

INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES IN SOUTH KOREA: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIONALITY AND ETHNICITY

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International marriage has increased drastically in South Korea in recent years, and by 2005, 13.6 per cent of marriages involved a foreign spouse. The purpose of this study is twofold: to explore the demographic demand and supply of foreign spouses in the marriage market in South Korea, and to examine how social positions of foreign wives vary by their place in the marriage market as determined by their nationality and ethnicity. Data show that the demand for foreign spouses is particularly strong among rural never-married and urban divorced Korean men. Among foreign wives, Chinese, especially Korean Chinese, tend to marry divorced Koreans, partly because many of them have also been married before. The Korean Chinese are the most autonomous among five groups of foreign wives examined, showing the highest rates of Korean citizenship, divorce-separation, and employment. Southeast Asian women tend to marry rural never-married men, and they are the most adaptive to the host society in the way they show among the highest rates of Korean citizenship and employment (after controlling for their poor Korean proficiency and short duration in Korea). Their divorce-separation rate is the lowest regardless of such control. This study demonstrates that marriage migrants' adaptation to the host society differs significantly by nationality and ethnic origin.

Keywords: International marriage, South Korea, citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, remarriage, Chinese, Southeast Asian

International marriages and multiethnic families are becoming important current topics in the media and in national politics in South Korea. Heins Ward, who is black and a distinguished football player in the United States, was the top news story during the ten days he visited South Korea with his Korean mother in April 2006. The media frenzy touched various issues never publicly discussed before, especially regarding discrimination against mixed-race children in Korea. Owing to this outcry, the government promised legislation recognizing the citizenship of children of cohabiting international couples.¹

International marriages through the 1980s were largely restricted to Korean women marrying foreign husbands, and most of them lived in a foreign country.

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Many of these marriages took place in the context of the Korean War and the continuing American military presence in South Korea (Song 1974; Park 1982; Yuh 2002). Only since the 1990s have immigrant foreign spouses become a visible population in Korea and, together with the even larger population of immigrant labourers, they have challenged the long-held image of a homogeneous Korean society. With the emergence of these immigrant populations, various agents, including human rights advocacy groups, local government offices, and scholars, have studied their social circumstances. They highlight the hardships that immigrant spouses face, including the commercialization and anonymity of broker-arranged marriages (quick matching based on superficial information about the other party); conflicts with in-laws and related violence in the family; and limited access to social services (Kim 1998; KWDC 2003; Yi 2003; Yoon 2004; Yoon and Yim 2004; Lee 2005). However, most of these studies are exploratory and use small samples.

This study attempts to provide a more comprehensive view linking the marriage patterns of foreign spouses to their social positions in the host country, using national data from marriage registration statistics and an in-depth survey of immigrant wives (including those who are divorced or separated).² We highlight the variation by nationality and ethnicity of immigrant wives, especially contrasting two major groups: Korean Chinese and Southeast Asians. The next section discusses the demographic characteristics of the marriage market, highlighting the population segments involved in international marriages. Then follows a brief reflection on the social circumstances other than demographic that facilitate international marriages. The third section uses data from a national survey of 945 foreign wives (Seol *et al.* 2005) and examines their social positions in South Korea using multivariate analysis. Then follows a conclusion.

Demography of the marriage market in South Korea

In South Korea the percentage of total marriages that involve a foreign spouse increased threefold over the four-year period between 2001 and 2005, from 4.6 to 13.6 per cent (see Table 1). The theories of international labour migration view labour shortages in receiving societies as a primary cause of worker immigration, but labour shortage is usually limited to or particularly severe in certain segments of the structurally differentiated labour markets (Massey *et al.* 1993). National data, such as marriage registration and population census statistics, show that international marriage is particularly relevant to two groups of men, never-married men in rural areas and previously married men of low socio-economic status in urban areas, although the most recent reports suggest that international marriage is becoming more prevalent also among urban never-married men (Seoul Economy 2006).

Rural never-married men

With the rapid pace of industrialization from the 1960s, many rural young women migrated to urban areas for factory jobs; sex-selective rural–urban migration continued in the 1980s while the service sector expanded. Therefore, the sex imbalance in the rural population has worsened through the past few decades. For example, in rural villages (*myun* areas), for ages 20–24 the sex ratios (number of males per 100 females) were 126, 151, 188, and 162 in 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, respectively. The analogous numbers for ages 25–29 were slightly lower but still above 100, reach-

Table 1 Percentage of marriages that involve a foreign spouse, South Korea, 2001–2005

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Foreign wife	3.1	3.6	6.3	8.2	9.8
Foreign husband	1.6	1.6	2.1	3.2	3.8
Total	4.6	5.2	8.4	11.4	13.6
Number of international marriages	15,234	15,193	25,658	35,447	43,121

Source: Marriage registration statistics (KNSO 2005).

ing 131 in 2000 (KNSO 2005). The sex imbalance among single rural people is more severe: in 2000, for ages 25–29 and 30–34, sex ratios among never-married persons were more than 300 in rural villages (*myun*) and more than 200 in town areas (*eup*).³ It is not surprising that about one in four (27 per cent in 2004) marriages in rural areas involve foreign wives.

Marriage registration statistics show that more than 50 per cent of foreign wives live in provincial areas, containing medium and small cities as well as rural towns and villages,⁴ whereas only about 40 per cent of foreign husbands do so (Table 2). Provincial residence is most common among wives from Southeast Asia, at about 70 per cent. Among foreign husbands, provincial residence does not vary by nationality.

In the next 20 years, the male excess among rural young adults is expected to worsen as the cohorts born in the 1980s and 1990s reach marriageable age. The sex ratio at birth went beyond 110 in the mid-1980s and reached a peak, 116.5, in 1990. Since then it has steadily fallen but is still above the natural ratio of 105–106: it was 110 in 2002 and then 108 in 2004. In 2005 the male excess was the greatest for ages 10–19 and the next highest for ages 0–9, foretelling a still worse sex imbalance for young adult males looking for brides in the coming years. Thus, a shortage of females may be observed even in some urban areas.

Divorced men

Less well known than the increase in foreign wives in rural areas is the increasing trend of divorced men marrying foreigners. Nationally, divorce rates increased rapidly during the past decade. The crude divorce rate (number of divorces per year per 1000 population) was only 1.1 in 1990 but it reached 3.5 by 2003; it fell back to 2.9 in 2004 and 2.6 in 2005, which is still double the level of a decade ago (Figure 1). Ages at divorce are concentrated in the thirties among men and more evenly distributed in the twenties and thirties among women. Remarriages make up an increasing proportion of all marriages: in 1990 about one in ten marriages involved remarriage of either spouse or both, but in 2004 and 2005 a quarter of all marriages were in this category (Figure 2; KNSO 2005).

Marriage registration data show that remarriages constitute a much larger proportion among international marriages than in the national total. Among Korean men

Table 2 Recent trends in international marriages by nationality of foreign spouse and marriage order, South Korea, 2001–2005, percentages

Country/ nationality	Korean husband– foreign wife					Korean wife– foreign husband					
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	
% of foreign spouses who live in rural provinces ^a											
	Foreign wife					Foreign husband					
China	52	52	49	49	49	Japan	31	34	35	40	37
Philippines	68	70	72	61	69	China	34	42	40	44	42
Vietnam	48	64	65	67	71	US	41	42	39	43	39
Thailand	71	72	64	67	70	Europe ^b	35	37	34	44	36
All nationalities	52	54	52	52	54	All nationalities	34	39	39	43	41
Distribution of marriage order of Korean spouses											
	Korean husband					Korean wife					
1st marriage	67	66	58	54	55	1st marriage	60	63	56	46	43
2nd marriage	32	33	41	45	43	2nd marriage	38	36	41	52	54
Widowed	3	4	4	4	4	Widowed	3	3	4	6	6
Divorced	29	29	37	41	39	Divorced	35	33	37	46	48
Missing	1	1	1	1	2	Missing	2	1	2	2	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	Total	100	100	100	100	100
% of foreign spouses who marry a previously married Korean spouse											
	Foreign wife					Foreign husband					
China	38	41	48	53	53	Japan	50	52	48	49	47
Philippines	20	20	22	29	29	China	22	38	68	77	79
Vietnam	26	27	29	28	26	US	22	20	23	22	21
Thailand	16	19	21	24	24	Europe ^b	13	11	9	11	9
All nationalities	32	35	40	45	43	All nationalities	38	36	41	52	54
Distribution of nationality of foreign spouses											
	Foreign wife					Foreign husband					
China	70	64	70	72	66	Japan	58	49	41	34	31
Japan	10	9	7	5	4	China	4	6	19	37	42
Southeast Asia ^c	8	15	14	15	23	US	22	25	19	14	12
Mongolia	1	2	2	2	2	Europe ^b	8	9	8	6	5
Other	11	10	7	6	5	Other	9	13	14	10	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	Total	100	100	100	100	100

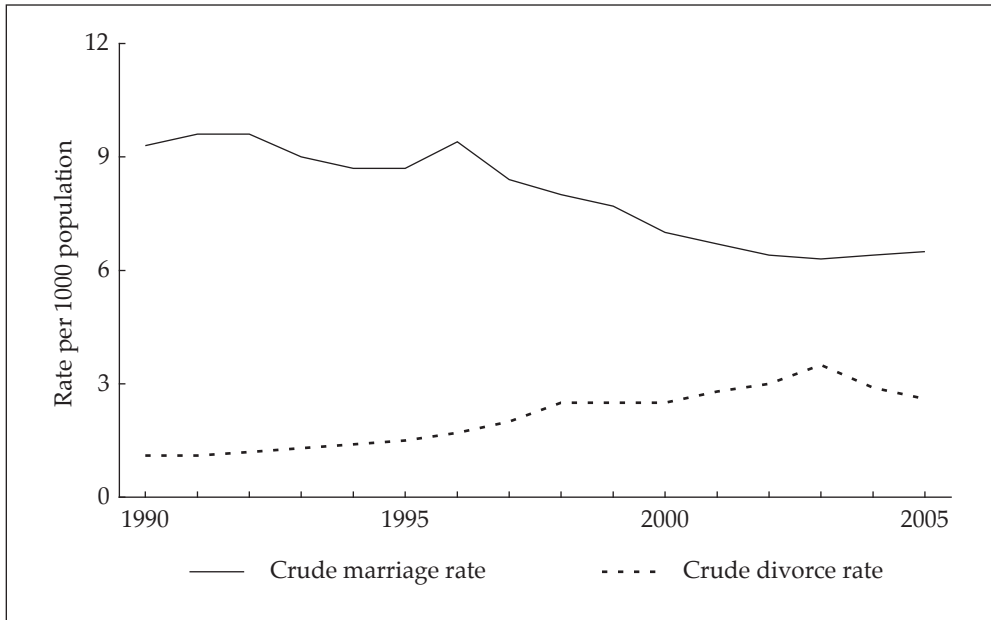
a Includes all residents in the 8 provinces containing rural villages.

b Includes Germany, France, Canada and Australia.

c Includes Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

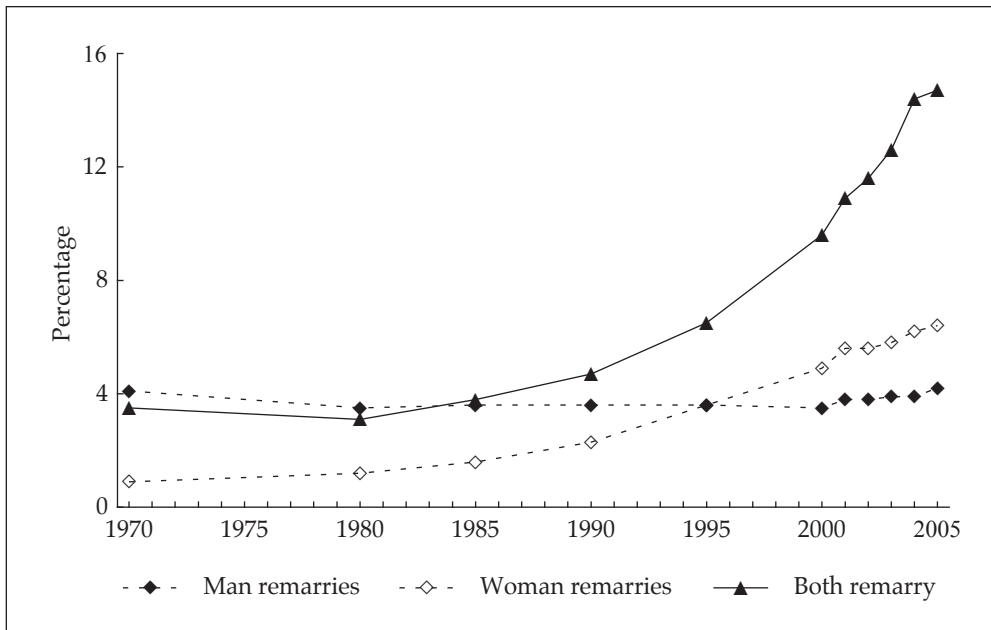
Source: Marriage registration statistics (KNSO 2005).

Figure 1 Crude marriage and divorce rates, South Korea, 1990–2005



Source: KNSO 2005.

Figure 2 Percentage of marriages involving the remarriage of either or both spouses, South Korea, 1970–2005



Source: KNSO 2005.

with international marriages in 2001, 32 per cent were remarried, but the percentage increased to 45 in 2004 (Table 2). Among Korean women marrying foreigners, the percentage remarrying rose from 38 to 52 over the same period (Table 2). Most remarrying Koreans have been divorced, and only about one in ten have been widowed (Table 2).

Interestingly, certain nationalities of foreign spouses are more likely than others to marry previously married Koreans. Chinese are substantially more likely to be involved in the remarriages of Korean spouses, compared to other groups such as Southeast Asian women or European men (Table 2). For 53 per cent of Chinese wives and 79 per cent of Chinese husbands, Korean spouses were previously married. Data in the last panel of Table 2 show that Chinese make up about two-thirds of foreign wives and about 40 per cent of foreign husbands. The high representation of Chinese spouses in international remarriage of Koreans may be partly because they themselves were previously married. Publicly released marriage registration statistics do not provide information about the marriage type of foreign spouses, but data from the Survey of Foreign Wives confirm this.

Overall, marriage registration data demonstrate that the international marriage market in Korea is differentiated by the nationality of foreign spouses, which in turn suggests that the social positions of foreign spouses may vary by nationality.

Social environments of international marriages

The demand for foreign spouses created by the recent demographic changes in Korea alone cannot explain the rapid increases in international marriage. Another important component is the availability of foreign spouses willing to marry Koreans. Whether it be marriage or labour migration, international migration is primarily driven by migrants' motivation for better economic opportunities, and globally an increasing number of women are joining the stream of international migration (Piper 2002; Park 2005). In the Survey of Foreign Wives conducted in South Korea in 2005, a majority of 945 foreign wives reported that one of their primary motives for marrying abroad was an economic one (Seol *et al.* 2005).

However, this general cost and benefit framework cannot be applied to all foreign spouses in the same manner. For example, for ethnic Koreans living in the regions of northern China and former Soviet Union republics, Korea is where their ancestors came from. Thus, they migrate to Korea mainly for economic opportunities, but also their status as a minority in the countries of residence and their ethnic ties to Korea are intensifying the migration stream (Moon 2000). For ethnic non-Koreans, some underlying social changes, which may be broadly summarized as cultural globalization, can be a factor. That is, the influences of mass media, commercial trade, and other material and cultural exchanges reduce psychological distances among countries and stimulate imagination about the destination society (Piper and Roces 2003; Teo 2003; Park 2005).

Apart from these environmental shifts, a more direct factor explaining the rapid expansion of international marriages is the institutionalization of marriage brokers (Han and Seol 2006). Dozens of brokerage firms have started in Korea recently, as international marriage brokerage is a lucrative business that requires little initial investment. Government regulations overseeing the sector have fallen behind the pace of its growth, and activities of the firms are virtually uncontrolled. These firms

often specialize in certain countries or certain regions within a country and use a chain of brokers from the grassroots to higher levels matching local women to Korean men. Korean-side brokers take Korean men to a prearranged overseas site where potential brides gather, and altogether it takes only a week or so for a man to pick the bride and have a simple wedding ceremony. Then the man comes back to Korea alone and applies for a foreign spouse visa on behalf of his wife (e.g. Chosun.com 2006). Brokerage advertisements are seen everywhere in Korea, in street placards, brochures, and newspapers. How to properly regulate this practice while meeting the needs of both men and women is a challenge to the governments on both sides (Han and Seol 2006).

Another factor supporting international marriage is the explicit and implicit policies of the central and local governments of South Korea. Obviously, demographic conditions demanding foreign workers and spouses are an underlying force influencing the policies. Some local governments in rural areas sponsor international marriages through sister-town relationships or through the help of brokerage firms, similar to practices in Japan (Satake 2004; Donga.com 2005). Many local government offices, mostly in rural areas, are now running Korean language or cooking classes designed to socialize foreign wives into the local community. Forces influencing the central government to build more immigrant-friendly policies include various civil and religious organizations advocating human rights of immigrants and their children (Lee 2003).

Lastly, the literature suggests that harsh labour immigration laws may promote international marriages as an alternative route of entry into the country. It has been observed that statistics of international marriages often run in parallel with strict immigration policies (Piper and Roces 2003). Some anecdotes support such an argument in Korea, but without systematic investigation into the issue it is hard to distinguish between these different motives.

Social positions of foreign wives by nationality and ethnicity

Marriage registration data showed that marriage patterns of foreign spouses vary by nationality. This section explores whether such a variation in marriage patterns implies a parallel variation in social positions among foreign wives, as measured by Korean citizenship, divorce or separation status, and employment. These three indicators measure foreign wives' status in a broad social spectrum across political, economic, and social areas. Citizenship in a nation state is the ultimate indicator of full legal membership in the society (Piper and Roces 2003; Park 2005). Foreign wives' labour-market activity is an indicator of economic independence, regardless of whether it is motivated by the economic needs of the family. Economic contribution to the family may mean more power and autonomy within the family. The implications of marital breakup are more complex, potentially reflecting both adverse life circumstances and foreign wives' control over their lives. Alternatively, it may indirectly indicate bogus marriages. If international marriage were a means to obtain the right to residency in South Korea for employment or other purposes, then divorce or separation may be a likely outcome once the intended goal is reached. A high rate of divorce or separation of a certain group may indicate a tendency to use marriage as a means to Korean residency, especially when assessed after other factors are controlled.

The main research question in this section is how nationality and ethnicity of foreign wives affect their social positions. One major characteristic that differentiates Chinese marriage migrants from other nationalities is that a majority of Chinese migrants are ethnic Koreans. Ethnic Koreans from China occupy a unique position among all immigrants because they have more-or-less preserved their Korean cultural traditions, including Korean language proficiency, owing to their close proximity to North Korea and to the Chinese government policy of supporting cultural autonomy for certain ethnic minorities. Furthermore, new Korean legislation, the 2004 revision of the *Koreans Abroad Law*, gave ethnic Koreans from China and former Soviet republics many legal privileges akin to those of native Koreans. Southeast Asian wives are another distinct group with rapidly growing numbers.

For the present analysis, the sample of 945 foreign wives is classified into five groups. Two groups are ethnic Koreans, the first from China, the second from all other countries, including Uzbekistan and other former Soviet Union republics, as well as Southeast Asian and other countries. The next two groups are ethnic non-Koreans: the first from Southeast Asia, more than a half of this group comprising Filipinos in our sample, although in recent years Vietnamese have predominated; the second from all other countries, including China, former Soviet Union republics, Japan, Mongolia, Bangladesh, with Chinese making up more than one-third of this group. The fifth group consists of members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, called Unification Church or *tongilgyo* in Korean. Unification Church is a religious sect advocating interracial marriages and was responsible for a large share of international marriages in Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. In this analysis they are treated as a separate group regardless of nationality or ethnicity because their marriages and marital lives are governed by their religious doctrine. A majority of Unification Church wives are from Japan, and about a quarter are from Southeast Asia. This fifth group is listed under 'Ethnic non-Korean' in Table 3.

Survey

Sponsored by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, a team of researchers conducted the Survey of Foreign Wives in 2005 (see Seol *et al.* 2005), which is the most comprehensive survey ever conducted on immigrant wives at the national level. Based on the immigrant data from the Ministry of Justice, sampling quotas for selected administrative areas were determined jointly by nationality and rural-urban distribution of foreign wives. Within the selected areas sampling frames were obtained from the local government offices and systematic samples selected. First contacts were made by telephone and, if agreed, questionnaires were provided to the respondents. In areas where sampling frames were not available, several additional approaches were used. In some small rural localities, all households were visited to find immigrant-wives. In certain urban areas, respondents were selected among people who visited the local immigration office. In many other areas, questionnaires were administered through non-government organizations. Some of these organizations specialize in legal and various other problems faced by foreign workers or spouses, current or former, while others are meant for ordinary Koreans as well as foreign workers or spouses, specifically for women or for farmers. A total of 21 such organizations across the nation were involved in the survey. Even though the survey started with sampling quotas by nationality and residence areas, with the diverse approaches to data gathering used the final outcome is not strictly a representative

Table 3 Characteristics of immigrant wives by ethnicity, origin nationality and Unification Church membership, South Korea, 2005, percentages

Characteristic	Ethnic Korean		Ethnic non-Korean			Total Sample
	Korean Chinese	Other Korean	Southeast Asian	Unification Church	Other	
Reason to enter Korea						
Marriage	86	71	75	72	61	76
Other	14	29	25	28	39	24
Years since entering Korea						
0-4	60	72	56	11	60	51
5-9	31	21	38	49	33	36
10+	9	7	6	40	7	14
Speaking Korean						
Fluently	78	32	10	14	30	40
Some	10	43	46	46	35	31
Poor	12	25	44	39	35	29
Age						
18-24	6	26	13	1	14	10
25-34	44	53	51	23	57	44
35+	50	21	36	76	29	46
Age at marriage						
15-24	22	43	32	9	27	24
25-34	46	50	51	76	56	55
35+	32	7	17	14	17	21
Previously married						
Wife only	11	10	4	1	11	7
Husband only	10	7	15	4	12	10
Both	24	8	5	3	17	14
Neither	55	75	76	92	60	69
Sample size	335	68	208	181	153	945
%	36	7	22	19	16	100

Source: Survey of Foreign Wives 2005; authors' analysis.

probability sample. However, in several characteristics, including nationality, rural or urban residence, age, and length of stay in Korea, the sample turns out to be quite representative of the foreign spouse population presented by the Ministry of Justice (Seol *et al.* 2005).

As the data are used in this study mainly for multivariate analysis and for comparisons among ethnic and nationality groups, sample representativeness is of less concern, except for the analysis of the occurrence of divorce or separation. There are two major potential sources of bias for the estimation of divorce or separation prevalence. First, foreign spouses who left Korea are not included in the sample, thus wives of the nationality groups that are more (or less) likely to leave the country after divorce or separation than are other nationality groups will be underrepresented (or overrepresented) in the survey. Another potential source of error is related to the divorced or separated foreign wives' tendency to contact non-government organizations, which were an important venue for selecting survey subjects.⁵ Unfortunately, however, it is difficult to assess the extent of such sample selectivity.⁶

Sample characteristics

Table 3 presents the characteristics of the 945 sample respondents along those variables to be used in the multivariate analysis. The five groups, Korean Chinese, other Koreans, Southeast Asians, Unification Church members, and other non-Koreans constitute 36, 7, 22, 19, and 16 per cent, respectively.⁷ Three out of four first entered Korea for the purpose of marriage, as opposed to employment, visiting relatives or friends, or other reasons. The percentage that first entered Korea for marriage is highest among Korean Chinese (86 per cent) and lowest among other non-Koreans (61 per cent). About half of the respondents came to Korea in the past five years. Ethnic Koreans from countries other than China are the most recent immigrants, while Unification Church members have resided in Korea the longest and also have been married the longest (not shown).

The five groups show substantial differences in the ability to speak the Korean language. Among Korean Chinese, 78 per cent report that they speak Korean fluently, whereas only 10 per cent of Southeast Asians report that they do so. Despite their long residence in Korea, Unification Church members are among the poorest in Korean proficiency, suggesting their distance from Korean society. Ethnic Koreans from areas other than China speak Korean as poorly as other non-Koreans, although better than Southeast Asians and Unification Church members. Ethnic Koreans living in countries other than China do not seem to have maintained the cultural and language traditions as have those in China.

Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 68, with a majority between 25 and 44 (Table 3). Age at marriage is the highest among Korean Chinese. Korean Chinese wives and their husbands are most likely to have been married before, but other non-Koreans, a third of whom are Chinese, also show a relatively high likelihood of previous marriage.

Multivariate analysis

For each indicator of social position, two columns of results are presented in Table 4. Model 1 shows the observed percentage distribution of the indicator among the five groups. Model 2 shows the predicted percentages calculated from the multivariate logit analyses of the three indicators. The explanatory variables are basically the same

Table 4 Determinants of social position indicators among immigrant wives, South Korea, 2005, percentages^a

Characteristic	Citizenship		Divorced/separated		Employed	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Group						
(Korean Chinese)	47	47	13	7	40	30
Other Korean	21 **	24 **	8	8	19 **	21
Southeast Asian	38 *	40	2 **	2 *	26 **	33
Unification Church	17 **	8 **	–	–	13 **	13 **
Other	16 **	16 **	10	9	31	32
Reason to enter Korea						
(Other)		17		3		29
Marriage		32 **		6 *		25
Years since entering Korea						
(0–4)		12		5		25
5–9		49 **		5		29
10 or more		56 **		11		24
Speaking Korean						
Fluently		33 **		5		37 **
Some		31 **		6		25 *
(Poor)		19		5		16
Age						
(18–24)		20		–		18
25–34		32		–		22
35 or older		26		–		32 **
Age at marriage						
(15–24)		–		2		–
25–34		–		7 *		–
35 or older		–		7 *		–
Previously married						
(Neither)		31		3		22
Either/both		21 *		14 **		36 **
Citizenship status						
(No)						26
Yes						28
Current marital status						
(In union)						24
Divorced or separated						59 **
Widowed or unknown						31
Overall predicted %	32	28	7	6	29	26

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

a Predicted percentages from logit analyses.

Source: Survey of Foreign Wives 2005; authors' analysis.

across the indicators with a little variation. Among the three variables of age, age at marriage, and years since entry into Korea, any two determine the third, so only the two with most relevance are put in each model. Between citizenship and divorce or separation statuses, temporal order or causal direction is ambiguous and the relationship is not tested in the analysis, while the two are included as the explanatory variables of current employment status.⁸

The binomial logit is used to analyse citizenship and employment status, and the multinomial logit is used to analyse marital status with the currently married or cohabiting status as a reference category and the widowhood and divorce–separation statuses as two alternative outcomes. We present the results only for the divorce–separation outcome. The predicted percentages represent the estimated percentages of the indicator event when all the other characteristics in the model are set constant at their mean values. An asterisk shows that the percentage is significantly different from the percentage of the reference category that is put in parentheses. Percentage differences among the other categories except the reference category are not statistically tested.

Citizenship

Model 1 shows the observed citizenship rates, that is, the percentages of respondents who received Korean citizenship among the five groups of foreign wives. The average citizenship rate in the total sample is 32 per cent. Among the Korean Chinese (the reference category), the citizenship rate is the highest at 47 per cent, and the percentage differences between the Korean Chinese and each of all four other groups is statistically significant. The citizenship rate of Southeast Asians is 38 per cent, higher than the rates for other Korean, Unification Church, and other non-Korean groups, which are 21, 17, and 16 per cent, respectively.

After taking into account reason to first enter Korea, years since entering Korea, Korean language proficiency, age, and either spouse being married before, the predicted percentages of citizenship are not statistically different between Korean Chinese and Southeast Asians (Model 2). These results in Models 1 and 2, together with the descriptive statistics in Table 2, suggest that Southeast Asians' citizenship rate is lower than that of Korean Chinese mainly because of their poorer command of the Korean language. The other three groups show still lower citizenship rates than Korean Chinese, after taking into account those factors. The predicted percentage of citizenship is the lowest among Unification Church members, consistent with their religious doctrine that does not recognize citizenship in individual nation states.

The results in Model 2 also show that the citizenship rate is higher among foreign wives who first entered Korea for the purpose of marriage than among wives who first entered Korea for other reasons. This seems to suggest that those who entered Korea for marriage have a stronger intention to be a full member of Korean society and live in Korea permanently. As citizenship acquisition requires knowledge about the history and social context of Korea as well as some level of Korean language proficiency, the citizenship rate is higher among wives who have lived longer in Korea than it is among those with shorter duration, and higher among wives with a good command of Korean than among those with less proficiency. If either spouse was previously married, then the foreign wife is less likely to have citizenship, perhaps reflecting less interest. To test whether the effect of previous marriage is due to the higher likelihood of divorce or separation, we performed additional analysis with

marital status in the model but the effect remained significant. The negative coefficient of divorce–separation was not significant (results not shown).

Divorce or separation

Model 1 shows the observed percentages of foreign wives who are divorced or separated from their Korean husbands among four groups. Unification Church members are excluded from the analysis because their divorce rate in the sample is zero, consistent with their religious doctrine. The divorce–separation rate is the highest at 13 per cent among Korean Chinese wives, but the percentage difference is statistically significant only with Southeast Asians, among whom only two per cent were divorced or separated. The divorce–separation rates of other Korean and other non-Korean groups are eight and 10 per cent, respectively, and not statistically significantly different from those of the Korean Chinese. As discussed earlier, sample selectivity is a possibility but various indirect evidence does not lead to any clear pattern of bias.

Model 2 controls for several characteristics, including reason to first enter Korea, years since entering Korea, Korean language proficiency, age at this marriage, and either spouse being married before. After taking these characteristics into account, the predicted divorce–separation rate is still significantly lower among Southeast Asians than among Korean Chinese or any other group. If these are unbiased results, then they may suggest either that Southeast Asian wives have the strongest family-centred values or that they are least likely to marry Korean men as a means to other ultimate ends, such as easier entry or secure residence in Korea for employment.

The findings in Model 2 also demonstrate that the divorce–separation rate is higher among those who first entered Korea for marriage than among those who entered Korea for other reasons. Brokers often mediate the former group's marriages, and such marriages may have more unexpected outcomes than marriages formed after women came to Korea; or the result may indicate the presence of bogus marriages. Length of stay or Korean language proficiency does not affect divorce rates. This result is contradictory to the notion of sample selectivity in terms of Korean proficiency. At the same time, the finding raises the question whether marital breakup may reflect foreign wives' control over their lives. If either spouse has been married before, the divorce rate is substantially higher than among couples in first marriages. The divorce literature commonly discusses a higher divorce rate for remarriages than for first marriages even among domestic couples, but the percentage difference is so substantial there may be other related circumstances. Wives who marry at age 25 or older have a higher divorce rate than those who marry at earlier ages. The literature discusses the possibility that marriage may be used for easier entry or stable residence in Korea. To test this view, we included citizenship in the model, but the negative association was not significant (result not shown).

Employment

The observed employment rates among the five groups of foreign wives are presented in Model 1. On average, 29 per cent of foreign wives are employed. Again, the employment rate is highest among Korean Chinese at 40 per cent, and the percentage difference between Korean Chinese and each of the other groups is statistically significant except for other non-Koreans, among whom 31 per cent are employed. Thus, whether ethnic Koreans or not, wives from China tend to have high employment

rates. The employment rates among Southeast Asians, other Koreans, and Unification Church members are 26, 19, and 13 per cent, respectively.

Model 2 examines the same explanatory variables as those in the citizenship analysis but also includes citizenship and divorce–separation as two statuses preceding the current employment status. After other characteristics are controlled, only Unification Church members show a significantly lower employment rate than Korean Chinese, 13 and 30 per cent, respectively. Employment rates of other Koreans and Southeast Asians are no longer lower than that of Korean Chinese. This means that, as in the case of citizenship status, Southeast Asians have a lower observed employment rate than Korean Chinese mainly because of their poorer command of the Korean language, lower divorce rate, and younger ages. Other Koreans show a pattern similar to the difference with Korean Chinese but they show a lower level of employment than Southeast Asians.

Korean proficiency, not reason for first entering Korea or years since entering Korea, leads to employment. Women under 35 have a lower employment rate than older women, probably because of child bearing and rearing. Citizenship status has no direct effect on employment, suggesting that legal or political membership is independent of social participation. Divorced or separated women show a higher employment rate than currently married women, reflecting their economic independence.

Summary characteristics of the five groups

Findings from the multivariate analysis show that Korean Chinese may be characterized as the most autonomous among the five groups compared. They show the highest rates of Korean citizenship, divorce–separation, and employment. Their high divorce rate is largely explained by the high rate of either spouse having married before and high age at marriage, but the rate is still high even after controlling for these characteristics. The question why so many of those Korean Chinese who marry Koreans divorce or separate needs to be explored in future research, but some speculations are possible. It may be that since divorce rates are increasing in China (unrelated to Korean ethnicity) social pressure pushes those divorcees to remarry internationally (*New York Times* 2005), while at the same time remarriages are generally more likely to end in divorce than first marriages (Cherlin 1992). Another possibility is that at least some of those international marriages are bogus marriages, that is, some Korean Chinese may have divorced to remarry Koreans. A survey has not been conducted on foreign husbands, but marriage registration statistics showed that 8 of 10 Chinese men marry previously married Korean women, suggesting that they also could have been previously married. Also the composition of Chinese among all foreign husbands increased 10 times just over the four-year period, from 4 per cent in 2001 to 42 per cent in 2005. These drastic changes with regard to Chinese composition in the marriage market may reflect some artificial trend, bogus marriages, but with these aggregate data alone it is hard to estimate how pervasive the practice is (Han and Seol 2006).

The Korean government enacted in 1999 the *Law Regarding the Immigration and Legal Status of Koreans Abroad*, which gives Koreans abroad (*dongpo*) the same rights granted to Korean citizens in the areas of employment, financial and real estate transactions, and participation in national health insurance if they stay in Korea for long. Only with the revision of 2004 was the law made applicable to ethnic Koreans living in China and republics of the former Soviet Union (Ministry of Justice 2005), but the

documentation required for initial entry visas and periodic renewals is substantial (Seol *et al.* 2005). Thus the demand for bogus marriage may not diminish substantially in a short period. Most Koreans living in China and republics of the former Soviet Union are the descendants of refugees forced out of Korea under the harsh Japanese colonialism during the first half of the twentieth century. Currently they are ethnic minorities in those countries, and strengthening nationalism in some of the new republics of the former Soviet Union pushes Koreans to relocate again (Kim 2005). The migration stream of Korean Chinese will continue but with the new legislation allowing Korean Abroad visas, a demand for unwanted foreign-spouse visas may disappear in the future.

If Korean Chinese are the most autonomous, Southeast Asians are the most adaptive to the host society. Their observed rates of Korean citizenship and employment are lower than those of Korean Chinese, but once years since entering Korea and Korean proficiency are taken into account, the rates are no longer significantly different. Also, the divorce or separation rate is considerably lower than for other nationalities or ethnicities except for Unification Church members. It appears that Southeast Asian wives are determined to be full members of their married-in families and of Korean society.

In contrast to ethnic Koreans from China, Koreans from areas other than China turn out to be the most maladaptive. Their Korean citizenship and employment rates are low, whether or not years since entering Korea and Korean proficiency are controlled. At the same time, their divorce–separation rate is as high as that of Korean Chinese. Being the most recent immigrants and coming from various countries, these wives may not have adequate social support networks, and they do not even speak the Korean language well. And yet, since they are ethnic Koreans, expectations about their social integration may be high among both themselves and the people around them, and such a gap between expectation and reality may cause a problem. Public and private support seems to be needed.

Other non-Koreans, that is, ethnic non-Koreans who are not Southeast Asian and not Family Federation, may be characterized as struggling: being autonomous while remaining foreign. As mentioned, more than a third of them are from China. With high rates of divorce or separation and a high rate of employment, they are similar to Korean Chinese in their autonomy level as well as in the possibility of their marriages being bogus. But their Korean citizenship rate is low, suggesting they are not yet fully incorporated into the society. Lastly, Unification Church members seem to be internally oriented and very much secluded from the host society. They show the lowest rates in all three indicators. They are physically located in the land of Korea but do not seem to be interested in full social integration.

Summary and conclusion

International marriage has increased drastically in South Korea. The percentage of total marriages to a foreign spouse increased threefold from 4.6 to 13.6 in the four-year period between 2001 and 2005. This study explores the demographic characteristics of the marriage market in Korea to explain the increase, and examines the social positions of immigrant wives. International marriages increase for Koreans of both sexes, but men are two to three times more likely to marry a foreign woman than are women to marry a foreign man. A theory of international labour migration supposes

that labour shortages of the host country are concentrated in certain segments of the labour market. In Korea, the demand for foreign spouses seems to be greater in certain segments of the population, young rural men and divorced urban men.

Marriage registration data show that the segmentation of the marriage market parallels a differentiation among foreign spouses by their nationalities. Chinese women as well as Chinese men tend to marry divorced Koreans, whereas Southeast Asian women tend to marry rural men. The analysis of data from the National Survey of Foreign Wives shows that the segmentation of foreign wives by nationality reflects women's characteristics. The analysis of survey data also shows that the differentiation in the marriage market has important implications for immigrant women's social positions. Immigrant wives occupy distinctive social positions by their nationality and ethnicity. While Korean Chinese wives are the most autonomous and most fully incorporated in the society, the circumstances around their high rate of remarriages call for further research. Other ethnic Koreans, besides Chinese, are the most maladaptive, requiring significant public and private support. Ethnic non-Koreans from outside Southeast Asia also need social support with regard to their low citizenship rate and high divorce–separation rate. Ethnic non-Koreans from Southeast Asia may be the most adaptive to the host society in that with extended stay in Korea and improved Korean proficiency their citizenship and employment rates are as high as those of Korean Chinese while their marriages remain intact. Unification Church members are much secluded from Korean society.

As economic and cultural globalization processes continue, migration streams related to international marriages are expected to keep growing in the coming years. This study suggests that the ethnic and national composition of these streams is likely to continue to exert a significant influence on the status of foreign wives in their host country.

Notes

- 1 Korean citizenship follows the principle of *ius sanguinis*, granting citizenship to offspring of citizens (Park 2005).
- 2 The term 'immigrant wife' refers to one who now lives in Korea who had non-Korean nationality before marrying a Korean spouse. It does not refer to current or past legal immigration status. In this study, we use the term interchangeably with 'foreign wife'.
- 3 The male never-married population aged 20–24 is almost the same as that aged 25–29 in both town and rural areas. This is because military service is compulsory for men in their early twenties in Korea and they are not counted in this statistic.
- 4 The reports of aggregate marriage registration data contain statistics by province but not by rural-urban residence. There are eight provinces, which include medium and small cities as well as rural towns and villages, and seven large independent cities (data not shown).
- 5 There may be other sources of bias as well, e.g., the response rates or refusal rates may differ among different nationality groups, but they are beyond the scope of this study.
- 6 First of all, the Ministry of Justice in South Korea does not provide statistics for returners by visa categories and origin nationalities. Also, divorce statistics released by the National Statistical Office do not include data by foreign nationality. Even the raw data files of divorce and marriage registrations, which contain the variable of 'origin area (*bonjeok*)', do not have the categories of foreign nations detailed enough for this study (KNSO 2005). The only relevant data in assessing the representativeness of the sample may be the numbers of undocumented foreigners by their original visa categories, which are reported annually by the Ministry of Justice, apparently based on failed renewals or extensions of the visas (MOJ

2006). If we calculate the ratio of these undocumented residents to documented residents for each nationality in a given year, those ratios may indirectly inform the likelihood of foreign spouses' remaining (or returning) after divorce or separation. The ratio of undocumented to documented female residents in foreign-spouse visa category F-2-1 was 7.6 per cent for Korean Chinese wives while the analogous percentages were 4.9, 4.0, and 3.1 for Filipino, Thai, and Vietnamese wives in 2005 (MOJ 2006, ratios calculated by the authors). These numbers may suggest a higher divorce or separation rate among Korean Chinese than among Southeast Asian wives. However, even these ratios do not provide a reliable or consistent picture of marital breakups because the nationality distributions of foreign spouses entering and exiting the F-2-1 visa category (by getting citizenship, permanent residency, or other ways) vary by years and hence the numerators and denominators in the ratios do not necessarily correspond.

One remedy for the sample selectivity problems may be to take into account the factors possibly causing such selectivity in the multivariate analysis. For example, if the likelihood of divorced or separated wives being selected into the sample varies, at least partly, by Korean language proficiency, then the sample-selectivity bias should be reduced in measuring divorce–separation prevalence, once Korean proficiency is controlled.

- 7 There is a discrepancy between this distribution by nationality and that shown in the marriage registration statistics in Table 2. Several factors can explain the discrepancy. Marriage registration statistics show data only for the recent five years, whereas the survey data show the cumulative outcomes of many more years in the past. Also, registration statistics do not provide data by Korean ethnicity, so Chinese include both ethnic Koreans and non-Koreans. Nor is the survey distribution directly comparable to the statistics of foreign wives (F-2-1 category) reported by the Ministry of Justice. Foreign wives who have lived many years in Korea, including Unification Church members who are mostly from Japan, may have already received permanent residency, if not citizenship, of Korea.
- 8 Husband's characteristics are not included because fewer than half the husbands of the respondent wives completed the husband questionnaire. On the other hand, the husband information from the wives' survey shows a considerable discrepancy from the husband's own answers where available. Most of all, for wives who are divorced or separated, the husband information is lacking or outdated.

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