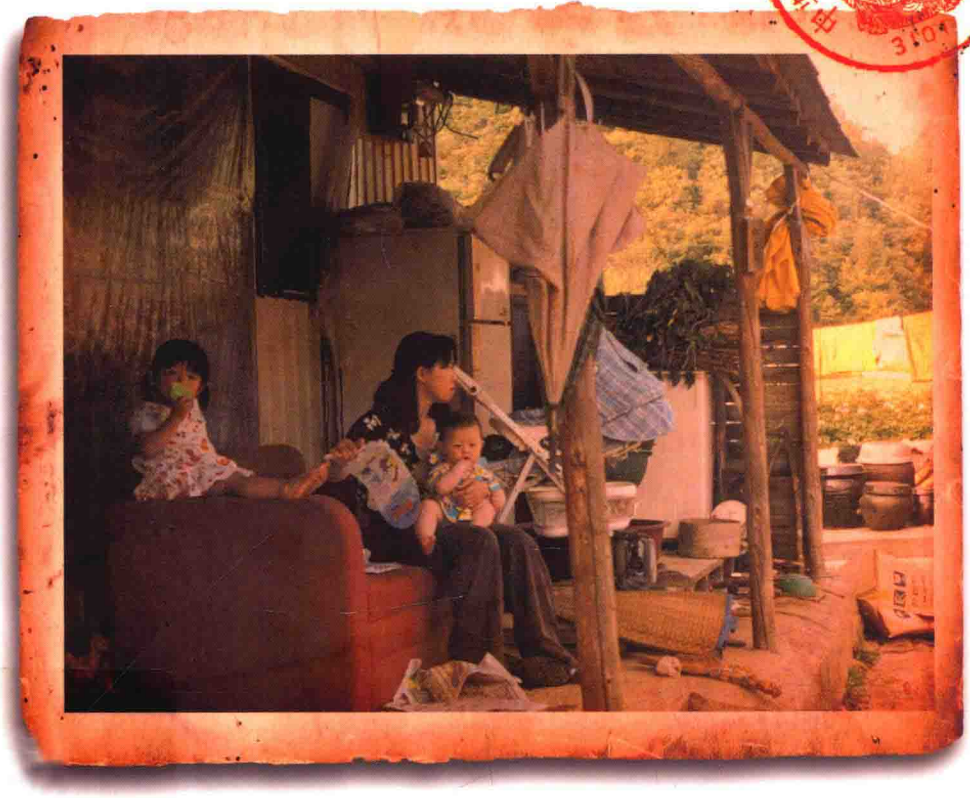
MAKING AND FAKING KINSHIP

Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea



CAREN FREEMAN

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Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea

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Making and Faking Kinship

For my parents

Acknowledgments

This book was more than a decade in the making. Over this long period, I received a tremendous amount of support—financial, intellectual, logistical, emotional, and familial—from many different sources. The people to whom I owe the greatest thanks remain anonymous in order to protect their privacy: the Chosŏnjok and South Korean families and individuals who gave so generously of their time and let me into their hearts and homes. I am especially grateful to my host families in Harbin, Mudanjiang, and Creek Road Village who cared for me as if I were one of their own. Without them this project would not have been possible.

While in the field, I was sustained by many friendships, new and old. I thank Shin Seungnam ("Ŏnni") for sharing her home with me in Seoul, answering my incessant questions, and helping me track down information related to my research. Jung Hyeouk assisted me in countless ways as a close friend and confidante. I am also grateful to Shin Jongjin for his readiness to help me, whether in Seoul or in Charlottesville. I could not have secured and carried out interviews with dozens of South Korean farmers

and their Chosŏnjok brides without the assistance of my patient and intrepid research assistants, Kim Kyŏngŭn and Kim Chiyŏng, and, on my first rural excursion, Kim Hyunjoo.

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Throughout the process of writing and revision, I benefited from the opportunity to present my ideas and receive critical feedback as a participant on numerous conference panels. Sections of this book were presented at the 2001, 2002, 2005, 2007, and 2008 meetings of the American Anthropological Association and the 2001 and 2010 meetings of the Association for Asian Studies. These forums helped me crystallize my thoughts for chapters 2 through 5. Some of the ethnographic vignettes in this book were published earlier in Nicole Constable's edited volume *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia* (2005), which grew out of

the 2001 conference panels. Nicole's enthusiastic interest in my work and the inspiring example of her own research and writing fueled my determination to turn this project into a book. Her careful reading of an early draft contributed greatly to the final version.

I also acknowledge the immensely helpful comments provided by one anonymous reviewer and Nancy Abelmann. Nancy's editorial insight resulted in a more tightly constructed, ethnography-centered book with more suggestive titles and subheadings. Thanks also go to Nancy for coming up with the book's evocative title. Clark Sorensen helped me track down details on Chosŏnjok settlement patterns and handed me an interesting question to ponder: How does a researcher define what is "old" and "new" when studying a population as complexly positioned between the currents of "Korean" and "Chinese" history? Further reflection must await future publication. At Cornell University Press, I am extremely thankful to Roger Haydon for his lightning-quick feedback, persistent encouragement, and editorial expertise throughout revision and publication. I am also grateful to Candace J. Akins and Martha Walsh.

I began what turned out to be an inordinately long, drawn-out process of writing by giving birth to my son, Benhui. Along the way my daughter, Sohie, was born. With their boundless desire for my undivided attention, they constituted the greatest obstacle in the timely completion of this project but also my greatest joy in life. A number of friends provided moral support, proofreading, and/or childcare assistance at various stages: Holly Lord, Tania Grasso, Emily Snelling, Robin Edwards, Karen Rifkin, Sivan Sherman, Hilary Steinitz, Rachel Miller, and my sister, Cyndilee Kosloff. For making sure I got a minimum dose of exercise and fresh air each day, I thank Chula and Cecil (both of whom I miss profoundly) and Meimei. I never could have managed to see this project to the end without the expert childcare and nutritious Korean meals provided by my parents-in-law, Hyunjung and Keysun Ryang. Eugene Ryang tolerated our transnational relationship through nearly two years of fieldwork and has stood by me throughout the travails of writing and parenting. With his constant exhortations to rest, exercise, and strive for a "balanced life," I emerged from the writing phase much healthier and more spiritually centered than I might otherwise have been. Most of all, I thank my parents, Stanton and Rita Freeman, to whom this book is dedicated. They encouraged and enabled me to pursue my wanderlust early on, which eventually led me to the study of anthropology.

Notes on Language and Translations

Romanization

I have followed the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization for Korean words and names. Chinese terms and names are romanized in pinyin. For the names of authors, I use the romanization that appears in their publications. I render the names of friends according to their preferred method of romanization. Names appear according to the Korean and Chinese practice of putting the family name before the first name, except where individual preference dictates the English convention of surname last.

Translations

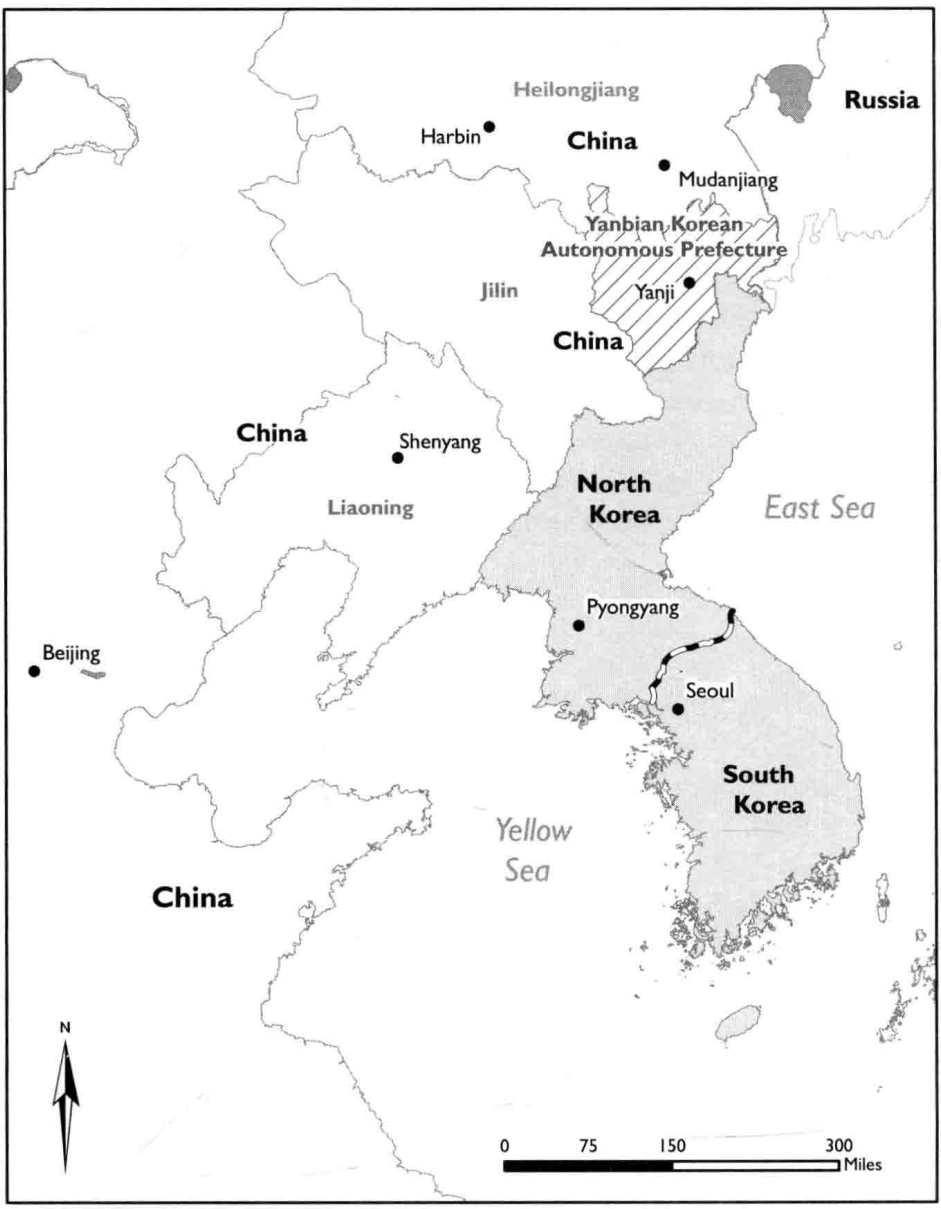
Translations of native terms appear in either Korean or Chinese, reflecting the language that was used by my research subjects. Most Chosŏnjok employed a mixture of both languages when speaking to me, and thus

Chinese and Korean terms may alternately appear in passages attributed to a single individual. In referring to concepts that are used by both Korean and Chinese speakers, I provide translations in both languages. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Korea and Koreans

While some scholars use the term "Korean Chinese" to refer to Koreans who reside in the People's Republic of China, I follow the subjective naming practices of my research subjects who refer to themselves as Chosŏnjok (Chaoxianzu in Chinese). When referring to the Republic of Korea (ROK), I am careful to use "South Korea" rather than simply "Korea." I follow this practice to help bear in mind that North Korea (DPRK), as a political and geographic territory, stands between the nations of China and South Korea. Only when the context makes it clearly unambiguous, do I drop the geopolitical modifier and refer to South Korea as Korea.

Making and Faking Kinship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Introduction

I first learned about transnational marriages between Chosŏnjok women and South Korean men in 1995 while reading the *Korea Times* one morning on the subway in Seoul. I had been casting about for some time for a research topic that would allow me to draw upon my decade-long acquaintance with China, further explore a newfound interest in South Korea, and build on theoretical interests in kinship, gender, and transnationalism I had been cultivating. The editorial I read that morning struck me as a winning lottery ticket, the prize being a project ideally suited to this particular combination of personal and academic interests.

The article was written by David Steinberg, a scholar of South Korean society whose insightful commentaries appeared in a weekly editorial column. In this particular essay, Steinberg described a "quiet rural social crisis" under way in the South Korean countryside concerning the inability of hundreds of thousands of rural bachelors across the country to find marriage partners. South Korean women en masse, like their counterparts in

Japan[1] and Taiwan and even outside the continent in Ireland,[2] have largely rejected rural matrimony and the drudgery of rural living presumed to go along with it, setting their sights instead on city-dwelling husbands. What was unique to the situation in South Korea, and what I was most surprised to learn from the article, were the measures being taken by the South Korean government to redress the shortage of rural brides: government-funded matchmakers were leading groups of farmers on week-long "marriage tours" to northeastern China where they were expected to fare better in the competition for local brides.

Home to nearly two million ethnic Koreans or Chosŏnjok[3] (*Chaoxianzu*), northeastern China was viewed in the early 1990s as an ideal source of potential brides for South Korea's bachelor farmers and, as I would later discover, for other men on the margins of South Korea's marriage market, including unskilled workers, divorcees, widowers, and the disabled. Between 1990—when marriages between women in China and men in South Korea first began—and 1998 when I set out to do the research for this project, tens of thousands of Chosŏnjok women had stepped forward to fill the vacancies in South Korean households in villages, small towns, and cities throughout the peninsula (Kang 1998).[4] By the time I arrived in the field, the project of supplying Chosŏnjok brides for South Korean men was no longer primarily a government-funded initiative. A host of profit-seeking marriage brokers had come to dominate the business of leading marriage tours to northeastern China.[5]

South Korea has since witnessed an extraordinary rise in the number of foreign brides entering the country, not just from China but from other

1. Kelsky 2001, 1–2; Burgess 2004.

2. Gilot 1998; "Irish Farmers' Need for Wives Becomes Calendar Fodder," *Korea Times,* February 4, 1999, p. 10.

3. "Chosŏn" derives from the name of the last dynasty on the Korean peninsula before Japanese colonization. Ethnic Koreans who migrated to northeastern China as early as the late seventeenth century and throughout the early twentieth century were officially recognized in 1945 as an ethnic minority in the People's Republic of China under the name of Chosŏnjok or "the Chosŏn nationality." North Koreans also use *Chosŏn* to refer to their country, while South Koreans use the term *Han'guk*.

4. By the end of 1999 the number of marriages between Chinese (predominantly Chosŏnjok) women and South Korean men totaled 37,171; by 2005 the figure had nearly doubled to reach 70,163 (Lim 2010, 65).

5. In 2009 more than 1,200 agencies were officially registered as international marriage brokers (Kwon 2010).

countries in the region, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Mongolia, Cambodia, and Russia. By 2005, thirty-six percent of South Korean men in rural areas were reportedly married to foreign brides (HK Lee 2007, 9).[6] Amid predictions that households with migrant women will comprise twenty percent of the total number of South Korean households by the year 2020 (HM Kim 2007, 101), the "multicultural family" as it is now called in South Korea is a rapidly escalating social and political issue, spawning a broad-based public debate as well as myriad popular culture representations[7] and legislative initiatives. This book documents the first spate of international marriages that grew out of the evolving political, economic, and demographic circumstances within and between China and South Korea during the 1990s. An in-depth ethnographic look at the complex cultural logics surrounding this earlier wave of migrant brides will enable us to understand the historical precedents of what has become a steadily growing and contentious phenomenon in South Korea today.

Looked at from the Chinese side, the exodus of Chosŏnjok brides to South Korea emerged in the broader context of rapid marketization and globalization of the national economy and the increasing opportunities for spatial mobility that accompanied these twin processes. Anthropologists have examined patterns of domestic and transnational mobility among diverse segments of the population in China's post-1978 economic reform period, including overseas Chinese entrepreneurs shuttling across the Pacific (Ong 1997, 1999), migrant workers moving to special economic zones within China (CK Lee 1997, 1998), Chinese scholars sojourning abroad (Liu 1997), and the vast "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) of peasant migrants moving to cities throughout China (Zhang 2001a, 2001b; Solinger 1999). Less attention has been paid to how the new and increasingly transnational dimensions of social and spatial mobility have affected the lives of China's minority nationalities. The popular perception that China's minorities live in isolated enclaves on the political, social, and economic periphery of the Han Chinese world, presumably far removed from regional

6. Cho Uhn (2005) puts the proportion of rural households with foreign brides in 2005 at 27.2 percent, or 11.7 percent of *all* marriages in South Korea (28). Tim Lim (2010), citing South Korean government statistics, asserts that "multicultural marriages" comprised 13.6 percent of all marriages in South Korea in 2005, dropping to 11.9 percent in 2006 (65).

7. See Epstein 2009.

and transnational networks of mobility, makes it perhaps startling to note that in the late 1990s, the Chosŏnjok had higher rates of mobility than any other nationality in the People's Republic of China (PRC), including the Han Chinese (Zheng 1998, 74).

The unique opportunities for geographic mobility open to the Chosŏnjok in the 1990s were to a large extent created by the restructuring of political and economic relations between the Chinese and South Korean nations and their complementary economic requirements. The opening of China's doors to the global economy in the post-Mao period coincided with the emergence of labor shortages in the rapidly industrializing South Korean economy as well as bride shortages in the South Korean countryside, itself a consequence of earlier migrations by women to South Korean cities. In response, South Korean capitalists have invested heavily in China's northern and northeastern provinces, and China's Chosŏnjok population has helped redress the shortage of both wives and workers in South Korea. By 2001, it is estimated that there were 200,000 Chosŏnjok migrants living, either legally or illegally, in South Korea (J Lee 2001, 129).

Although the symbiotic needs served by the back-and-forth movement of people between the two countries were clearly important in explaining the surge of Chosŏnjok brides (and other migrants) into South Korea, some empirical questions prompted me to undertake this research. What exactly was entailed in a "marriage tour," and why would the South Korean government promote and facilitate this type of transnational matchmaking? Even more perplexing, why would large numbers of Chosŏnjok women opt to marry South Korean farmers and poor workers when few South Korean women would deign to marry them? The sudden appeal of foreign brides for South Korean farmers and blue-collar workers could be understood in light of their widespread marital predicament, but it was less clear what motivated women from China to venture so far from home and across national borders to marry into the lowest rungs of South Korean society. Were Chosŏnjok women being coerced into transnational unions by impoverished families who could not afford to support them? Or was northeastern China such a dreary place compared to the South Korean countryside that women themselves were actively seeking South Korean marriage partners as a pathway to upward mobility? With respect to the business of matchmaking, how did commercial marriage brokers and their clientele differ from the matchmakers dispatched with government funding to northeastern China?