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**International Marriage in Asia:  
What Do We Know, and  
What Do We Need to Know?**

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## **International Marriage in Asia: What Do We Know, and What Do We Need to Know?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

International marriage has received increasing attention in recent years, both from a theoretical perspective and because of a practical concern with urgent policy issues arising from the emerging trends. Patterns and characteristics of international marriages appear to differ widely among world regions, and defy a broad, all-encompassing theoretical explanation. Although there is a clear need to develop a conceptual scheme to account for the rise in international marriage (Kim, 2007), it appears crucial at this stage to build up the knowledge base about international marriage in different regions, to provide a stronger foundation for theoretical advances. This paper focuses on the East and Southeast Asian region. It updates available information about trends in international marriage in the region, categorizes the kinds of international marriages taking place and their relative numerical importance, and discusses factors contributing to the trends in international marriages in this region. It also discusses some of the implications of international marriage trends, and makes a few forays into the vexed area of policy. The paper ventures some comments on how international marriage trends in this large part of Asia differ from those in other parts of the world.

It should first be noted that international marriage is more difficult to define and conceptualize than might at first appear. For example, when a citizen of one country marries somebody from a different ethnic and socio-cultural background who migrated to that country, say, eight years ago, that would not normally be defined as an international marriage. When somebody from a settled immigrant population goes to the country of origin to find a bride, this will certainly be considered an international marriage, though the cultural distance involved may be much less.

### **TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES**

An earlier paper (Jones and Shen 2008) documented the trends in international marriages in a number of East Asian countries - South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore. As far as could be ascertained, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore had the highest proportions of citizens marrying foreigners of any countries in East, Southeast or South Asia, exceeding by far China, the Philippines and Vietnam, which are the sources of quite large numbers of brides in other countries. The reason is that large numbers of brides leaving for other countries can still translate into fairly low prevalence of international marriages in countries with large populations. This is also evident in the tiny proportions that international marriages make up in Indonesia. However, it should be borne in mind that international marriage migration may be more significant in particular localities in such countries, such as for ethnic Chinese (mainly Hakka) from the Pontianak area of Indonesia, who predominate in the flow of Indonesian brides to Taiwan; and for certain villages in northeast Thailand, where a high proportion of women have married foreigners (Tosakul 2010).

The statistics on international marriage are far more sketchy for countries in the region that are the main “senders” rather than “receivers” of marriage partners, namely, China, the Philippines and Vietnam. There are three main reasons for this. First, the data are incomplete and not readily available; second, there are many other movements, often on a smaller scale, other than that of sending brides to the wealthy Asian countries; third, the “sending” countries send not only to other parts of Asia, but also to other parts of the world (Jones and Shen 2008: 12). The figures are best for the Philippines. Marriage migration from the Philippines is considerable; over the period 1990-2009,

between 14,000 and 25,000 Filipino spouses left the country annually as spouses or partners of foreign nationals, according to data collected by the Commission on Filipinos overseas.<sup>1</sup> Although this represents only around 3 per cent of annual marriages in the Philippines, it may be considerably underestimated. The figure includes marriages between Filipinos and foreigners registered in the Philippines, including marriages taking place in other countries that are registered with the Philippines embassy in the country concerned. However, there will no doubt be many marriages that are not so registered. The figure for the Philippines in Table 6 has been adjusted upwards by about 30 per cent to take this into account.

The third column of Table 1 shows the relative importance of international marriages for a number of countries in the region, as a prelude to discussing trends in international marriages in the key countries. Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea are all marked by substantial proportions of marriages in which one partner is a foreigner. Japan comes next, closely followed by the Philippines and Vietnam. The final column of the table is important, but discussion of its significance will be held over until later in the paper.

**Table 1. Various Asian Countries: International Marriages as a Percentage of all Marriages**

Country	Approximate Year	All international marriages	International marriages involving different ethnic group**
Singapore (o)	2008	39	13(*)
Taiwan	2003	32	10
	2010	13	4
South Korea	2005	14	7
	2010	11	9
Japan	2005	5	5
	2010	5	5
Philippines	2009	4(+)	4(+)
Vietnam*	2005	3	3
Indonesia*	2005	1	1
China*	2005	0.7	0.4
India*	2005	0.5	0.3

Note:

o Marriages of citizens to non-citizens, including permanent residents of Singapore.

(+) Philippines numbers raised by 30% to take into account marriages of Filipinos overseas that are not registered with the Commission on Filipinos Overseas.

\*\* Foreign spouses of the same ethnic group are Chinese in the case of Taiwan; Chinese, Malays or Indians in the case of Singapore; and Koreans in the case of Korea.

\* Very rough estimate.

<sup>1</sup> The major destination countries were the USA and Japan, followed by Australia.

The trends in international marriages have been rather erratic in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the first half of the decade, the proportion of international marriages among all marriages was steadily rising in Korea, Taiwan and Singapore (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). However, in Japan, the rising trend in evidence since the mid-1970s has levelled off from 2000 onwards, although a small peak was observed in 2005 and 2006 (Table 5). Trends in the other countries since the mid-decade have been mixed. The number of marriages of Taiwanese men to foreign brides fell sharply from 48,633 in 2003 to 20,716 in 2006, and further to 17,709 in 2010. This represented a very substantial decline from 28.4% of all marriages of Taiwanese men in 2003 to 12.8% in 2010 (Table 2). The reasons are fairly clear. In 2004, the government stepped in with a variety of legal restrictions and penalties to limit cross-border marriages and to inhibit marriage fraud. “There is no guarantee of legal status for marriage migrants until couples can pass a face-to-face interview held either at the checkpoints of major airports or in foreign spouses’ home countries” (Chen 2011: 5-6). In South Korea, after rising very sharply since 2000, the proportion of marriages to foreigners among all marriages peaked at 13.5 per cent in 2005, and since then has hovered around 10-11 per cent (Table 3). In Singapore, there has been a levelling-off in the proportion of marriages of citizens to non-citizens since 2005, but at a high level, hovering just under 40 per cent of all marriages involving Singapore citizens (Table 4).

**Table 2. Taiwan: Proportion of International Marriages, by Nationality of Wife, 1998-2010**

Year	Number of registered marriages ('000)	Percent of wives from foreign countries	Percent of foreign wives from		
			China*	Southeast Asia	Other countries
1998	146	14.1	58.0		42.0
1999	173	17.0	56.8		43.2
2000	182	23.0	54.4		45.6
2001	171	25.1	60.3	39.0	0.7
2002	173	25.9	61.2	38.1	0.8
2003	171	28.4	65.4	33.5	1.1
2004	131	21.4	37.6	61.1	1.3
2005	141	17.9	56.0	42.3	1.7
2006	142	14.5	67.1	30.8	2.1
2007	135	16.0	67.7	30.1	2.2
2008	155	11.8	66.7	30.4	2.9
2009	117	15.6	69.1	28.5	2.4
2010	139	12.8	70.7	26.3	2.9

Note: \*Including Hong Kong and Macao.

Source: calculated from data in Chen, 2011, Table 4.

**Table 3. South Korea: International Marriages as Percentage of All Marriages, 2000-2010**

	No. of marriages ('000)	% of marriages with one foreign spouse			Ratio (col.4/col. 5)	% of foreign brides from	
		Total	Wife from foreign country	Husband from foreign country		Vietnam	China
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
2000	332	3.5	2.3	1.2	1.5	1.3	49.1
2001	318	4.6	3.1	1.5	2.0	1.3	72.0
2002	305	5.0	3.5	1.5	2.4	4.4	65.6
2003	303	8.2	6.2	2.0	3.1	7.4	71.2
2004	309	11.2	8.1	3.1	2.6	9.8	73.6
2005	314	13.5	9.8	3.7	2.6	19.0	67.0
2006	331	11.7	9.0	2.7	3.3	34.1	49.1
2007	344	10.9	8.3	2.6	3.2	23.1	50.7
2008	328	11.0	8.6	2.4	3.5	29.4	46.9
2009	310	10.8	8.2	2.6	3.1	28.8	45.2
2010	326	10.5	8.1	2.4	3.3	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Statistics Korea, Vital Statistics.

**Table 4. Singapore: Trends in International Marriages of Singapore Citizens, 1998-2008**

Year	Marriages of Singapore citizens	Percent of marriages with one non-citizen spouse			Ratio (col.4/col.5)
		Total	Wife non-citizen	Husband non-citizen	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1998	21,233	32.8	24.0	8.8	3.0
1999	23,500	29.7	21.1	8.5	2.5
2000	20,500	31.2	22.4	8.8	2.5
2001	19,990	32.3	24.3	8.0	3.0
2002	20,700	31.2	22.9	8.3	2.8
2003	19,458	32.7	24.5	8.2	3.0
2004	19,615	36.3	27.6	8.7	3.2
2005	20,494	41.0	32.2	8.8	3.7
2006	20,778	39.3	30.6	8.6	3.6
2007	20,775	38.9	29.8	9.1	3.3
2008	21,042	38.7	30.2	8.4	3.6

Note: Singapore citizen marriages refers to marriages where one or both of the partners in the marriage is a Singapore citizen.

Source: Computed from data in National Population Secretariat, 2009. Figures for years 1999 to 2002 are not precise, as they had to be read from a graph.

**Table 5. Japan: Trends in International Marriages, 1970-2009**

Year	Number of Marriages ('000)	Percentage of marriages with one foreign spouse			Ratio (col.4/col.5)
		Total	Wife from foreign country	Husband from foreign country	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1970	1029	0.5	0.3	0.3	1.0
1975	942	0.6	0.3	0.3	1.0
1980	775	0.9	0.6	0.4	1.5
1985	736	1.7	1.1	0.6	1.8
1990	722	3.5	2.8	0.8	3.5
1995	792	3.5	2.6	0.9	2.9
2000	798	4.5	3.5	1.0	3.5
2001	800	5.0	4.0	1.0	4.0
2002	757	4.7	3.7	1.0	3.7
2003	740	4.9	3.8	1.1	3.5
2004	720	5.5	4.3	1.2	3.6
2005	714	5.8	4.6	1.2	3.8
2006	731	6.1	4.9	1.2	4.1
2007	720	5.6	4.4	1.2	3.7
2008	726	5.1	4.0	1.1	3.6
2009	708	4.9	3.8	1.1	3.5

Source: Calculated from data in Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan, 2009.

There have also been some changes worth noting in the source country of the brides. Interestingly, in Taiwan, despite the sharp decline in number of foreign brides, the distribution by source region did not change much: China increased from 65 per cent in 2003 to 69 per cent in 2010, and Southeast Asia decreased from 33 per cent in 2003 to 26 per cent in 2010 (Chen 2011). Throughout the past decade, Vietnam has been dominant among the Southeast Asian source countries, accounting for between 74 and 77 per cent of those from Southeast Asia who applied for resident visas in Taiwan between 2000 and 2008 (Wang 2010, Table 3).

In Korea, Chinese brides (mainly ethnic Koreans, or *Josunjok*) have maintained their predominance until very recently.<sup>2</sup> Only in 2008 did their proportion of total foreign brides first fall below 49 per cent, with another sharp fall in 2010 to 28 per cent. However, there has been an enormous upsurge in the proportion of Vietnamese brides, which reached 34 per cent of the total in 2006, then falling slightly to around 29 per cent in the 2008-2010 period. Meanwhile, the proportion of Japanese and Filipino brides declined sharply – from 15.5 per cent to 4.5 per cent and from 18.6 per cent to 6.5 per cent, respectively, over the period 2000 to 2009. It should be noted that the number of brides from Japan and the Philippines did not change much; it was just that the number from the other source countries increased greatly.

<sup>2</sup> Some Korean local governments and agricultural associations contributed to the international marriages by importing ethnic Korean Chinese women for their unmarried rural citizens (Lee 2005).

In the case of Japan, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, three countries have dominated as sources of brides: Korea, China and the Philippines. However, their relative importance has changed: the proportion from Korea and the Philippines has fallen steadily, and that from China has increased (see Table 6). In 2009, Chinese brides accounted for almost half of all foreign brides, followed by the Philippines (21.5 per cent), Korea (15.4 per cent), Thailand (4.6 per cent) and Brazil (1.0 per cent). The striking difference between the very small number of Vietnamese brides in Japan compared with the other countries<sup>3</sup> requires explanation. It appears that marriage brokerages for Vietnamese brides have not developed in Japan in the same way that they have in the other countries.

**Table 6. Countries of Origin of Foreign Wives Marrying Japanese Husbands, 1990-2009 (per cent)**

Country of origin	1990	1995	2000	2003	2009
Korea (N or S)	44.6	21.7	21.9	19.1	15.4
China	18.0	24.9	34.9	36.7	47.6
Philippines	-	34.6	26.5	28.0	21.5
Thailand	-	9.2	7.5	5.2	4.6
Brazil	-	2.8	1.2	1.1	1.0
Other countries	37.4	6.8	8.0	9.9	9.9

Source: Jones and Shen, 2008, Table 5; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2009

### **SOME KEY FEATURES OF INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN THESE FOUR DEVELOPED COUNTRIES**

From the trends shown in the tables, and from a range of other sources, the key characteristics of international marriage trends in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore can be summarized.

#### **Males Marrying Foreign Brides the Key Feature**

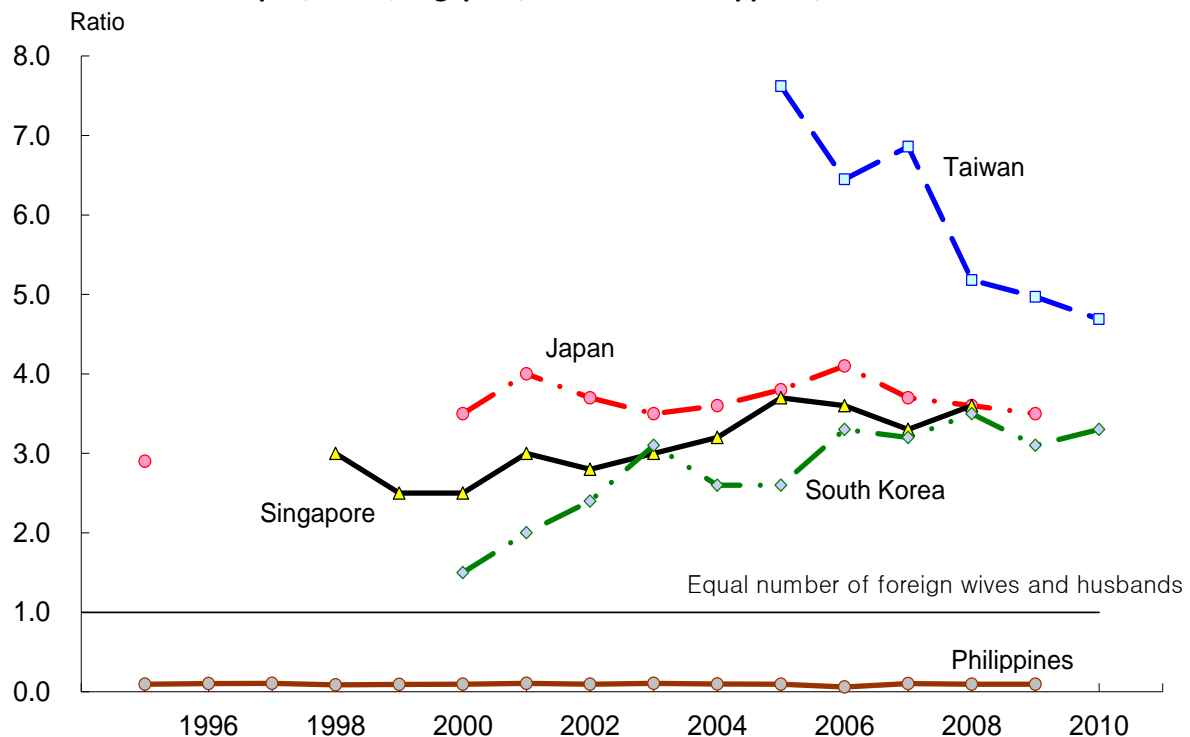
In these four countries, the ratio of males to females engaging in international marriage is of the order of 3 or 4 to 1, except in Taiwan, where it is much higher (Tables 3, 4 and 5). In Japan, ever since 1990, there have been three to four times as many Japanese men marrying foreign brides as Japanese women marrying foreign husbands. This was not always the case. In the 1970s, when foreign marriages were much rarer, the numbers of men and women marrying foreigners was in balance. In South Korea, in 2000 and 2001, when marriages with foreigners were not very common, the ratio of males to females engaging in international marriage was 2 to 1 or less. But from 2006 on, it has been above 3 to 1. In Singapore, where international marriages were already common over a decade ago, the ratio of males to females contracting such marriages was in the range of 2.5 to 1 to 3 to 1. Since 2003, when international marriages rose to an even higher level, the male to female ratio has been even higher – between 3 to 1 and 3.7 to 1. Taiwan has by far the highest ratio of males to females contracting international marriages, so much so that the latter are rarely mentioned in academic papers on cross-border marriages in Taiwan. In 2003, the ratio of foreign brides to foreign grooms was 8 to 1, and among the “stock” of foreign spouses living in Taiwan in 2004, the ratio was 12 to 1 (Tsay, 2004 : Tables 1 and 2).

<sup>3</sup> In Singapore, official statistics are not available on the source countries of foreign spouses, only the source region. However, it is well known that Vietnamese brides have grown sharply in number, as a result of marriage brokerages operating between the two countries.



The obverse of this pattern is found in at least two of the key bride-supplying countries – Philippines and Vietnam. As shown in Figure 1, the ratio of females to males in Filipino international marriages is more than 10 to 1. This would probably be the case in Vietnam as well if figures were available. Destination countries of Filipino brides are very varied; over the 1980-2009 period, 41.6 per cent went to the USA, 29.0 per cent to Japan, 7.9 per cent to Australia, 4.1 per cent to Canada, 3.4 per cent to Germany, 2.0 per cent to Taiwan, 2.1 per cent to South Korea and 2.0 per cent to the UK.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Ratio of Foreign Wives to Husbands from Foreign Countries, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan and Philippines, 1995-2010**



It is possible that the ratios in Figure 1 are somewhat distorted by a greater tendency in the wealthy East Asian countries for women who marry a foreigner to move abroad than is the case for males who marry a foreigner, and therefore not to show up in the statistics. Unfortunately, evidence on this is scarce, but it is unlikely that such a distortion would be enough to greatly modify the picture shown in the Figure.

<sup>4</sup> The source of these figures is the Commission on Filipinos Overseas. The data are for males and females combined, but since females constituted 91.4 per cent of the spouses, the figures essentially reflect the education of female spouses.

### **Men Marrying Foreign Brides are Disproportionately Older**

The mean age of men who marry foreign brides is considerably higher than that of men marrying local women. For example, the average age of Korean grooms marrying foreign brides in the 2004-2005 period was 42.3 years (Kim 2008, Table 2), well above the average age of those marrying Korean brides. In Singapore, in 2008, 35 per cent of those marrying non-citizens were aged over 40, compared with 10 per cent of those who married Singapore citizens (National Population Secretariat 2009).

Consistent with the typically older age of men marrying foreign brides, there is a wider age difference between spouses in the case of men marrying foreign brides than when the men are marrying local women. In Taiwan, although the Chinese brides tend to be much older than the Southeast Asian brides (mean age at marriage 31.3 and 23.6, respectively, in 2001: see Tsay 2004, Table 5), both the Chinese and Southeast Asian brides were typically marrying men 10 or more years older than themselves – 55 per cent in the case of the Chinese and 67 per cent for the Southeast Asians. Likewise, a 2009 survey in Korea of all couples involving a Korean man married to a foreign bride showed an average 10-year difference in age between the spouses (Lee, forthcoming). In Korea, there has been an increase in the proportion of the ever-married (mainly divorced) among men contracting international marriages. In 2004, more than one quarter of international marriages of Vietnamese, Filipino or Mongolian women to Korean men were between never-married brides and ever-married grooms (Kim 2007). In Singapore, the age gap between Singaporean men and their foreign brides tended to be much wider than in the case where both partners were Singapore citizens (National Population Secretariat, 2009).

### **Different Characteristics of Spouses in the Case of Males and Females Marrying Foreigners**

A substantial proportion of males from these wealthy Asian countries who are marrying foreign brides are engaging in brokered marriages with women from lower-income countries in Asia - China, Vietnam, Philippines, and to a lesser extent, Indonesia and Mongolia. Women from the wealthy countries are marrying men from a wider range of countries – mainly from Asia, but with North America, Europe and Australia much better represented than in the case of marriages of males from these countries. Whereas there are very few brides from the United States marrying men from Korea, Japan, Taiwan or Singapore, the United States features much more prominently as a source of husbands for women from these countries.<sup>5</sup> For example, although the number of Korean men marrying women from the United States is negligible, the United States is the third largest source of foreign husbands for Korean women, providing 12 per cent of foreign husbands (Kim 2007, Figures 3 and 4). In Japan, among marriages occurring in 2009, only 0.7 per cent of foreign brides were from USA, compared with 19 per cent of foreign husbands (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan 2009).<sup>6</sup> Statistics from Taiwan on male foreign spouses show that over the 2008-2010 period, 21.4 per cent were from Japan, 18.8 per cent from China/Hong Kong/Macao, and 17.1 per cent from the USA.<sup>7</sup> These figures include those who do not reside in Taiwan. Another set of data – on those who acquire Taiwan residence permits as foreign spouses – shows that up to June 2009, Thai men

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that these figures could be biased, because Japanese, Koreans, or Singaporeans marrying abroad and not returning may not be included in the statistics. Marriages abroad may be more common in cases where women from the United States are marrying men from these countries, than in cases where men from the United States are marrying women from these countries.

<sup>6</sup> The other main countries supplying husbands to Japanese women were Korea (24.6 per cent), China (12.9 per cent), UK (4.8 per cent), Brazil (3.8 per cent) and the Philippines (2.0 per cent).

<sup>7</sup> Source: Ministry of Interior, Weekly Statistical Bulletin.

constituted 27.8 per cent, those from USA 12.2 per cent and from Japan 11.9 per cent.<sup>8</sup> Thai husbands were more numerous than those from China/Hong Kong/Taiwan. Most of these Thai men married Taiwanese women when they were working in Taiwan (largely in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations).<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Singapore, 97% of male citizens marrying internationally are marrying Asian brides, whereas only 69% of female citizens marrying internationally are doing so. While only one per cent of the brides are from the Americas, Europe and Oceania, 25 per cent of the bridegrooms are from these regions. (National Population Secretariat 2009, Table 7). The differences are related to (but not fully explained by) the very different profile of male and female Singapore citizens marrying non-citizens. In the case of males, 52.4 per cent had post-secondary or university education; in the case of females, 74.7 per cent had these levels of education - and they were marrying grooms with even higher levels of education (National Population Secretariat 2009).

### **Educational Differences between Spouses**

The evidence of educational differences between spouses in international marriages of East Asians is mixed. Filipinas engaging in international marriages tend to be much better educated than Chinese or Vietnamese women who marry internationally. Overall, of all Filipino spouses and other partners of foreign nationals registered over the 1989-2009 period, 49 per cent had at least some tertiary education.<sup>10</sup> It would not be surprising if, on average, these brides had more education than their husbands. This is certainly what is found in Korea: brides from the Philippines and Mongolia marrying Korean men in 2004-05 tended to be better educated than their Korean husbands, but this was not the case for brides from China and Vietnam (Kim 2008, Table 2). One factor was said to be the prevalence of Koreans studying English in the Philippines, providing more opportunity for Korean men there to meet well educated Filipinas (Kim 2008: 147). In general, among Filipinas marrying in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, there has been an increase over time in the proportion who marry down in terms of the educational attainment of the respective spouses (Ogena, Valencia and Roma 2008).

The data for Japan, though, are not consistent with the patterns discussed above. In Japan, a much lower proportion of Filipino brides have tertiary education than is the case for those from Korea and China. Liaw et al (2010: 64) attribute this to the fact that many of these Filipinas entered Japan as “entertainers”, jobs that do not appeal to well-educated females (2009).

### **Residence Patterns**

Considerable publicity has been given to the problems of farmers and other men in rural areas in finding brides, and to the involvement of local governments in Korea and Japan in finding international brides for local men. Sex ratios at marriageable ages in many rural areas rose sharply as young women moved to the cities, and the task of finding brides for rural men was seen as crucial in re-populating rural areas and maintaining a rural base for national identity (Nakamatsu, 2002; Liaw et al., 2010: 20-21). Immigrant wives in Korea are certainly over-represented in rural areas compared with Korean-born wives: in 2010, 24 per cent of them lived in rural areas, compared with 8 per cent

<sup>8</sup> Source: National Immigration Agency, Ministry of Interior.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Melody Lu Chia-Wen for guiding me to the various sources of Taiwanese statistics, and for her comments on the marriages with Thai workers.

<sup>10</sup> The source of these figures is the Commission on Filipinos Overseas. The data are for males and females combined, but since females constituted 91.4 per cent of the spouses, the figures essentially reflect the education of female spouses.

of native-born wives (Kim, Kim and Kim, 2011, Table 2). However, this should not blind us to the fact that most of the foreign brides are living in urban areas, especially in large cities. For example, only 27 per cent of foreign brides of Koreans lived anywhere outside the five largest cities, and well over half of them lived in the Seoul metropolitan area. This is not surprising, since Korea is a highly urbanized country, but it certainly puts paid to the image of most brides coming to the rural areas. Residence patterns in Korea do vary considerably, however, according to the country of origin of brides, with more than half of those from Vietnam and the Philippines living outside of the five large cities, and those from China being strongly concentrated in cities (Kim 2007, Table 5).

In Japan, there is an over-concentration of foreign wives in the Tokyo prefecture and the Kanto region more generally. Most of the rural and peripheral prefectures did not have more foreign brides than their share of Japan's population would suggest, despite the shortage of potential brides in many villages and towns in these prefectures (Liaw, Ochiai and Ishikawa 2010: 74-76).<sup>11</sup>

### **Role of International Marriage in Modifying Ethnic Homogeneity**

Japan and Korea are two of the world's most ethnically homogeneous societies. Taiwan is less so, if the differences between mainlanders and native Taiwanese are recognized as important; Singapore is ethnically quite diverse. In Japan and Korea, there has been strong resistance to immigration as a means of tackling increasing labour shortages or even to the Singapore pattern of employment of contract workers who can be forced to leave after the expiration of their contracts. Given this extreme reluctance to open up labour markets to foreigners, or to allow immigration to dilute ethnic homogeneity, the role of marriage migration in achieving the same end "through the side door", as it were, gains in significance.

Yet it would be easy to overlook the fact that much of the marriage migration is not modifying the ethnic mix. Well over half the marriage migrants to Taiwan are from mainland China; over half the marriage migrants to Korea are ethnic Koreans, mostly the "Josunjok" from China.<sup>12</sup> This is not to understate the adjustments needed when the partners are ethnically similar but from different countries (see, for example, Freeman 2005). But the data in Table 1 is still of great interest in showing the role of cultural affinity in international migration patterns. The gulf between the higher proportion of international marriages in Singapore, Taiwan and Korea and the smaller proportion in Japan becomes less marked when the comparison is restricted to those from a different ethnic background. When this is taken into account, marriage migration's role in modifying the ethnic mix in the former three countries is less dramatic, though very important nonetheless. The effect of policy change in limiting the effect of marriage migration on the ethnic mix is very apparent in Taiwan. Whereas in 2003, the modification of Taiwan's ethnic mix through each year's marriage migration was far greater than in Japan or South Korea, by 2010, this impact had become less than in these two countries.

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<sup>11</sup> The only exceptions were the prefectures of Yamanashi, Nagano and Fukui in the Central region, and Yamagata in the Tohoku Region.

<sup>12</sup> For further details about the history of Josunjok marriage migration to Korea, see Lee, 2009.

## **APPARENT REASONS FOR THE EMERGING PATTERNS**

Viewing international marriage migration from the perspective of the wealthy East Asian countries, a generalization to be tested would be that the great majority of international marriages entered into by citizens of these countries (i.e. those of males from these countries) involve the deliberate and targeted search for spouses outside their country by those disadvantaged in various ways in domestic marriage markets, whereas more of the international marriages of females from these countries, and some of those of males, arise in a less targeted way from increased globalization, involving mobility through tourism, internationally-staffed offices, business travel, international study and student exchanges, and short-term temporary skilled migration. It really does seem that the stereotype of men disadvantaged in local marriage markets men seeking brides in other, lower-income countries is the dominant pattern here. However, it is far from true that these males are all rural and/or poorly educated.

### **Marriage Market Considerations Underlying Patterns of International Marriage in the Region**

While the number of international marriages in Taiwan has fallen sharply after 2003, it is important to keep in mind that around 13 per cent of annual marriages of Taiwanese males are still to foreigners. In Korea, the figure is about 8 percent, in Japan around 4 per cent, and in Singapore a massive 30 per cent. Even the seemingly low figures in Japan and Korea represent a remarkable change in these ethnocentric societies. The embedding of a pattern of international marriages in these four developed East Asian countries for more than a decade (two decades in the cases of Japan and Singapore) has already resulted in a diversification of their ethnic mix, and will continue to do so in future.

The trends in international marriages over the past decade have been playing out in the context of a collapse in fertility in all these countries, which now have among the very lowest levels of fertility in the world (Frejka, Jones and Sardon 2010). Indeed, the TFR of 0.89 in Taiwan in 2010 appears to be the lowest ever recorded in any country with a population exceeding 10 million. Part of the explanation for the collapse in fertility has been delayed and less marriage in all these countries (Jones 2007; Jones and Gubhaju 2009). While there is not space here to elaborate on the reasons for the earlier demise of the universal marriage system in the region and, latterly, for remarkably high proportions of both males and females remaining single in their 30s and 40s, they can be divided crudely for our purposes into the categories of voluntary and involuntary non-marriage.

There appears to be a good deal of both causes of non-marriage in East Asian countries. Voluntary non-marriage characterizes those who either eschew marriage totally (probably not a very large group), or who are open to marriage but give greater priority to education, work, career, and other interests, and who wait rather passively for the ideal spouse to appear on the scene. When the ideal spouse does not materialize, they remain single. Involuntary non-marriage can be said to characterize those who strongly desire to marry, but who find themselves in sub-categories of the population for which there is sex imbalance in the number of potential spouses. In East Asian societies there are fairly rigid expectations about appropriate marriage partners, which means that a “marriage squeeze” (imbalance between males and females in the number of potential spouses) may arise for certain group in the population, whether categorized by age, education, social class, occupation or geographical location. Moreover, in Korea there is a generalized excess of males in some age groups, due to sex selective abortions in the 1980s (Kim 2004).

For all the countries under discussion, when the never married are classified by age and education, it is found that the groups with the highest never married proportions are the lesser-educated males and the highly educated females (Jones, 2007: 463). Table 7 illustrates the point for Singapore. Other evidence shows that it is more the women in the region who are having misgivings about marriage. Survey data for Japan show that a considerably lower proportion of women than of men say they felt positive about their marriage (*The Economist* 20/8/2011), and in both Japan and Korea, a smaller proportion of women than of men see marriage as necessary or intend to marry (Choe 1998; Retherford, Ogawa and Sakamoto 1996). What has been referred to as the “marriage package” in these countries is not very appealing to many women (Bumpass et al. 2009). This package for many is perceived to include responsibilities to the husband’s family, including the prospect in many cases of caring for his aged parents; the stresses and strains of raising children in the high pressure educational environment of East Asian countries; and the expectation that the wife will work in a demanding job as well as perform the housework and the major childrearing activities.

**Table 7. Proportion Never-married by Age, Sex and Educational Level, Singapore (percent), 2000, 2005 and 2010**

Sex and age group	Below secondary		Secondary		Post-secondary		University	
	2000	2010	2000	2010	2000	2010	2000	2010
<b>Female</b>								
25-29	21	23	30	35	43	52	54	62
30-34	13	13	17	18	23	27	27	28
35-39	10	9	14	13	20	18	23	21
40-44	9	9	15	12	20	16	22	19
<b>Male</b>								
25-29	62	64	58	64	70	74	69	76
30-34	40	39	29	38	28	37	28	35
35-39	28	29	18	25	15	21	13	17
40-44	21	23	14	18	9	14	7	11

Source: Singapore population censuses, 2000 and 2010.

However, the partner-seeking options open to the men and women who are “stranded”, as it were, in the marriage market are very different. Given economic and cultural realities in these countries, use of marriage brokers in arranging international marriages is an option that serves the needs of the “stranded” males fairly well, but is not open to highly educated women. Matchmaking approaches with a realistic chance of serving this group would have to be much more subtle – even if they were desired, which is an open question. For Japanese single women, overseas trips and overseas education and employment are perhaps undertaken with a number of motives – among which, marriage to a foreigner may or may not be one (Yamashita 2008; Toyota 2007; Toyota, this conference).

There have been many studies of the motivations of women from the source countries. The emphasis in these studies is not on marriage market anomalies, but on the desire of women to better their (and their family’s) economic condition. In the Philippines, the economy has been chronically unable to absorb the growing number of job seekers into satisfactory employment. Not only does this affect women’s income earning prospects, but also their prospects for improvement

by marrying local men, who face similar labor market problems. In Vietnam, the flow of brides is more organized, and there is a ready supply of poor farm girls. But localized large outflows of female marriage migrants will certainly affect the marriage market in these areas (Belanger and Linh 2011).

Focusing on the different dynamics operating in the case of international marriages of males and females from the four wealthy Asian countries that are the main focus of this paper, a distinction can perhaps be drawn between opportunistic and targeted international marriages. In the case of women in these countries marrying foreign men, opportunistic elements predominate, reflecting globalization, greater chances to meet foreign men in the workplace, increased foreign travel, etc. It is noteworthy that in Singapore and Japan, the percentages of women marrying foreigners have not changed at all over the past decade, whereas percentages for men have risen. In Korea, there was a sharp rise up to 2005 in the proportion of women who marry foreigners; it has since fallen back substantially, but it is still double the proportion in the early 2000s (see Table 3).

### **Role of Marriage Brokers in East Asian International Marriages**

The utilization of commercial matchmaking agencies and the internet for spouse search is a development influencing both domestic and international marriage markets. There are 3,100 matchmaking agencies in Japan, and the industry is worth about 30 billion yen (280 million US\$) (*Straits Times* 24/6/2005). In South Korea there are 1,000 agencies and two in five couples who married between 1998 and 2003 met through matchmakers, according to the Korean Institute for Health and Social Affairs (*Straits Times* 23/8/2008). It is not surprising that commercial matchmaking on this scale spills over international borders, and that international matchmaking has become important in a number of countries (Wang and Chang 2002; Nakamatsu 2003, 2009; Lu 2008). For example, some of the dating agencies operating in Singapore specialize in foreign brides, in particular from Vietnam. Small-scale commercial matchmaking also takes place, frequently conducted by couples who were themselves matched through commercial brokers (Chee, Yeoh, and Dung 2011).

## **SOME ISSUES RELATED TO INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE IN ASIA**

### **Motivation, Agency and Gender**

Marriage migration opens up some new opportunities for women and also creates new inequalities. The focus of enquiry rather becomes how, within social constraints, women actively make their decisions on entering international marriage, negotiate their relations with their husbands, their husbands' families, the host societies and the families back home, and reconstruct their subjectivities (Jones and Shen 2008: 20-21).

In a book provocatively entitled *Wife or Worker?*, Piper and Roces (2003) note that the distinction between the two analytical categories – wife and worker – is very much blurred. Marriage is one of the fundamental motives for migration, and marriage may also be the unintended result of migration or, in some cases, a self-conscious strategy to escape from undesirable kinds of work. Thus the boundaries between labour migration and marriage migration and between commercial international marriages and trafficking of women into international marriage are re-conceptualized as fluid and inclusive. The argument that commercially arranged international marriages can be seen as a simple exchange of money for intimacy, or money for care, is too simple:

The relationship is not one of perfect substitutability between money and care but instead one better characterized as a fraught, negotiated terrain where love and labour, care and money, exist in fluid states of partial substitutability *and* complementarity. Both Singaporean husbands and Vietnamese wives are involved in the commercially matched marriage as active agents, and are keenly aware of the fluid nature of the negotiated relationship at stake (Yeoh, Chee and Dung 2011).

Though this may be the case in this Singapore study, there is some evidence from other countries of agency-recruited brides from poorer countries being used by the husbands to serve a function closely akin to that of a maid – to care for him and, in some cases, to care for elderly or disabled members of his household, without this having been made clear in the initial recruitment process.

In the literature on international marriage migration, the social consequences in the source area have been relatively neglected. One recent study helping to redress this is Belanger and Linh, 2011, which shows multiple effects on the social fabric of sending communities in Vietnam, on gender relations in these communities, and (negatively) on the marriage prospects of poor young men in the sending communities. More studies of this kind are needed.

### **Problems of Adaptation, Acculturation, and Community Attitudes**

In addition to the normal problems of acculturation and adaptation in any cross-boundary marriage, there are additional problems when public attitudes in the country of destination view the country the bride comes from as relatively backward and underdeveloped, and the motivations and character of the brides are stereotyped in negative ways. Such is the case, for example, of Filipinas in Japan, because of the early history of movement of Filipinas to Japan, many of them as “entertainers”, and of Vietnamese in Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, because of their typically low education and rural background. In Taiwan, media reports often link spouses from Southeast Asia with social problems.

First, they are depicted as people of low education who, among other issues, do not know how to raise children properly. Secondly, they are portrayed as transmitters of disease. Lastly, they are victims of domestic violence and are thus to be pitied rather than welcomed as worthy individuals who have their own agency (Huang 2006: 459).

There has been a rapidly expanding literature on aspects of the adaptation issues faced by foreign brides in East Asian countries (see, for example, Constable (ed) 2005; Kim (ed) 2008; Palriwala and Uberoi (eds) 2008; Yang and Lu (eds) 2010), though less about the men who are marrying these women. The adaptation issues are of course complex, and differ according to the background of both partners in the marriage. There is not space to elaborate on these issues here. Just as an example, Lee (forthcoming) finds that in Korea, the brides from Southeast Asian countries have much lower rates of participation in the labour force than those from China (both Korean Chinese and Chinese). This is partly because of language problems, affecting their labour market chances, and partly because they are much more likely to have children than those from China. But the relatively low incomes of such couples mean that more needs to be done by government to facilitate their entry into the labour market.

It is generally hypothesized that the greater the difference in background between spouses (cultural background, age, religion, education) the higher the risk that the marriage will end in divorce. In the case of international marriages, although these differences are indeed often great, there may be offsetting factors, including perhaps a realization that it is necessary to work hard on making the marriage work because of the obstacles it faces, and a stronger commitment to making the marriage work because of limited alternative options.



The limited evidence tends to indicate that wide spousal age differences in international marriages increase the risk of marital dissolution in Korean and Taiwanese marriages, but that educational differences play a less clear role (Kim and Lee 2008; Chen 2008). However, limited data and the complexity of the factors involved mean that there is need for much more research on these issues. It seems that in Japan, rather high divorce rates for brides from Philippines and Thailand may result from the family system in the Tohoku Region, where many of them go, because of their difficulty in adjusting to the obligatory co-residence between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law in this region (Liaw et al. 2010: 76-79).

### **Role of Governments; Legal Aspects**

Governments can influence both the size of the flow of marriage migrants and the ease or difficulty of their adjustment in the country of settlement. The changes in policy in Taiwan have been noted earlier, and had a major impact on the flow of marriage migrants from both China and Vietnam. The policy discussions in both Taiwan and Vietnam illustrate the politicization of the issue (Kung 2009).

Japan and South Korea do not allow the import of foreign domestic labour; Taiwan and Singapore do. Policies in countries receiving both marriage migrants and contract labour migrants show some inconsistencies. Singapore provides the curious paradox whereby those seeking brides through commercial bride-seeking arrangements often bring brides into the country from the same socio-economic background as those who are stringently prevented from marrying if already working in the country as maids" (Jones and Shen 2008: 19). As pointed out by Yeoh, Chee and Dung (2011), in these countries the reliance on foreign domestic workers or marriage migrants provides a cheap solution to the reproductive crisis arising from care deficits in the areas of childcare, eldercare and domestic work in a way that suits the ideology of these states, by passing the care responsibilities on to the familial realm.

Legal issues have an impact on the wellbeing of those affected by international marriage, not only the partners to the marriage itself, but also children born to the couple. In the case of the partners themselves, the key issues relate to citizenship of the foreign spouse, and become important to both her and her children should the marriage break up. In both Korea and Japan, the delay before a spouse can be granted permanent residence can really disadvantage foreign wives, particularly if they find themselves in abusive or exploitative relationships (Piper, 1997: 334).

### **East Asian Patterns in a Wider Context**

How different is the East Asian pattern from international marriage patterns in other parts of the world, and what are the differences in the factors driving international marriage and in its consequences?

East and Southeast Asian countries show an extraordinary gender disparity in marriage migration patterns (see Figure 1). Males from the wealthier countries are marrying females from the poorer countries; females from the wealthier countries and males from the poorer countries are heavily underrepresented in international marriages. Moreover, to the extent that women from the wealthy countries are marrying foreigners, the source country mix of their partners differs sharply from that of their male compatriots. How much is hypergamy (women marrying up) in evidence? On the face of it, the pattern of women from poor countries marrying men from countries with 10 times their own country's per capita income is clearly hypergamous. But it is not as simple as that, when we consider education, social status, lifestyle and geography, as Constable (2005, Chapter 1) elegantly elaborates. The paradoxes of hypergamy are well illustrated by marriage mobility among Filipinas,

who as noted earlier are in many cases better educated than the men they marry in East Asian countries. In the case of Vietnamese marriage migrants to Taiwan, however, hypergamy seems clearer, given the average low educational levels of the migrants and the overriding motive of acquiring a higher income to help the family back home (Nguyen and Tran 2010).

One key difference from some other parts of the world is that in many countries of Europe, for example, there are large diasporas (e.g. of Indians and other South Asians in the U.K., people from Maghreb living in Europe, Turks in Germany and Austria etc) where there is a strong incentive to seek spouses from the home country (see, for example, Lievens, 1999; Cretser, 1999). This is not a feature of East Asian patterns of bride seeking, except perhaps to some extent among the Chinese diaspora. However, cultural affinity certainly appears to be an important consideration for males looking for brides – as exemplified by the high proportion of Chinese brides among Taiwanese international marriages, the high proportion of ethnic Koreans among women from China marrying Korean men and the widespread belief in both Taiwan and Korea that Vietnamese make good wives both because their appearance does not differ greatly from that of Taiwanese or Koreans, and because a Confucianist heritage makes them more able to fit in with the local customs.

Another key difference is that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have been relatively homogeneous populations. Given the strength of factors making for homogamy in marriage markets (Kalmijn, 1998) there had to be some triggering factor to cause men in these countries to seek brides overseas. The key factor appears to have been the problems certain categories of men face in domestic marriage markets. The population of Singapore is certainly not homogeneous, but the marriage market issue seems to have been crucial in Singapore also. Although international mobility in the form of business and tourism travel has increased enormously in East and Southeast Asia, not only from the wealthier countries but also from countries such as China, Thailand and the Philippines (Hugo 2005), this international mobility does not appear to have been as important as targeted bride-seeking in influencing the number and pattern of international marriages.

If we compare these East Asian patterns with patterns of international marriage in a country such as Australia, we see in Australia a wide range of patterns of international marriage, with the search for brides from the home country being important in the case of some migrant ethnic groups (Greeks, Lebanese, Turks, etc – Khoo et al. 2009), some targeted searching by those disadvantaged in the local marriage market (mail order brides etc. – see Roces 2003) but much more of the opportunistic marriage resulting from contacts through international business, education, and tourism. This would also be the case in countries such as the US and UK, though with a higher proportion of “brides from home country” in the UK, because of its large South Asian population.

I have not been ambitious enough in this paper to take up the challenge of developing a comprehensive conceptual scheme to explain emerging patterns of international marriages. But by documenting some of the trends, patterns and issues, and addressing some of the causal factors, I have perhaps provided some material that can be used by others to do so.

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