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“Ways of Being” and “Ways of Belonging”: Social Integration Experiences of Migrant Wives in Cross-National Marriages in Singapore

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Abstract

“Mixed marriage” in the traditional Western-centric literature is often seen as a “facilitator of integration” as marital unions potentially provide “privileged access to residence and citizenship status for family members of citizens” (de Hart 2015, 171). In contradistinction, the scholarly literature on cross-national marriages based on the Asian experience has questioned this perspective, highlighting that marriage migrants – particularly women moving from a less developed to a more economically advanced country – face considerable barriers to integration as they navigate precarious and prejudice-ridden pathways towards residency and citizenship rights. Drawing insights from both sets of literature, this paper examines the integration experiences of 36 migrant wives from low-income, cross-national families in Singapore. We follow Charsley, Bolognani and Spencer (2017) in treating “integration” not so much as a singular measure but a complicated and contested set of processes occurring unevenly across several domains, including the social, cultural, civic/political, structural and identity. By distinguishing and examining the inter-relationships between the different domains, we frame integration as a combination of both practical “ways of being” and meaning-laden “ways of belonging” (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004), where marriage migrants’ everyday practices in negotiating the spheres of life intertwine in influencing their sense of belonging, and vice versa.