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# CROSS ... BORDER MARRIAGES WITH ASIAN CHARACTERISTICS

Edited By  
Hong-Zen Wang &  
Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao

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# CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES WITH ASIAN CHARACTERISTICS

*Edited by*

**Hong-Zen Wang and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao**



**Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies**

Research Center for Humanities & Social Sciences

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Hong-Zen Wang and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao  
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# Gender, Family and State in East Asian Cross-Border Marriages

*Hong-Zen Wang and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao*

## I. Introduction

After several decades of an economic boom, East Asian societies have experienced many aspects of rapid social changes; and of these, a major change in “population composition”. Societies which had imagined that they were of a homogeneous type, and had consisted much the same ethnic group, had long ignored the fact that they actually comprised many different ethnic groups; each residing in the same geographic space (Lie 2001). It was not until late 1990s that they began to perceive this diversity of differing ethnic groups living together. Such a demographic compositional change had been the result of increasing interconnections, the development of inter-regional economies, and the frequent travel of the peoples in this region.

After the Plaza Agreement of 1986, mass capital from the three East Asian countries, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, poured into Southeast Asia and China. Accompanying this capital flow, skilled labour from these countries moved back and forth between the homeland and host countries, thus creating a cross-regional highly skilled labour market (Wang 2008). In addition, better developments in communications also facilitated the movements of people to other countries either for travel or study (Jones and Shen 2008). By the close of 2007, the above three East Asian countries had mutually exempted travel visa requirement for short-term tourist visitors, which was to become a future basis for possible free labour movement throughout the region. After the appreciation of the Yen, in the 1980s, increasing numbers of Japanese tourists travelled to neighbouring countries, and likewise Taiwanese and Korean tourists in the 1990s. In early 1980s, the Taiwan government lifted

its overseas travel restrictions, and also restrictions on capital investment in Southeast Asian; and thence Mainland China in the late 1980s. Thus was created the opportunity for contacts between the peoples of East and Southeast Asia. The Japanese government tended to increase the numbers of students coming to Japan for study, and to relax its regulations governing overseas student visas and employment requirements, in the late 1980s (Nakamatsu this volume).

Contacts among the peoples of the region also resulted from the labour-shortage problems in the three countries, thus began the importation of "cheap" labour from such poorer bordering countries as Mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Both Korea and Japan had adopted "trainee schemes" so as to hire cheap labour, and thus to void the effects of their respective government's local minimum wage protection policies. In addition to the trainee schemes, a preference to import "same blood" ethnic groups, like *Josunjok* or *Nikkeijin*, whereby it was imagined cultural and language barriers to the low-skilled workers in the domestic markets of the host societies, would be avoided. In Taiwan, although Chinese migrant workers had been proposed by domestic capitalists in the late 1980s, and the early 1990s, it had been ruled out by the government upon the basis of national security (Tseng 2004), but in the end the "guest-worker scheme" as employed by the Singapore government came to be adopted. Yamanaka (this volume). This demonstrates how in the 1990s, the global economic restructuring in this region, contributed to the influxes of migrant workers. Increasing contacts between local citizens and foreign nationals, were also to result in cross-border marriages.

Though the changing global economic and social contexts help the increase of contacts among people in this region, it did not necessarily always give rise to cross-border marriages. Two major domestic factors, i.e., marriage squeeze, and an ageing society, increased the need to widen domestic marriage markets. A man (or, a woman) may suffer the effects of a marriage squeeze when they are excluded from the marriage market; these may be due to a variety of reasons, e.g., imbalance sex ratio of births in China tend to squeeze marriage market for males, there resulting thence an insufficiency of marriageable females. Or a society sees the mate-matching should be of a higher social economic status: the male marrying a female of a lower social economic status female, will disadvantage males of a lower social economic status in the marriage market, and so might they be squeezed out the market. As the data

shows, most cross-border marriages in these countries are those of men of lower social economic status, marrying women from less developed countries like China, Vietnam or the Philippines. It might be the result of a marriage squeeze of men, who could not find “suitable” women in the domestic marriage market, no matter the reason thereof. (Kojima this volume) points out that in East and South Asian countries, including China and India, sex ratio imbalances at marriageable ages is beginning to occur; this being the result of imbalances in the sex ratio of births that have continued since the beginning of the 1980s. Accordingly, the marriage squeeze for men is expected to persist well into the future throughout the whole of Asia.

Another key factor promoting cross-border marriages in this region is the rapid ageing of the population, and this together with a declining fertility rate. A low fertility rate is due to a lower marriage rate, and it also relates to the marriage squeeze; here men of lower educational, or lower social economic, status are unable to marry, or do not seek to marry women of a higher level of education. The narrowing educational gap between men and women in this region means that those men with “traditional hypergamy views” of marriage would not be able to find a mate matching their expectations. Regarding the rapidly ageing population, governments of this region still expect that the elderly care should be the responsibility of the family. As a result is the newly-rich middle classes may employ domestic helpers to alleviate the burden of caring of the elderly, but low income families have no means to resort to such measures, other than to seek marriage with a “traditional wife” in order to help with domestic work and so cope also with this deficiency in the caring of the elderly.

## II. Common Features of Cross-Border Marriages

Cross-border marriage is not new to the history of East Asia, nor does it differ in this respect in the cultures of other regions. At least three common features generally characteristic of East Asian cross-border marriages, i.e., co-ethnic marriages, hypergamy marriages, and the masculine culture in cross-border marriages.

In the three East Asian countries there is a high percentage of co-ethnic marriages (Jones and Shen 2008: 13, table 6). In Taiwan, more than two-thirds of the immigrants are from Mainland China (or PRC),



and most of the female immigrants from Indonesian are ethnic Hakka Chinese, viz., the cross-border marriages amounts to 75% ethnic Chinese. In Korea, Chinese "*Josunjok*" (overseas ethnic Korean) constitute the major group to seek marriage with South Korean partners, amounting to two-thirds of the cross-border marriages. Cross-border marriages with Japanese also constitute an important role; many are Japanese Koreans who were forcibly moved to Japan before 1945. Such co-ethnic marriage phenomena are not particularly different from other cross-border marriage areas, where people seek partners from the same overseas ethnic groups (Thai 2008).

Hypergamy seems to be a common phenomenon world-wide, thus we find more women from the less developed countries seek to marry men in the economically better-developed countries, e.g., Chinese or Filipina women seek to marry Japanese or Taiwanese men. In year of 2006 the GNP per capita of Japan, Korea, and Taiwan totaled, respectively: US\$24,431, US\$18,164, and US\$15,565; while that of Vietnam, the Philippines and China, respectively, totaled: US\$673, US\$1,356, and US\$2,055 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2008). Such an income gap naturally explain in part the reasons why some women in these countries decide to move and seek cross-border marriages in the expectation of a better life, whether or not for the betterment of their own situation, or for that of their natal families. The economic development gap allows men in regions of a more developed economy, considerable advantages in their search for potential partners in a much wider marriage market outside their national boundaries. However, we might be cautious when cite this concept, as Constable (2005) says: it is useful only insofar as it can be used to raise questions rather than to foreclose on them. The female movement through marriage is the outcome of mixed motivations that are embedded in quite different social structures, these cannot be reduced to a single economic factor.

If we look at cross-border marriages from feminist perspective, we will find out that gender culture plays a key role in the process. Like the concepts in literature, to the effect that Western men tend to seek "traditional woman with their characteristic feminine traits". Men of East Asia also imagine that women from less developed countries have not yet lost such "merits", as the man who married a Chinese said "when I return home after work, my wife will bring a basin to wash my feet." What Taiwanese woman would stoop to do that?" (Wang and Tien, this volume). Masculinity can also be expressed in other ways, for instance,

the Japanese man who decided to marry a Filipina entertainer when he learned that she did not save money for her kidney problem, but instead had sent money home to help her natal family, and so was willing to sacrifice her health; he felt, "I really need to help her" (Suzuki, this volume). A man with such a gender view is not actually searching for a native woman or a foreign woman, but, rather, a traditional woman. Such a masculinity culture exists both in the West and in the East, and should be found to constitute an important factor in the promotion of cross-border marriages which, up to now, has not been widely discussed in the literature.

### III. Cross-Border Marriages with Asian Characteristics

So one might ask "what are the features of East Asian cross-border marriage—if they are not so different from those of other societies?" Here we would like to point out which factors are East Asian specific, and which lie behind the currents of cross-border marriages in this region.

The most salient feature of East Asian cross-border marriages that differs from Western marriages, is that marriage is not solely an individual choice, but is one embedded in the family and is also one with a long-established place in the community. Though these countries have experienced rapid industrialization and the family structures seem to converge towards a "nuclear" family: the ideal life of the individual is to marry a partner along with family members and to live jointly with them. In Chinese tradition, it is important to have a son to inherit family property, and to worship his ancestral forebears, as Confucius says "without a child is the most unfilial thing" in one's life (*buxiao you san, wuhou wei da*). Both in Japan and in Korea, men are expected to inherit the family property and status. Therefore, marriage in East Asian societies is not only the individual's preference, but also that of the family.

Group pressure to marry not only comes from family, but also from the society. Any deviance from the norms will soon be noticed and discussed, and in daily interactions the individual will feel the pressure. Some men might not like to marry, but after the "suitable marriageable age", their family members, friends or colleagues will keep on asking them "why not marry". In Japan, a man not marrying after marriageable age is regarded by his surrounding people as "*nureochiba*", man who is useless and gets in the way like wet dead leaves (Suzuki, this volume).