

Marriages with foreign women in East Asia: bride trafficking or voluntary migration?

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In Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, where it is difficult for some men to find a spouse in their home country, a growing number of wives are brought in from abroad. Immigration of this kind has developed rapidly in recent years. Danièle Bélanger explains the reasons behind this influx of foreign women and its demographic consequences.

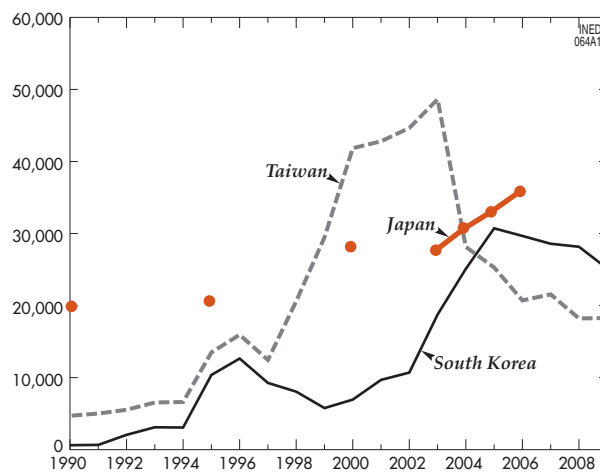
Some developed countries in East Asia, notably Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, hold multiple demographic records: very low fertility, rapid population ageing and high female singlehood rates. However, another emerging trend is currently transforming these societies: the rapid increase in immigration. In 2008, a quarter of the world stock of 214 million international migrants lived in Asia, including 15 million in East Asia [1]. In this region, a proportion of them are women who migrated to get married. In countries like South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, which do not encourage immigration, these women constitute the largest group of new migrants, with the exception of foreign temporary workers (see Box). The majority come from China and Southeast Asia, notably from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. In receiving countries, they are referred to as “foreign brides” and represent a distinct category in the statistics on foreigners.

◆ A sharp increase in marriages with foreign women

Since the early 1990s, a growing number of East Asian single men have been seeking wives abroad. In Taiwan, the number of marriages to foreign-born women rose from a few thousand per year in the early 1990s, to almost 50,000 per year in 2003 (Figure 1). A similar increase occurred in South Korea, with almost 30,000 marriages

in 2005, representing 10% of total marriages in the country (Figure 2). Despite a decline in recent years, these unions still represent a non-negligible proportion of marriages (15% in Taiwan in 2009 and 8% in South Korea). The decrease observed in Taiwan in the mid

Figure 1 - Numbers of marriages between a Taiwanese, Japanese or South Korean man and a foreign spouse, by year of marriage



Sources: National statistical offices.

(D. Bélanger, *Population & Societies*, 469, INED, July-August 2010)

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2000s can be explained by government measures to clamp down on such marriages, considered too numerous. In Japan, the practice of marrying foreign women began in the 1980s but did not reach the same proportions as in neighbouring countries (only 5%-6% of all new unions in the mid 2000s) [2]. These marriages are by no means a marginal phenomenon, however, and are changing the face of the host societies.

The largest group of foreign brides in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan comes from the People's Republic of China (Figure 3). Among these women, those who marry in South Korea are primarily of Korean descent. Those who marry in Taiwan already speak the country's official language, Mandarin, an asset which facilitates integration into their husbands' families. In South Korea and Taiwan, Vietnamese women constitute the second largest group of foreign brides. They are usually young, single women, whereas Chinese immigrant spouses are often divorced women who cannot remarry in China. In South Korea, the age difference between spouses in 2004 was 17 years, on average, in unions between Korean men and Vietnamese women and 7 years between Korean men and Chinese women [3]. At first, these marriages concerned only men from poor, rural communities, but they have now spread to the urban middle classes.

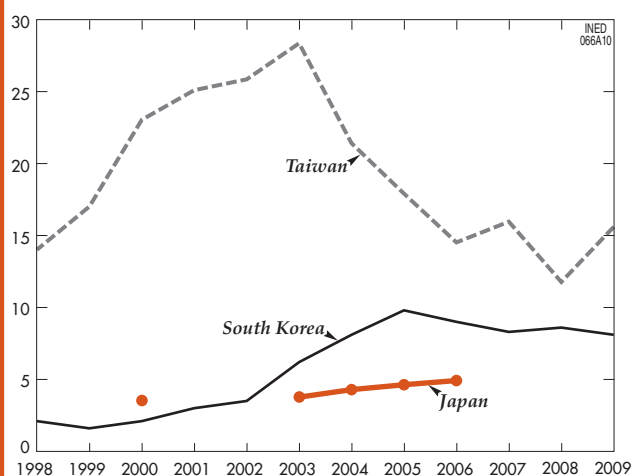
◆ Differences in male and female expectations

This quest for a foreign wife stems partly from the difficulties that men encounter when trying to find a spouse in their own country. Yet in 2005, one out of every six women between the ages of 35 and 39, in both Japan and Taiwan, was single [4]. Women are increasingly educated and a growing proportion are economically active. At the same time, the relations between the sexes and the division of household tasks between spouses

have barely changed, and measures to help working mothers are insufficient. Women are obliged to choose between work on the one hand and marriage and motherhood on the other. A growing number of them are refusing to accept the traditional wifely role: they want to continue working and thus prefer to stay single. These changing attitudes have led to a severe deficit of potential wives on the marriage market. Men, for their part, are responsible for continuing the paternal lineage by having sons and, in many cases, must also provide support for their elderly parents. Social pressure is so strong that it is difficult for them to remain single and childless. So when a family loses all hope of seeing their son marry a local woman, they opt for a foreign bride.

The proportion of male births in South Korea increased in the 1980s and 1990s as a direct result of the growth in sex-selective abortion [5]. However, contrary to what one may think, the resulting deficit in female births has played only a minor role up to now in the "foreign bride" phenomenon. In fact, men who married foreign women between 1995 and 2010 do not belong to the generations affected by a deficit of females. Those aged 35-40 in 2005⁽¹⁾ were born between 1965 and 1970, a period when the sex ratio was normal. However, for the generations of men born in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, a period of "missing" female births, the foreign bride phenomenon is likely to amplify when they enter the marriage market – unless male singlehood becomes socially acceptable and therefore increases.

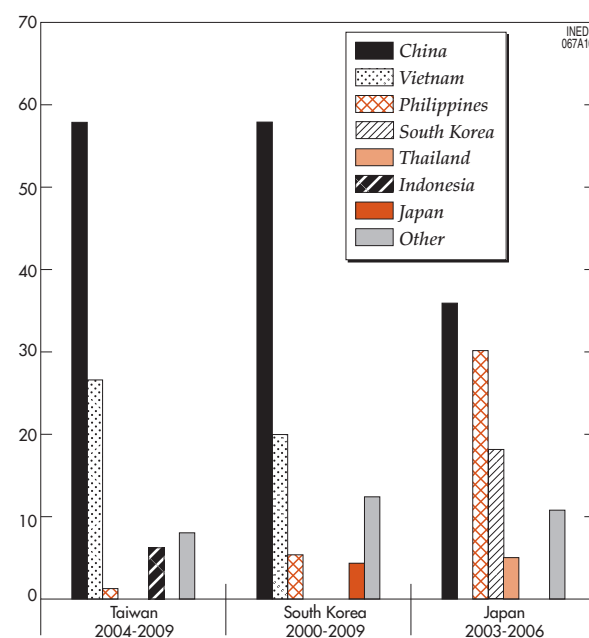
Figure 2 - Proportions of marriages with a foreign spouse with respect to total marriages, by year of marriage, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, 1998-2009



Sources: National statistical offices.

(D. Bélanger, *Population & Societies*, 469, INED, July-August 2010)

Figure 3 - Distribution of foreign spouses by nationality



Sources: National statistical offices.

(D. Bélanger, *Population & Societies*, 469, INED, July-August 2010)

(1) The mean age of men who marry a foreign woman is high because they spend many years looking for a wife locally before opting for a foreign bride.

◆ Go-betweens: family networks and matchmaking agencies

Once the first marriages of this type have taken place, the family and friends of the migrant spouses who have already settled in the host countries help other women in the family to migrate. Very often, a “pioneer” immigrant spouse acts as a go-between and finds a husband for her sister or a friend, who subsequently migrates. However, family and social networks play a minor role as compared to the matchmaking agencies which, in both sending and receiving countries, have largely contributed to the strong increase in mixed marriages and the migration associated with them. The agencies know the procedures involved in marrying a foreign woman and bringing her into the country. They can take care of all formalities and financial arrangements, thereby making themselves indispensable to their clients. They are private companies and they advertise everywhere: on television, in newspapers and on the street. One Taiwanese television station maintains a constant flow of images of women “available” for marriage. These omnipresent advertisements encourage men to turn to the international market.

International matchmaking agencies offer package tours for men to “supplier” countries, thus enabling them, in the space of seven to ten days, to choose a woman and start marriage formalities. Afterwards, the man returns home and within a few months, in the time it takes for the agencies to handle immigration formalities, the woman can join her new husband. The cost is between USD 6,000 and USD 12,000 (EUR 5,000 and EUR 10,000) for the husband’s family. In Vietnam, the potential brides are also expected to pay for these services; local go-betweens who work in partnership with Korean and Taiwanese matchmaking agencies have started charging fees of between USD 1,000 and USD 3,000 (EUR 800 and EUR 2400).

◆ Bride trafficking or voluntary migration?

Some people see these unions as a form of human trafficking. In the migrant women’s native countries, for example in Vietnam, this type of migration is frowned upon by the government, and the women are considered to be either victims of human trafficking or opportunists who take advantage of the system in order to settle abroad. Heated debates on the subject in Taiwan and South Korea have resulted in new laws being passed. In Taiwan, only non-profit agencies are authorized to operate, while the South Korean government has introduced a system of controls, with agencies now being required to hold a licence.

Note that these unions take place in societies where arranged marriages and financial transactions between families, including payment of a dowry or a “bride price” are a long-standing tradition; these customs are still socially acceptable, even if they are less common among the younger generations in some countries. However, a marriage between two strangers, organized by an agency, differs from an arranged marriage between two families;

Box

Migrant labour in East Asia: temporary foreign workers with few rights

Due to its rapid economic development and the decline in fertility, East Asia is experiencing a shortage of low-skilled and unskilled labour, notably in the manufacturing, agriculture and fisheries, domestic employment and services sectors. In order to address this problem, programmes were created in the early 1990s to bring in foreign temporary workers. Largely inspired by similar projects implemented in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, they aim to ensure a continuous turnover of migrant workers while preventing them from settling permanently in the country. Foreign workers have few rights, often earn lower wages than nationals and are obliged to leave their families behind. They have access to neither permanent residency nor nationality. Some countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan, allow first contracts to be renewed. Sending nations (China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan) encourage temporary labour migration, deemed to favour their own economic development by reducing pressure on their domestic labour markets and generating an inflow of money from migrant remittances. The Philippines is a case in point, with eight million of its nationals working abroad and government initiatives which encourage international migration.

Japan, less open to foreigners than its neighbours, favours foreign migrants of Japanese origin, particularly the children and grandchildren of Japanese emigrants to Brazil. Japan has also opted for a model involving the recruitment of “trainees” and “interns”, who represented the largest group of foreign workers in Japan in 2000-2007 [7]. Over 100,000 new “trainees” were recruited in 2008, a 25% increase with respect to 2004. The majority are of Chinese or Vietnamese origin (76% and 8% respectively), and are authorized to work in Japan for a period of three years. This programme is a disguised stratagem for recruiting cheap foreign labour to meet the demands of employers in the manufacturing sector.

In Taiwan, low-skilled migrants work notably in industry and human services, as caregivers for older adults in their own homes or in institutions. In 2009, over 3% of all manual workers were temporary foreign immigrants, compared to 1.5% fifteen years earlier. Most foreign workers come from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

South Korea initially implemented the Japanese “trainee” model, and then abandoned it in 2007 in favour of a temporary foreign workers programme. Effective since 2009, this programme enables migrants to work in the country for five years under relatively stringent conditions, including limited mobility between sectors and employers. South Korea favours foreign migrants of Korean descent. They obtain work visas more easily than others and the conditions governing their residence are less restrictive.

in the latter case, the families meet and express their approval of the marriage, which must comply with their social norms. The spouses often come from the same or similar geographic and social backgrounds.

The majority of immigrant women get married of their own accord and not because of parental pressure. They usually have a dual objective: to marry and migrate. The aim is not to contract a marriage of convenience but rather to “kill two birds with one stone”. Like most migrants from developing countries, foreign brides hope that by migrating they will be able to provide financial assistance to their families and improve their own lives. Their husband and in-laws expect them to rapidly produce a child and to devote themselves to household tasks. Moreover, in many cases, they are expected to care for their husband’s elderly parents. This situation sometimes breeds conflict and even domestic violence, and may also lead to divorce and, for the wife, a return to her native country.

◆ Integration problems of migrant women

At first, governments of receiving countries were in favour of marriages with foreign women, seeing them as a means to maintain population growth in rural areas where it was difficult for men to find spouses. They also welcomed the potential increase in births. From their point of view, the phenomenon was essentially a family issue rather than an immigration question. In South Korea, some towns offered financial incentives to families who wanted their sons to marry foreign women. As the majority of these immigrant spouses had already established ties with the host country through marriage, it was assumed that they would quickly become socially integrated. Consequently, very few measures were in place in the 1990s to facilitate their integration. Further to studies which showed that foreign spouses did indeed encounter difficulties, receiving countries invested in integration programmes (language and cultural education). They also allocated funds to NGOs and government bodies that provided services for these women, including shelters for victims of domestic violence.

◆ An increasingly diversified population

The immigration of foreign spouses leads to a more diversified society. A large majority of residents who obtain the host country’s nationality are foreign spouses, many of whom are women. In Taiwan, 98% of the 13,232 naturalizations recorded in 2008 were granted to wives or husbands of Taiwanese citizens. In 2008, more than four out of every five naturalized residents were immigrant wives of Vietnamese origin [6]. Much attention is being focused on the issue of children born to couples of mixed nationalities, both in political circles and among researchers, with attempts to adapt the existing social services to these children’s specific needs. In 2008, one out of every ten newborns in Taiwan had a foreign-born mother.

This situation contrasts with the dominant ideology of ethnic and national purity which prevails in East Asia.

In South Korea, the very derogatory term of “children of mixed blood” was, until recently, attributed to children whose parents had different origins. The Taiwanese government sees foreign spouses from Southeast Asia as a threat to the “quality” of their national population. These women may undergo discrimination and be excluded from the labour market and from public life.

In East Asia, the proportions of foreign-born and naturalized residents are still quite low compared to the situation in other developed regions. In 2007, foreign-born residents represented 1.7% of the population in Japan and 2.2% in South Korea [7]. However, their numbers are increasing and this poses a major challenge for receiving countries, obliging them to adapt their immigration policies. The immigration of foreign brides is one of the most important migratory phenomena in this region, with potentially significant demographic and societal consequences.

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of East Asian men marry a bride from a foreign country. In the late 2000s, marriages in which the wives were of foreign origin accounted for 15% of new unions in Taiwan, 8% in South Korea and 6% in Japan. The largest group of immigrant spouses in these countries come from the People’s Republic of China. Vietnamese women are the second largest group of immigrant spouses in South Korea and Taiwan, and likewise for Filipino women in Japan.

The quest for spouses abroad stems from the difficulties encountered by men in their own countries. Women are increasingly unwilling to accept the traditional role of wife and mother, with an unequal division of tasks between spouses and, in many cases, the obligation to leave their job. Matchmaking agencies play a key role in the rapid increase of these marriages.

A large majority of foreign spouses who migrate to get married do so of their own accord and not because of parental pressure. Their objectives are to marry and migrate. Like most migrants from developing countries, they hope that migration will enable them to send money back to their families and to improve their own lives.