

Egalitarianism Meets Confucianism: Masculinity Negotiation and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Swedish Male Spouses in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study investigates the cross-cultural adaptation process of Swedish men, rooted in Nordic egalitarianism, who relocate to Taiwan, a society emphasizing Confucian ethics and relationship orientation. While existing research on marriage migration in Asia predominately focuses on Southeast Asian female marriage migrants, this study focus on Western men who despite their privileged gender status, navigate significant structural conflicts within Taiwanese kinship and social structures. Adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), interviews were conducted with five Swedish spouses residing in Taiwan through a thorough bottom-up analysis following Yardley's criteria for validity to ensure research rigor. By integrating phenomenology with C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination" as a dual theoretical lens, the results reveal how participants experience structural tensions in the division of domestic labor, filial piety, and parenting. Furthermore, it explores how they reconstruct family roles, negotiate masculinity, and develop unique acculturation strategies regarding cultural conflicts. This research offers empirical insights into family sociology, examining how Nordic values resonate with Taiwanese family concepts, thereby enriching cross-cultural dialogue from the perspective of global citizenship.

Keywords: cross-border, multiculturalism, family issues

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Introduction

“Marriage is not merely a matter between the bride and groom, but a union of two families” (Liang, 2016). In Chinese society, the institution of marriage often transcends the will of the individual, bearing intergenerational responsibilities and familial expectations that extend beyond the individual level (Liang, 2016). As such, for marriage immigrants in Taiwan, their interactions in daily life extend beyond the couple themselves and are intimately connected with the entire family and even the interplay of two cultures.

The above discussion serves as a framework for the majority of the subsequent content. It highlights the core objective of this study, which is not merely to observe “whether a foreigner is living well in Taiwan,” but to explore the cultural script conflicts encountered by Swedish male marriage immigrants when entering family and kinship networks centered on “Confucian ethics” and “social orientation.” The study aims to gain a deep understanding of their subjective perceptions and interpretations, and to analyze how these Swedish men negotiate and adapt within the cultural context of a Chinese society-oriented environment.

In their research, Lin (2008) details the nature of family adaptation among marriage migrants. It is explained as family relationships centered, with emotional bonds among family members serving as the foundation for interaction, thereby developing a multi-layered adaptation process encompassing psychological states, family status, communication behaviors, and participation in decision-making (Lin, 2008). Our objective is to highlight the impact of cultural differences on individuals’ subjective experiences of family life. Our further objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the compromise and adaptation strategies Swedish husband employs when integrating into Taiwanese family life.

Literature Review

“I” and “We”—The Influence of Values and Culture

In this study, the conflicts these Swedish men experienced with their in-laws were not merely simple disagreements, but rather a clash between Chinese “collectivist” and Swedish “individualist” values. According to Wang (2005), to understand how values influence people’s daily lives and actions, they must be examined within specific cultural and social contexts; they cannot exist independently of their context. Similarly, Johnson (2014) points out that the scope of values extends beyond mere behavioral choices to encompass how individuals treat themselves and others. Our focus lies in how values influence people’s thoughts and actions. We argue that the conflicts and unease experienced by Swedish men within their in-laws’ families in Taiwan are not merely issues of personal cross-cultural adaptation, but rather structural tensions arising from the socio-cultural differences between Sweden and Taiwan.

First, we explore the nature of Chinese cultural traditions. Scholars refer to the fundamental roots of the Chinese people’s psychological structure, behavior, and lifestyle as “social orientation” (Yang, 2005). To adapt to the lifestyle of an agricultural economy, specifically in terms of protection, production, and consumption, the family serves as the core unit. To manage the allocation of limited resources, the role-based nature of relationships within and outside the family enabled individuals to stay within their proper bounds and act in accordance with propriety to maintain order. Consequently, the Chinese social orientation is grounded in familism; the relational orientation concerns how individuals interact with others; the authority orientation explains how individuals align with those holding power within a group; and the

other-oriented dimension describes how others' evaluations of an individual influence that person (Yang, 2005). Confucian thought is the product of the institutionalization of these social orientations. Lee (2025) summarizes the dimensions in which Confucian values manifest in personal life as follows: (1) Family-centeredness: Filial piety toward parents and respect for ancestors, with the family's honor, disgrace, and interests taking precedence; (2) Power distance: adherence to order, emphasis on individual roles and hierarchical power positions, and gender-specific responsibilities and obedience; (3) Other-oriented: group harmony and reciprocity, emphasizing values centered on others; (4) Personal cultivation: suppression of personal preferences and feelings, acceptance of reality, and avoidance of conflict.

Hofstede's Culture Dimensions

Hofstede's research has made significant contributions to understanding the value systems and lifestyles of various societies; When examining cross-cultural conflicts, the primary task is to clarify the cultural traits involved in the clash; this understanding serves as the core foundation for subsequent problem-solving (Lan, 2014). In this study, we focus on three of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: 1. Individualism/Collectivism; 2. High/Low Power Distance; and 3. Masculinity (Competition)-Oriented/Femininity (Care)-Oriented. This framework is applied to examine the cultural value contexts of the Swedish marriage migrants and the Taiwanese counterpart, as well as the resulting differences.

According to Hofstede's theory, in individualistic societies, individuals are encouraged to care only for themselves and their immediate family; self-expression is accepted; and each person should independently maintain their own income and manage their own expenses (Hofstede, 2011). While a certain score of Sweden's level of individualism differs between publications, methods and datasets, the current consensus is that Sweden has one of the highest levels of individualism. (Komisarof & Akaliyski, 2025). In the Swedish individualistic culture; the individual and their closest family are of utmost importance, and the country is considered to adopt progressive ideals regarding child-rearing (Gurdal & Sorbring, 2024).

In collectivist societies, individuals are taught to uphold the virtue of maintaining harmony within their group and to practice economic reciprocity among family members. Scholar Yang (2005) refers to collectivism within ethnic Chinese families as "family collectivism," or a family-oriented approach, whose core elements are summarized as follows: a sense of unity among family members that promotes solidarity; mutual dependence to maintain family prosperity; and self-restraint and conformity to preserve family harmony (Yang & Yae, 2005).

Power distance refers to the extent to which individuals are aware of their position within the power structure and the degree to which less powerful members accept unequal distribution of power. In high-power-distance societies, the family-based notion is that children are expected to obey their parents, and parental authority continues to exert influence throughout a person's life. Parents do their utmost to provide care and affection when their children are young, and even after children reach adulthood and are capable of managing their own lives, they are still expected to be obedient and show respect toward their parents and other elders (Hofstede, 2010). Confucianism, through four of the Five Relationships (excluding friendship)—ruler-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, and brother-brother—emphasizes hierarchical and sequential relationships in social interactions (Huang, 2005). In contrast, societies with low power distance encourage children to take charge of their own affairs and lives as early as possible. Once children grow up, they are treated as independent individuals who interact with

others on an equal footing, regardless of age or status, and do not formally express respect or obedience (Hofstede, 2011).

Masculine (competition)-oriented and feminine (care)-oriented refer to the gender roles and functions of men and women. These are distinguished based on the degree of diversity and consistency in a society's gender values: if men and women share a significant degree of humility and care-oriented values, the society is considered feminine, where both men and women are expected to be humble, gentle, and focused on quality of life; Conversely, if a society's gender values are clearly differentiated and place greater emphasis on masculine traits such as resilience, ambition, and achievement, it is a masculine society (Hofstede, 2010). In Hofstede's research, Sweden was the most feminine country among all those studied, a finding corroborated by the prevalence of cohabitation without marriage (Andersson et al., 2017), general shared house chores (Ruppanner et al., 2017) and low expectations on males being the predominant economic provider (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2022).

The Role of Phenomenology and the Sociological Imagination in Research on Marriage Migration

Phenomenology is regarded as the study of the appearance of things. That is, the way things present themselves in our experience, or the way we experience them. Its purpose is to reveal the meaning inherent in experiences as perceived from a subjective or first-person perspective (Smith, 2013). Phenomenology holds that experience as a whole. Even when analyzing specific aspects of an individual's experience, we can return to the phenomenon as a whole to discern its existential context and circumstances (Lin et al., 2022). The background of this study is the cultural differences and conflicts encountered by marriage immigrants from Sweden who have relocated to Taiwan. In research on cross-cultural marriage immigrants, by suspending our prior knowledge of a subject, we encounter the subject's experiential phenomena through a direct, essence-oriented perspective (Lee & Lai, 2009).

This research employs phenomenology as a method to restore the essence of experience and deepen our understanding of the interview data; We also draw upon Mills's concept of sociological imagination, using "experience" and "comparison" to identify the personal struggles faced by Swedish men when confronted with the Confucian ethical values cherished by the Taiwanese community, as well as which of the values they hold dear are threatened in their interactions with their in-laws in Taiwan, it is necessary to consider the deeper social conflicts built into how these family relationships work. (Mills, 1996). Sociological imagination enables researchers to shift perspectives within a given context, navigating the intersection of individual experience and broader society, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive assessment and interpretation (P, 2023). It is worth noting that this study emphasizes "differences in scripts" rather than "the superiority or inferiority of civilizations," with the aim of promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Context and Method: Setting the Scene

This study employs interviews to capture the subjective accounts of five Swedish male marriage immigrants regarding their interactions with their in-laws in Taiwan. All interviewees reside in Taiwan and have been married for one to three years. While the Nordic countries all share similar egalitarian views, the focus was limited to Sweden due to time constraints. Sweden was especially chosen because it has the largest number of married men from the five

Nordic countries in Taiwan; consequently, not only is the pool of potential interviewees broader, but these men also have the potential to make greater contributions to local society.

Our study was conducted using qualitative research interviews. With the participants' consent, we recorded the interviews and transcribed them. Qualitative research focuses particularly on individuals' interpretations of current social conditions; therefore, the interview method allows us to explore how interviewees feel about their experiences and how they interpret these phenomena (Wu, 2015). When conducting research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, IPA, the key to success lies in implementing the dynamic process of "double hermeneutics," meaning that researchers must attempt to understand how research participants themselves understand and construct the meaning of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interview results in this paper were analyzed using the interpretive phenomenological analysis steps detailed by Gauci (2019), which integrate the operational guidelines of Smith et al.: (1) carefully reading and repeatedly listening to the verbatim transcripts to immerse oneself in the participants' meanings and contexts; (2) recording the researcher's own understandings and thoughts to capture the development of the double hermeneutic; (3) independently identifying and extracting emerging themes for each participant; (4) conducting a second-order analysis to gather the researcher's inferences and reactions to the text; (5) adopting an idiographic approach, gradually expanding from the specific experiences of individual participants to general categories; and (6) developing overarching themes across all interview data. By repeatedly moving back and forth between the text and the data processing process within the "hermeneutic circle," and through continuous comprehension and suspicion, we can uncover the deeper meanings hidden beneath the literal meaning in the minute details (parts) of the text and the participants' first-person experiences. Finally, we return to the text as a whole and the specific lifeworld context of the participants (Gauci, 2019).

To ensure the quality and reliability of this study, we evaluated our research methodology based on the four core criteria for qualitative research proposed by Yardley (2000). Regarding "sensitivity to context," rather than simply matching theoretical frameworks, we comprehensively reviewed prior studies to deeply contextualize the cultural nuances between Taiwan and Sweden. We prioritized the participants' subjective voices and maintained strict ethical standards to safeguard their well-being throughout the interview process.

To fulfill "commitment and rigor," the research team dedicated extensive time to immerse themselves in cross-cultural issues. We systematically gathered comprehensive interview transcripts and applied a thorough analytical approach to capture both the overarching themes and the subtle details of the immigrants' lived experiences.

In terms of "transparency and coherence," we explicitly detailed our research design and findings, ensuring that our interpretative phenomenological methodology aligned seamlessly with our theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, we actively maintained reflective journals to practice reflexivity, critically examining how our own pre-existing cultural biases might impact the interpretative process.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates "impact and importance" by offering substantive theoretical and socio-cultural insights. By assisting readers in developing a more profound understanding of cross-cultural adaptation within a globalized era, this research aims to foster societal empathy and cultural inclusivity, translating academic findings into concrete, practical awareness.

Result and Discussion: Unpacking the Experiences of Taiwanese Integration

The Essence of Marriage and the Significance of Family Roles in the Eyes of Swedish Men

Interviewees brought egalitarian ideals to their marriages in Taiwan, shaping their perceptions of household equality. They view the central idea of marriage as built on mutual support and the realization of personal achievements, demonstrating the Swedish cultural emphasis on “equality” and “shared responsibility” within marriage. The foundation of the partnership is characterized by an absolute structure of equality, emphasizing mutual support and the joint raising of children. The core idea of the interviewees of equality was according to the 50-50 principle, that each partner should contribute to 50% of the household work. While the allocation of the kinds of household didn’t necessarily deviate from gender stereotypes, allocations were based on mutual decisions interviewees described aligned to what each partner preferred and saw strength within. Interviewee 2 stated: “I think the division of the house work shares my Swedish values. I mean she’s much better than me at cooking so it makes sense that she does most of it and I do other stuff.”

The financial responsibilities were also grounded in what was fair rather than an obligation related to gender, adapting to both partners’ income and current needs, as one interviewee stated:

Because both of our so both have individual companies, right? So it depends. [...] sometimes maybe it will be me who pay most of [...] the expenses uh a month and maybe some months it will be her that will pay the majority of them. (interviewee 4)

Interviewee 2 shared “And also since my salary is higher, I pay for most of the stuff at least the bigger stuff like rent and uh if we want to buy something bigger.” The 50/50 principle is again mentioned both by interviewee 3 stating that he would feel “bad” if he wasn’t “at least approaching kind of 50/50”, and interviewee 5 explaining:

I take care of the bills and I usually take care of like daily eating outside and paying for groceries. [...] I mean of course, my wife does handle the finance of the house but in my way of thinking is that if we ever would sell the house then that’s her money. So I think it’s uh I think I would say it’s still 50 50. (interviewee 5)

In short, all interviewees sought to implement their egalitarian ideals regarding financial and domestic labor within their Taiwanese households, and none reported encountering significant spousal friction or resistance. This was also the conclusion related to the larger family. The interviewees neither had experienced any encounters with traditional masculine expectations emphasizing achievement and responsibility when dealing with Taiwanese in-laws; Instead, for some interviewees, the in-laws in contrast demonstrated more feminine values as concern for happiness and well-being. “He didn’t expect anything. He only said we need to support each other”, explained interviewee 2, which interviewee 3 echoed, “I don’t think they had many expectations except for the children part. [...] treat each other well and take care of each other. These are the things they have said to us.”

From Independency to Interdependency

One area the interviewees frequently shared experiences of frustration within was the dynamic relationships of the large Taiwanese families. The collectivistic nature of the Taiwanese family, how it operates and the hierarchy of it, clashed with the interviewees' perception of how a family "should" work. The family contrast was described by one of the interviewees:

In Sweden, parents don't interfere in their children's daily lives. [...] You can decide for yourself what to tell them and what to share. [...] But in Taiwan, the whole family is like a single entity—everyone shares everything, even personal matters. And when it comes to money, people just casually give gifts to family members, [...] Everyone has this 'we're family' mindset; there are no secrets—we're like one. (interviewee 1)

This distinct "we're family" mindset translates into daily interactions that the Swedish interviewees often perceived as overprotectiveness and coercive giving, which fundamentally challenged their egalitarian values. In their daily experiences, acts traditionally coded as "care" or "goodwill" in Taiwanese culture were often felt as boundary violations. For instance, Interviewee 5 recalled an incident at a furniture store: "I was going to pay for my food, and my wife's mom did not accept that. So she pushed through and put her credit card on the machine which for me is... seen as very disrespectful in Sweden." Rather than feeling supported, the interviewees felt stripped of their status as equal, independent adults. Interviewee 1 shared a similar frustration when temporarily living with in-laws, noting that the parents were "refusing us to even like help with like cleaning chopsticks." Through the lens of the independent self, being placed at the receiving end of this unidirectional care forced them into a passive role of dependency.

Consequently, navigating this intense collectivistic environment becomes exhausting, often likened to "a strategy game of trying to make the correct move at the correct time" (interviewee 5). This constant flow of unsolicited generosity generates a profound sense of social debt. From a Swedish cultural perspective, which emphasizes self-reliance and the give-and-take mentality, this dynamic is highly uncomfortable. The interviewees 3 revealed an internal conflict: "sometimes, like subconsciously, but sometimes also actively, do not want to... accept all the generosity or the friendliness because I'm worried that getting so close will give them leverage to make these demands" (interviewee 3).

The climax of this struggle between the independent self and the family power structure manifests when this perceived leverage infringes upon highly private, non-negotiable life decisions, such as childbearing. Rooted in traditional notions of filial piety, the Taiwanese family structure normalizes elders' natural control and expectations over the younger generation's major life events. When faced with familial expectations regarding having children, interviewee 3 felt deeply violated, describing it as an "authoritarian or invasive way of parenting." He further explained that it felt like "taking for granted that they could simply dictate such a massive part of our lives." Moving from an independent upbringing to a community-focused system often means their personal boundaries are repeatedly violated in the name of tradition.

Ultimately, immersed in a system where living spaces, finances, and time are intensely shared the interviewees found themselves continuously forced to adapt their lifestyles. They struggle to "shake the feeling of someone kind of being over your shoulder and having expectations" (interviewee 3). This ongoing cultural tension powerfully illustrates how structural "care" in a

collectivistic society can transform into an oppressive force, leading to a profound struggle for the independent self-striving to maintain its boundaries within a deeply entrenched power structure.

Strategy and Process of Adapt

Although they exhibited different behavioral patterns, the five Swedish marriage immigrants demonstrated a high degree of consistency in their passiveness when facing cultural conflicts with their in-laws in Taiwan. Their approaches to conflict resolution often involved “letting them have their way” or “shutting down” (interviewee 5), essentially adopting a hands-off attitude. By “swallowing” their dissatisfaction or conforming to the in-laws’ wishes, they aimed to avoid escalating tensions. When asked how they dealt with cultural conflicts, interviewee 1 mentioned: “I would respect them and I would play by their rules.”

This act of resisting the expression of genuine feelings and putting on a mask to maintain harmony within the in-laws’ family system accurately reflects the “surface acting” strategy in emotional labor as described in Hochschild’s theory (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

It was, like, playing a role or putting on a character a bit. Like, how I talk, behave, act, everything, because there's just a sense of you have to listen, what is expected from you, and then you have to kind of like respond to that. (interviewee 3)

Such behavioral responses actually trace back to the unique characteristics of Swedish culture: although Sweden is often viewed as a highly individualistic country, as noted by Tian & Guang (2017), Swedish society also retains collectivist traits that emphasize maintaining group harmony and avoiding conflict. Consequently, in social interactions, when they are concerned that their direct expressions might offend their in-laws, they tend to consciously suspend the Swedish cultural trait of expressing opinions: “In Sweden we love to share opinions uh so I try to just silence them a bit and just go along with them” (interviewee 3).

Discussing with their wives and have them help convey or establish boundaries in a harmonious manner that fits within the cultural context of Taiwan. In cross-cultural adaptation, this post-event communication is not only an outlet for emotions but also a process of trying to understand the underlying reasons behind cultural differences in Taiwan. By understanding the cultural context (such as understanding the well-intentioned motives behind Taiwanese parents’ overprotectiveness), they can truly accept it internally and generate corresponding emotions, thereby transforming from “surface acting” to “deep acting” (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

The kind of newest addition to how I act[...] It's just the newest part, instead of being, like, a theatre mask that I put on, now it's just another piece of clothing, maybe, that I put on. So it feels more normal. (interviewee 3)

I would say adjusting and also yeah adjust my self and changing a bit my behavior maybe like you know like ing and trying to just relax and enjoy the ride. (interviewee 5)

The key to helping marriage immigrants adapt lies in placing individual behaviors within a broader ethnic cultural context and developing multiethnic perspective. When they realize that the habits of their in-laws actually stem from their social orientation toward “harmony” and “authority”, such as they are asked to respect elders and the expectation of compulsory giving

them food, they can lower their personal defenses and maintain an open attitude toward different values (McGoldrick & Preto, 2005). This adaptation process does not involve completely abandoning one's personal values, but rather developing a cross-cultural competence and self-identity that blends "soft on the outside, strong on the inside."

It maybe completes me more, like, expanded my personality or like my cultural repertoire, [...]you kind of, inventing a new personality, or, like, in how you communicate, and now it has become a more complementary part of my original person. (interviewee 3)

Conclusion

This research shows that when Nordic egalitarianism meets Confucianism, the greatest friction does not come from negotiating masculinity or breadwinner roles, but from navigating family hierarchy and collectivist care. The findings indicate that when confronting structural conflicts, specifically, the encroachment on individual boundaries by Chinese "family collectivism" and the structural dominance of elders over younger members under "high power distance", Scandinavian men exhibit a dynamic adaptation strategy. This strategy progresses from "self-suspension" and "delegating boundary agency" to their spouses, to ultimately developing a "multiethnic perspective", characterized by an "outer-soft, inner-firm" approach. On one hand, they strive to maintain harmony within the family sphere by enacting the role of compliant, amiable sons-in-law. On the other hand, they tend to redefine the connotations of family roles and masculinity. By striking a balance between the achievement-oriented, economic provider expectations of traditional masculine societies and the shared responsibilities of a supportive partnership, they actively demonstrate the egalitarian values of feminine cultures that prioritize quality of life and emotional support.

This study contributes to the growing literature on marriage migration by describing and analyzing the interaction dynamics and negotiation strategies of Swedish men within their Taiwanese in-laws' families, thereby demonstrating cross-cultural competence. There are some limitations to our study. First, the presented findings may not fully represent all Swedish marriage immigrants in Taiwan. Future research could not only compare whether the negotiation and adaptation strategies of long-term Swedish marriage immigrants in Taiwan undergo deeper changes and differences, but also explore those who have interacted with their in-laws but failed to adapt and could not reside in Taiwan long-term. Additionally, studies could investigate cases where the failure to adapt led to severe conflicts, ultimately making them unable to maintain their marital relationships. Although we have presented some findings that differ from previous perspectives, our study is limited to exploring the cultures and adaptation strategies of two specific countries. Therefore, in the face of a globalized and multiethnic social context, it is crucial to conduct more diverse research on the encounters between different cultures.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that, while reviewing and refining the language of this manuscript, they utilized the AI-assisted writing software DeepL, Gemini and NotebookLM. Their use was limited to:

1. Preliminary translation of certain paragraphs to ensure precise wording and structure, as well as the translation of foreign-language literature.
2. Verifying data sources and conducting similarity checks in compliance with academic ethics standards.
3. Translating and transcribing the preliminary interview data in order to allocate more time towards the analysis.

The author further declares that, apart from DeepL, Gemini and NotebookLM, no other artificial intelligence or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate content while writing this manuscript. The concepts, research design, experimental procedures, research results, analysis, and discussion in this manuscript are original and derived from careful and systematic research execution.

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