

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Introduction to “Governing Marriage Migrations: Perspectives from Mainland China and Taiwan”**

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Cross-border migration for the purpose of marriage is on the rise, and at present it constitutes one of the most common forms of long-term international mobility in East Asia. This special issue of *Cross-Currents* analyzes marriage migration in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan as a subject of governance. The articles included here demonstrate that marriage migration has attracted considerable policy attention and public anxiety not because it is about “marriage” or “migration” per se, but because it is perceived to be inseparable from a wide range of other issues, such as sexual morality, family norms, national identity, and border security. In particular, the long-lasting social relationships marriage migration creates and the role of marriage migrants (the vast majority of whom are women) in rearing the next generation of the state’s sovereign subjects tie marriage migration to state security concerns. Popular anxieties about marriage migration are often based on projections into the future rather than observations about the present reality. On one hand, the fact that marriage migration is deeply embedded in myriad social institutions and relations that cannot be dealt with in isolation causes a projection-based mode of governance; on the other hand, it renders transnational marriage particularly hard to govern, which further exacerbates anxiety. But this should not be seen as a failure in public policy. The articles in this special issue argue that such projections, imaginations, and self-perpetuating anxieties are important parts of how nationhood is constructed in the current era. As such, marriage migration as a subject of governance provides us with a special angle to examine how politics works in subtle and sometimes invisible ways on local, national, and transnational levels.

International marriage migration in general, and that in Asia in particular, has been extensively documented by academic publications, NGO reports, and the media. The existing literature commonly identifies commodification as the key characteristic of such marriages,

particularly in Asia, where it is often commercially brokered. Nicole Constable conceptualizes international marriage as part of the larger trend of “commodification of intimacy,” in which “intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market” (2009, 50). Commodification is also seen as the main cause of various problems. Commercial brokerage is suspected of upsetting established norms regarding marriage and family, introducing unethical liaisons, and furthermore, opening doors for sexual exploitation and human trafficking. As Lucy Williams points out, academic research on international marriage has been heavily overshadowed by anxieties about human trafficking and the sex industry (2010, 74, 84; see also Tseng, this issue). We question the commodification assumption on both conceptual and empirical fronts. Conceptually, if we follow Marx and Polanyi to understand commodification as a process through which one aspect of human life (e.g., labor power) or nature (e.g., land) is turned into an object that can be purchased and sold, it is hard to imagine how a marriage, by definition an institution and a set of relations, could be turned into a commodity. The brides and grooms across borders do not sell or buy the marriage itself. Empirically, international marriage is not necessarily more commodified than other forms of marriage, if by commodification we mean the heightened importance of commercial elements in marriage. The so-called mercenary marriage (*maimai hunyin*, literally “buy-and-sell marriage”) in prerevolutionary China was well known, and its eradication was a main social goal of the Communist Party. In voluntary marriages without a third party’s intervention today, calculation about material interests is common, and this calculation has been much exacerbated in mainland China since the late 1990s, when urban housing was privatized. The practice of dowry also became more widespread and businesslike in parts of India as a result of the process of economic liberalization and globalization (Xiang 2006). Indeed, concern about the “commodification” of international marriage migration may well be shaped by a particular liberal ideology that assumes marriage and family ought to be separated from the economic domain.

We instead call attention to how marriage migration is being “governmentalized.” The process of how marriage migration takes place, how it is defined as lawful marriage and employed as a legal act of migration, and how this process is experienced on the ground is, to a great extent, defined by how marriage migration is governed. What is special about international marriage, especially for those from lower social strata, is the particularly complex procedure that it has to go through because of government regulations. It is these regulations that make commercial brokerage indispensable. The brides and grooms do not

buy marriage; they pay for the search for partners and for the process that conforms their marriage to government rules. While it is certainly true that the line between marriage migration and labor migration is often blurry in reality (Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Wang and Chang 2002; Williams 2010; Lauser 2008; Piper and Roces 2003), the *separation* between these categories imposed by policies may influence migrants and their partners more greatly (see Chen, this issue). As Elena Barabantseva and Caroline Grillot (both in this issue) point out, cross-border marriages in southwest China have existed for a long time, and they became “problematic” only when they became subject to governance and border control that redefine existing social practices as illegal. In Taiwan, as shown in the articles by Mei-Hua Chen and Hsun-Hui Tseng, marriage migration became an issue that demanded urgent state intervention when it was linked to other policy concerns, such as illegal migration, sex exploitation, and human trafficking. International marriage migration, as we have observed, is certainly not a spontaneous social phenomenon, nor is it subjugated to the single principles of market regulations or state border concerns; rather, it is a subject of population governance.

The articles in the special issue pay attention to how new categories of distinction take shape and influence the governing processes. Mei-Hua Chen’s account shows the role of the derogatory term *dalumei* in public discourse about mainland brides in Taiwan and the border work that the state authorities carry out through their fight against “fake marriages” and prostitution. By monitoring international marriages, the normative sexualized national order is reinforced. In the process, the bedrooms of all Chinese-Taiwanese mixed marriages become “battlegrounds in the struggle for national security.” In Caroline Grillot’s study, mixed marriages and “Vietnamese brides” in China’s border area with Vietnam become a concern for the state due to its fear of an uncontrolled flow of human trafficking and smuggling across the border. As in Chen’s account, all undocumented wives are suspected of illicit activities due to their “nonexistent” documentary status. Elena Barabantseva’s study shows the inconsistencies and contradictory effects of the shift from the category of customary ethnic marriage to “illegal marriage” in local governmental and public discourses in the context of the formalization of a binational border-governing regime. Hsunhui Tseng’s analysis highlights how the illegalization of commercial marriage brokerage in Taiwan is premised on the assumption that marriage migrants are victims or commodities of brokers. This view institutionalizes a particular kind of governing order reflective of Taiwan’s aspirations to be counted as a liberal democracy of middle-class citizenry with its imagined

gender equality, rather than providing a mechanism of addressing the realities faced by women seeking better life opportunities through marriage. Hongfang Hao's analysis shows the complex intersections of these concepts and processes in the case of one family in northeast China.

Taiwan and the PRC provide productive cases as they enable us to discern both divergences and commonalities in the process of "governmentalization." Taiwan has been receiving marriage migrants since the mid-1980s, while the PRC is changing from one of the major sources of marriage migrants to Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore to the destination for marriage migrants from its poorer Asian neighbors (Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and North Korea). The ground is shifting faster than many of us expected: for instance, a village of just over four hundred households on China's southwestern border had more than one hundred wives from Burma in the mid-2000s (Shen 2014), and Vietnamese wives are now found in northeast China in sizable numbers (Hao, this issue). Taiwan and the PRC also offer an interesting comparison regarding their perceptions about borders: for Taiwan, the long maritime border is self-evident, so who is inside and who is outside the country is physically definable; in the PRC, the most active streams of marriage mobility are found across land borders. Due to different geopolitical realities, Taiwan's and the PRC's bordering practices in relation to marriage migration differ significantly. In Taiwan, such practices start in the airport before the "marriage immigrant" is let into the country and continue throughout the first several years, while in China these practices occur many years after the marriage has taken place. But most importantly, the processes by which marriage migration becomes an issue for concern in the two places differ sharply. The young democracy in Taiwan involves wide societal participation in policy formation; in the PRC, the process is primarily driven by the government and is characterized by gaps between the local and central states. The Taiwanese government is eager to guard its sovereignty through the regulation of marriage migration, especially against the PRC, where the majority of foreign wives come from. In comparison, the PRC faces the challenge of governing intimate relations in infinitely variable local contexts as a sovereign issue that is primarily the prerogative of the central state. Nevertheless, both cases traverse the domains of public and private, personal and political, and emotional and rational.

Therefore, the governance of marriage migration must be examined as a set of concrete operations driven by multiple, often contradictory, rationalities, rather than as a pre-designed and fixed scheme. The contributions in this issue are all based on in-depth field

research. Hongfang Hao's article sheds light on how new flows of marriage migration, specifically from Vietnam to northeast China, derive from and overlap with the older flows from China to Japan and South Korea, and from Vietnam to Taiwan. These migrations are connected in multiple ways: through personal networks, brokerage, remittances, and flows of information. Of particular interest to this special issue is that some Vietnamese wives in the northeast, for instance, learned Mandarin in Vietnam using textbooks that catered to Taiwan-bound brides. Behind the intensification and intersection of marriage migrations is also what one may call "a marriage economy," whereby sisters who are abroad financially assist their brothers to marry foreign women and establish a pattern of replacement migration.<sup>1</sup> Hao's article is especially valuable because it is based on detailed fieldwork in a place that both sends and receives international marriage partners, and it examines in-migration from the sending place's point of view.

Caroline Grillot and Elena Barabantseva show how marriage migration becomes a subject of governance in China—the process is far from straightforward—and take this as a lens through which to detect emerging patterns of governance. Barabantseva demonstrates how the sovereign border influences informally arranged Yao ethnic marriages in a location in Guangxi not along the distinction of inside/outside, but by relying on the mutually dependent relationship between indispensability and disposability. Cross-border co-ethnic marriage partners are disposable in the eyes of the local state when it comes to population quantity and quality concerns, but they play an important role in the local labor and moral economies as mothers, caregivers, translators, guides, manual workers, and carriers of intangible ethnic Yao knowledge. Grillot details how the attempt to govern marriage migration, rather than to ignore or deny it, has created a condition of "nonexistence" for Sino-Vietnamese households in China. The marriages are not formally recognized and are excluded from various welfare provisions not because they are declared as illegal, but because the processes of recognition in both Vietnam and China involve complex paperwork and requirements that most cross-border marriages cannot meet.

The last two articles in this special issue focus on Taiwan. Mei-Hua Chen's analysis of the "fake marriage test"—interviews and inspections conducted by officers to disqualify liaisons between couples that are not regarded as genuine marriages—demonstrates how the concern about marriage migration changed the public image of mainland Chinese women from possible victims of exploitation to subjects of suspicion to threats to state security, and how this change serves to harass Chinese sex workers and reinforce the dominant

heteronormative order concerning sex and family. Finally, Hsunhui Tseng's article deconstructs some deeply ingrained assumptions behind the Taiwanese government's ban on transnational marriage brokerage in 2008, which was enacted partly under pressure from Taiwan-based women's rights groups. While the relation between brides and brokers is multidimensional, embedded in complex social fabrics and involving solidarity as well as exploitation, the rationalities of the government and the women's groups are disembedded and assume clear-cut distinctions between what is legal and illegal and between individuals' self-reliance and mutual dependence. Tseng concludes that we need a double-edged strategy: more acute, detailed attention to the local context and a transnational perspective that is free from the nation-state container.

International marriage migration as a subject of governance is a site of constant negotiations between social and political norms, dominant patriarchal ideologies, biopolitical discourses on inclusions and exclusions, and the role of borders in the continuous (re)production of a particular national form. On the ground, marriage migration means different things to different people—for some brides it serves as an opportunity to gain better living conditions, but in the eyes of some human rights activists it opens doors for sexual exploitation and illegal practices. The process of governmentalization, however, subjugates multiple meanings to a particular set of concerns surrounding the notion of state security and family norms. Yet the dominant governance rationality is itself fraught with internal contradictions. Marriage migration is tolerated and sometimes facilitated because it is indispensable for population reproduction in an increasing number of regions across Asia, but it is at the same time regarded as a potential threat to *how* the national population should be reproduced. From the governments' perspectives, marriage migration both contributes to and undermines so-called "population security" (Barabantseva, this issue). No single solution is likely; what is critical is to appreciate the complexities, make the silenced voices heard, and problematize how the dominant order is achieved. To this end, detailed, multidisciplinary, and fieldwork-based studies are particularly valuable. Such careful scrutiny of the fast-changing realities in the governance of marriage migration may well provide opportunities for broader theoretical innovation.

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## Notes

- 1 Haimei Shen’s (2014) presentation at the “Governing Marriage Migration” conference, where these and other papers were first shared, shows that the inflow of foreign wives from Southeast Asia to southwest China is a reaction to the demographic imbalance created by the outmigration of local women to other parts of China, which is in turn conditioned by regional disparity, ethnic relations, and China’s economic development in general.

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