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

Yean-Ju Lee,† University of Hawaii 
Dong-Hoon Seol, Chonbuk National University, Korea 
Sung-Nam Cho, Ewha Womans University, Korea

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 multietnic 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.

† Address for correspondence: Yean-Ju Lee, Department of Sociology, University of Hawaii, 2424 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA. Email: yjlee@hawaii.edu.
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). 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-