

Family Life, Conflicts, and Adaptations of Immigrant Women in International Marriages in Rural Areas*

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(In lieu of an abstract) The steep rise in international marriages since the mid-1990s indicates a fundamentally different phenomenon from the international marriages that took place in South Korean society in the past. Most of the international marriages after the Korean War took place between American soldiers and Korean women or between affluent Japanese men or Western men and Korean women. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Korean men have been marrying women from countries with less prosperous economies. The frequency of this kind of marriage increased rapidly after the mid-1990s. There is especially a noticeable growth in the percentage of marriages between women from Asian countries with less developed economies and Korean men from rural areas or low-income Korean men from urban areas. Korean women are also increasingly marrying foreign male laborers in South Korea.

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1. Introduction

The steep rise in international marriages since the mid-1990s indicates a fundamentally different phenomenon from the international marriages that took place in South Korean (hereafter, Korean) society in the past. Most of the international marriages after the Korean War took place between American soldiers and Korean women or between affluent Japanese men or Western men and Korean women. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Korean men have been marrying women from countries with less prosperous economies. The frequency of this kind of marriage increased rapidly after the mid-1990s. There is especially a noticeable growth in the percentage of marriages between women from Asian countries with less developed economies and Korean men from rural areas or low-income Korean men from urban areas. Korean women are also increasingly marrying foreign male laborers in South Korea (hereafter, Korea).

The popularization of international marriages in Korea adds a fundamental dimension to the reflective debates about Korean society and culture that have begun with the recent increase of foreigners including migrant workers. The increase in foreign residents poses serious questions about Korea's ethnic and national identity, going beyond issues of ignorance and discrimination against foreigners or foreign cultures. In principle, Korea's governmental policy currently does not accept immigrants.¹ It only permits temporary residence for the unskilled foreign migrant workers who make up the majority of foreign laborers in Korea. Family companions of unskilled migrant workers are not eligible for a residence visa in order to reduce the chance of the workers permanently staying in Korea. However, foreigners who migrate to Korea through international marriages can acquire Korean nationality. As the number of children of these "multicultural families" (*damunhwa gajok*) increase, a question about the identity of "nation" and "ethnic group" has been raised in Korean society, where once "nation" and "ethnic group" were seen as identical.

Many foreign women immigrate to Korea through international

¹ (Editor's note) In recent years, South Korea has eased its strict control on immigration in the face of demographic challenges from the aging population and the currently low fertility rate (Park 2017).

marriages not only for the purpose of marriage itself but also for other goals such as finding a job in Korea or getting new life opportunities. As a result, even though Korean society does not welcome immigration, immigration is taking place and immigrants are being incorporated into Korean society as Korean citizens. In order to highlight the function of marriage as a vehicle for immigration, in this article I use the term “marriage immigrants” (*gyeoron iminja*) instead of “migrant women.” I do this in part to emphasize the social and cultural conflicts and necessary adaptations experienced by female immigrants who have become wives and mothers in the Korean countryside. Such challenges have been overlooked by previous researchers who analyze Asian women’s migration to South Korea from the perspective of the feminization of migration. Their foci have been on topics such as globalization, economic gaps between countries, feminization of poverty, gendered labor, marriage trafficking, and women’s rights.

I aim to bring attention here to the need for a shift from Korean society’s interest in international marriage as a means to solve the problem of finding matches for Korean men and from social and pathological discussions of “human trafficking,” “fraudulent marriage,” or “domestic abuse in international marriages,” to practical and concrete discussions about the integration of immigration and immigrants within Korean society. While international marriages have been gaining popularity, neither the government nor local communities have prepared for or even considered policies relevant to the socio-cultural phenomena that can result from international marriages. Foreign women who migrated through international marriage did not receive any political or administrative support from the government or local communities in the 1990s. Adapting in the new environment was considered an individual issue and foreign women had to pave new lifeways entirely by themselves. NGOs for migrant laborers’ human rights or local women’s organizations showed interest in marriage immigrant women, but mostly focused on urgent cases like extreme human rights violations or domestic violence cases. They were not able to offer a systematic response to the cultural conflicts or adjustment problems that occur in the process of adaptation to Korean society for a majority of marriage immigrant women.

Since NGOs and the media have raised the issue, central and local governments have started to create policies and programs for human rights protection and cultural adaptation of marriage immigrants. However, the

governmental response is not systematic, various ministries offering similar, short-spanned programs. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that there is no existing data from empirical studies of the life of the families or children of marriage immigrants. The media and NGOs that have been looking into circumstances of the marriage immigrant women who come to shelters can offer important materials for understanding the human rights violations foreign women experience, or other kinds of insult or injury. However, they can only provide fragmented cases in regard to the processes of marriage immigrant women's adaptations to their families, local communities, and Korean culture.

Previous research studies largely rely on interviews with marriage immigrant women who were in counseling with NGOs or those in shelters. Consequently, everyday problems faced by the majority of marriage immigrants remain underexplored. To overcome this limitation, this study focuses on rural areas where there are relatively high rates of marriage immigrant women being integrated into large families or local communities as compared to immigrant women in urban areas. In this article, I present and analyze ethnographic data on conflicts that marriage immigrant women in Korean rural areas experience in their families and local communities and on the patterns in their cultural adaptation and social integration.

2. Types of International Migration in Korea

Globalization has brought changes to transnational migration in Asia with women increasingly taking central roles. Women were previously considered tied-movers who followed their husbands or fathers in border-crossings but are now recognized as active agents of migration. This change of view is partially brought about by increased scholarly attention to women's migration, whereby scholars intend to overcome shortcomings of previous gender-blind studies that overlooked women's roles or agency in international migration. It also reflects significant increases in women's transnational migration. The globalized capitalist system widens the gap between rich and poor nations and expedites women's poverty. Furthermore, it leads to women being recruited as a "gendered" class that offers labor in the caretaking services typically regarded as "female work," such as housework, child care or patient care, or labors related to sexual

intimacy (Kim Hyeonmi 2001, 2004).

In the recent development of the “feminization of migration” (Yi Hyegyong 2005a: 74), female migrants make up more than 50 percent of the total number of migrants. There is also a shift from permanent transnational labor migration to temporary transnational labor migration. This is a result of families increasingly encouraging women (daughters or wives) to migrate for jobs that are relatively easier to get overseas (Yi Hyegyong 2005b: 38). The feminization of migration in the Asian region is reflected in Korean society. During the 15-year period in which migrant workers have moved to Korea, the ratio of female migrant workers has remained between 30 percent and 35 percent. This figure is lower than in other Asian countries. The ratio of women among migrant workers in Taiwan and Singapore is about 60 percent and 45 percent in Japan (Yi Hyegyong 2005b: 39). The reason for the relatively low ratio of Asian female migrant workers in Korea is related to the Korean government’s labor migrant policy. The Korean government did not “officially” approve recruitment of foreign migrant workers before it introduced the Employment Permit system. Various expedient methods were used for labor migration to Korea prior to this. For example, a large number of foreign women entered Korea through an entertainer visa (E-6) and worked in the nightlife industry. For Korean-Chinese women, marriage with Korean men was used as a relatively convenient strategy for migration compared to costly and difficult labor migration. The ratio of women among total immigrants becomes significantly higher when the number of female migrants who migrated via the full variety of migrant routes is combined with the number of migrant laborers. Based on data from 2003, the proportion of women among immigrants living in Korea is 44 percent (Yi Hyegyong 2005a: 74).

Researchers who study international marriage in Asian countries emphasize that women’s migration, labor, and marriage are connected in multi-faceted ways rather than being separate. They criticize previous studies of “mail-order brides” that approached women in international marriages simply as brides and failed to observe the composite roles and identities women have as “wives,” “mothers,” “workers,” and “citizens,” and suggest that the focus for research should be put on the agency and multi-faceted lives of migrant women (Piper and Roces 2003). The rapid increase in international marriages between Korean men and foreign women since the mid-1990s is a phenomenon resulting from the combination of

“feminization of migration” and the problems in Korea’s marriage market that have been deepening especially in rural areas. Marriage immigration to South Korea became a viable choice that could give new life opportunities and economic opportunities to foreign women who considered international migration in order to find a job or to escape poverty. The purpose of marriage for these women is not simply forming a “romantic” relationship based on intimacy with their spouse, but also securing an economic foundation for their family in their home country and for their own future.

3. Current Status of International Marriages and a Review of Previous Research

In rural areas, marriages between Korean men and foreign women were initiated as a means to solve the growing problem young males had with finding a spouse. When this problem was raised as a social issue at the end of the 1980s, official action was taken to promote marriage between rural bachelors and Korean-Chinese women. A politician who first arranged marriages between single farmers and single women from Yanbian believed that in order to restore the historical bond with Manchuria, it would be most effective to recombine bloodlines (Jeong Unggi Dec. 16, 1990). He arranged a marriage between a Korean man from a rural area and a Korean-Chinese woman in December 1990. It was an intra-ethnic marriage but, regarding the nationality of the couple, it was an international marriage. After this marriage, women’s organizations and farmers’ associations began to visit China frequently in order to find spouses for young men in rural areas. After diplomatic relations normalized with China in 1992, local governments started to arrange marriages between Korean men and Korean-Chinese women through varied routes.

International marriage in rural areas expanded, as well, due to the efforts of the Unification Church (also known as the World Peace Unification Family Association). The Unification Church stresses interethnic, interracial marriages between its believers, claiming that forming a “true family” free of self-interest is an important religious practice for a peaceful world. The Unification Church has been especially encouraging marriages between Koreans and Japanese. Six thousand Japanese women in the Unification Church were married to Korean men

in a large-scale public ceremony in 1988. The Unification Church then started to arrange marriages with Korean men not only for Japanese women but also for Filipino women. It also encouraged international marriages to ordinary citizens even those who were not church members thus contributing to the popularization of international marriages in Korean society. The Unification Church's branch in the Philippines counted 4,924 Filipino women who married Korean men through 10 mass weddings between 1992 and 2005 (Han Geonsu and Seol Donghun 2005: 109).

Target countries for seeking women for international marriages to Koreans also diversified. There are increasing cases of Korean-Chinese women marrying Korean men as a means for labor migration, many of whom transition into jobs in Korea once they receive a residence permit. And international marriage brokers have emerged to take an increasingly active role in bringing international couples together. During the early popularization of international marriages, many Filipino women migrated to Korea for marriage. However, as a growing number of people felt uncomfortable about differences in skin color, international marriage brokers started introducing women from Vietnam, Thailand, and Mongolia, and ethnic Koreans from Uzbekistan.

Table 1 shows the yearly increases in international marriages with foreign women. In 1990, the number of Korean men marrying foreign women was 619, and from 1995 their number surpassed the number of Korean women marrying foreign men. In 2004, international marriage was so popular that it took up 11.4 percent of the total number of marriages that year. Marriages between Korean men and foreign women accounted for 72 percent of total international marriages, and the cumulative number of marriages reached 128,762 by 2004. Among 6,629 of total registered marriages in rural areas 1,814 were international marriages, meaning 27.4 percent of the total of such marriages were transnational (Korean National Statistics Office, June 2005).

The actual conditions of international marriages were studied by NGOs that support marriage immigrant women, and by central and local governments and academia. First, there are NGO reports on domestic violence that portray the poor human rights conditions international marriage immigrant women often experience. There are also reports on the feminization of migration and the risks of human trafficking (Anyang Jeonjinsang Welfare Center Migrant Women's Shelter WeHome 2003;

Table 1. Numbers and rates of international marriage (1990-2004)

(Unit: number of marriages, %)

Year	Total number of marriages	International marriages		Foreign wives		Foreign husbands	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1990	399,312	4,710	1.2	619	0.2	4,091	1.0
1991	416,872	5,012	1.2	663	0.2	4,349	1.0
1992	419,774	5,534	1.3	2,057	0.5	3,477	0.8
1993	402,593	6,545	1.6	3,109	0.8	3,436	0.9
1994	393,121	6,616	1.7	3,072	0.8	3,544	0.9
1995	398,484	13,494	3.4	10,365	2.6	3,129	0.8
1996	434,911	15,946	3.7	12,647	2.9	3,299	0.8
1997	388,591	12,448	3.2	9,266	2.4	3,182	0.8
1998	375,616	12,188	3.2	8,054	2.1	4,134	1.1
1999	362,673	10,570	2.9	5,775	1.6	4,795	1.3
2000	334,030	12,319	3.7	7,304	2.2	5,015	1.5
2001	320,063	15,234	4.8	10,006	3.1	5,228	1.6
2002	306,573	15,913	5.2	11,017	3.6	4,896	1.6
2003	304,932	25,658	8.4	19,214	6.3	6,444	2.1
2004	310,944	35,447	11.4	25,594	8.2	9,853	3.2
1990-2004	5,568,489	197,634	3.5	128,762	2.3	68,872	1.2

Data from Korean National Statistics Office, Population dynamics (marriage, divorce). <http://kosis.nso.go.kr>.

Calculation (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu 2005: 3)

Asian Migrant Women International Forum Preparatory Committee 2005; Choe Geunjeong 2003; Gwangju Women's Development Center 2003; Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center 2004; Bak Hyeonjeong 2004; Yang Hyewu 2005; Yi Geumyeon 2003). These NGO reports mainly focus on cases of abuse in their effort to inform the public of the situation in which married immigrant women find themselves. As the problems of international marriages have become manifest, local governments have researched the current situations for marriage immigrant women in their jurisdictions and have been discussing ways to help them culturally adapt (Gangwon-do Provincial Office 2001; Kim

Aeryeong 1998; Min Gayeong 2004; Yi Yunae 2004).

At the central government level, the Ministry of Health and Welfare conducted a survey of the actual situation of marriage immigrant women in 2005 (Seol Donghun *et al.* 2005). This survey was the first conducted on a nationwide scale in an attempt to develop health and welfare policies for immigrant women married to Korean men. The results of the survey accurately reflected the then-current status of international marriages. The National Institute of Korean Language has conducted surveys on the topic of language and cultural adaptation of migrant women in international marriages (Wang, Han, and Yang 2005), and the Ministry of Health and Welfare conducted a survey on the actual conditions of international marriage agents and an on-site study of marriage arrangement trips abroad for Koreans (Han Geonsu and Seol Donghun 2005).

In academia, researchers specializing in cultural anthropology, sociology, social welfare studies, and women's studies have been paying attention to migrant women in international marriages. In the beginning, studies were mostly conducted on the master's thesis level. There were studies of marriages between Korean men and Korean-Chinese women (Hong Gihye 2000; Seong Jihye 1996) and studies of marriages between Korean women and migrant workers who reside in Korea (Jeon Suhyeon 2002; Jo 2000). Recently studies have been done on marriages between Korean men and Filipino women (Im Anna 2005) and Vietnamese women (Ha Minh 2005) as a part of a larger study on international marriages between Korean men and immigrant Asian women. In the field of social welfare studies, there is a master's thesis on marital stability (An Hyeonjeong 2003) and one on family problems of transnational couples (Im Gyeonghye 2004). Master's theses on international marriages include a cultural anthropological study of Filipino women who migrated through international marriages (Yun Hyeongsuk 2004, 2005), a study on the current status of international marriages and international marriage families (Yi Hyeogyong 2005a, 2005b), and a sociological study of women in international marriages who have settled in rural areas (Kim Ji-Ah 2005; Bak Jaegyung 2005). Several theses approach international marriages from the perspective of feminization of migration in women's studies (Kim Eunsil 2004; Kim Jeongseon 2004; Min Gayeong 2004; Yun Jeongsuk and Im Yugyeong 2004; Ewha Women's University Korean Women's Institute 2004). As a related topic, there is a study on Filipino male migrant workers married to Korean women (Kim Minjeong 2003). A study that describes

international marriages in Japan's rural areas (Hwang Dalgi 1993) provides material for comparison for understanding international marriages in Korean rural society.

4. Current Status of International Marriages in Jeollabuk-do

The regional distribution of marriage immigrant women who move to South Korea through international marriages shows that 74 percent reside in urban areas and 26 percent reside in rural areas (Seol Donghun *et al.* 2005). Considering that the population ratio between urban and rural areas is 80:20 (2000 Census), 26 percent in rural areas is not a small fraction. Table 2 presents the current status of foreign women who migrated through international marriages per region. The ratio of transnational households with foreign wives in Jeollabuk-do is 0.44 percent which is second highest after 0.45 percent.²

The international marriages in Jeollabuk-do area began taking place after an official campaign in the early 1990s that arranged marriage between Korean-Chinese women and Korean bachelors from rural areas. Japanese women also started to immigrate to this region because of the Unification Church's expansion into rural areas. As the Unification Church promoted international marriage to bachelors in rural areas who were not members of the church and introduced them to Filipino women along with Japanese women, women from Southeast Asia including Filipino women began to migrate to the Jeollabuk-do area through international marriages. As the number of men who were married to foreign women increased, an ever-growing number of people saw international marriage as a plausible choice. International marriages started to spread regardless of religious belief, either through the Unification Church or through introductions by the foreign women who had already migrated to the region.

² In Jeollabuk-do, the number of foreign women has always been higher than the number of foreign men since the Jeollabuk-do government began to record statistics of foreigners in its jurisdiction by gender in 1997. The increase in the number of women since 1999 is due to a surge in international marriages. The higher proportion of foreign women in rural vs. urban parts of Jeollabuk-do is supposedly due to an increase in foreign women who moved to the region through marriages.

Table 2. Current residence status of marriage immigrant women by region (as of the end of April 2005)

(Unit: household, person, %)

	Number of households	Number of marriage immigrant women	Ratio
All regions	17,391,932	66,912	0.38
Seoul	3,780,305	16,454	0.44
Busan	1,251,069	3,753	0.30
Daegu	853,142	1,857	0.22
Incheon	908,673	4,114	0.45
Daejeon	469,847	1,426	0.30
Gwangju	492,068	1,301	0.26
Ulsan	356,143	996	0.28
Gyeonggi-do	3,748,325	16,681	0.45
Gangwon-do	563,355	2,142	0.38
Chungcheongbuk-do	534,231	2,176	0.41
Chungcheongnam-do	736,328	3,047	0.41
Jeollabuk-do	675,145	2,955	0.44
Jeollanam-do	741,768	3,250	0.44
Gyeongsangbuk-do	985,475	2,892	0.29
Gyeongsangnam-do	1,096,069	3,288	0.30
Jeju Island	199,989	580	0.29

Note: The number of registered households by province, city, and county is based on data from the end of 2004. The percentage was calculated based on assumption that there is one female marriage immigrant per household.

Source: Korean National Statistics Office (<http://kosis.nso.go.kr>) and Ministry of Justice Database 2005; calculation by Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu (2005: 11).

Foreign population in Jeollabuk-do per year (1990-2003)

(Unit: persons)

Division	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Population (total)	4,803	5,773	5,311	6,024	7,245	7,469	7,726	8,437
Men		2,810	2,596	2,795	3,404	3,215	3,235	4,065
Women		2,963	2,715	3,229	3,841	4,254	4,591	4,372

Source: Jeollabuk-do Statistics Yearbook

5. Selection and Overview of Research Subject Cases

My study site is Imsil County located on the east side of Jeollabuk-do Province. Imsil is one of six towns (*si*) and counties (*gun*) in the Province. According to the Ministry of Justice survey in 2005, there were 69 recent marriage immigrants in the Imsil-gun region, representing eight different countries of origin.³ For the study, we selected one woman from each of the eight countries in two groups, according to the length of their stay in Korea, 1 year and 5 years, approximately (Table 3). If we could not find any women who met these criteria (country of origin, length of stay) in Imsil-gun, we interviewed women in the neighboring areas, Sunchang-gun and Namwon-si. In Imsil-gun, we interviewed 13 immigrant women. In Sunchang-gun we selected one Japanese woman, one Mongolian woman, and two Uzbek (of Korean descent) women. In Namwon-si we selected two Chinese (Han Chinese) women. There were no recent cases of marriage immigrants among the Japanese women in the survey area; therefore, I used as a selection criterion their age range rather than the length of stay. Korean-Chinese women were selected regardless of their length of stay, because the period of residence did not seem to significantly influence their understanding of language or cultural adaptation.⁴ We had to expand to neighboring regions to recruit potential research participants, partly because some mother-in-laws or husbands in Imsil-gun did not permit immigrant women to meet with the researchers.⁵

³ According to the Supreme Court's analysis of the family registries in 249 cities, counties, and districts in Korea from 2003 to 2005, 37.5 percent of the marriages registered in Imsil-gun in this period were international marriages and it is the third highest rate of international marriages in Korea following Boeun-gun (40 percent) and Hampyeong-shi (37.6 percent) (Joongang Ilbo, March 4, 2006).

⁴ (Editor's note) Most Korean-Chinese speak Korean fluently, so that in their case, language is much less a problem in their cultural adaptation into Korean society.

⁵ There were a few cases where family members did not allow immigrant women to meet with researchers. One of the reasons for their reaction was recent media coverage that focused on cases of married immigrant women who suffered human rights violations by their husbands and family. We also felt that mothers-in-law and husbands might have been worried that immigrant women would "get bad influences and runaway." In a severe case, a mother-in-law completely prohibited her daughter-in-law from going outside the house. In the research area, there were marriage immigrant women who "ran away" from their families. Husbands and mothers-in-law of immigrant women who heard about these cases around them or saw them on the news sometimes tried to prohibit immigrant women from being in touch with the outside world.

We visited the houses of each of the research participants to observe their family life and also interviewed the husbands or parents-in-law who live together with the research participants. In a few cases, the immigrant women themselves or their family members did not want the researchers to visit their home, therefore we used communal places such as the town hall for interviews. Let's now look at the research participants' background as presented in Table 3.

Regarding the marriage process, 7 out of 19 couples were married through the Unification Church and 6 were married after being introduced to family and relatives of immigrant women who were already married and living in Korea. Five couples got married through an international marriage broker. Three among those five couples were married through a township council that worked with international marriage brokers to arrange marriages and the last two met through the brokers. Korean men who married through the brokers spent a similar amount of money on marriage arrangements as the donation amount that members of the Unification Church pay to the church. According to them, the cost was between 10 and 13 million won. Korean men introduced to their spouses by immigrant women also paid a fee for introduction, and in some cases the men paid for a trip to the future bride's country for the person who introduced them as well.

In regard to the difference in education levels, women from the Philippines, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan had higher educational levels than the men they married. None of the husbands had attained an education higher than college level. Three were elementary school graduates and most of them were high school graduates. In the case of women, 9 had an educational background higher than college level and one woman had graduated from a 6-year university in Russia. Cases of the biggest educational level gap were couples where the husband had graduated from elementary school and the wife had an educational level higher than college. There were three couples who had this gap in common. In regard to age differences, men were on average 11 years older than their wives. Vietnamese women were youngest on average due to their early marriage custom and they were mostly in their 20s. In some cases when men were re-marrying, their age was higher and the biggest age gap was 24 years.

Table 3. Interview participants

Name	Country of Origin	Age	Length of Stay**	Education Level	Age of Husband	Husband's Schooling	Number of Children	Place of Residence	Marriage Route
A	China (Joseonjok)	23	1y 4m	High school	31	High school	1	Imsil-gun	Marriage immigrant introduction
B	China (Joseonjok)	28	2y 11m	Technical college	37	High school	1	Imsil-gun	Marriage immigrant introduction
C	China (Hanjok)	23	10m	Middle school	37	Middle school	1	Namwon-si	Marriage immigrant introduction
D	China (Hanjok)	29	6y 9m	Middle school	41	High school	2	Namwon-si	Marriage immigrant introduction
E	Japan	27	4y 1m	High school	37	High school	1	Sunchang-gun	Unification Church
F	Japan	33	5y 6m	Technical college	35	High school	2	Imsil-gun	Unification Church
G	Japan	44	6y 8m	High school	49	High school	1	Imsil-gun	Unification Church
H	Philippines	28	5y 5m	University drop out	37	Quit middle school	3	Imsil-gun	Unification Church
I	Philippines	31	5y 4m	Technical college	44	Elementary school	2	Imsil-gun	Unification Church
J	Philippines	35	7y 5m	University	59	Elementary school	1	Imsil-gun	Marriage immigrant introduction
K	Thailand	23	1y	Middle school	28	Middle school	0	Imsil-gun	Unification Church
L	Thailand	42	6y 9m	Middle school	52	Middle school	2	Imsil-gun	Unification Church

Table 3. Interview participants (continued)

Name	Country of Origin	Age	Length of Stay**	Education Level	Age of Husband	Husband's Schooling	Number of Children	Place of Residence	Marriage Route
M	Vietnam	19	3m	High school	38	High school	0	Imsil-gun	Farmer association + Marriage broker
N	Vietnam	21	1y 7m	High school	43	Middle school	1	Imsil-gun	Marriage broker
O	Mongolia	25	1y 7m	Technical college	34	High school	1	Sunchang-gun	Marriage broker
P	Mongolia	43	7y 10m	University	50	Elementary school	0	Imsil-gun	Brother-in-law introduction
Q	Uzbekistan*	22	2y 2m	High school	38	High school	1	Sunchang-gun	Township council + Marriage broker
R	Uzbekistan*	33	5y	University	42	Middle school	2	Imsil-gun	Marriage immigrant introduction
S	Uzbekistan*	34	2y 2m	University	36	High school	1	Sunchang-gun	Township council + Marriage broker

* All the women from Uzbekistan are Koryoin.

** The length of stay is based on data from the end of July 2005.

6. Family Life, Conflicts, and Adaptations of Marriage Immigrant Women

All the marriage immigrant women who resided in the research area except the Japanese women admitted that the economic gain for themselves or their family in their home country was an important factor in deciding to get married.⁶ One woman said that her fondness for Korea, especially the “Korean Wave”⁷ had an influence on her decision to marry a Korean man and move to Korea (Case M), but it was noted during the interview process that her underlying need for economic improvement was a motivator for the marriage. This case demonstrates that Korean popular culture that spread through the Korean Wave created an unrealistically ideal image of Korean society for some Asian women who imagined a Korea which differed from reality. Many of the marriage immigrant women who responded to the interview said that they felt worried after realizing that their husband and in-law family’s economic status was worse than they thought before marriage and that the possibility of them finding work in Korea was low.

Japanese women had a tendency to rely on religion to deal with unsatisfactory life conditions in Korea. They often believed that they could achieve salvation in a family unit by marrying a Korean man and forming a “true family.” For them achieving this goal is a ministry of the Unification Church. However, these women revealed their honest thoughts about the popularity of the Korean Wave among Japanese women when they commented, for example, about the possibility that others might marry Korean men: “They will likely suffer a lot if they get married into a family in Korea. Yonsama?⁸ What are you talking about? Try getting married and move here and see what it is really like.” (Case E)

6 For discussions of the motivations and processes of migration through international marriage, see Seol Donghun *et al.* 2005; Yi Hyegyong 2005b.

7 (Editor’s note) Korean Wave refers to the global spread and popularity of Korean popular culture, K-pop, and K-dramas in particular.

8 (Editor’s note) Yonsama is a nickname given by Japanese fans to the Korean actor Bae Yong-jun, who became popular in Japan in the wake of the Korean-Wave television drama *Winter Sonata*.

1) *Frustration upon Arrival in Korea*

Most of the marriage immigrants who agreed to be interviewed had not had accurate information about Korean society or their husbands before their marriage. Upon their arrival, many were shocked not only by the financial status of their husbands but also by the living environment and lifestyle in Korea's rural area. According to her husband, Case Q from Uzbekistan had later (6-7 months after she arrived) told her husband her first impression in the following words: "When we arrived in Jeongeup, the sun had already set and when we looked around, we saw unpaved roads, and upon arriving in Sunchang-gun where our husbands lived, we thought it was so deep in the mountains. The other Koryoin⁹ women who came with me were uneasy and wondered if we were all getting sold" (as in human trafficking). Women who had college education especially were shocked. Case S, who graduated from a university in Uzbekistan and worked for a telephone company, learned about Korea through large Korean companies such as Samsung or Daewoo that had entered Uzbekistan. However, her image of Korea that was based on its advanced technology and cutting-edge products was destroyed when she arrived at her new family's house. Her first impression was "It is too dirty." During our interview, S made eye gestures at the mess her husband and father-in-law had just made; they had just come back from working in the fields and she pointed at children's clothes on the floor leading to the kitchen where we, the researchers, were sitting. S, who had lived in the city and worked in the office of a phone company, felt the agricultural lifestyle of her parents-in-law and husband was "messy and dirty." In a few cases, immigrant women had no particular complaints about their husband or in-law family's financial status or standard of living. For example, Case I was living a relatively satisfactory life. Her husband ran a rather large farm business renting out his farmland. He also built a new house for the family to live in before the marriage, and she could visit her family in her home country. Case M said that even though life was different from what she saw on television, in Korea they had better agricultural machines than in

⁹ (Editor's note) Koryoin refers to ethnic Koreans in the post-Soviet states. They are descendants of Koreans who had been deported from Far East to Central Asia in 1937 by the Stalin regime. It is inferred here that the Uzbek woman Q is a Koryoin and came together with other Koryoin women as marriage immigrants.

Vietnam and life was more comfortable in comparison. However, these women meant that their life in Korea was comparatively better than the one they had in their home countries. As they became accustomed to Korean society, they expressed frustration over the great disparities in living standards between urban and rural areas in Korea.

2) *Struggles and Adapting with Food and Housing Conditions*

Problems related to differences in food and housing conditions are commonly shared by immigrant women during their adaptation process to Korean society. Korean-Chinese women, who are regarded as the most familiar with Korean culture and lifestyle, say that it is hard even for them. A Korean-Chinese woman (Case A) says, even though there are many similar dishes that also exist in her culture, such as kimchi, she struggled with the differences in cooking styles. The Korean-Chinese community adopted a lot of Chinese cooking methods and Korean-Chinese women found it difficult to get used to Korea's low-fat cooking style and the lack of lard. Not using ingredients such as coriander also made Korean-Chinese women miss their home food. A Chinese woman (Case D) struggled because she was unfamiliar with Korean food and there were many Korean dishes she had never tried before such as *cheonggukjang* (fermented soybean soup) or raw octopus.

Japanese women have a relatively good chance of finding their home country's food in Korea, but they try to hide their Japaneseness in rural areas. Case E said she struggled with the spiciness of garlic, and she even suffered from eating *namul* (seasoned vegetables) because of the garlic smell. She was also not used to the Korean rural habit of eating the same dishes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. When it is too hard, she makes simple Japanese food for herself such as udon or tonkatsu.

A Mongolian woman (Case O) talks about how all the new food surprised her. She had never tried anything like it in Mongolia, especially the seafood. O said when she first saw a crab, it looked like a bug and it was too disgusting for her to eat. She found most of the seafood difficult to eat because she had never eaten it before. She misses the dairy products in Mongolia such as milk tea, and she cannot understand why her husband or mother-in-law does not drink milk. Her husband says, "We could not drink milk because we were always poor... a hillbilly could not have milk." And he adds that the Mongolian food his wife sometimes tries to cook is

“hard to eat because of the smell of milk”; even the Korean food she cooks is “mixed with Mongolian style” and also hard to eat.

Among the women from Southeast Asian countries, one Thai woman (Case L) said she did not have a hard time with the spiciness of Korean food because she was already used to eating spicy food. L says spiciness was not a problem but she did not think Korean food was tasty. Her husband commented regarding his wife’s cooking:

She uses cooking oil in everything, every time she cooks. All the dishes from her country contain oil. When she first came to my house, she used up five bottles of cooking oil per month. I wondered why she used so much oil and I realized it was because she cooks a lot of deep-fried food and fried food. Anyway, she is good at cooking fried food. She must be better at cooking it than Koreans.

Filipino women also struggle with the spiciness. They also cook a lot of deep-fried fish or chicken and their husbands and family are baffled by it as in L’s case.

Regarding food adaptation, the husbands and mothers-in-law of immigrant women stick to the opinion that the wives’ home country dishes “do not taste good” or “it isn’t a food that is worth eating.” They are also not happy when marriage immigrant women cook their home country’s food, and they say that immigrant women should adapt to Korean food and be able to cook Korean food as soon as possible. Mongolian and Filipino food products can be ordered from Seoul via post, but the families of the foreign wives did not feel the need to purchase these items, which would entail spending “a lot of money on food that is not worth eating and tastes bad.” Among the foreign wives interviewed in Jeonnam area, there was a mother-in-law who threw away Filipino food her daughter-in-law cooked (Yun Hyeongsuk 2005: 319). Couples whose marriage is stable and who are not living with parents are more likely to eat the immigrant women’s home country food. Case P who has been married for more than 7 years, orders lamb and other items from Mongolian food vendors in the Dongdaemun market in Seoul and cooks food from her home country.

Because many husbands and families of immigrant women insist on eating only Korean food, immigrant women learn to cook Korean food from their mothers-in-law or neighbors. In most cases communication is difficult, so they learn to season correctly through observation and the Korean food cooking skills of the immigrant women vary. In cases where

an immigrant woman lives with her mother-in-law or other in-law family housewives, she will learn to cook Korean food relatively quickly, but if she lives with only her husband and children she has to learn to cook Korean food through other housewives in the neighborhood. The most difficult part of learning to cook through observation is adjusting the seasoning correctly. In many cases the final tasting is done by mothers-in-law or husbands.

A Filipino woman (Case J) lives with her husband and child, and she does not have a mother-in-law or any other female relatives who can teach her how to cook Korean food. Her husband taught her how to cook by tasting the food next to her while she cooked. She also tried to copy restaurant food at home and that is how she learned to cook Korean food. J tried to learn to cook the food her husband likes. In the summer she cooks *bosintang* (dog meat soup), a food her husband likes, even though the dish is repugnant to her. When J cooks *bosintang*, she cannot try the soup even if it is only for tasting, so she gets her husband's help. J also learned to make kimchi from a housewife neighbor and she sometimes sends kimchi she made to her husband's daughter from his previous marriage, who is herself married and lives in Seoul. J is a case of someone who has adapted well, which can be seen from her even being able to make food for ancestral rites. However, Korean food is still a burden to J. She has given up on cooking her home country's food because her husband does not like it.

Adaptation to food is not merely about knowing the cooking methods, but the husbands and in-law families say that as long as foreign wives know how to cook Korean food, that is all that is needed. A Thai woman L's experience is worth noting as a case that demonstrates how complicated and subtle the process of food adaptation is. L's husband explained the process of his wife's adaptation to Korean food. "At first, she said even the spicy chili is not spicy. It's because Thai food too can be spicy. But now I can see that she has adapted to Korean food, because she cannot eat spicy food. Now she says spicy Korean food is spicy." L was used to the spiciness of Thai food and she liked it, and at first, she could easily eat spicy Korean food. However, she eventually realized that even though both Thai food and Korean food can be spicy, Korean food is differently spiced from Thai food and this is when she actually understood the spiciness of Korean food. This example shows how food adaptation is a subtle and complex process.

Like food, residence is another area of life to which immigrant women

have to adapt. Immigrant women who have used chairs and beds all their life, struggle with the lack of those items in rural houses in Korea. For immigrant women who live in a newly built or refurbished house the problem is less serious. In the cases of immigrant women who live in old-fashioned houses, however, their biggest wish is often to fix their kitchen or house. A Mongolian woman P purchased low cost furniture including a sofa and a bed because “it was so hard to live on the floor.”

3) Adaptation and Conflict in Family and Kinship Life

Immigrant women have their most serious conflicts and adjustment issues within their family life. Media report on extreme cases of abuse by husbands or mothers-in-law, but in many cases, immigrant women overcome the conflicts they have with their in-law family or husbands in various ways. It is worth pointing out that the extreme cases reported in the media do not paint the whole picture.

Here I look at the different aspects of conflict and adaptation marriage immigrant women deal with. In the research area, 11 out of 19 international couples were living with their husband’s parents. Only one husband out of the 11 cases was the eldest son in his family. The rest of the husbands who lived with their parents had been living with them since before the marriage and had been getting help from their parents or they used to live in the city during their youth and had returned to their hometown. The couples who were not living with their husband’s parents lived on their own because the parents had died or were living with their eldest son in a nearby area. Most of the husbands studied in this research who were not the eldest son in their family and still lived with their parents were men who could not afford to get married on their own and received help from their parents in paying for the marriage to a foreign woman.

Mother-in-Law and Daughter-in-law Conflict

The most difficult part of marriage for marriage immigrant women is conflict with their mothers-in-law. Problems with mothers-in-law are the biggest cause of conflict for Korean housewives too. Counseling agents who arrange international marriages say that mothers-in-law do understand the special situation of their foreign daughters-in-law, who moved to a place where the language and culture are completely different. In-law conflicts, however, are exacerbated not only because the mothers-

in-law demand or expect the same things from their foreign daughters-in-law as they would from Korean daughters-in-law¹⁰; but also because mothers-in-law may treat the immigrant women as children and fail to give a new wife the right to be in charge of the household finances as would be the responsibility for a Korean wife. Mothers-in-law not uncommonly express prejudice against marriage immigrant women such as harboring suspicions that the foreign wife may become a “runaway daughter-in-law.”

Conflicts Based on Cultural Differences. In-law parents have little knowledge about their daughter-in-law’s home country or culture. Mothers-in-law in urban areas sometimes join in the process of selecting their son’s foreign bride. Among the international couples we have interviewed in urban areas, there were cases where mothers-in-law accompanied their sons on the marriage arrangement trips abroad or attended meetings with international marriage brokers.¹¹ Many males in urban areas who missed the ideal timing for marriage were the ones who were not able to stand on their own feet and they received help from their parents or siblings. In these cases, parental influence is strong during the process of selecting a spouse. However, among the parents-in-law in this research area, there were no cases where parents accompanied their sons on the marriage arrangement trips or attended the marriage arrangement events that can directly influence the process of spouse selection for their sons. In Case K, the man got married to a foreign woman through the Unification Church, and the marriage arrangements took place in Korea. Although his mother accompanied him to Jiri Mountain where group blind dates took place, she could not enter the actual site.

The mothers-in-law in the study’s subject families had little knowledge about their daughter-in-law’s country or culture. Most of their knowledge about their daughter-in-law’s countries came from television shows about overseas travel or foreign culture. Each of the mothers-in-law in the survey

¹⁰ The chief of Jupiter International Marriage Cultural Center. Interviewed on January 24, 2005.

¹¹ I have interviewed and researched marriage immigrant women in urban areas including Seoul, Busan, and Chuncheon. Previous studies on migrant women in urban areas are subjects for comparison for analysis of conflicts and adaptation of marriage immigrant women in rural areas (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi, Han Geonsu *et al.* 2005).

described the country of her daughter-in-law as a “poor country” or “a country with food shortages” and they had little interest in the lifestyle or culture of those countries. According to them, the fact that their daughters-in-law came from a country poorer than “us” diminishes the cultural value of their countries, and therefore, they saw no need to be interested.

Mothers-in-law in urban areas who join the marriage arrangement trips to Philippines or Vietnam see the economically backward environment of these countries. Their experiences reinforce their prejudice against the home country and culture of their foreign daughters-in-law. Many marriage immigrant women are displeased with the disrespectful comments of their in-law parents about their home countries (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu 2005).

In the case of Korean-Chinese women or Koryoin Uzbek women, they are not physically different from Koreans in Korea. Their Korean in-laws thus tend to believe and expect that their home country’s culture must be the same as in Korea. For example, one of the frequent complaints that husbands and mothers-in-law have against Koryoin Uzbek wives is that those women “behave as they please.” This complaint reflects the difference in the cultural value given to individuality.

Generally, husbands and in-law family members of marriage immigrant women claim that they are lacking in “knowing and doing things sensibly [without being told every time or explicitly],” which is characteristically expected of Korean women. A Mongolian woman O’s husband claims that his wife’s sluggish behavior comes from cultural differences. He also claims that his wife speaks her mind without trying to read the face of her mother-in-law or other people because of cultural differences.

Communication is the biggest problem and there are lots of cultural differences related to it. In Korea ... (hesitates before continuing to speak), we do things in a fast manner, and she also does things rather quickly, but in the morning, she kind of acts in a way she pleases. It may be her self-expression, but a Korean person will try to read the face of her mother-in-law if she lives with her mother-in-law, but my wife is not like that at all. In some ways, one could say that is a positive trait ... We cannot say what we want to say to our father but she does. Koreans cannot say what they want to say to others like “you are bad,” but her way of communication is different. (O’s husband, 34 years old)

A Japanese woman (Case E)’s husband feels that his wife does not care

for his mother enough. "My mother used to be healthy, then suddenly she got a little bit sick, and as daughter-in-law, she should feel worried and maybe take her to the hospital to get medicine for her, but my wife does not think like that. She should try to be more caring," but he says "she is not capable of having those kinds of thoughts." His wife E said that the difficulties for her in understanding Korean culture were that she could not judge when she was supposed to speak and when she was supposed to silently show care through behavior. This arises from the frequently mentioned feature of Korean culture, its "high-context" characteristic. She felt it was difficult for her to interpret and judge the situations based on the context without having certain standards or rules to follow. At first E thought that she should explain each thing to the elders and ask their opinion rather than not saying anything but seeing other Korean people, who do not say what they need to say, she felt confused. One time she even wanted to request something from her mother-in-law, but thought she should refrain, like other people. However, other Korean women sometimes spoke freely to elders, and in some cases, they did not say anything, and it seemed like everyone was acting appropriately. E said that other Korean women can preemptively act without being told by the elders: "I cannot foresee things like that, really, I think Korean women are so great. I envy them. It would be so nice if I could behave like them."¹²

From her own perspective, E pointed out the issue of privacy as a major cultural difference she had experienced: "There is no distance." She meant that she could not have privacy as she wanted. E was shocked to see that when her husband's friends and family came to visit, they behaved as if they were in their own house.

In Korea, when a husband's friends come they don't hesitate to stay until midnight, 1 a.m., 2 a.m. In Japan, people would try to read other people's face and leave rather early. [And] when my husband's sister comes to our house, she cleans. At first I really could not understand that, and I was shocked, I really had a great shock. It is considered a good thing to do in Korea, but to us it looks like I am someone who doesn't clean. I asked another Japanese housewife about it and she said everyone gets shocked at first... The first time my husband's sister came here and cleaned the house and interfered with our business by asking things like why is this here, it

¹² A study showed that foreign migrant laborers experience difficulties in adapting to Korea's "high-context culture" (Yu Myeonggi 1997: 92). This can be applied to the cases of immigrant women in international marriages (Yun Hyeongsuk 2005: 320).

shocked me. "What, what is going on?" I was stressed. (E, Japanese, 37 years old)

On the other hand, E's husband complained about his wife who puts distance between herself and relatives or close neighbors: "When my siblings come for a visit, she barely greets them and instead goes to her room to do her things... she doesn't stay with us much."

Immigrant women also could not understand the relationship Korean men have with their mothers very well. When Korean men do something for their mothers as an expression of filial piety and consideration some of their foreign wives considered them "mama's boys." E stated that she could not understand her husband who, without even letting her know, gave his mother a gift which E herself had put her heart into selecting and sent from Japan for him.

I sent my husband clothes before as a gift and he gave one piece of clothing to his mother. At first I really could not understand that... How could you give a gift from your girlfriend to your mother? This man is a mama's boy. We fought a lot because of it. (E, Japanese, 37 years old)

Marriage immigrant women were critical of their Korean husbands who they saw as excessively subordinate to their mothers both emotionally and in their daily life. It could be a sign of their filial piety. But among the men who have foreign wives, there were many cases where these men were very dependent on their parents, especially the mother. One activist who has been counseling marriage immigrant women stated that some husbands tell their mothers about even small details of their marriage such as marital conflicts, private problems, and even problems related to sex. One foreign woman said she could not understand at all how her husband made his mother nag at her about not sleeping with her son.¹³

Mothers-in-law are unhappy with the sluggish behaviors of their daughters-in-law and they say their daughters-in-law ignore them. Daughters-in-law say they often cannot understand what their mothers-in-law are talking about and that it is even harder to understand because they yell in a scary voice. Mothers-in-law refuse to believe that their daughters-in-law don't comprehend Korean. Mothers-in-law do not

¹³ Interview with Yi Ingyeong, Director of Eoullim, Migrant Women and Multicultural Family Center, in Busan, on June 7, 2005.

understand how difficult it is to learn a foreign language, and when they see their daughters-in-law responding correctly to a situation by understanding nonverbal cues, they assume that their daughters-in-law fully understand the Korean language. Most mothers-in-law I met during the field research claimed that their daughters-in-law could understand the language completely after about one year and that there was no problem whatsoever. However, daughters-in-law struggle because they still have problems with understanding Korean. In such circumstances, mothers-in-law yell louder, thinking that their daughters-in-law are disrespecting them by not responding or not doing what they were ordered to do even though they understand everything. Daughters-in-law at times try to avoid their yelling mothers-in-law because they are afraid of them.

Conflict Centered on Distrust with Home Finances and Infantilization of the Spouse. Constantly being “treated like a child” and not being trusted with the finances causes conflicts for married immigrant women. When foreign wives first move to Korea after getting married, their language skills are poor and they are unfamiliar with many things, therefore, their husbands or in-law parents need to help them with every matter as if they were raising a “little child.” Immigrant women have complaints about this kind of treatment continuing even 4-5 years after getting married. They struggle with the fact that even though they are the ones who do most of the housework, finances of the house are completely taken care of by their husbands or mothers-in-law. The husband of a Mongolian woman (Case O) says that his wife has gotten angry because she was treated like a child by the neighbors.

Since she is always in the neighborhood, she tried showing up to the local women’s association and one time at night, she came back home fuming with anger. I asked her, why are you coming home like that? And she said, neighbors had asked her because she is a foreigner, “Do you know how to get to your house?” She said to me, “Am I a child? I can find my house, just because I am a foreigner, I would not be able to do it?” She had a lot of similar experiences. She would see Korean people doing something and come home and she says she could do it too. (O’s husband, 34 years old)

Marriage immigrant women not only get treated like children by their neighbors but they often have little real power in household matters. In most cases, mothers-in-law or husbands go to the markets and even if

immigrant women join in, they are not in charge of the shopping and need to ask for money to purchase products each time. A Mongolian woman P used to run a business in Mongolia. After moving to Korea she started selling Mongolian items in Korea and Korean items in Mongolia. She had lots of experience in the Mongolian market near Dongdaemun Market. However, after she got married and moved to Imsil-gun, she could not even buy side dishes by herself.

When we go to a market, my mother-in-law walks in front and she buys everything. (She was speaking in Korean language but during this part she shortly explained to the interpreter in Russian. "I only get to carry the bags.") [When I say to my husband] give me money to buy food for the month, my husband does not give money, even 10 won, [for my own spending]. He gave me 14,000 won. What did I buy with 14,000 won? I bought 3,000 won potatoes. 1,000 won carrots. 3,000 won cucumbers and 3,000 won tomatoes. And after that, my husband bought alcoholic beverages. Just that. 14,000 won. Stress. He's very stingy. (P, Mongolian, 43 years old)

If an immigrant woman only recently moved to Korea or has a young child and cannot go outside, or does not have a kind mother-in-law or has no mother-in-law, she has to rely on her husband even for buying underwear or menstrual supplies.

Yet those immigrant women who were frustrated with their mothers-in-law for not trusting them with the finances of the house usually did not wish to be completely in charge of the household finances. They believed that it would be too difficult for them if they have to take care of everything. They merely wanted to have more independence for themselves.

[I talked to my husband about me running the household] and he then asked, who is gonna pay the electricity bill, water bill, and the rest. Since he spoke like that, I ... [wasn't confident] so I said it's ok then. I sometimes think. I am kind of not confident. I thought it would be easier to leave everything to my husband. (E, Japanese, 27 years old)

Husbands felt anxious about handing over financial control to their wives. E's husband said that even though he did not think she was going to steal his money he could not trust her to be frugal.

I could not let her be in charge of my bank account or manage the bills. I cannot trust her with that. She does not know how to run a household. For

example, if I gave her 10 million won of my savings, she has to manage it well and increase the saved amount at least a little bit, spend less, one should have such concerns. But she is not like that, she buys everything she needs, she buys everything she wants, she is like that. When she asks me for money or says she needs to buy something, I would sometimes go out and buy it. (E's husband, 37 years old)

Generally, husbands with Japanese wives who usually come from families with good economic backgrounds, did not worry that their wives were going to steal their money. However, husbands and parents-in-law of women who have a poor family were reluctant to give them the rights to manage the household.

“Treating them like a child” became a custom for the practical reason of protecting women who recently immigrated, but it needs to be in balance with how well foreign women have adapted to Korean society. Overprotection and underestimation of marriage immigrant women make them intimidated. These attitudes also negatively influence the pride and emotions of women and causes instability in their marriages.

“Runaway Daughter-in-Law”: Prejudice and Oppression of Foreign Daughters-in-Law. Prejudice against and oppression of marriage immigrant women become causes of conflict in in-law relationships. In particular, worries that mothers-in-law have about the marriage immigrant women running away play a big part. International marriages break either through a formal divorce process or when a foreign wife secretly “runs away.” Those who have no relatives in Korea, like one Koryoin Uzbek woman, tend to go through the court process and return to their home country. But in the case of Korean-Chinese women, who often have relatives in Korea, they tend to “run away.”¹⁴ Experiences and rumors about the foreign women who have disappeared in the research area or in its surrounding areas create concerns for many mothers-in-law and husbands.

A mother-in-law of a Thai woman, Case K, was especially anxious because her son's health was not good.

I am worried that we will do something wrong and she will leave. It has not happened over here yet but I heard that someone ran away in Jeonju. She had

¹⁴ (Editor's note) It is inferred that those who have relatives in Korea tend to “run away” and stay with their relatives, not to risk their residence status in Korea while leaving their marriage.

a kid and ran away with the kid. It depends on how well-off the family is. One could not live in a poor family with unsatisfactory family conditions. Among the people the church [the Unification Church] arranges are some ill people, or people with terrible drinking habits. Foreigners cannot live with these kinds of people, how can they? There is a woman who married and moved here, and her husband is very ill and has had surgery on three parts of his body. I heard he is in hospital now. Those wives have a hard time after moving here. They should not provide women to those people. They just provided a foreign woman to him without any consideration. People with those kinds of problems are like that. (K's mother in law)

The prejudices against “runaway” daughters-in-law are not only based on real life cases but also influenced by the reports on television and various other media. Press reports about women who run away make mothers-in-law anxious. It even makes the town's seniors who do not have foreign daughters-in-law in the family, suspicious that foreign daughters-in-law could run away at any time. These anxious feelings are expressed through monitoring and oppression of daughters-in-law. Among the cases that turned down a meeting or even a phone call with us (researchers) is one such case. In some cases, although an interview was allowed and researchers were permitted to visit the houses, mothers-in-law were worried about the contents of the interview with the daughter-in-law. A Vietnamese woman (Case N)'s husband had been married to a Korean-Chinese woman who had “run away.” He again found a foreign wife, this time, from Vietnam. The mother-in-law in this family monitored her daughter-in-law intensely, probably because of her ex-daughter-in-law who had run away. She was even listening outside the window to the conversation her daughter-in-law was having with a researcher and a research assistant, who was a female graduate school student.

A mothers-in-law's vague anxiety is sometimes expressed through verbal violence toward their foreign daughters-in-law. A Chinese-Korean woman (Case A) heard not only her mother-in-law but the old women in the village saying bad things about her.

The old women in the village sit around together and say bad things about their daughters-in-law. (Did you hear it yourself?) Yes, I heard it many times. They would say bad things about me even right in front of me. They do it while I am right there. (What kind of bad things did they say?) They say things like, I came to Korea and there is nothing to do for me so I just sit around at home and pamper myself, and they said compared to me who is doing nothing at home and just asking for money, the wife of my husband's

second oldest brother works. They say she is so much better and more likable because she goes to work and earns money. And about family inheritance, they speak as if I am greedy and want it, they threaten me by saying that they are going to do this and that if I were to run away. (Laughs) (Are women here nervous about their daughters-in-law's running away?) Yes, they say they are worried that I might run away. One time I bought flight tickets to travel to China. I was sick, so I decided I was going to go to China. Then my mother-in-law came to me and said she was going to die right now if I go to China, so my plane tickets ... I couldn't go. (She thought you would leave for good?) Yes. Because I was packing. And I couldn't go." (A, Chinese-Korean, 23 years old)

This kind of prejudice deepens and turns into endless suspicion about the commitment of the foreign women regarding their marriages. Korean in-law women suspect that the reason the foreign women married their sons or brothers are not based on innocent intentions like love or building a family but based on their intention of solving economic problems their family have back in their poor home country. They worry that the women will "run away" and get a job to earn money when they get the opportunity. A migrant woman A says her mother-in-law started to monitor and nag her much less "when my stomach got big when I had been pregnant for five to six months." She said that the hardest thing for her was to have "a life like in a prison, feeling trapped."

Among our research participants, there were couples who moved out from the husband's parents' house because of the conflicts between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Case Q, an Uzbek woman of Korean descent, moved out from her in-law parents' house because she had conflicts with her mother-in-law who nagged her a lot about "wasting water when washing dishes and taking a shower."

Extreme cases of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts have become known to the public through the counseling cases of NGOs. Abuse of foreign women by their husbands and mothers-in-law is often criticized as the cause of the breakdown of international marriages. However, participants of this study show that the immigrant women adapt to the conflict with their mothers-in-law in many different ways. Some immigrant women are well aware that their husbands could not marry a Korean woman and they use this fact strategically to fight against their husbands and mothers-in-law. They resisted their mothers-in-law by hinting they could move out of their mother-in-law's house or indirectly expressing their intentions of divorcing their husbands. However, not all

mothers-in-law have conflict with their foreign daughters-in-law. Among the mothers-in-law we met in the research area, there were some who were taking good care of their daughters-in-law. They were aware that their foreign daughters-in-law married their sons who were not able to get married until their 40s, and some thought that their son was “a little bit slow.” Mothers-in-law in these cases make an effort to take good care of their daughters-in-law rather than trying to be served by them.

Conflicts with Husbands and Adapting

The core of family life for marriage immigrant women is their relationship with their husbands. The marriage dissatisfaction level of international couples is similar to that of Korean couples: 7.1 percent for international couples and 8.4 percent for Korean couples. However, the ratio of very satisfied couples is higher among international couples than among Korean couples. The ratio of respondents indicating a medium satisfaction level was higher among Korean couples (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu 2005: 116-117). These statistics show that many international couples are adapting to each other even if they experience marital conflict. It is possible, however, that their problems are not easily revealed through surveys, given the difficulties that marriage immigrant women have with communicating their opinions.

It is challenging for immigrant women to form an intimate relationship with their husbands. They decide to get married after only a short blind date and then move to an unfamiliar country after several months of preparation procedures. That is, most of the international marriage couples start their marriage without any experience of an emotional or personal relationship with their partner. Couples not only have to form intimacy in this circumstance, but they also have to overcome various obstacles such as differences in language, culture, educational level, and age.

The language barrier is a fundamental obstacle to understanding each other and forming an emotional bond in the international couple. Case R, a Koryoin Uzbek woman, said that she had been learning Korean for around two years, but still she could not talk about her deepest thoughts because she only knows simple expressions to use in daily life. She said that her husband does not try to learn Russian. During our research, a women's agrarian committee in the study area held their first Korean language class for foreign housewives. Until then, learning the Korean language was a burden completely left to the foreign wives and their families. Most

Korean husbands leave the burden of learning the language to their foreign wives. Very few husbands indicated in the survey that they were willing to learn their wife's language. The wives attempted to learn the Korean language through a variety of methods, most of which were through television. The only textbooks they had were books teaching simple conversation for tourists and pocket dictionaries. They learned the language simply by watching television all day. They learned a few simple words from family members.

The roles of husbands in the language learning process were varied, depending on their personal characters. Most husbands try to teach Korean to their wives at some point and then they give up. However, Case J's husband was an exception. He kindly supported his wife's study for a long time. He taught her by repeating the same expressions many times and by explaining the meanings of words over and over. When the marriage immigrant women cannot get help from their husbands or family, sometimes they learn the Korean language from their neighbors. Case L went to her village's employment promotion project because of economic difficulties she was having shortly after immigrating to Korea, and the experience helped her greatly with her Korean language study. In most cases other than these individual cases, couples were not able to communicate well enough to develop intimacy. As long as the foreign women could "guess" from context what their husbands wanted, and did that, the husbands claimed that their foreign wives did not have a problem with communication and that any language problems will naturally resolve as time passes.

Age differences provide another obstruction to forming intimacy. The average age gap of the couples in our research area was 11 years, and Vietnamese women were among the youngest. Age differences often make it difficult for husbands to understand their younger wives' preferences and desires. The husband of Case O says that he had a fight with his wife who is younger by 9 years, because she was pregnant and tried to travel to Chungcheongnam-do with her friends during the rainy season in Korea. "Because she is young, we have conflicts because of those things. She tries to do whatever she wants to do." The husband of Case Q is 15 years older than his wife, and his personal preferences are very different than those of his wife. The 22-year-old wife says she changed all her husband's clothes when she got married. To change his look to a younger style, she bought a pair of blue jeans and made him wear them and she also dyed his hair. She

grew up in the city and she was used to going to clubs at night, drinking. She spent her days before marriage like other young people in urban areas. When she got married and moved to Korea, life in the countryside was hard for her so she tried to change her husband's general style. Q had been to the police station with her husband because she hit him during a fight that arose from her conflict with her mother-in-law, and she had gone to Seoul and stayed there for 2-3 days without telling anyone. She finally returned because she pitied her husband, and now she is raising her child, trying to live in peace with her husband.

A Koryoin Uzbek woman who interpreted interviews with other Koryoin Uzbek women for our research told the researchers about her friends who are married to Korean men and are mending their differences with their husbands. Seven of her alumni from the department of Korean language studies in an Uzbek university married Korean men. The wives focused on changing their husbands, who were older and had a lower educational level than they did, so the husbands would fit the wives' standards. Her friends did not like the way their husbands spoke or behaved so they corrected their speech or behavior by saying, "people with little education act or speak like that." They changed their husband's appearances and fashion style as well. However, as time passed, they realized that their husbands all started to look like Uzbek men of Korean descent (Uzbek Koryoin men). In the beginning, these women believed that their marital conflicts were caused by a difference in education and the age gap, but they finally realized that the conflicts originated more from the cultural differences between Korea and the Korean-Uzbek community.

Cultural differences include views on how an ideal marital relationship should be. For Filipino women, it is especially important in marriage to have a romantic relationship and express feelings and affection. Previous studies on Filipino women have frequently discussed the Filipino women's romantic view of love and the importance of emotional bonds in marriage for them (Kim Hyeonmi 2004; Baek Jehui 2000; Seol Donghui, Kim Hyeonmi, Han Geonsu *et al.* 2003; Yun Hyeongsuk 2004, 2005). One Filipino woman, whom I interviewed in a study of marriage immigrant women in an urban area (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu 2005), said she married her husband after a period of dating and she has a good relationship with her husband and his family. However, her husband stopped expressing affection after marriage and it is frustrating for her. She stressed that the most important thing in marriage is love. "Giving me

kisses sometimes and showing me attention by speaking to me in certain ways without being shy around other people, making me feel loved, these things are normal in marriage in the Philippines” (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu 2005: 148-150). Filipino women whom we met in the research areas also had a strong desire to form an intimate relationship with their husbands.

Relations with In-laws

Marriage immigrant women often have difficulties being incorporated into their family's network beyond their husbands' nuclear family. In rural areas, unless there are many relatives who live close by, there is no interaction between the family members other than during special holidays. During holidays immigrant women tend to act in a passive way, as there are not many roles they can fulfill during the holiday period. There were also very few marriage immigrant women who participated in ceremonial occasions with relatives by themselves. Most people from rural areas hold their weddings in cities, and there are not many opportunities for foreign wives to attend ceremonial events without their husbands. Even if they did, after the first or second time, they usually stop going to these events by themselves. A Filipino woman, Case J, was reluctant to go by herself to a place where Korean people were gathering, because she was embarrassed by all the attention people showed her. Her relatives who found out that she married into their family had told her to come to family ceremonial occasions, so she attended a few times without her husband, but she does not do it anymore. She said she does not go anymore because she feels awkward seeing her neighbors or relatives dancing and singing on a tour bus rented by the town.

In general, immigrant women were not able to establish close relationships with their husband's relatives in their daily lives even though they are included in their husband's family network. In my previous research (Seol Donghun, Kim Hyeonmi and Han Geonsu 2005), I noticed that marriage immigrant women in urban areas do not meet their relatives often either, except during special holidays. Many low-income, urban international couples tended not to interact with the husband's siblings when the husband's parents were both dead.

4) *Childrearing*

It appeared that in matters of child rearing, immigrant women generally agreed with their husbands or parents-in-law, as they were worried that their children might be slow in their intellectual growth or language development if exposed to different languages. The language researchers who worked with us noticed that even when the foreign wives were soothing their children they never used their own language. In interviews, immigrant women said that they would not use English or their mother tongues until their children became proficient in Korean. They were afraid of hearing from their friends or neighbors that “Your child is slow at learning to speak.” Their anxiety was that they might ruin their child’s future. Most husbands and parents-in-law appeared not to be passionate about teaching the mother’s native language to their children. Some Filipino women’s husbands said that they wanted to teach English to their children after they entered school. It seemed that in many cases people did not think it would be necessary to teach them the native language of the foreign mother if it is not English.

Filipino woman J uses only Korean in raising her son and does not use English. She plans to teach English to her son when his Korean becomes perfect. However, she is planning to educate her 4-year old son in the Philippines in the future because her husband is quite old (59 years old) by her standards. J seemed to be skeptical about the possibility of settling in Korea by herself when her husband dies. Her husband’s children are all grown up and her husband’s economic status is also poor. She expressed her concern by saying that she wants her son to go to college in the Philippines where tuition is cheaper.

7. Current Status of International Marriages and Multiculturalism in Korea

International marriage is a social phenomenon that is on the increase both in urban and rural areas. Marginalized males in Korea’s marriage market choose international marriage in order to form a family. Also there is an increasing number of Korean men who seek foreign women for remarriage. Remarriages among international marriages are increasing every year; they were at 32.3 percent in 2001 and reached 45.3 percent in 2004 (Korean

National Statistics Office 2005). As international marriage became a business, a number of international marriage brokers sprang up, and they are further promoting international marriages in Korean society.¹⁵

Despite the flourishing of international marriages, families of international couples and marriage immigrant women have to overcome cultural differences and language issues entirely by themselves and find ways to deal with conflicts and adaptation issues without having support from the government or society. This study reveals that while marriage immigrant women go through the difficult process of cultural learning and adaptation in their daily lives without having systematic explanations or guidance, Korean husbands and in-law families demand in a unilateral way that immigrant women assimilate to Korean culture quickly. Also, husbands and in-law families lack an understanding of cultural differences, so they attribute behaviors or mistakes that are mostly caused by cultural differences to the immigrant wives' personal character. This misunderstanding creates conflicts within the family and within couples. This leads us to recognize the need for systematic research about international marriage families' and couples' cultural learning, conflict, and adaptation. Ethnographic research in particular, about their cultural learning, conflict, and adaptation can provide an important frame for an analysis of the changes in Korean culture and society.

We as a society need to help married immigrant women overcome culture shock and cultural differences so that they become able to take a role in Korean society with their own contributions. Also, children who are born and grow up in these families should be able to learn different cultures through their mothers and contribute to enriching and diversifying Korean culture.

¹⁵ The marriage broker business currently operates on a voluntary registration system, the accurate size of the broker business being unknown. As of November 2005, I have verified 2,098 phone numbers of brokers by combining the information in the Korean phone book, the internet phone book, and the marriage broker business association's member address book excluding duplicated companies and companies that did not register their office address. As a result, 892 companies had been confirmed to be operating (Han Geonsu and Seol Donghun 2005: 7-8).

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