

A Tale of a Global Family: Shifts and Connections among Different Streams of Marriage Migrations in Asia

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Abstract

Transnational marriage migration is an important global phenomenon, yet each marriage remains an intimate, personal, and life-shaping event. This article traces the life of a family in rural northeast China that has developed global connections through marriage. In particular, it focuses on the story of a Chinese husband and his Vietnamese wife, which provides insight into the expansion of marriage migrations to and from China over the last decade. The article analyzes how different streams of marriage migrations are linked, specifically the flow of wives from China to Japan and South Korea, and from Vietnam to Taiwan, South Korea, and China. These flows are interconnected in many ways, including through personal networks, brokerage, remittances, and flows of information. Such interconnections in turn exemplify how apparently independent and unrelated migration flows may present multilayered connections of migration factors, diversification, and increasing complexity of migration experiences.

Keywords: transnational family, commercially arranged marriage, marriage strategy, globalization of householding, chain migration

Introduction

Yong, a thirty-two-year-old man in the small county town of Fangzheng, has a Japanese brother-in-law, a South Korean brother-in-law, several Japanese cousins-in-law, and a Vietnamese wife who is divorced from a South Korean man (see figure 1).¹ This global family epitomizes the intensification of marriage migrations to and from China over the last decade. By tracing the formation of Yong's family, particularly his own marriage to his Vietnamese wife, Mei, this article sheds light on how different streams of marriage migrations are interconnected—specifically, the flow from China to Japan and South Korea, and from Vietnam to Taiwan, South Korea, and China. These flows are interconnected in many ways, including through personal networks, brokerage, remittances, and flows of information.

The phenomenon of transnational marriage migration has received increasing attention over the past few decades. It is commonly agreed that transnational marriage migration, especially

commercially arranged marriage migration, is a product of globalization, the widening of the gap between developed and developing countries, and gender inequality both locally and globally. In this article, rather than focusing on the gaps, I emphasize the connections of people, money, language, and information between local and global landscapes, and their role in forming families and creating new streams of migration.

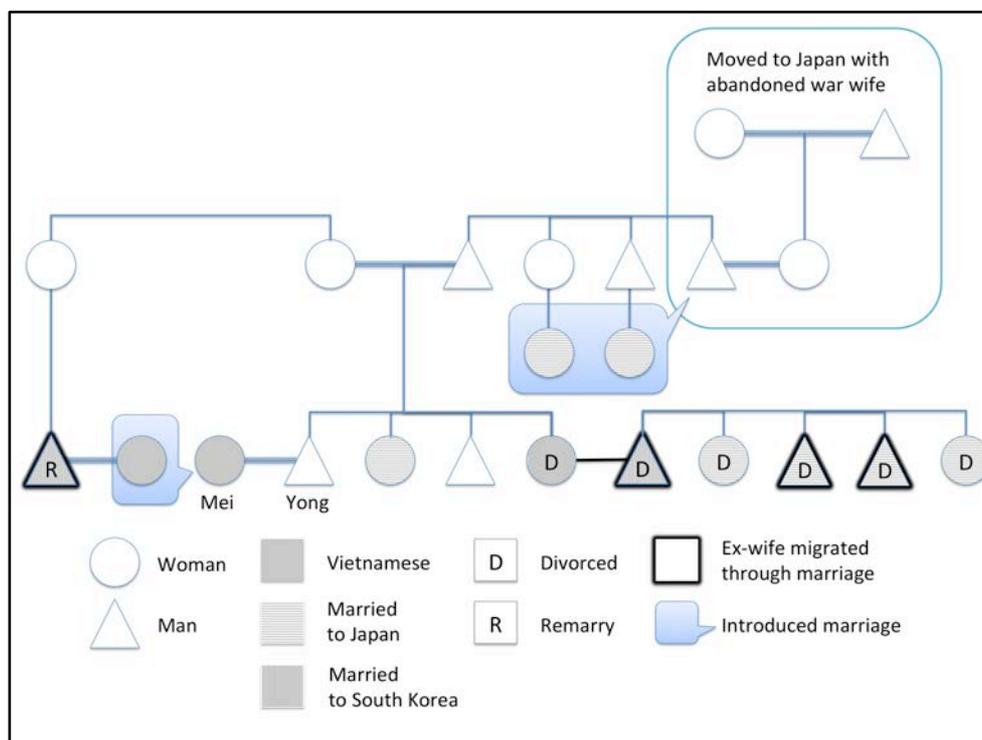


Figure 1. Yong's family relationship tree. Chart created by the author.

Over the past twenty years, women in Fangzheng County in northeast China have been marrying Japanese or South Korean men and emigrating to their countries, as exemplified by Yong's sisters (see figure 1). Since 2009, an increasing number of men in Fangzheng County have married Vietnamese women, as Yong's case shows. Such migration patterns indicate that a shift is happening in mainland China: still perceived as a developing country, it has started to receive marriage migrants. From a macro perspective, this change may be explained by several factors. Perhaps the most important is China's increasing economic presence, most significantly its transformation into the world's second-largest economy in 2010. In addition, tighter controls on Vietnamese marriage migration to Taiwan and South Korea may be driving Vietnamese women to other countries, like China.² However, such macro-level factors are certainly only part of the reason for this shift, since most people don't leave their countries easily. In this article, I combine macro and micro perspectives to investigate how this shift happened and what it might represent, drawing on empirical studies of Chinese husbands and Vietnamese wives in Fangzheng County,

especially Yong and Mei's case. I collected the data from 2007 to 2013, visiting Fangzheng County almost every year (except 2008 and 2011). There, I conducted semi-structured interviews and life story interviews, and engaged in participant observation.

Literature Review

In recent years, scholars focusing on the cross-border movement of Asian women have stressed the feminization of migration (Hugo 2005; Yamanaka and Piper 2005) and the globalization of reproduction (Liaw, Ochiai, and Ishikawa 2010, 50). Previous research has dealt with both the labor migration of women as domestic workers, care workers, and sex workers (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002) and the marriage migration of women as wives. In the realm of marriage migration, the research has stressed that, while flows from Asia to Western countries have been facilitated by the Internet or transnational family networks (Constable 2003; Hung 2008), flows between Asian countries are mainly commercialized marriages arranged through marriage brokers (Wang and Hsiao 2009). A number of marriage migration streams between Asian countries—East Asian countries in particular—have been the subject of previously published studies.

Marriage migration streams to Japan are particularly prominent. According to statistics from the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry of Japan, in 1975, the number of marriages registered between Japanese men and foreign women surpassed the number of marriages registered between Japanese women and foreign men for the first time. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, these foreign wives were predominantly of South Korean, Taiwanese, and Filipino nationality; since the early 1990s, the number of mainland Chinese wives has increased (Shukuya 1988, 14–20; Kuwayama 1995, 16). Previous studies have discussed the conditions of marriage migrants who marry to Japan as “rural brides” (Shukuya 1988; Kuwayama 1995), and transformations of the traditional Japanese family system (Utani 1998). Other studies have looked at specific aspects of this phenomenon, including the ability of migrant women established in Japanese rural communities to become active agents in their local societies (Takeda 2011); the conflict arising from the role given to a Chinese wife in interactions with her Japanese family (Saikanjuna 2011); the brokerage system (Nakamatsu 2009); and the agency of foreign wives (Nakamatsu 2003; Hao 2013).

Another research focus has been marriage streams to South Korea and Taiwan. The number of cross-border marriages in Taiwan increased significantly in the 1990s, with the overwhelming majority of these marriages being between Taiwanese men and mainland Chinese women, followed by marriages with Vietnamese women. In South Korea, international marriages have also increased since the 1990s, with a rapid increase in the early years of the twenty-first century, mostly between

South Korean men and Chinese women, followed by Vietnamese women. As marriage migration has increased, the number of related studies has also increased. These include studies on structural factors leading to marriage migration from Southeast Asian countries (Hsia 2002); Southeast Asian spouses' livelihood adaptations and resistance strategies (Chang 2008; Lim 2006); brokerage systems (Wang and Chang 2003; Lu 2008); and the situations of Taiwanese men who married foreign wives (Wang and Tien 2009). Previous studies have also discussed the impact of politicians and state powers on the livelihood of mainland Chinese spouses living in Taiwan (Chao 2004a, 2004b, 2005) and the impact on Chinese society as the sending side (Chao 2007). In the case of South Korea, there are studies on the influences that migration policies have had on multicultural families, marriage status, and satisfaction levels (Lee 2009, 2013) and on transnational family strategies and the migration strategies of ethnic Koreans in China (Freeman 2011).

A final marriage migration stream can be observed from Vietnam to China, in particular in the border region between these two countries. China and Vietnam are mostly known for sending out marriage migrants to more economically developed regions. However, we should not underestimate the importance of cross-border marriages between these two countries. These marriages involve people of the same ethnicity across the border (Fan 1999; also see articles by Barabantseva and Grillot in this special issue). During the 1950s and 1960s, Vietnamese women married and moved to China, and, during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, many Chinese women married and moved to Vietnam (Luo and Long 2007, 16). After a brief interruption in the late 1970s, Sino-Vietnamese relations recovered in the late 1980s. As a result, more romantic and arranged marriages could take place in the border region alongside various forms of trade. Several studies have discussed social and legal status issues, as well as the livelihood adaptations of Vietnamese women who emigrated to China (Luo W. 2006; Long and Luo 2007; Long and Li 2007; Luo L. 2010).

These studies mentioned in this literature review provide insight into the various marriage migration streams between East Asian countries and suggest a shift in marriage migration flows, with South Korea and Taiwan gradually turning from sending regions into receiving regions. However, these studies either focus on one stream or exclusively discuss policies, women's livelihoods, or brokerage systems related to marriage migrants to a single receiving country. In contrast, drawing on a case study of one family in Fangzheng County in northeast China, this article sheds light on how these streams connect and intersect with one another. In addition to paying attention to individuals' distinct experiences with cross-border marriages, I also describe another stream in marriage migration, in which Vietnamese wives move to very distant northeast China.

Fangzheng County

Fangzheng is a county with a population of about two hundred thousand in northeast China. In most ways, it is an ordinary and small county, but it is also unique in certain ways. For example, numerous stores display signs in Japanese, and any bank can exchange money.³ Also, when one enters a restaurant, it is common to hear conversations about friends and relatives in Japan.

There are historical reasons for the presence of Japan in everyday life in this region. Fangzheng County was once part of Japanese Manchuria. After the Japanese defeat in 1945, many Japanese gathered in Fangzheng County and tried to return to Japan. Some were able to return, while others—mostly women and children—were stranded in China. According to Fangzheng government statistics, about 4,500 Japanese remained there. They are called “abandoned war wives” (*zanryu-fujin*) and “orphans” (*zanryu-koji*) in Japan. In 1972, with the normalization of relationships between China and Japan, these wives and orphans were finally able to search for their lost kin and move back to Japan with their extended families. After returning to Japan, some of them also began to introduce Japanese men to women in Fangzheng County. Thus, a social network with Japan was created that caused a chain migration.⁴ According to 2010 local government statistics, of the county’s total population of 230,000, around 38,000 people from the region lived abroad. The majority of them, around 35,000 people, lived in Japan. An estimated number of people with relatives living abroad was 48,000.

Meanwhile, local men in Fangzheng County started marrying Vietnamese women beginning around 2009. The number of Vietnamese wives grew rapidly, from about 100 in 2010 to over 1,100 in 2011.⁵ What conditions made this possible? Why did a community that had traditionally sent marriage migrants abroad start bringing them in? And what does this shift represent? I address these questions mainly through a case study of one representative global family.

The Case Study of the Global Family

Marriage Squeezes for Men

One social impact of outmigration in sending communities is that it becomes more difficult for local men to marry local women. Studies of three communities in Vietnam that send marriage migrants to Taiwan and South Korea found that, because the local women have the opportunity for an international marriage, their bargaining power in local marriages increases, leading to an increase of required marriage funds and marriage expenses. As a result, local men are facing difficulty marrying in a marriage market with increasing prerequisites (Belanger et al. 2013, 210–211). A similar situation can be observed in ethnic Korean communities in China. Outmarrying

with South Korean men has become one of the rational choices for ethnic Korean women in China. One effect of this trend is a significantly larger male-to-female ratio in ethnic Korean communities, leading to more difficult marriage prospects for ethnic Korean men in China (Zheng 1999, 69; Jiang and Piao 2011). In Fangzheng County, according to local people, a similar situation exists. A local villager in his fifties said:

In our day, it was easy to marry. There weren't many expectations on marrying someone and, once you reached a certain age, your parents and relatives introduced you to someone. I didn't have much money when I married. The wedding ceremony was very simple, but it was enough. But now it's hard to marry, especially for men. You see, all those girls want to go abroad. Even those already married, if something happens they get the divorce and go abroad. Now they don't see the person, but the money.

Marriage costs for men in Fangzheng County are increasing every year. According to local residents, to acquiesce to marriage with someone in the countryside, women often demand an apartment, furniture, and around 150,000–160,000 *yuan* (US\$24,000–25,000) in cash.⁶ Someone living in the center of the prefecture (a more urban region with better life conditions compared to the countryside) will require at least 100,000 *yuan* (US\$16,000) in cash. People say, “If farmers want grandchildren these days, they have to sell their land and house as a marriage fund for their son.” It is in this context that Yong hoped to find a wife. His mother explained to me:

It's difficult to marry here, you know. See, there are many women who go to Japan or Korea. Even many married women divorce and go, right? Women are more picky when it comes to marriage. Especially my youngest son [Yong] was not very popular with girls from the start.

Not surprisingly, good-looking, popular men are able to find partners and marry without such monetary resources. However, for men like Yong, who aren't “very popular with girls,” marriage requires a certain economic standing.

In this situation, Yong's original marriage strategy was to go abroad. Because opportunities to go to Japan are scarce in this area, those who manage to do so become more attractive. A local villager described people who went to Japan in the following way: “They can use money as if it was just a piece of paper. They use it as they like without worrying about the cost.” Similar comments were made about women who emigrated abroad: “They look very fashionable and well-traveled, and they have beautiful skin. They look younger than local women of the same age.” In other words, people who went abroad appeared better in many ways. Therefore, if Yong could go to Japan, his wife could also go to Japan, which would make marriage to Yong more desirable. As his mother explained:

If he could go abroad, if he could bring a wife with him to Japan or somewhere else, he could marry easily here. It'd be nice if he were in a position to choose whom to marry. But there are not many ways for men here to go [abroad]. Even so, we tried many ways. As a cook, as an international student.... But the screening is tough, and he never got through.⁷ While spending many years trying in vain, he turned thirty.

Eventually, the idea of marrying a foreign woman appeared as an alternative strategy. One day, Yong's mother received news from a relative that a marriage broker was bringing some Vietnamese women who were looking for prospective partners. She met the broker and was introduced to Mei; she liked Mei and immediately called her son to arrange matchmaking. Yong also liked Mei, so he introduced her to the rest of his family and showed her around his house so that she could see their living environment. Yong lived in a spacious apartment with a clean interior located in the center of the prefecture. After assessing Yong's situation, Mei agreed to marry him, and the two returned to Vietnam for the wedding ceremony and marriage procedures.

Marriage to Mei: Economic Support from Sisters Abroad

The broker fees for Yong's marriage, including the cost of the wedding ceremony, added up to around 100,000 *yuan*, a large amount of money. Yong was only able to afford this thanks to his sisters' economic support. One of his sisters lives in Japan; the other is in South Korea. The two went to foreign countries under the influence of one of their uncle's family members. That uncle's mother-in-law is an "abandoned war wife" who returned to Japan with her whole family in the late 1990s. That uncle arranged marriages with Japanese men for two of his siblings' daughters. However, Yong's sisters were not part of these arrangements. They used marriage brokers instead, as described by Yong's mother:

My daughters' uncle arranged marriages for the daughters of his other brothers, but when it was our family's turn, he did nothing. That pissed us off a bit. If the daughters of everyone else were going to Japan, mine also wanted to go. Since her uncle was not arranging it for us, my little daughter registered herself with a marriage broker, and got married to a Japanese man. It is better that she did it herself, you know. If her uncle had arranged it, we'd have to be grateful to him forever. She'd have to, for example, pay him a New Year's visit every year. Since she did this herself through a broker, there's no need for any of that. We paid a 50,000 *yuan* fee to that broker. At that time our family didn't have this [amount of] money, so we paid with borrowed money.

Yong's other sister first married a local man, but after her sisters-in-law divorced their husbands and moved to Japan with their children, she also decided to move abroad. As described

before, people who go to Japan have better economic and social prospects in the eyes of those who stay behind. Thus, it is not surprising that, with the departure of one wife, other women became motivated to search abroad for better life opportunities for themselves and their children. As Yong's mother said:

Those girls, you know, they also went to Japan for their children. In this countryside there's no good future. They can give a better education to their children abroad and also teach them a foreign language. With these qualities they may have a better future. Seeing these girls going to Japan with their children, my daughter also wanted to take her child abroad. Also, her husband back then was useless and did no work at all! He was good-looking, but couldn't do a thing. How was she supposed to live together with him? But my daughter didn't go to Japan. She went to work in South Korea and stayed there illegally. It was hard. She couldn't bring her child since she was there illegally. Fortunately, she fell in love and married a South Korean man. Now she has a legal visa living in South Korea.

Yong's large, clean apartment, which Mei saw and where they live now, was purchased by his sister in Japan. The apartment was paid for with the first 2 million *yen* she earned doing part-time jobs in Japan. Her parents now rely on her remittances. Although the situation of the other sister who went to South Korea doesn't allow her to save much money, she also occasionally sends goods. Yong himself is a driving instructor, and his monthly salary also doesn't allow him to save easily. Fortunately, his house is very large, and his parents were able to continue to live with him after he married. In most cases, the wife demands a separate apartment from her in-laws, but Mei accepted living together with Yong's parents. His sister and parents also covered other costs related to his marriage.

In Fangzheng County, as in other sending regions, relatives and families benefit from those who go abroad. The following observation is common: "If only one family member or relative goes to Japan or Korea, it is possible to benefit from that link" (the Chinese expression for this is *zhan guang*, meaning "bask in the light of the glory of others" or "reflected glory"). I heard this sentiment during a number of interviews. For example, a public servant in his sixties told me:

My sister married the child of an abandoned war orphan arranged by a relative and left for Japan. My brother also went to Japan together with his mother-in-law, who is an abandoned war wife. They helped us a lot from Japan. When my sister first came back, she brought a large color TV. At that time, there weren't many color TVs around, so everyone came to see the TV, and we were proud of that. When our parents were sick, they covered all expenses. When our parents died, they paid a lot of money so that we could afford a luxurious funeral. My sister also paid a large proportion of my child's schooling fee.

In Yong's case, he was supported financially to be able to marry a foreign wife. This type of support was also observed in other interviews. Xiaoyun, one of my interviewees, married a Japanese man in 2009 through a marriage broker. She also accompanied her brother to Vietnam with a broker in 2011, and he finally got married to a Vietnamese woman. Xiaoyun paid all the costs associated with his marriage using the money she earned doing part-time jobs in Japan.

Yong was able to marry a Vietnamese woman because of his sisters' help from abroad. However, wasn't all about money. If there had not been any marriage broker to introduce him to Vietnamese women, such a marriage would have been unlikely in this rural area of northeast China far away from Vietnam.

Marriage to Mei: The Role of Transnational Broker Networks

When Yong married, there were already a number of marriage brokers mediating marriages between Chinese men and Vietnamese women. Some brought Vietnamese women to Fangzheng County for matchmaking with local men, as in Yong's case. Other brokers went to Vietnam with their Chinese customers for matchmaking abroad, as in Xiaoyun's brother's case. Alternatively, some Vietnamese wives also arranged marriages between people they knew.

So, how did marriages with Vietnamese women start in Fangzheng County? I interviewed Ms. Qi, the first broker to arrange marriages with Vietnamese women in Fangzheng. According to her, in 2010 there were around one hundred Vietnamese wives in Fangzheng County, of whom eighty had been introduced by her. As she explained:

I originally arranged marriages between women from here [Fangzheng County] and South Korea. Then, my partner in South Korea mentioned the possibility of arranging marriages with Vietnamese women. There are many Vietnamese wives in South Korea, you see. And there are also a lot of men around here who can't get married. So, that partner introduced me to another broker in Vietnam, and we [the broker in Vietnam and Mrs. Qi] decided to do it together. That broker is of Chinese nationality but was born and raised in Vietnam. And the interpreter for matchmaking is a Vietnamese who had married in Taiwan.

It is clear from Ms. Qi's story that the network of transnational marriage brokers played an important role in the development of this marriage migration stream. Commercially arranged marriage patterns that have occurred in East Asia in recent years have intersected in Fangzheng County. Also, as Ms. Qi mentioned, the interpreter she worked with is also a marriage migrant. The ability of Taiwanese to comprehend the Fangzheng dialect was also an important factor. I found that some Vietnamese women are using study books originally created for women who marry Taiwanese men (figures 2, 3a, and 3b). I was also shown a wedding video that was made in both Mandarin and Vietnamese, in which the master of the ceremony was speaking in both languages as

well. During the banquet, there was a song in Taiwanese Hokkien, which indicates that the marriage ceremony style was also adapted from Vietnamese-Taiwanese marriages. As can be observed from these cases, Vietnamese women's marriages in Taiwan provided a model for Vietnamese-Chinese marriages in Fangzheng County.

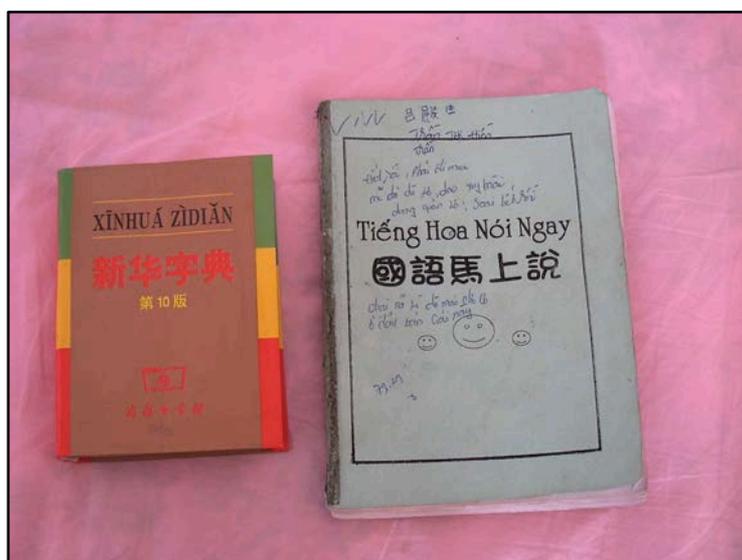
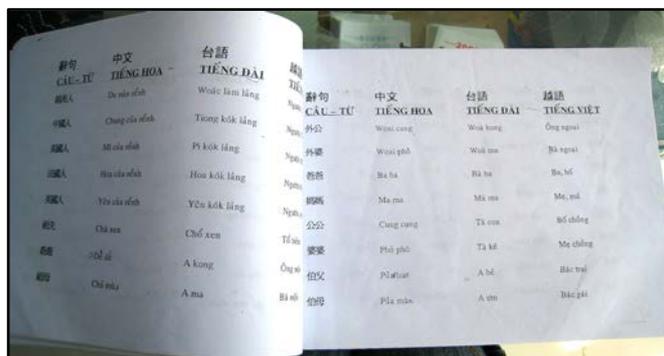


Figure 2. Chinese dictionary and Taiwanese Mandarin textbook used by a Vietnamese wife in Fangzheng County. All photos in this article were taken by the author.



Figures 3a and 3b. Another textbook used to translate daily conversation sentences between a Vietnamese wife and her Chinese husband. This book was originally created for Vietnamese wives marrying Taiwanese men, and includes sentences in Vietnamese, Taiwanese Hokkien, and Mandarin.

From South Korea to China: Mei's Story

It will soon be three years since Mei married Yong. She is able to communicate in Chinese fairly well. Her daughter is one and a half years old. When Mei arrived in Fangzheng, there were already many Vietnamese wives around, so Mei would go out with her daughter every day and hang out with them, shopping or just chatting. Mei is from South Vietnam, and her sister is in South

Korea, married to a South Korean man. When I asked why she decided to marry a foreigner, she said:

I guess it's because many people around you do the same. My parents didn't specifically say anything to me, but we all can see the changes in people around us and their families. It's not like our family is short of money or anything, but I thought it'd be nice if things could get better. If I'd married someone local, we'd both use all the money and not have any left for our families to do other things. Also, Vietnamese men are darker and don't look good. You know, having a whiter skin looks healthier... and wealthier too. Even though he may actually not have money, at least it looks like he does. That's why I wanted to marry a foreigner. But, there's no money here, you see.

And then she laughed. I asked her why she didn't go to South Korea like her sister. She didn't answer my question and said that she had actually intended to go to Hong Kong, since she had seen it on TV and it looked like a good place. She didn't know she would go to Fangzheng County instead when she accompanied a marriage broker to China.⁸

Two years after I became acquainted with Mei, we were walking together in the Fangzheng County shopping district. When we passed through a new store selling South Korean goods, she said, "South Korean goods are nice, aren't they?" I replied, "If you had gone to South Korea like your sister, many things would be different." Mei then brought out an unexpected revelation. "Should I say it? I haven't told anyone this, though.... I actually have been to South Korea."

Mei, like her sister, had been married to a South Korean man and left for South Korea. But she ran away after several months. She described her experience in the following way:

I was married to a farmer in South Korea. There, I lived with my in-laws and woke up early every morning to work with them. But the husband didn't work. He just slept and watched TV every day. Even though we worked until late at night, nobody was kind to me. I was tired every day, and it was hard, very hard. Still, I didn't say anything and just smiled. The husband was already over forty, and he didn't bathe nor brush his teeth. During summer, he would hang around in the house without wearing anything. Without wearing anything, really! Not even pants! It was really gross. Besides, he wanted to do it every night. Day after day, who could tolerate it? I ran away from that place before one year had passed. With the help of friends, I found some work in a factory. Still, my home in Vietnam is really good. The house is large and we're not really lacking anything. So I had never worked back there. But in that factory I worked every day and was very tired. One day, I got scolded after I said I was tired. I was told not to work there anymore then. I also had some quarrels there before, so I decided to go back to Vietnam.

Before returning to Vietnam, Mei called her husband and asked for a divorce. The divorce certificate was mailed to her sister. However, even after returning to Vietnam, Mei was not able to remarry easily.

While working in South Korea, Mei also dated a Vietnamese man she had met through the Internet. His sister lived in the United States, and he had a job in design with a good salary. He sent her gifts, like mobile phones and accessories, and was fun to talk with; they had phone conversations every day. However, after Mei returned to Vietnam, where they met face to face, they soon broke up. She recalled:

My god! I was really startled! He was shorter than me, fat, and with very dark skin. It was scary. I returned everything he gave me and didn't answer his calls. I can't date someone like him!

Mei had another shock after returning home. She had confided her experiences in South Korea to a friend by phone, and that friend had spread the story around. She said:

Really, because of that friend everyone knew about my divorce. The neighbors spread rumors about how that husband was not good, and how unlucky I was. And they'd compare me with their daughters, saying how they had found wonderful husbands. How they lived in wealthy homes and were even able to pay for a new house for their families. It was really painful. And since everyone knew about me, it was unlikely for me to find someone to marry there.

By this time, Mei was already twenty-eight years of age and was considered old to be unmarried. At that moment she decided she had to marry a foreigner.

Mei accompanied a marriage broker, who said that he would introduce her to a prospective Hong Kong partner, but they actually went to Fangzheng County. After seeing Yong's house and family, she agreed to marry him. She told me:

If I didn't like the family, I wouldn't have agreed to marry him. This place sure isn't wealthy, and the environment is not good at all. But the family is friendly and nice to me, including the in-laws. They are totally different from the family in Korea. In Korea, the elderly always come first. I had to ask my mother-in-law for everything first. They also ate first. And I had to ask permission from my mother-in-law to go out. There were many etiquette rules that had to be obeyed. Here it is completely the opposite. Grandchildren come first, then the children, and the elderly come last. When there's some good food, the grandchildren eat first, then the children, and the elderly eat last. I feel I'm cared about here. My father-in-law cooks, and I wash the dishes. I go out every day, and I know that they would prefer me to stay at home, but they don't complain. My husband gives me a credit card and cash, saying that I can use them as I like. But I don't spend much. When I go out, they look after my daughter sometimes. Since this place is not wealthy, I almost can't send remittances to Vietnam. By saving about 20 *yuan* every day, I may have something to spend when I go back for a home visit.

When Yong's sister in South Korea comes to visit, she speaks in Korean to her child. Although Mei can understand what is being said, she wants to keep her experiences in South Korea

secret from her current family.

As we can see, marriage migrants face pressures from both the receiving and sending societies. Mei didn't have the good fortune to find an ideal partner in South Korea, and although she returned to Vietnam, she was pushed overseas again because of local mockery and rumors about her failed marriage. Now, although she has moved to a poor, rural region in northeast China very far from Vietnam, she is happy since people are nice to her.⁹

Looking at how Mei has settled down, relatives conclude that she has a good marriage. Some have even asked if she could arrange partners for their daughters as well. She explained:

I told them that this is not a really good place, that it's poor. But they didn't believe me. And they insisted that I find someone here to introduce [to their daughters]. I then said it would not be my fault if anything goes wrong, and introduced one of my cousins to one of my husband's cousins.

This cousin's wife had divorced him to go to South Korea, and by introducing him to another Vietnamese woman, Mei was perpetuating transnational marriage in Fangzheng County.

Analysis and Discussion

The stories of Yong and Mei and their eventual marriage in Fangzheng County reveal this family's dynamic cross-border marriages and cross-border migrations. Their stories include most of cross-border marriage streams in East Asia, as shown in figure 4. Specifically, Yong's family's case interweaves elements of marriage migration flows from China to Japan, from China to South Korea, from Vietnam to South Korea, from Vietnam to Taiwan, and from Vietnam to China.

In the background of all these migration flows, one common factor is the gendered quality of mobility. Due to factors such as visa restrictions, there are limited means to move in this transnational space, with marriage being the most common strategy. Also, the regions involved in these marriage migration flows share the cultural traits of patrilocality and hypergamy, meaning that women are usually able to move "upward" through marriage, while men are not. Although Yong wanted to go abroad, it was difficult for him. This gendered mobility has brought a variety of imbalances to the region, one being the number of "left-behind" single men and divorced men who struggle to find prospective marriage partners.

However, even though the cross-border movement of women may have complicated marriage prospects for men, in Yong's case he was able to profit from kinship. Women who emigrate, like Yong's sisters, often send remittances back home, and these remittances may be used to contribute to the marriage funds of "left-behind" kin, placing them in economically better conditions to marry.

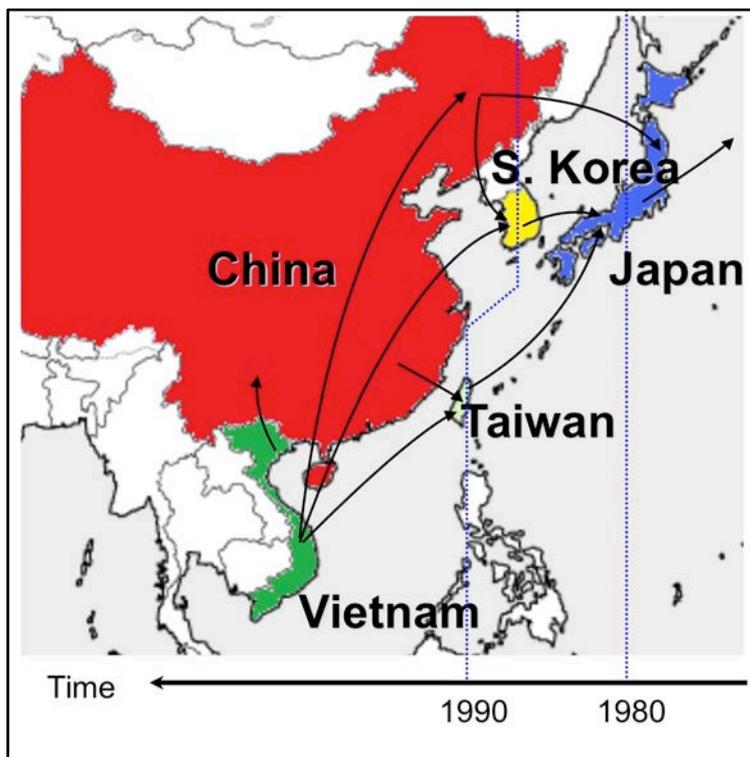


Figure 4. Map of the main marriage migration routes in Asia. Locations inside countries do not necessarily represent regions of emigration or immigration within each country. Diagram elaborated by the author from an open source map.

Also, the “left-behind” men form a new prospective market for existing marriage brokers: through the cooperation of marriage brokers across borders, it has become possible for a region that traditionally sent marriage migrants abroad to start receiving marriage migrants. Marriage brokers have been able to reach these new markets more quickly by leveraging existing mediation systems and resources created to interact with people using a different language. For example, without the presence of overseas Chinese in Vietnam and a common language between China and Taiwan (an existing destination for Vietnamese marriage migrants), it would have been much more difficult to establish a new marriage migration route from Vietnam to China.

Finally, there is an expectation of social and economic rise related to marriage migration, resulting in pressure for emigrating women to “succeed.” Mei’s first marriage did not succeed, and she returned to Vietnam. But instead of accepting her warmly, the local community ended up pushing her abroad again. Since women are supposed to succeed after emigrating, they must keep moving, unable to settle back home. Moreover, as illustrated by the case of Yong’s sisters (who were influenced by their relatives’ cross-border migration and moved to Japan and South Korea either through marriage or through work), or Mei’s cousin (who, after hearing of Mei’s “success,” asked to be introduced to a marriage partner in Fangzheng County), other women who see their friends and relatives successfully migrate for marriage may want to follow the same path. Thus, a

persistent mobility chain is achieved, with migrants unable to return and a cascade effect for new migrants settling down in the same place.

There are other studies on the inflow and outflow of women by marriage that point to cases in regions close to the Chinese border in which ethnic minority women from China marry and move inland, while foreign women near the border become marriage migrants to the same region (Shen 2012). This phenomenon has been called the “replacement mobility of women” (Shen 2012, 9). The cases of Yong, his cousin, and Xiaoyun’s brother all involve similar conditions: they are all Fangzheng County men who married Vietnamese women because of previous difficulties in finding spouses or because they were divorced by women moving abroad. In this sense, we may speak of a “replacement” due to the movement into Fangzheng County. However, I have chosen these case studies not in order to discuss replacement relationships but rather to stress the relationships and interconnections between various streams of women’s migration. Various flows that seemed to be independent from one another until now are obviously connected in personal networks, broker networks, remittances, and the flow of information. These interconnections may create new flows of people, pluralize migration experiences, and diversify directions of movement. And this multilayered connection of migration factors, diversification, and increasing complexity of migration experiences is only expected to increase in the future.

Still, some readers may think Yong’s story is an extreme and unique case. Admittedly, Fangzheng County does have specific conditions, such as accumulated social capital with Japan, thanks to historical ties and a relatively large number of marriage brokers. However, information today spreads quickly and is no longer confined to a specific region. For example, marriages between Chinese men and Vietnamese women became a hot Chinese media topic in 2010. At the center of this topic was not a specific place such as Fangzheng County, but a single resident of Nanjing named Dai, who provided his marriage story on the Internet. He read an article on the Internet titled “My Relative Married a Vietnamese,” which piqued his interest.¹⁰ Mr. Dai then went to Vietnam, found a marriage broker there and took part in many matchmaking events, until he eventually met and married a Vietnamese woman. Afterward, he wrote in detail and posted on the Internet pictures about his experience. After he got married, he and his wife started introducing Vietnamese women as prospective marriage partners for men in diverse regions in China through his website. Then, in 2012, when I was contacting marriage broker companies that arrange international marriages between Chinese and Vietnamese, I found out that one of them had been inspired by Mr. Dai’s story and had decided to go to Vietnam, too. In this way, in addition to making historical connections and encouraging business expansion to new markets, the Internet is also responsible for creating new connections between people. Currently, not only Vietnamese, but

Indonesian and Cambodian women as well, are moving to China through marriage migration. The multilayered connection of migration factors, diversification, and the increasing complexity of migration experiences are indeed alive and well.

Conclusion

Transnational marriage migration is an important global phenomenon that has received increasing attention over the past few decades. Still, most studies approach the subject from the perspective of the perceived socioeconomic gaps between countries and focus on a single marriage migration stream. In contrast, by tracing the life of a family in rural northeast China that has developed global connections through marriage, this article analyzes how different streams of marriage migrations are linked, specifically the flow of wives from China to Japan and South Korea, and from Vietnam to Taiwan, South Korea, and China.

These flows are interconnected in many ways, including remittances, brokerage, personal networks, and flows of information. Remittances from marriage migrants place “left-behind” kin in economically better conditions to marry other marriage migrants. Cooperation between marriage brokers across borders helps forge new marriage migration routes between two regions without specific historical or trading connections. Marriage brokers have mediation systems and resources to interact with people using different languages that may be leveraged for fast development of a migration route. And, expectations of social and economic rise related to marriage migration have put pressure on the women who emigrate. They are expected to succeed away from home, to the extent that those returning from failed marriages are eventually forced to move abroad again. In this respect, “successful” marriage migration attracts more women and men to this practice through personal networks. Finally, media such as the Internet help to spread images of “successful” transnational marriages and increase its appeal. Future research will aim to further address how these connections may be affecting perceived family structures, gender roles, and consequent cultural adjustment issues.

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Notes

- 1 The names of all interviewees mentioned have been altered.
- 2 In Taiwan, the interview system for Vietnamese wives became more strict in 2005. The waiting period from time of the wedding ceremony to the interview has increased to at least six months, and failing the interview has become a possibility. This interview system is said to have become a method for the Taiwanese government to control marriages of its nationals with Vietnamese women (Kung 2009, 181–182). Statistics show that new marriages with Vietnamese wives have decreased from over 10,000 in 2004 to fewer than 5,000 in 2006 and have remained mostly unchanged since then. In South Korea, general support measures toward marriage migrants were enacted in 2006, including legislation controlling international marriages by controlling the issuance of spouse visas and supervising marriage brokers (Song 2009, 80). In this case, too, new marriages with Vietnamese women have decreased since 2007.
- 3 Not all banks exchange money in China, especially in remote places. But, in Fangzheng County, almost every bank not only exchanges money but also displays their exchange rates in big letters to attract customers.
- 4 I use the term *chain migration* to refer to the following types of situations, which I observed from my interview data. At first, some sons of abandoned war wives or orphans tended to go to Fangzheng County to look for spouses; then, as in Yong’s family, returnees to Japan introduced Japanese men to their relatives for the purposes of marriage; in other cases, those who had returned to Japan became brokers of commercially arranged marriages between Japanese men and Chinese women. Some of these marriage migrants then introduced marriage partners to their friends and relatives in China or became marriage brokers themselves. This sequence of events creates the chain migration. Also, during my fieldwork in 2007, I was told that, as the process to obtain a Japanese spouse visa was taking longer, more women were choosing to outmarry to South Korea instead. While Fangzheng County was part of Japanese Manchuria, it received also some Koreans, resulting in a local ethnic Korean community. This allowed for a connection with South Korea for marriage migration.
- 5 The 2010 figure was provided by the first broker who introduced Vietnamese wives to Fangzheng County. The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference of Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in Fangzheng County released in 2011 a report on their investigation on the issue of marriage brokers in the region. According to information obtained from the Public Security Bureau by one of the report’s authors, there were about 1,100 Vietnamese wives in the region.
- 6 Yan (2010) describes and analyzes the common practice in northeast China of grooms giving money at the time of marriage.
- 7 As this family’s circumstances show, only women used the marriage channel to go to a foreign country. For men, the possibilities for migration include being a family member of a “stranded war wife” or a “stranded war orphan,” or going to Japan as an international student or as a professional with specialized skills. All of these alternatives require specific family conditions, skills, or educational backgrounds. Those who do not fulfill any of these criteria may apply for a visa using forged documents from brokers. However, this migration route involves high procedural costs and has a low success rate. The visa screening process is very strict and most applications are rejected.
- 8 Mei didn’t say much more about the marriage broker who accompanied her to China, only that the person was eventually arrested by the police (Mei didn’t want to elaborate on the reasons or details).
- 9 Of course, not all cases end have a happy ending like Mei’s. According to local government

officials, around three hundred Vietnamese women have divorced their husbands in the region.

- 10 The original post was in July 2008 on a famous Internet forum (Tianya Club) in China. In the post, the writer asks for opinions on the case of a twenty-eight-year-old relative with average looks and personality, a high school teacher with an annual income of 50,000–60,000 *yuan* (approximately USD\$8,500), who got married to a pretty twenty-one-year-old Vietnamese woman.

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