

Marriage Immigration and Gender in South Korea: Accounting for Gender Disparities in International Marriages

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Recent studies on immigration in East Asia are focusing on female marriage immigration, the migration of large numbers of women from developing countries to marry men from industrialized countries like South Korea. Typically lost in the discourse however, are international marriages involving foreign grooms, once the more dominant trend in South Korea before the mid-1990s. This article explains how trends in international marriages in South Korea reversed in the mid-1990s and how marriages involving the two genders differ in their drivers and characteristics. Both phenomena are examined in the context of neo-classical economics and push-pull theories of migration, hypergamy, homogamy, demographic transition, changing social norms, and state policies. The large scale migration of foreign brides to South Korea, or marriage immigration, is driven by demographic factors, institutionalized support, and the rise of a commercial marriage industry. Marriages involving foreign men do not share the characteristics of marriage migration, its drivers are less clear, nor is it supported by the state and Korean society.

Keywords: immigration, migration, marriage migration, marriage immigration, international marriages, gendered migration, immigration policy

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the Asian Tiger economies of South Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong, and Singapore are all accompanied by migration. This phenomenon is initially associated with internal and external movement of workers to fill labor demands in

industrializing and industrialized countries. Recent developments have shown a different form of migration: increasing numbers of migration associated with marriages. Even countries that were once thought to be immune to immigration like South Korea are experiencing a surge of such a migration. Yang and Lu (2010), and Lim (2009)

noted the rising incidence of marriages between men from South Korea and women from China, developing countries in Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent, Central Asia. Women marriage immigrants now make up the second biggest group of new immigrants below temporary workers in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Shay, 2010).

In 1990, only 4,710 or approximately 1.2% out of the 394,602 marriages in South Korea were with a foreign citizen. The number of international marriages and its percentage as a proportion to all marriages in South Korea gradually increased throughout the 1990s. In 2000, international marriages between Koreans and foreign nationals were estimated to comprise 3.7% of the total marriages for the year (Nho, Park, Kim, Choi, & Ahn, 2008). In 2004, such marriages increased three folds climbing up to 11.4% of the total number of marriages. The proportion of such marriages relative to the total number of marriages has remained high since 2004, generally staying above 10% of the total. As of 2011, 29,762 cases or 9% of the total 329,087 marriages in South Korea involved a Korean and a foreign spouse.

While marriage is generally regarded as a private concern and not that of the state, concern with international marriages has increased along with its growth in magnitude and importance especially since the 1990's (Lee, 2008). International marriages and the phenomena of marriage migration present new challenges as both sending and receiving countries deal with socio-cultural, political, and economic implications of this phenomenon. The challenges are especially difficult in countries like South Korea, where international marriages have been historically rare and discouraged due to socio-cultural norms and an ethnic-based conception of identity that emphasize racial and cultural homogeneity.

Most contemporary literature and studies on international marriages tend to focus on women marriage immigrants (see for example Kim, 2008; Lee, Seol, & Cho, 2006; Lee, 2008; Kim, 2009, etc.). Typically lost in the discourse however, are international marriages involving foreign grooms

of Korean wives, once the dominant trend in South Korea before the mid-1990s. Foreign husbands in such unions receive very little research attention, possibly because the number is small relative to females, and possibly because men are assumed to be more 'independent' and 'problem-free' (Tseng, 2010). While they are occasionally mentioned in passing, few scholars actually pay attention and attempt to account for these disparities.

The main objective of this article is to provide an overview of the history and trends of international marriages in South Korea, examining male and female international marriages against the framework of classical theories of migration, hypergamy, and homogamy. In contrast with the dominant literature, this article disaggregates the trends for both genders, exploring the similarities and differences in the trends and drivers of such marriages. This article explains: 1) how trends in international marriages in South Korea reversed in the mid-1990s as a result of demographic, socio-economic, and political factors; and 2) how marriages involving the two genders substantially differ in their drivers and characteristics.

There is reason to believe that gender disparities have serious social implications on a wide range of social, economic, and political issues. Research in this area, according to Tseng (2010), can enrich understanding of the processes and patterns of marriage migration and gender as a system and can further uncover the gender logic behind immigrant adaptation and integration. Gender disparities have implications on public policies, social integration, marital expectations (e.g. the "prescribed" role of a spouse), and domestic relations (e.g. success or failure of marriages, familial relationships, etc.)

EXPLAINING MARRIAGE IMMIGRATION

There are several general theories of migration that explain the movement of people from developing countries like the Philippines to

more industrialized countries like South Korea. Neoclassical economic theories look at migration as a result of the substantial wage difference between developing countries and industrialized countries. Push-pull theories on the other hand explain that migration is a result of push factors from sending countries and pull factors from receiving countries. Push factors can include lack of employment opportunities, low wages, low living standards, political instability; pull factors can include plenty of employment opportunities, high wages, higher living standards, and political environment among others (Kim, 2009).

Concepts that are more specific to marriage immigration include the concepts of hypergamy, homogamy, and endogamy. Hypergamy is the practice of marrying upwards of one's socio-economic class. Initially, the concept was explained as marriage between a woman of a lower caste and a man of the upper caste. Later on, it was modified to explain that the female would gain status while the male would not incur substantial status loss from the marriage (Crestor & de Leon, 1982). Extending this concept to international marriages, this perspective advances the view that migrants (usually women) from less developed countries marry men from more developed countries to improve their socio-economic status.

Homogamy refers to marriages between individuals who are similar to each other in some way (e.g., socio-economic status, class, ethnicity, or religion) (Lu, 2008). Endogamy likewise emphasizes preference and marrying within the same ethnic, social, or economic group to the exclusivity of others (e.g., see Kalmijn, 1998; Tseng, 2010). These concepts have been used to explain why certain groups prefer to marry from the same ethnic group. In some cases, the search for a potential spouse can extend to overseas diaspora or co-ethnics from other countries such as the case in Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. Another useful concept is referred to as marriage squeeze, defined as the imbalanced sex composition of the marriage-eligible population. With an insufficient number of potential spouses of one gender,

marriages are more difficult (Kim, 2008). The search for spouses can extend overseas.

INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES IN SOUTH KOREA

While international marriages are not unusual in many parts of the globe, it has generally been rare throughout Korean history. The unpopularity of international marriages is possibly related to the serious prejudice and social stigma against such unions in Korean society, especially against marriages involving Korean women. Most early international marriages in Korea were associated with the invasion of the country by China and Japan, where women were frequently victimized as spoils of war. As a patriarchal society that valued women's "virginity", those who were captured and abused by invaders were seen as symbols of the failure of national defense and often shamed as outcasts. Women who served as mistresses of Japanese soldiers during the occupation of Korea, those who engaged in sexual labor, and later, those who married American soldiers were likewise condemned for "betraying" nationalism (Lee, 2008).

International marriages rose after 1945 (post-World War II) partly due to the presence of the US military in the Korean peninsula. Since the 1960's, the Unification Church has also organized marriages between Korean men and foreign women with most brides being Japanese (Lee, 2008). This church is also responsible for a large share of international marriages in the 1970s, and 1980s (Lee et al., 2006). The church originally based in Korea is known for its practice of holding mass marriages, in many cases with the church leaders designating and pairing the spouses, which in some cases can include foreign women.

Until 1995, majority of international marriages in South Korea involved foreign men and Korean women with many of the men usually from Japan, the US, and some from China. In 1990, the Statistics Korea (2006) database registered 4,091 such marriages. In contrast, registered marriages

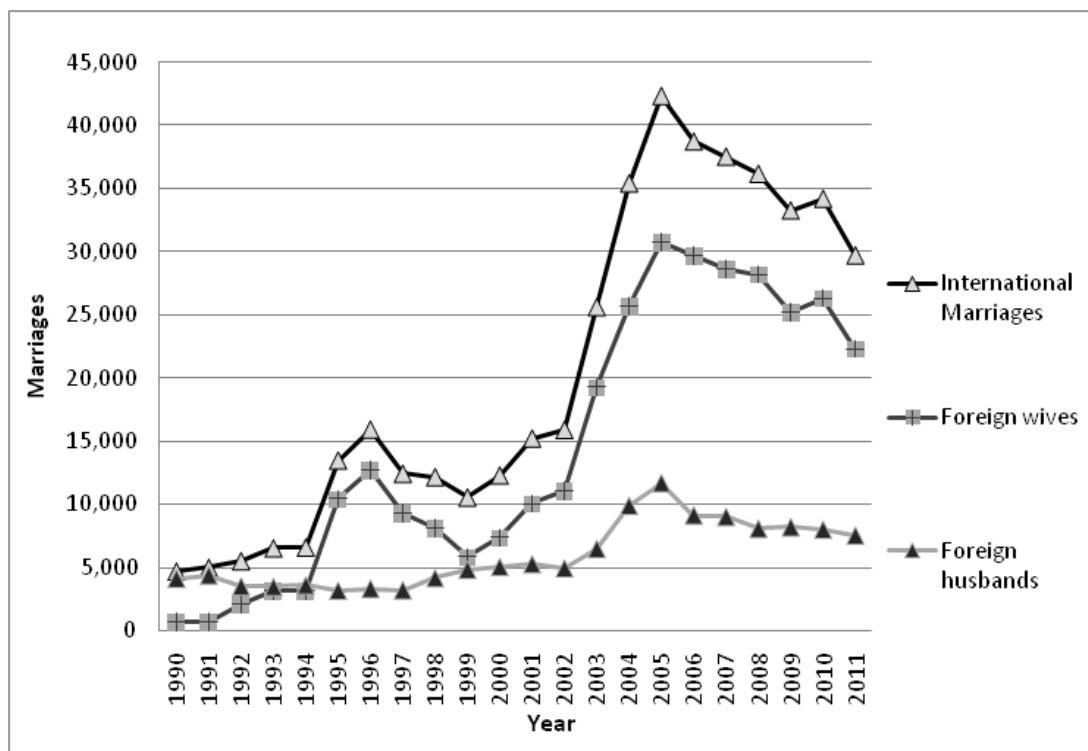


Figure 1. International marriages in South Korea from 1990-2010 by gender.

Source: Statistics Korea, 2001, 2006, 2012a

involving Korean husbands and foreign brides only numbered 691 in that period. In the immediately succeeding years until 1997, marriages involving foreign grooms would hover between 3,400 and 4,000 annually while marriages involving foreign brides would rapidly rise. By 1995, the latter type of marriages would suddenly jump to 10,095 effectively reversing the historical dominance of the former. This is shown in Figure 1.

By 1995, the number of marriages between Korean men and foreign women began to overtake that of Korean women and foreign men. In 1995, the percentage of the latter dropped to 23.2% while the former suddenly rose to 76.8% of total marriages. Marriages involving foreign brides grew rapidly reaching 79.3% of all marriages in 1996 before gradually narrowing down to 54.6% in 1999. The figure rose again after this period and the gap has since increased. Since 2003, more than 70% of all international marriages involved foreign brides.

Why the sudden reversal? By the 1990s, large numbers of rural South Korean men were unmarried and having serious difficulty in finding local wives. Local governments and agricultural associations, concerned about the social disruptions that may be caused by large numbers of unmarried men and the future of rural communities organized “Rural Bachelors Matching Drives.” Lee (2008) noted that in 1990, a local politician and professor arranged marriages between single rural men and ethnic Koreans from China in order to unite Korea and its diaspora. Later on, other local associations and local governments followed suit and began to organize marriage tours to China in search of potential wives from among the ethnic Korean diaspora (Lee, 2008; Lim, 2010; Kim, 2008).

Encouraged by economic opportunities in rapidly industrializing South Korea, lax policies, and ease of securing visa for other family members, the number of women marriage

migrants from China soon increased rapidly. Between 1990 and 1999, a total of 37,171 marriages involving Korean men and women from China were registered (Lee, 2008). Arranging marriages became a lucrative trade and soon a commercial marriage brokerage industry rose up to meet the demand. Alarmed by the massive wave of migration and fake marriages arranged by those who sought to take advantage of the system, the Korean government clamped down on such marriages beginning in the mid-1990s. In 1996, it signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of China that complicated the process of marriage, a policy stayed in place until 2003. The result was a sudden and substantial decline in wives from China and overall international marriages after 1996.

Foreign Brides: Increasing Numbers and Diversity

The restrictions on marriages involving women from China also had another effect: greater diversification of foreign spouses. Individuals, local governments, and marriage brokers turned to other countries in search of spouses. There was an increase of brides from other countries, principally Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Mongolia, and others (Lim, 2009; Lee, 2008). By 2000, women primarily from Southeast Asian countries, took up the slack created by the drop in the number of women from China. International marriages became more diversified even as their numbers began to rise once more.

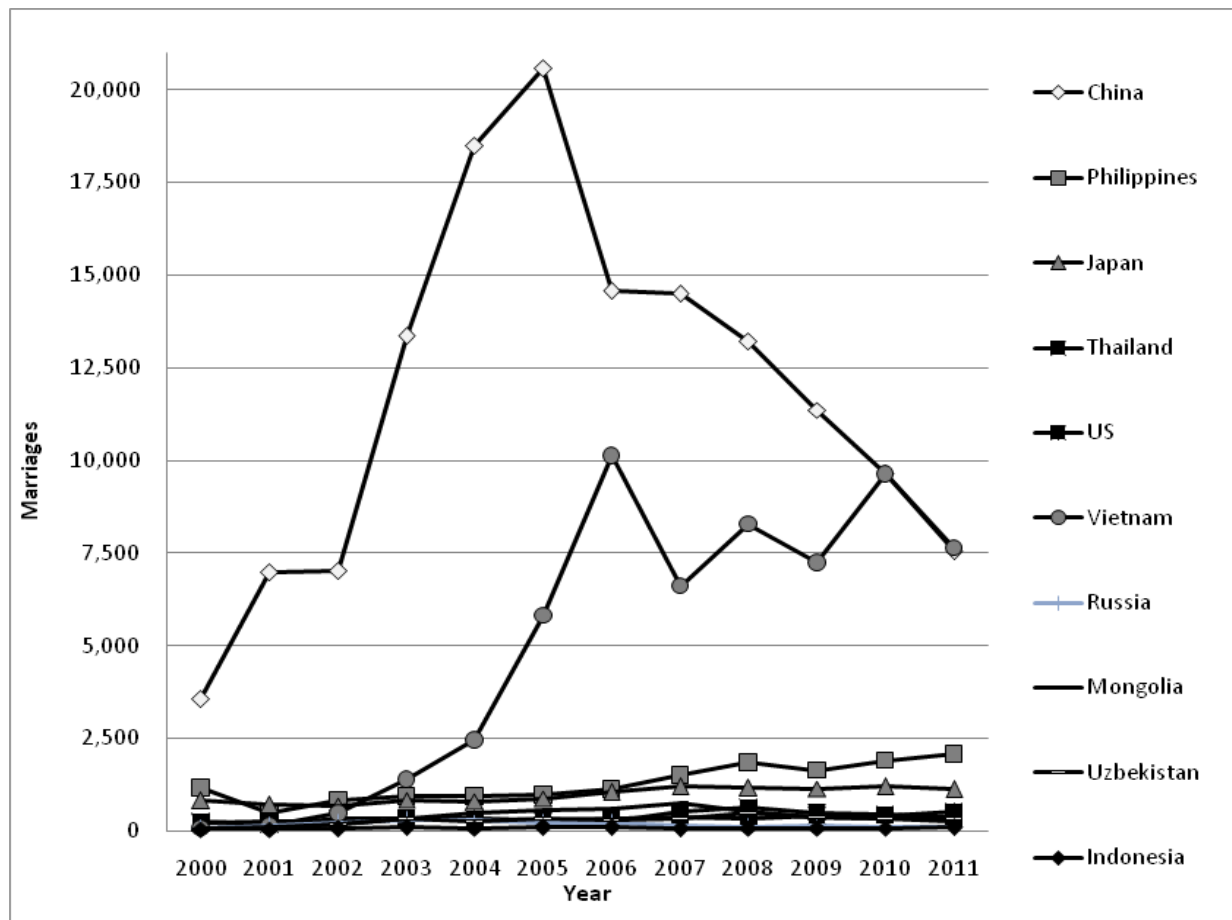


Figure 2. Foreign brides in South Korea by country of origin for the period 2000-2010.

Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and to a lesser extent, Cambodia are the origin of the fastest rising group of foreign brides. Marriages involving Vietnamese women have been increasing since 2000 and account for the fastest rising number of marriages equaling China at 9,623 marriages in 2010. Similarly, the number of marriages involving women from the Philippines is also growing, albeit not as big or as fast as Vietnam. The numbers started strong in 2000, declined the following year and then gradually continued to rise until 2010 with just a minor decline during 2009.

Large scale migration of Vietnamese brides to Korea is a fairly recent phenomenon that only began in the 2000. The rise of such marriages however has been fast and consistent, picking up year after year until it peaked in 2006 at 10,128 marriages after which it experienced a series of alternating mild decline typically followed by an even higher gradual increase. By 2010, the number has sufficiently risen to match the annual number of marriages involving Chinese women nationals and Koreans at 9,623 marriages for the year.

The sharp drop in the number of marriages involving Vietnamese brides after 2006, on the other hand, came shortly after a period of negative criticism against the practices of matchmaking agencies. Advertisements offering the chance to marry 'obedient' Vietnamese women, offering bride guarantees, and the practices where women are lined and given numbers for selection by Korean were met with criticism in both Vietnam and South Korea. Along with criticisms from NGOs, a group of Korean lawmakers filed a bill in 2005, proposing to regulate matchmaking agencies. The law was passed and took effect in 2007.

Marriages between Philippine women and Korean men, which only totaled 1,593 from 1990-1999 (Lee, 2008), increased to 1,174 in 2000, dropped the following year, gradually picked up again and steadily increased. Substantial number of women from other Southeast Asian countries

like Cambodia and Thailand also entered the picture. Cambodian women were only involved in a total of five marriages from 2000 to 2002. Their numbers rose to 19 in 2003 and rapidly increased to 1,804 cases in 2007, dropped to 633 cases the following year and rapidly picked up again beginning in 2009. In the case of women from Thailand, the number of marriages generally remained between 200 and 400 every year from 2000 to 2006 and then moved between 400 and 600 cases every year from 2007 to 2010.

Substantial number of entrants from Central Asian countries like Mongolia and Uzbekistan also appeared beginning in 2000. Marriages involving women from both countries gradually increased, with marriages involving Mongolian women peaking in 2007 at 745 marriages followed by a modest gradual decline. Marriages involving Uzbekistan women peaked in 2008 at 493 and were then followed by a modest gradual decline.

The incidence of marriages involving Korean men and women from countries with close contact and a long history of marriages, like Japan and the U.S., which had substantial numbers from 1990 to 1999, remained significant in the period from 2000 to 2010 (Kim, 2010). The annual number of marriages involving Japanese women in particular generally fluctuated between 690 and 844 from 2000 to 2004 and then gradually rose to reach 1,206 in 2006 and remained above 1,140 from this period to 2010. The annual number of marriages involving women from the U.S. on the other hand had very small gradual increases but remained in the range 231 and 428 cases from 2000 to 2010. The rest of the countries that were not discussed in detail in this section have had relatively smaller number of marriages. These generally did not go above 400 marriages a year.

Explaining the Rise of Foreign Brides

Neoclassical economic theory, push-pull theory, and hypergamy can offer some plausible explanations for the increasing number of foreign brides migrating to South Korea. The industrial and economic programs of the South Korean

government in the 1970s had borne fruit and by the 1990s, South Korea was one of the fastest growing industrialized economies. It is reasonable to argue therefore that perceived economic opportunities may have significantly contributed to female marriage migration to South Korea.

We will note that seven out of the top nine countries of origin of foreign brides have substantially lower per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), one of the indicators of the gap in their quality of life, than South Korea (\$30,254) even at present. According to the World Bank (2012) World Development Indicators database, the 2011 per capita GDP of these countries in purchasing power parity are as follows: China (\$8,466), Vietnam (\$3,435), Philippines (\$4,140), Cambodia (\$2,372), Thailand (\$8,703), Uzbekistan (\$3,310), and Mongolia (\$4,764).

Homogamy and endogamy also offers a complementary explanation. Especially in the 1990s, the alternative brides of choice for South Korean men were ethnic Koreans from China. This was a fairly obvious option given the strong emphasis of Korean society on an ethnic-based notion of identity and a desire to maintain ethnic purity. Furthermore, they were imagined to be more adaptable since they shared similar physical traits and are familiar with Korean language and culture. Even at present, many of the foreign brides from China and Uzbekistan are members of the Korean diaspora, what they refer to as *koryuin* (ethnic Koreans from former USSR countries like Uzbekistan) and *chosunjok* (ethnic Koreans from China).

Marriage immigration in South Korea is also partly influenced by economic development, improvements in the status of women, and changing norms in the receiving country. With better education and career opportunities, many women in developed countries delay their marriages, bear fewer children, and are more aware of gender equality (e.g., see Kim, 2010). As a result, they resist conservative patriarchal societal arrangements which demand that women forego careers, focus on child rearing and domestic chores, and be subservient to their

husbands. Thus, rural South Korean men who are relatively low-income, have lower social status, and who tend to subscribe to more conservative patriarchal norms find themselves at the low-end of the marriage market. Accordingly, they resort to foreign brides whom they imagine will be more willing to accept such arrangements.

There is ample evidence to show that the shortages of Korean brides in the 1990s was not a sudden event but the result of the confluence of various factors: residual effects of population management policies and economic and demographic transitions that took decades in the making resulting to what Kim (2008) referred to as 'marriage squeeze.' Marriage squeeze is defined as the imbalanced sex composition of the marriage-eligible population. This is the result of a combination of factors that cause imbalances in the marriageable population leading to higher proportion of one gender in relation to the other (Kim, 2008). This makes marriages more difficult, as there are insufficient potential spouses of one gender.

A significant cause of imbalanced sex composition in the marriage-eligible population is the rise of sex ratio at birth. Sex ratio refers to the ratio between male and female births. In South Korea, there is a heavy preference for male babies as male children are seen as carriers of the family line. Poston, Wu, & Gon (2003) argued that the reduction in fertility heavily skewed sex-ratio in South Korea is a result of various human interventions. Since the 1970s, the sex ratio of male children to female children has always remained above 104:100 and even reached a peak of 116:100 in 1990. Pre-natal sex screening and availability of abortion has made parents more capable of choosing male children (preferred in traditionally patriarchal societies like Korea) that further skewed the national sex ratio.

Kim (2008) postulated that rapid and continued decline in fertility reduces the size of the birth cohort. If men typically marry younger women, as is the case in South Korea, then the shrinking birth cohort substantially reduces the number of younger women eligible for marriage as the size

of succeeding generations are smaller than the preceding one. This further exacerbates marriage squeeze. The number of live births has been on a gradual decline in South Korea since the 1970s and it currently has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. This may be attributed to economic growth and government policies that encouraged couples to limit their children (Kwon, 2001).

The decline in birth rates may be attributed to the combination of economic growth and government policies that encouraged couples to limit their children. Kwon (2001) noted that the Korean government adopted a population control policy simultaneously with its industrial programs and implemented a National Family Planning Program for 26 years from 1961 to 1987. These programs ranged from the extensive use of mass media to popularize and promote the notion of a small family as an ideal, offering tax deductions and incentives, and offering government housing

loans for couples that limit their children to two, to the promotion and distribution of contraceptives, and sterilization services.

If we assume the typical marriage age in South Korea to be between 20-34 years old for females and 25-40 years old for males, we can map the population trend of Korean males and females of typical marriage age in Figure 3. As can be seen in the figure, in 1995, the population of males of marriageable age has overtaken the population of marriage eligible females. Since then, the numerical gap between the two groups has grown even bigger.

We argue that this population reversal around 1995 accounts for the sudden increase in the number of international marriages involving Korean men and foreign women in 1995 as shown in Figure 3. It is no coincidence that in 1995, the year of reversal of the historical trend of the higher ratio of males compared to females of

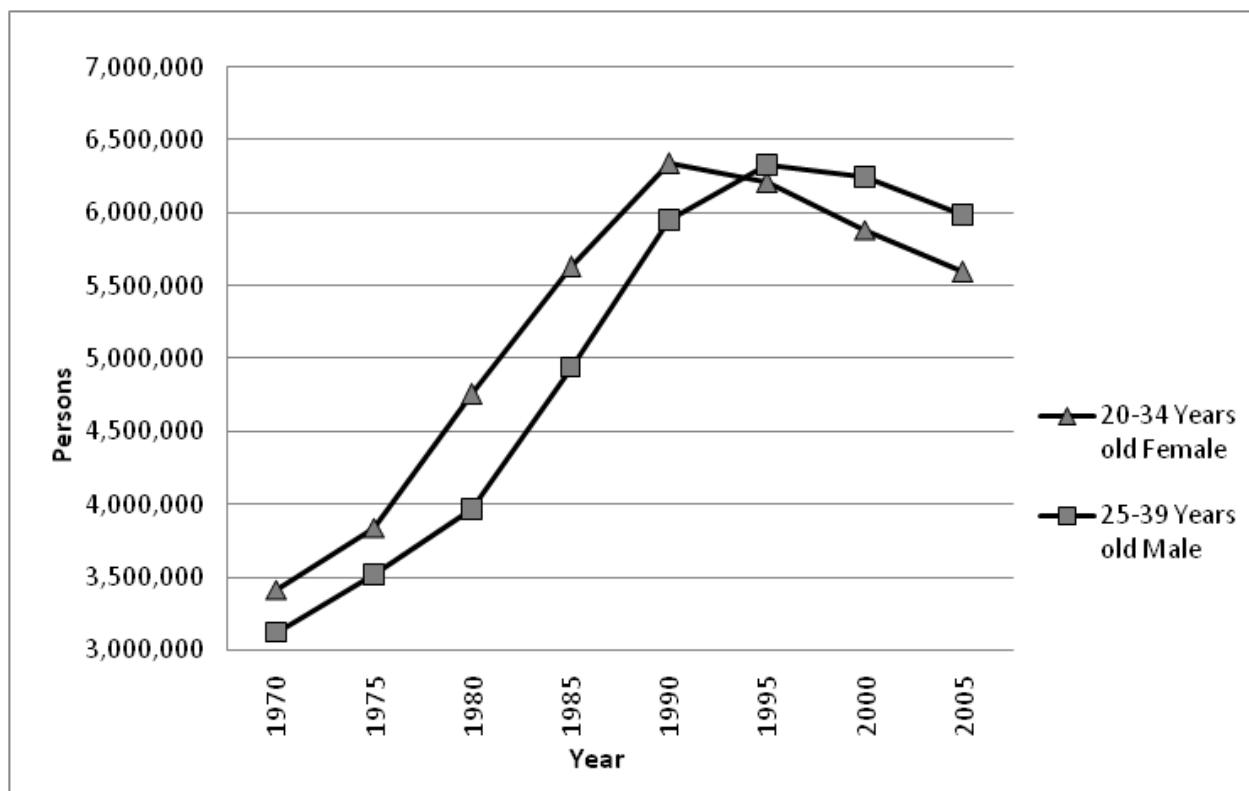


Figure 3. Males and females of typical marriage age in South Korea for the period 1970-2005.

Source: Self-computed from Korea National Statistics Office, 2012a

marriageable age is also the year of reversal for the historical trend where the number of marriages involving foreign grooms were generally higher than the number of marriages involving foreign brides. This the time when 'shortage' of Korean brides began to manifest.

The increasing number of marriages between Korean men and foreign women follows the increasing gap in the number of men and women of marriageable age. This supports the proposition that the increasing number of such marriages is driven, at least partly, by the shortage of Korean women of marriageable age. With such a powerful demographic factor to deal with, single Korean men have very limited choices: don't marry, postpone their marriage, or find spouses from abroad. Many opted for the last choice.

The evidence suggests that the male-skewed demographics will persist in the near future given that the 1990s still feature a declining birth rate and heavily skewed sex-ratios. Poston et al. (2003) estimated that by 2015, as many as 400,000 or around 10 to 13 percent of marriageable-age males in South Korea will be unsuccessful in finding wives. Without an inflow of female immigrants, Korean males will continue to have difficulty finding wives locally well into the near future. As such, it is reasonable to expect that foreign brides will continue to be one of the most viable options for single Korean men.

Foreign Grooms: Slow and Steady Increase

As noted in the previous section, the annual number of marriages between foreign men and Korean women has remained below that of Korean men and foreign women since the trend reversed in 1995. Official statistics puts the number of foreign grooms at 37,436 from 1990 to 1999. This more than doubled in the next decade. From 2000 to 2011, a total of 92,804 such marriages occurred (See Figure 4). There is a noticeable gradual increase in the number of such marriages from 1990 to 2010. From 1990 to 1999, the annual number of marriages hovered between 3,129 and 4,795 per year. The annual

number of marriages exceeded 5,000 in 2000 and after a very small decline in 2002, gradually picked up until it reached a peak of 11,637 in 2005. Between 2000 and 2011, the average number of marriages doubled from the previous decade at 7,733 marriages per year.

Marriages involving male Chinese nationals on the other hand, have experienced a rapid rise and comprised 26.93% of all such marriages from 2000 to 2011. The rise and fall of the number of marriages in this group has been more dramatic compared to the other groups but it is not clear why this is the case. Beginning in 2002, the annual numbers rapidly increased by 352.47% in 2003, 204.03% in 2004, until it peaked by 39.22% in 2005. This was followed by a series of declines, which was only interrupted by a temporary increase in 2009, followed by an increase in 2010 and another decline in 2011.

Since 2000, marriages involving men from China have rapidly risen to the point that Chinese men have become the second largest group of foreign grooms. From 1990 to 1999, there were only 2,010 recorded marriages involving Chinese grooms. From 2000 to 2011 however this figure rose to 24,495. From 2000 to 2002, the number of marriages was only 210 to 263 a year. This figure suddenly increased to 1,063 in 2003, 3,618 in 2004, and peaked at 5,037 in 2005 and then dropped to 2,589 the following year. Afterwards, the number fluctuated between 2,101 and 2,617 until 2011. The trend for this particular group is somewhat similar to the trend for Chinese women marrying Korean men.

In contrast to the three major countries Japan, China, and the U.S., the number of marriages involving grooms from other countries are substantially smaller. Marriages involving men from Canada, Australia, Pakistan, England, Germany, Bangladesh, and France generally range from 60 to 400 marriages a year with an annual average of 147 per nationality. Marriages between Korean women and men from Taiwan and less developed labor sending countries to South Korea (e.g. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Philippines, etc.) on the other hand range from as low as three to

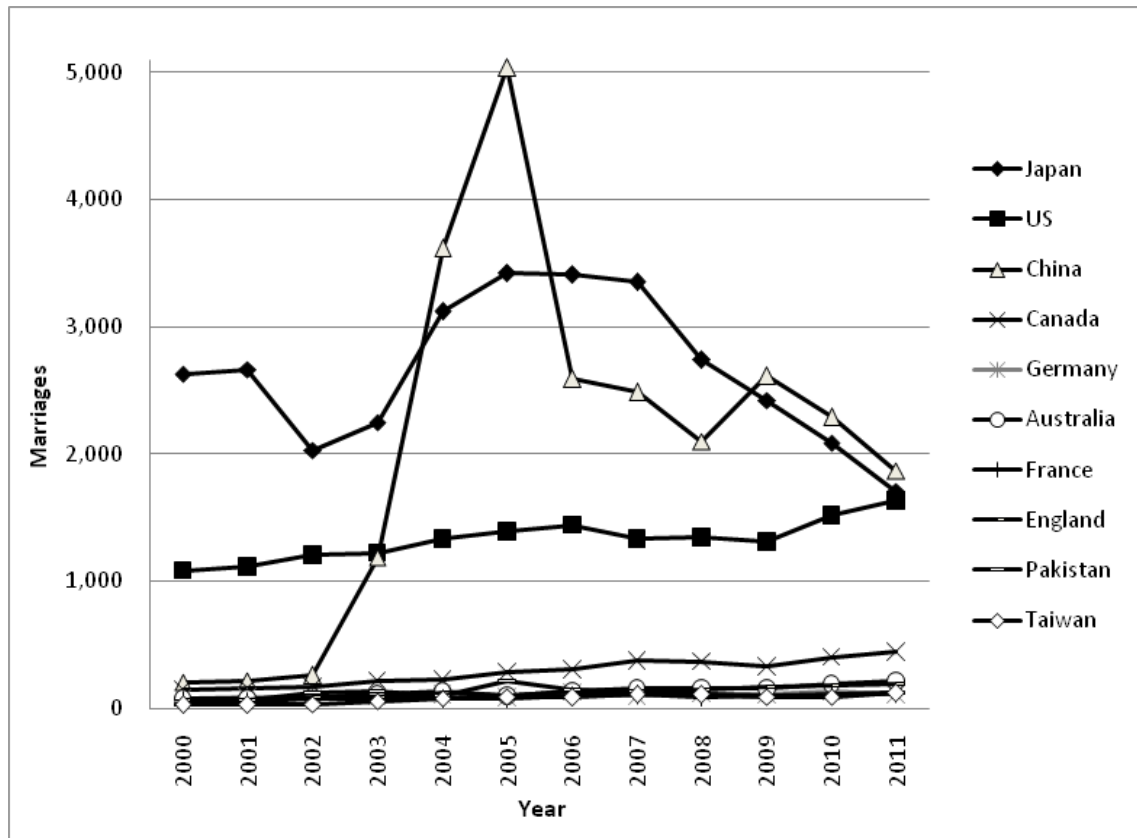


Figure 4. Foreign grooms by top ten country of origin for the period 2000-2010.

Source: Statistics Korea, 2012a

as high as 252 with an average of 58.35 marriages a year per nationality.

Explaining the Slow and Steady Rise of Foreign Grooms

Neoclassical economic theory, push-pull theory, and hypergamy are less helpful in explaining the slow and steady increase in foreign grooms in South Korea. Six of the top nine countries of origins of foreign grooms have higher per capita GDP compared to South Korea (\$30,254). According to the World Bank (2012) World Indicators Database, the 2011 per capita GDP of these countries in purchasing power parity are as follows: United States (\$48,442), Japan (\$34,294), Australia (\$39,438), Germany (\$39,211), France (\$34,993), and Canada (\$40,440). The only

exceptions are: China (\$8,466), Pakistan (\$2,763), and Bangladesh (\$1,788). The latter three are labor-sending countries to South Korea.

The U.S., China, and Japan, the top three origin of foreign grooms are countries that have close contact with South Korea due to geographic proximity and economic ties. Further, South Korea and these countries have large number of nationals working and residing in each other's country. From 1990-1999, international marriages involving Korean women and men from the U.S. comprised 9.69% of all international marriages but this too rose in the period from 2000-2010 into 17.14% of the total. Nominally, the annual marriages between American men and Korean women ranged from 1,000 to 2,000 between 1990 and 1999. From 2000 to 2010, such marriage figures generally ranged from 1,000 to 1,500

marriages annually. One possible factor is the existence of military bases manned by nearly 30,000 U.S. personnel in South Korea. The U.S. also has the second largest ethnic Korean community in the world, estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) at 1.7 million as of 2010.

In the case of Japan, historical ties, the close geographic proximity, and strong economic ties with South Korea are possible factors that facilitate marriages despite historical animosities between the two countries. Another factor to consider is that Japan hosts a very large ethnic Korean community. According to the Japanese government's official statistics, the population of ethnic Koreans in Japan is officially counted at 545,401 as of 2011 but this figure does not include ethnic Koreans who have adopted Japanese citizenship (Statistics Bureau, 2011). Marriages between Japanese men and Korean women

comprise the largest proportion of all marriages involving foreign grooms in both periods from 1990-1999 and 2000-2010 at 51.46% and 36.1% respectively. Nominally, the annual number of marriages has risen from the typical range of 1500-2500 marriages a year between 1990 and 1999 to 2000-3500 a year from 2000 to 2010.

Unlike in the case of foreign brides, there are no immediately obvious major demographic factors that can readily explain the slow and steady increase of foreign grooms. If we look at the changing population structure of South Korea however, we will note that the increase in the number of foreign grooms and foreign brides in some ways 1) parallels the increasing size of South Korea's foreign resident community (Figure 5) and 2) the increasing number of migrant workers, mostly from developing countries (Figure 6).

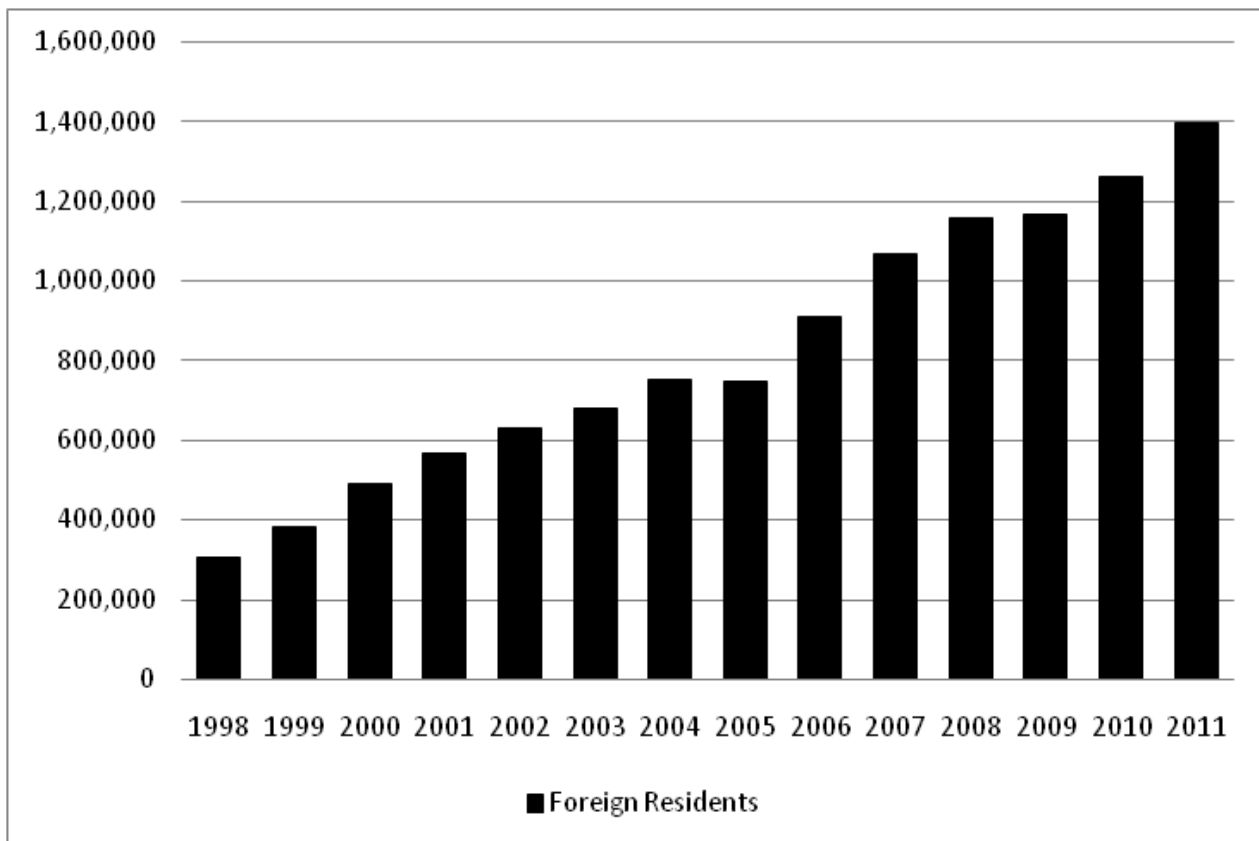


Figure 5. Foreigners living in South Korea as of 2011.



Figure 6. Foreign migrant workers in South Korea (1987-2011) estimate in thousands.

Source: Self-calculated. Data consolidated from Ministry of Justice, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011; OECD, 2007

At this point, we can reasonably assume that the increasing numbers of interactions brought about by the increasing number of foreign residents and migrant workers somehow contribute to the increasing number of international marriages in South Korea both involving foreign grooms and foreign brides but it is not clear to what extent. The number of foreign grooms is disproportionately lower compared to the number of foreign brides. As of 2007, around 90% of foreign migrant workers in South Korea were men and only 10% were women (Lim, 2010). And yet, almost 80%, a clear majority, of international marriages involve foreign women. It is fair to assess that women marry largely for immigration purposes while men migrate largely for labor purposes.

International marriages involving both foreign brides and grooms both showed substantial

increase in numbers after 2002 with foreign brides increasing from 11,017 to 19,214 and foreign grooms from 4,896 to 6,444 the following year. This increase has not been explained. This is possibly a result of a substantial change in the status of foreign spouses enacted by the Ministry of Justice of the Korean government that may have created better incentives for international marriages. According to H. Lee (2008), prior to 2002, foreign spouses received the Visiting and Joining Families (F-1) visa. This visa however did not grant permission for them to work in South Korea, a serious problem especially for foreign husbands who are expected to be the primary provider for their families. Beginning on May 2002, the government allowed foreign spouses to get residence (F-2) visas, which allowed them to get employment in the country.

Explaining the Gender Disparity

Both foreign brides and grooms have increased over the years but the increase in the former has consistently been disproportionately larger than the latter. This disparity is not only driven by the demographic factors but also a manifestation of the active solicitation of female migrants for marriage purposes and institutionalized support for female marriage immigration. Unlike marriages between Korean men and foreign women, which are encouraged by the government and facilitated by local governments, religious, and commercial marriage brokers, marriages between Korean women and foreign men are generally neither promoted nor directly facilitated by any of these institutions. In fact, these types of marriages are generally frowned upon in Korean society by conservatives who espouse patriarchal/patrilineal views and espouse an ideology of Korean 'racial' purity.

Public policies have a direct and indirect role in shaping international marriages. While South Korea does not have an explicit national policy promoting or directing female marriage immigration, it is clear from recent policies that the government is directly and indirectly promoting and supporting the migration of foreign brides as a means of addressing demographic problems such as the shortages of Korean brides in rural areas, low birth rates, and a rapidly ageing population in order to sustain the country's growth. From the national to the local level, various policies provide the basis for and support for migrant wives. Support for foreign husbands is conspicuously absent. They are often not directly addressed in families and instead subsumed under the multicultural family category.

The "Nationality Act" was amended twice in 1998 and 2004 extending the eligibility for citizenship and easing the process of citizenship acquisition for women marriage immigrants, especially those who have borne children. Compared to the general naturalization requirements (i.e., 5 years of legal residency in Korea and the ability to speak the Korean

language and to understand Korean culture), women marriage immigrants need only to satisfy one of two sets of less demanding requirements: a) 2 years of legal residency in Korea with their Korean spouses or b) a minimum 1-year legal residency in Korea after 3 years of marriage to a Korean national. The "Act on Aging and Low Birth Rate" of 2005 aims to maintain "proper population composition and to improve its quality in view of maintaining the state's growth" (Kim, 2008). Several dozen provinces and municipalities have ordinances providing financial support to single men from agricultural and fishery sectors to subsidize the costs involved in finding and bringing foreign brides to Korea that can reach from three to eight million Korean won (Kim, 2007).

The "Grand Plan" of 2006 outlined a comprehensive set of policies to support the "social integration" of foreign brides and the attainment of a "multicultural society" and designated the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF) as the coordinating agency. To reproduce "Korean" children, policies included tax incentives and child allowances as well as explicit assimilation policies to assist migrant wives to produce and rear "Korean" children (Kim, 2008). The "First Basic Plan for Immigration Policy" (FBPIP) 2008-2012, the blueprint of the Korean government's immigration policy, aims to provide "foreigners with the proper environment conducive for their political, economic, social, and cultural participation" (Ministry of Justice [MOJ], 2008b, p. 2). The plan, however, is biased towards specific groups: foreign professionals, investors, women marriage immigrants, and members of the Korean diaspora. Low skilled labor and their sojourn continue to be restricted under this plan.

The "Act on Regulation of Marriage Brokerage Industry" of 2007 aimed to regulate marriage agencies and protect the welfare of foreign brides. The "Support for Multicultural Families Act" of 2008 provides various social support services for marriage immigrants and multicultural families. These include programs for language and cultural adaptation, employment, addressing

domestic violence, child rearing and education, among others. The “Marriage immigrants Total Support Program” is concerned with assisting and encouraging them to give birth to and raise “Korean children.” Under these programs women marriage immigrants were granted several benefits such as minimum living support and mother/child support if with children even if they have not yet acquired citizenship (Kim, 2008).

The government has also established 159 “Multicultural Family Support Centers” nationwide. These centers provide migrant women with integrated service including: education in Korean language, education for understanding multicultural society, counseling on family education, interpretation and translation service, support for employment, and support for language development and education of children. In addition, the MOGEF and various local governments have also established multilingual hotlines and emergency centers to provide women in distress with emergency relief and counseling. It also provides women shelters connected to medical, legal, and departure support service.

The special role of marriage brokers in facilitating female marriage migration cannot be underestimated, especially in Asia where matchmakers have long-played a part in facilitating marriages. Local governments, churches, marriage migrants, informal community networks, the growing industry of commercial marriage brokers, and even human traffickers often facilitate the migration of foreign brides. Religious institutions such as the Unification Church have played a role in arranging the marriages of Koreans and foreign women since the 1960s. Increasingly, however, many international marriages with foreign brides are being arranged through private commercial brokers. In recent times for example, more than 70% of marriages between Vietnamese women and Korean men were arranged through private brokers. Matchmaking has grown into a billion dollar business industry in South Korea with more than 1,253 registered commercial marriage agencies (Shay, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

In general, we have observed that the larger share of international marriages occurs between Korean citizens and citizens of three groups of countries: those with historical ties and geographic proximity to South Korea, those with a high-population of ethnic Koreans, and more recently countries that are economically less developed than South Korea, especially in Southeast Asia. International marriages are facilitated by state and non-state marriage brokers and trends are influenced by policies on population management, immigration, labor, citizenship, denizenship, among others. In the case of foreign brides, there is strong evidence that large numbers of women are marrying to immigrate to South Korea, what we refer to as marriage immigration.

Foreign brides mostly come from: a) countries that are geographically proximate and has strong economic and historical ties with South Korea (i.e. China and Japan), b) developing Asian countries, mostly from Southeast and to a lesser extent Central Asia, or c) developing countries where a substantial population of the Korean diaspora reside (e.g., China, Uzbekistan). Majority of sending countries have low per capita GDP compared to South Korea. To a broad extent this pattern of immigration from a country with low level of economic development to a developed industrial economy fits that described by neo-classical economics, push-pull theories of migration, and hypergamy. There are also observable elements of homogamy and endogamy in the preference for Korean co-ethnic brides.

Upon closer examination, we validated that female marriage migration in South Korea is rooted in its socio-economic and demographic structure. Marriage squeeze resulting from imbalance in the sex-birth ratio aggravated by rapid fertility decline and changing socio-economic status of women has led to a shortage of Korean brides in rural areas that drives female marriage migration. With a severe imbalance in the number of Korean men and women of marriageable age manifesting beginning in the

1990s, local governments and marriage brokers resorted to finding wives for single rural men from other countries. Local governments, religious organizations, and commercial marriage brokers are responsible for facilitating international marriages between Korean men and foreign women.

State interventions and policies in the last decade further bolstered and sustained female marriage immigration. Major changes include among others: the adoption of the “Grand Plan,” the declaration of a policy of multiculturalism, amendments to the nationality law that eased the naturalization requirements for women marriage immigrants, the regulation of international marriage agencies, the passing of a law to improve the treatment of foreigners and migrants, the adoption of comprehensive plans for the social integration of women marriage immigrants, the designation of the MOGEF to coordinate policies for migrant brides and multicultural families, the establishment of Multicultural Support Centers and units that assist women marriage immigrants in language and cultural adaptation and provide shelter and counseling.

The presence of formal and informal institutions acting as facilitators of female marriage immigration cannot be ignored. Marriage agencies arranging mail-to-order brides in Western countries are well documented. The rise of such industries in South Korea is not surprising considering that arranged marriages and matchmakers are historically common in Asia. In the modern day, commercial marriage brokers have largely supplanted traditional matchmakers and operate in East Asian countries like Japan, Taiwan, Korea, China, and Singapore. Social networks also act as facilitators with marriage immigrants, their friends, and/or their family serving linking spouse seekers with potential brides from among friends or relatives from their home country (e.g., Lee, 2008; Seol, 2010; Tseng, 2010).

Foreign grooms predominantly come from countries: a) in close proximity with South Korea (e.g. Japan, China and to a lesser extent, Taiwan) and/or have traditionally large presence in South

Korea (e.g. U.S.); b) developed countries where substantial numbers of Koreans travel or migrate to (e.g. Canada, Australia, England, Germany, France, etc.) whose nationals are involved in smaller numbers compared to the first group; and c) labor sending countries to South Korea (e.g. Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Philippines, etc.), the nationals of which are involved in an even smaller number of marriages.

Unlike in the case of foreign brides, the case of foreign grooms is less easily explained by neo-classical economics, push-pull theories of migration, and hypergamy. With some exceptions, most foreign grooms come from countries that have higher or comparable per capita GDP relative to South Korea. Also, there is no evidence to suggest male marriage immigration (i.e., that large numbers of men are marrying to immigrate to South Korea). There are possible indications of elements of homogamy and endogamy as the US, Japan, and China, the top three origins of foreign grooms all has sizable Korean communities. To what extent this is significant cannot be determined from data in this paper. What is clear is that marriages with foreign grooms do not have clear demographic causes. Also, it does not enjoy the same level of recognition and policy support as marriages with foreign brides.

Compared to marriages involving foreign brides, marriages involving foreign grooms do not have the characteristics of marriage migration and have less clear driving factors. Possible explanations for marriages involving foreign grooms include geographic proximity, shared ethnic/cultural backgrounds, historical and economic ties, increasing contact, and possibly restrictive labor and immigration policies. It is also possible that such marriages are partly influenced by the influx of foreigners and migrant workers and the restrictive labor policies in the early 2000s that made marriage an attractive option for availing of residence and better economic opportunities. This needs to be investigated further.

International marriages involving foreign grooms receive scant attention in both academic

research and government policy. The disparity in attention is possibly a reflection of prevailing social norms and attitudes. While Korean society has somewhat accepted foreign brides, if reluctantly, foreign grooms do not appear to be as well accepted. It appears that both explicitly and implicitly, the role and importance of foreign brides in performing essential reproductive and child-rearing among other domestic and service functions is well recognized by Korean society and the state. They are also seen as easier to assimilate compared to foreign grooms. Further, they will bear and continue the male line. The beneficial role of foreign grooms on the other hand is less clear.

IMPLICATIONS

Between 1990 and 2011, a total of 130,240 foreign grooms were registered in South Korea. As of 2011, nearly one in every four registered international marriages in the country involved a foreign groom. A number of multicultural families, estimated in the thousands, did not register their marriage due to the undocumented status of the foreign husband. Among multicultural families, those with a foreign husband have suffered the most from social stigma and discrimination (Lee, 2008). And yet, this group receives very little attention at best and is excluded at worst. The integration of foreign brides into Korean society has taken precedence in policy reforms; foreign grooms lag behind (Lim, 2010).

This is also reflected in the disparities in the development of policies covering immigration, denizenship, and citizenship. The "Grand Plan" expressly states as a vision the "social integration of foreign brides and an attainment of a multicultural society" (Lim, 2010, p.69). The non-inclusion of foreign grooms in the vision is telling. Present multicultural policies are designed primarily with families having a foreign wife in mind. A cursory examination of the website of the MOGEF (<http://mogef.go.k>)

shows sections on programs and resources for women's development, migrant women, and women's rights but no specific resources or programs aimed towards foreign grooms and multi-cultural families with a foreign father. The latter group generally receives little attention in the multi-cultural discourse and lags behind families with migrant women and foreign brides in terms of policy and program support.

The uneven attention on the two genders, both among scholars and policy makers, do not bode well for the success of South Korea's multicultural policy. While the effort to give special attention given to migrant women in a country that perennially ranks low in the Global Gender Gap Report is laudable, the failure to incorporate multicultural families with foreign grooms marginalizes this group and is likely to lead to its own set of consequences. Unless they are recognized, given proper attention, and included in the ongoing discourse, the difficulties, needs, and concerns particular to these families, husbands, and their children are not likely to be understood nor addressed. One out of every four multicultural families are in peril of remaining marginalized and excluded.

There are no indications that international marriages will decline or stop in South Korea in the foreseeable future. Policy makers will therefore have to come to terms with the fact that the Korean society of the near future will be substantially different from the traditional image of an ethnically and racially homogenous society that many have held in the past and plan for the future. The increasing number of foreigners, immigrants, foreign spouses, and multi-racial children, now officially estimated by MOGEF at 122,000 as of 2010, will change the racial and possibly the cultural make-up of Korean society and bring about new challenges as the society tackles its ethnic-based notions of nationhood and identity. If these concerns are to be addressed, the best recourse for scholars and policy makers is to anticipate these challenges and prepare accordingly.

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