempted to engage in the conversation, and inevitably directed their speech solely to the husband. Only one respondent stated that the immigration officer spoke to her in English from the start. While some respondents were nonchalant toward hindered communication, many felt slightly disturbed. On the one hand, immigration officers with whom these women interact are the sole authority ascertaining their linguistic ability and their need for integration, who are also vested with the power to mandate their participation in integration courses; on the other, the dynamics of interaction in such a setting left these skilled women practically voiceless. As Wan, 28 years old, depicted, 'My husband accompanied me to the office. I stood by him the whole time and just signed the paper work in the end' (9 February 2016).

Many also recited numerous incidents and episodes in daily life concerning their German ability. Luo for example confided that although she took German lessons early on, she rarely spoke German outside her class and avoided it initially: 'I spoke English with my husband most of the time at home. I dodged phone calls as much as I could, unless it was *absolutely* necessary for me to pick it up. I don't feel like that anymore now' (22 March 2016). Wan and Hsieh (38 years old), both with a master's degree, recounted how they rehearsed repeatedly before making their first German phone calls and how they considered overcoming their dread and exploring an uncharted territory an extraordinary feat. These women also shared an impetus and desire to tackle German head-on as they moved away from early language-induced disorientation in social interactions. Deng, 25 years old, and Lee illustrated their experiences mutual to a dozen other interviewees. Deng said:

I asked my husband about the words I should use and then returned again to see the nurse who was not willing to speak English with me before. I spoke German to her, and suddenly she showed warmth and acceptance; I felt welcomed. (Deng, 11 February 2016)

Lee recalled:

Most of the time I can handle the situations myself in English; when I am really unable to, my husband will have to take over. ... But I want to learn German and learn it well. It's just that, when you decide to come and live here, you've got to accommodate to this country. What's the point if you don't? It'd be hard for you to integrate into this country for sure. (Lee, 11 April 2016)

Whereas these women are confronted with various language-related challenges, be it making a doctor's appointment, going to the post office, communicating with electricians repairing broken pipes, or misreading product labels in pharmacies, they unanimously exhibited the aspiration to improve their language skills and to overcome this hurdle that obstructs their 'normal' communication. They deemed leaping the language hurdle necessary for their integration ahead.

5.3. The significant other and the extended family

As many examples above have already manifested, the German husbands of these highly skilled women are an inherent part of their migratory experience, since spousal presence and sponsorship are imperative for family unification. This creates a relationship of dependency between partners, often exceeding the extent anticipated by the female migrants themselves. Meanwhile, within the family sphere, husbands as well as in-laws construct a unique and intimate environment where 'alternative' concepts of acculturation and integration are preferred and practiced.

Migrating to Germany 'uprooted' most of the women from their family and social circles, and to some degree reinforced their dependency on their husbands. Besides translating and facilitating whenever necessary, husbands had naturally become pillars of psychological support. For Chang, 27 years old, it was her husband's providing security and calmness that kept her grounded rather than anxious. For Meng, 36 years old, her husband went to great lengths to make circumspect and meticulous arrangements revolving around her settling down in Germany, ranging from preparing her for emergency situations, configuring her smartphone apps with vital information she might need, to designating friends or family members to assist her when he had to be away on business. For Hung, 37 years old, it was her husband's willingness to assist and patience in difficult times that mitigated her frustration. For Wang, 29 years old, it was her husband's everyday encouragement and positive feedback that strengthened her:

He really encouraged me to meet people who share the same language with me ... He heard me talking to a grandma living upstairs, who doesn't speak English, and he said to me elatedly, 'Hey, I saw you introducing Asian products to her today. You know, those on promotion in the supermarket. I think that's so cool! You can even communicate with her in German like that! You're really amazing!' (Wang, 18 April 2016)

As all interviewees were going through a transitional period, feelings of bafflement, anxiety, or disorientation were the common denominator. Whether or not their husbands were able to provide timely emotional support greatly influences these women's psychological well-being.

Interactions in the family sphere constitute the largest part of family migrants' social contact in the host society. With the exception of Mao and Han (36 years old), all other respondents expressed how the necessity of integration was transmitted both directly and implicitly. Luo described how her husband deemed integration a must and suggested that she improves her German faster and extends her social circle. She consequently resisted following up on integration courses at the beginning. Hsieh, having known and spoken English with her husband for more than 10 years before marriage, conveyed how he switched to chiefly German since her migration and insisted it the best approach to her integration. Despite her motivation to learn, Hsieh was, however, reluctant to follow orders. Lora's husband on the other hand unilaterally decided to switch completely to German upon their resettling in Germany after seven years in China. Lora also talked about how one of her in-laws goaded her husband to speak German to her. Bai, 37 years old, disclosed how her parents-in-law, who are both fluent in English, deliberated between them and chose to speak German as a means to assist her in language acquisition. As portrayed above, conversations, exchanges, and interactions in family settings are by and large naturally or intentionally conducted in German. There is then little surprise that three women used the term 'blank out' to describe how they fared in family gatherings in the early period.

Besides instituting explicit or mild language conversion, close extended family members, usually mothers-in-law, often coax these female family migrants into norms and behavioral patterns befitting proper 'wives'. Tang (32 years old) sketched out how her then-future-mother-in-law alluded to the German baking tradition and skills as indispensable to her life as a married woman:

It seems that the older generation simply thinks that certain things and tasks, as it should be, have to be done by women. Baking for one has to be done by women. . . . There is just a rather fixed set of rules when it comes to the division of labor, such is their thinking. My mother-in-law once came to me, at a time when I was still playing dead [feigning ignorance], since I was not at all into making dessert. She knew we were about to get married . . . she suddenly walked toward me and said, 'Don't you want to learn this recipe from me? You know it's literally Sean's [husband's pseudonym] favorite!' That's when I knew and learned about such things. Yah, right, so I feigned interests, as you do. (Tang, 18 March 2016)

Not unique to Tang's experiences, other informants also expressed that when coerced into these gendered and role-specific practices by their significant other and in-laws, their instinct is to dismiss and repel.

The significant others could be facilitators and gatekeepers at once. While family members of these female migrants are the stronghold of their new life in Germany, they often also define the scope and obligation of integration for these women. What has hitherto been neglected is that integration, as interpreted by these female family migrants' significant others and extended family members, involves many codified behavioral cues and gendered attitudes and value orientations embedded in the family realm. Thus, the postulated goal of integration conveyed or even demanded by these women's German family is bound to transcend mere language proficiency. Moreover, the results suggest that when their husbands and in-laws put palpable pressure of integration on these skilled women, it adversely blunts their original and self-regulated motivation to integrate.

5.4. Changing self-conceptions

What jointly characterized these highly skilled female family migrants prior to their arrival in Germany was their independence. Most of them conceived themselves as adventurous, goal-oriented, and assertive in their workplace and undertakings. During the early period in the host country, respondents have shown to continue using the same strategic repertoire, established before their migration, to confront and tackle challenges. Hence, as a continuation of their self-conceptions, many women prioritized integration, with goals of acquiring advanced language skills and 'fitting into' the German society, as their principal task.

Nevertheless, as exhibited above, language barriers and circumstantial constraints have compelled many to abandon the self-sufficient, independent, and preemptive self and become a dependant, legally, financially, and mentally. This unforeseen and startling dependency forced skilled female migrants to reflect intensively on themselves, reconcile incongruities between existing self-conceptions and new behavioral norms or expectations, and finally realign themselves accordingly. The rivalry between pre-established self-conceptions and new circumstances is reflected in the 'wife' and the 'migrant' roles.

Ning shared her observation and experience of expectations for wives. She was surprised to find during her postdoctoral employment in Germany that married women and mothers work mostly part-time. Her husband also voiced opinions preferring her to only take up part-time jobs if she were to opt for employment. Hsieh in addition articulated a similar observation. She pointed out how the clear-cut household division of labor in Germany, where husbands are the main sources of income and women homemakers, became her reality and how she struggled with it grudgingly. She found her identity much changed for having lost a defining aspect of her life, namely her occupation as a startup owner, and was now first and foremost recognized as somebody's wife. This sentiment of being identified as merely the wife of their German spouses, both officially and in their private sphere, was referred to by many respondents as a drive for their integration. Integration, in the form of higher language proficiency, was a stepping stone to regaining their independence.

Entering an intercultural marriage and taking on the wife's role, to which distinct expectations attach, call for the reconfiguration of self-conceptions. Being a migrant equally provokes contemplation over self-conceptions. Lang, 42 years old, had worked in advertising for more than 20 years and held a managerial position as an expat in Shanghai before she left for Germany. She recounted:

I suddenly felt unadapted toward many things. I realized then that I hadn't let go. I would never be able to find a position anywhere near the one I had before, in advertising, I mean. Not that I considered that at all. Yet, I seem to have all of a sudden lost my, all of my worth and values that I established before. (Lang, 15 March 2016)

Bai, also an expat in Shanghai before she arrived in Germany, had been working in the ready-to-wear industry for over 15 years. She depicted her transition as 'an about-face' which left her disoriented, given that she is now '*arbeitslos*' (unemployed) and does not know how she could sustain herself financially the way she used to. Ying painted yet

another picture. Having first built their home with her German spouse in Taiwan, she emphasized how migration plucked her and her child from Taiwan, where she was well-acquainted, well-informed, and connected to the social vibe. Her networks with other mothers were cut off, and she was forced to dedicate most of her time to reestablishing rhythms of family life once in Germany, an experience she called the 'deprivation of mobility'. In spite of these hurdles, they saw advanced language skills, synonymous with integration, as their way out of these conundrums.

The wife's role is linked to gendered expectations in the host country, and the migrant role attached to the need to integrate and unavoidable constraints in daily life. With the restrictions imposed by these two roles, female family migrants' changing self-conceptions pertain to the stark contrast between their previous independence and the present lack of it. It is nevertheless worth highlighting that while adjusting their self-conceptions during the process of accommodation and acculturation, these women still value their independence highly, realign their goal orientation to live up to that independence, and see their own integration through language acquisition in the early period as a pathway to it.

6. Conclusions

The stories told by these 21 Chinese-speaking highly skilled female family migrants on the whole were of preserving pre-established self-conceptions in the face of newly mounted challenges associated with their roles in the host society. Migration, and being in an intercultural marriage itself, situated them in the 'migrant' and the 'wife' roles. Their dependency was exemplified in both roles through their reliance on their German spouses, legally, financially, and mentally. Thus, their demonstrated urge to improve language proficiency—as the first step toward future integration—originated from their attempt to align their new reality with existing self-conceptions, which are often built around independence and motivation among these skilled and active women. They also view integration in the form of high linguistic ability the key to their true independence in Germany.

Although most women themselves clearly delineated the immediate task of integration to be language acquisition, which corresponds neatly with the German government's promoted goal, the intimate intercultural relationships are incessantly at work during their early arrival. Interactions with their husbands in the family sphere have shown to directly affect how these skilled female migrants perceive integration, both positively and negatively. Oftentimes, the notion of being integrated as a 'wife' into the quintessential German family life goes beyond the ability to speak the language. It is rather tied to the readiness to immerse oneself in and embrace a domesticated, housewifery lifestyle. Many women have openly defied or tacitly resisted when this alternative concept of integration—somewhat diverging from the officially propagated objective—was invoked by their spouses or family-in-law.

The binational marriages between these skilled female family migrants and their German husbands differ in theory from problematic mixed unions such as 'hypergamy' (Constable 2005) or mail-order brides (Humbeck 1996; Kofman 2004; Kofman et al. 2011), notorious for their unbalanced power dynamics. The power dominance of the

Table 1. Sample overview

Case number	Alias	Nationality	Age (years)	Degree	Original entry status	Time of arrival	Interview date	German level at the time of interview
1	Wan	Taiwan (ROC)	28	Master	Family migrant	15 April	9 February 2016	A2
2	Deng	China (PRC)	25	Master-to-be	Family migrant	15 July	11 February 2016	B1
3	Hsieh	Taiwan (ROC)	38	Master	Family migrant	14 December	26 February 2016	B2
4	Ying	Taiwan (ROC)	38	Bachelor	Parental dependant	15 March	8 March 2016	B1
5	Lora	Taiwan (ROC)	43	Bachelor	Parental dependant	14 October	8 March 2016	B1
6	Han	Taiwan (ROC)	36	Bachelor	Family migrant	13 December	10 March 2016	B1
7	Su	China (PRC)	29	Bachelor	Family migrant	15 July	10 March 2016	B1
8	Lang	Taiwan (ROC)	42	Bachelor	Family migrant	15 November	15 March 2016	A1
9	Meng	Taiwan (ROC)	36	Bachelor	Family migrant	16 January	16 March 2016	A2
10	Chao	Taiwan (ROC)	27	Master	Student visa	14 September	17 March 2016	B1
11	Tang	Taiwan (ROC)	32	Bachelor	Working holiday	14 July	18 March 2016	A2
12	Tsai	Taiwan (ROC)	28	Bachelor	Working holiday	13 December	21 March 2016	B1
13	Luo	Taiwan (ROC)	29	Bachelor	Working holiday	13 May	22 March 2016	B1
14	Lee	New Zealand	33	Bachelor	Family migrant	15 November	11 April 2016	A1
15	Ning	Taiwan (ROC)	38	Doctor	Working visa	13 August	14 April 2016	A2
16	Wang	Taiwan (ROC)	29	Bachelor	Family migrant	15 December	18 April 2016	A1
17	Mao	China (PRC); NZ Residence Permit	40	Bachelor	Family migrant	14 December	19 April 2016	A1
18	Bai	Taiwan (ROC)	37	Bachelor	Family migrant	15 September	19 April 2016	B1
19	Hung	Taiwan (ROC)	37	Master	Family migrant	14 December	19 April 2016	B1
20	Chang	China (PRC)	27	Bachelor	Family migrant	15 October	21 April 2016	A2
21	Sanny	China (PRC)	48	Master	Family migrant	15 August	6 December 2016	B1

Note: Alias are pseudonyms.

native spouses and their family members has nonetheless surfaced as an ineluctable element in these skilled women's intercultural intimate relationships. This then goes on to dictate the circumference of integration predominantly in the private sphere and how these women actually carry out integration. Whereas integration can be fostered and encouraged, it is ultimately a process that requires individual motivation and incentive. Nonetheless, in Germany where integration has already been translated into entry requirements and obligatory courses, additional expectations to meet the criteria of an ideal wife and family migrant coming from their intimate partners have unfavorably crippled many respondents' self-regulated motivation to integrate.

What sets this study apart from the existing literature on female spousal migrants is the focus on highly skilled women and their *initial period* of accommodation after arrival in the host country. Most informants, though actively engaged in the labor market before migrating, were still required to attend integration courses at the time when the interview took place. Time constraint has therefore been a primary factor in their on-halt 'employment aspirations' during this interim phase. Thus, while most interviewed skilled spousal migrants expressed some nebulous intent toward rejoining the workforce (the ultimate goal of 'structural integration' behind the entire integration regime), they deemed improving German proficiency the top priority, a prerequisite step before proceeding further.

Interestingly enough, it is this 'pragmatic self-interest of the migrant for improvement of life conditions,' not necessarily for 'integration' itself, that motivates their actions (Kontos 2014: 128). The strong urge to 'learn the language' shared among these skilled female spousal migrants attests to their real drive of 'becoming independent' once again, which unintentionally resonates with the 'integration trajectory' advocated by a conservative migration regime. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we recognize that these skilled female family migrants are ascribed to a domesticated ideal of gendered integration that diverges from entry into and engagement with the public sphere. This form of 'gendered integration' at the micro-level differs from macro-level gendered civic integration resulting in social exclusion and institutional bias. Ingrained in intimate relationships and the family realm, gendered integration in the private sphere, as shown in this article, presents itself as more elusive to tackle.

These current findings also inform the early process of immigrant integration and assimilation. The nature of family migrants joining German spouses is different from the rationale of assimilation theories, formulated to address large influxes of ethnic migrants or the encounter of multiethnic peoples. Also, studies devoted to intercultural family migrants' relationships in the private sphere and their integration have been deficient, though primary group relationships are believed to be instrumental to immigrants' initial acculturation and accommodation. As a result, interactions on the home front, which lay the foundation for future trajectories of integration, have been much neglected. Even less visited is how intercultural dynamics within the realm of the household contribute to family migrants' practices of integration. This article offers some insights into the intercultural dynamics experienced by skilled female family migrants. Future research could include family migrants of various national origins and further investigate whether integration-related expectations are equally imposed on men or gender-specific.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

Endnotes

1. Amendments to the Act include 'provisions to implement eleven EU directives on residence and asylum rules . . . and, above all, provisions to foster the integration of legal migrants'. The amendments came into effect on 28 August 2007. See [Auswärtiges Amt \(2015\)](#).
2. Exceptions, however, apply to citizens of Australia, Israel, Japan, Canada, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, and the USA. No certificate of linguistic ability is required. See [BMJV \(2016b\)](#) and [BAMF \(2016\)](#).
3. EU Blue Card Directive governs the conditions of entry and residence of highly qualified non-EU nationals for the purpose of employment. See [Eur-Lex \(2009\)](#).
4. I also established contacts with the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesministerium für Migration und Flüchtlinge) and more than a dozen of integration course providers. It was, however, not possible to obtain any data through these channels due to data protection laws in Germany.
5. The list of cities are: Berlin, Erfstadt, Essen, Göttingen, Hamburg x2, Jülich, Königs Wusterhausen, Leipzig, Meinerzhagen, Mühlacker, München x3, Nürnberg, Schmidt, Schwäbisch Gmünd, Tübingen, Wedel, Winsen, and Würzburg.

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