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BOOK REVIEWS

Exceptional States: Chinese Immigrants and Taiwanese Sovereignty by Sara L. Friedman Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. 264 pp.

[Mei-Ling Chien](#)

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Exceptional States is an engaging ethnography, which uses empathy to describe and interpret the struggles of Chinese spouses, on the one hand, and the uncertainty of Taiwan's sovereignty, on the other. Through the telling of several personal stories narrated by Chinese spouses, and by detailing discoveries obtained through participant observation in activities that Chinese spouses attend, this book presents the complicated intersection between marriage, personal life, and the nation. Facing this difficult task, Friedman covers the experience of individuals over several years during the 2000s to record “risky” encounters between Chinese spouses and officials, the government, and citizens in Taiwan.

In the first part of the book, focusing on the theme of border crossings, chapter 1 explores how the examination of identity and travel documents (passports, marriage certificates, etc.) invokes emotions in both Chinese spouses and in the bureaucrats conducting the examination, and how these exchanges expose both uncertainty and frustration over the question of Taiwan's sovereignty as a nation-state. The theme of sovereignty production at the intersection of intimate life and state power is addressed again in chapter 2 through discussion of bureaucratic processes for evaluating marital authenticity. Through the anthropological study of immigration policy and bureaucracy, the two chapters deliver a major theme: “how cross-Strait marriages were not merely part of but in many ways the linchpin of Taiwan's larger political struggles” (p. xiv).

Using Giorgio Agamben's notion of exceptionalism in a sovereign's constitution, "exceptional," a key word in the title of this book, is the main theme of part two. Looking at risky encounters between Chinese spouses and bureaucrats (risky in the sense that a potential result of these encounters includes deportation), the author also brings in the voices of NGO workers and activists to discuss how the imagination regimes of Taiwan make mainland Chinese an exceptional legal subject that, in turn, makes waiting for citizenship and work permits a long-term and nonlinear process for Chinese spouses (chapter 3). From description of public encounters between Chinese spouses and bureaucrats in policy-education forums and acculturation classes, chapter 4 addresses the kind of ambivalence that has been constituted. On the one hand, "bureaucrats depended on Chinese spouses to affirm ... their assertions of sovereign rule" (p. 139). On the other hand, the responses from Chinese spouses and their citizen partners show "how they might act less as a direct mirror for the state's sovereign claims and more as an unpredictable, strangely altered reflection" (p. 139). In doing so, these chapters make a specific contribution, arguing that the subject of exception is not a universal one.

Part 3 expresses the final themes of the book: belonging and gender. These last two chapters provide several stories that offer detailed profiles of individuals. They are based on personal accounts from the Chinese spouses' point of view. The chapters even include descriptions of personal engagements with the author, who is considered by her interlocutors as a needed friend, consultant, and companion. However, as the author makes clear, this book is not about the empirical differences in gender roles or expectations between Taiwanese and Chinese societies; rather, "this gender talk provides an important register through which cross-Strait political differences (and the diverse forms of socialization they engender) may be discussed, managed, and, in some case, neutralized to make them less threatening to the intimate domains of marriage, family and the nations" (p. 146). Through the author's rendering of these stories, the multiple meanings and concepts of personal histories, home, belonging, and national identities are redefined through these various personal accounts (chapter 6). In sum, this book utilizes vivid narratives and personal profiles of Chinese spouses to understand and interpret the situation between the borders of Taiwan and China. In doing so, this book provides a precise characterization of Taiwanese society and how it differs from socialist Chinese society.

For this informative and sympathetic ethnography, which illustrates the ambivalence, frustrations, tensions, struggles, and hope between Chinese spouses and Taiwanese society, my comments are as follows. Aside from the ethnography of bureaucrats, the data utilized are mainly from interviews of, or participant observation with, Chinese immigrant spouses. If the author had considered linguistic performance as part of her analysis, would a different type of social reality or personal identity have been presented? Would this ethnography weave different colors or provide different insights if it had been possible for the author to sit together with the families and citizen-partners of her Chinese spouse interlocutors as they spent time with each other, stepping into the domestic sphere as a part of participant observation? If this had been possible, the narratives of kinship and household and marital situations presented by Chinese spouses could have become dialogic. Conversational narratives (Ochs and Capps 2001) that emerge among Chinese spouses and their family may invite alternative descriptions for the stories and present encounters in a more interactive and intersubjective light.

REFERENCE CITED

Ochs, Elinor, and Lisa Capps. 2001. *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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