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Transnational marriage in Asia

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Guest Editor

In today's rapidly globalising world, marriage as a contract between two individuals based on love and commitment to each other is increasingly considered a norm. The degree of women's control over their marital decisions and choice of mate, based on individual traits rather than the family's socio-economic status, is seen as a measure of whether a society has embraced modernity. In reality, marriage involves many actors with complex decision-making processes and multiple considerations. In many Asian societies, being and staying married, for both men and women, is a social and family obligation and a criterion of social standing. Kin members, the state, marriage intermediaries (institutional or individual) and commercial sectors are all involved in decision-making. This is particularly the case of cross-border marriages, with the state deciding and controlling who is allowed to marry, whether spouses are allowed to enter or reside in the receiving societies, as well as their naturalisation and assimilation process.

As well as a rapidly increasing intra-Asian flow of marriage migration, there is a continued growth of Asian women marrying and migrating to the West and 'in between' diaspora communities. For the most part, it is women marrying (and 'marrying up') and migrating to wealthier countries. The dominant view is that women enter cross-border marriages for economic gains, and generally in order to extricate themselves (and their families) from poverty.

Scholarship on cross-border marriages in Asia has been vigorous in recent years. Two terms indicating rather different conceptual emphases are used: cross-border and transnational marriage. These two terms are used interchangeably but often not defined clearly. To make it more confusing, both terms can be used to refer to cross-ethnic/cultural or same-cultural marriages. The term *cross-border marriage* emphasises geographical, national, racial, class and gender and cultural borders constructed in the hosting societies. These borders are mainly mediated by the states as well as other social actors in order to differentiate the 'we' and 'the others'. This stream of scholarship concerns the impact of marriage migration on the host societies in terms of population pressure and social security, the political and social citizenship of marriage migrants and their integration and acculturation. Particular attention is paid to studying how to empower migrant wives in exploitative situations, such as domestic violence and commodified marriage brokerage. There is also a growing scholarship on the actors' strategies of crossing these borders.

The term *transnational marriage* emphasises a transnational network and space created by the actors themselves; as well as the transactions of economic resources, symbols and political and cultural practices between the sending and receiving communities (see Panitee Suksomboon's article 'remittances and 'social remittances': their impact on cross-cultural marriage and social transformation, p 6); and how these transactions influence local development, social practices and cultural norms in both sending and receiving societies. The term 'transnationalism' by no means suggests the end of the nation-state; instead, it focuses on how actors' opportunities and choices are mediated by the state and other transnational actors. (Willis et. al, 2004, see list of further reading). The articles in this theme issue follow this framework on transnationalism. They address diverse aspects of transnational marriages and challenge assumptions made by earlier scholarship, particularly the social actors other than the state.

Lenore Lyons and Michele Ford's article tells of couples comprised of Singaporean men and Indonesian wives in the Riau Islands. The men choose to live in Singapore, however they do establish a base in the Riau Islands and make regular visits to their wives. On the one hand, their choice of residency is shaped by the restriction of immigration policies imposed by both the Singaporean and Indonesian governments. The immigration policies of both governments are tied up with labour policy and class status. The husbands of cross-border

marriages have to prove to the state that they are of sufficient means to support their wives and thus will not become a welfare burden. On the other hand, the state's intervention does not seem to matter much for the couples in their daily experiences. For them, the choice of residency is clearly a lifestyle choice. As well as benefiting from an immediate improvement in their economic situation, Indonesian wives also experience class mobility. Their marriage to Singaporean men allows them to move into the lower-middle class. Equally, the working-class Singaporean husbands who are marginalised in Singaporean society can enjoy a comfortable middle-class lifestyle in the Riau islands. Lyons and Ford make the point that the wives do not wish to live in Singapore, a place they consider to be stressful and isolated.

Like Lyons and Ford's article, Shuko Takeshita's essay on transnational families of Pakistani men and Japanese women shows that aside from the economic motivation (job opportunities or wealth) and cultural practice (patrilocal), there are other factors affecting the transnational families' decisions and choices of residency. In this case children's education and the transmission of cultural and religious values. Takeshita studies the importance of religion in children's education and socialisation. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) are chosen as the migration destination of Japanese wives and their children instead of the couples' countries of origin. Pakistani men establish a transnational, kin-based business network trading used vehicles between Japan, UAE and Pakistan. Japanese women favour a home in the UAE over Pakistan because of the modern lifestyle and less control from their husband's family, yet they can still enjoy the social support of some kin members. The transnational kinship network therefore provides business opportunities, social support and helps maintain religious and cultural identities. Japanese women are active agents in this multiple migration process by choosing the destination, forming a support network among themselves, and developing educational strategies for their children who learn English and Japanese while being socialised in an Islamic environment.

Panitee Suksomboon's article gives a nuanced picture of Thai women who marry Dutch men and live in the Netherlands. These women actively maintain social ties with their home communities, and by doing so, they create a transnational space. This transnational space is important for Thai women not only in terms of social support, but also because their class mobility only exists in their home community and not in the host society (as Riau Islands wives in Lyons and Ford's study). To maintain their new-found social status Thai women transfer economic resources to their natal families either by economic remittance or via cultural practices such as gift-giving or paying for holidays for the whole family. They also disguise their economic and emotional hardships, creating an image of a happy life in Europe. This image, together with the socio-economic disparity between families with and without women marrying foreign men, fuels the desire of more women to marry abroad, thus triggering a chained migration. Suksomboon shows the linkage between the movement of people, transaction of economic resources as well as the cultural ideas and practices flowing in between this transnational space.

All three articles give pictures of marriage migrants as active agents in the migration process. Their choices challenge the assumption that marriage migrants marry either for economic gains, citizenship and welfare or lifestyle in an affluent society. However, as Lyons and Ford warn us, their choices are limited by the existing gender ideologies and their dependency on their husbands, which is strengthened by the economic disparity between the host and sending countries. While marriage migrants actively create a transnational space, not all of them can engage their husbands in it. While Singaporean and Pakistani men enjoy the advantages of the transnational space, Dutch men appear to have greater difficulty in appreciating the cultural practices of the wives' community and do not enjoy the social status and respect that their wives 'win' for them.

Parents in many Asian societies are heavily involved in the marital decision and mate choice of their children. This is also the case in cross-border marriages. Hsing-Miao Chi's article addresses an

understudied aspect of transnational marriages in the current literature - the inter-generational relations. This generation of mothers-in-law in Taiwan is 'caught in-between', in the sense that when they were young they were expected to fulfil the role of obedient daughters-in-law; now that they are old they are expected to do domestic work and care for young grandchildren when their Taiwanese daughters-in-law enter the job market. Previous research shows that one of the motivations for Taiwanese parents to choose a foreign wife (mainly from Southeast Asia) for their sons is that Southeast Asian women are considered to have 'traditional virtue' of gender roles and to be more obedient. Despite such expectations, Chi's study shows that the Taiwanese mothers-in-law of local marriages and those of cross-border marriages may have the same experiences. Having a foreign daughter-in-law does not necessarily increase the power of the mother-in-law. On the contrary, the unfamiliarity of the language and cultural practices of their foreign daughters-in-law makes them suspicious of daughters-in-law's intentions and creates what Chi calls 'emotional burden'.

A large number of intra-Asia cross-border marriages are intermediated either by institutions or individual matchmakers within the actors' kin and social network. These marriages are termed 'commodified marriages' and at times equated to trafficking. Michiel Baas's article problematises the dichotomy between 'love' and 'arranged' marriage in the context of India's IT industry. IT professionals in Bangalore tend to choose their marriage partners within the industry, regardless of their caste. On the one hand this is due to the fact that the transnational business practice of the industry is based on meritocracy - the IT companies deliberately discourage employees from following the cultural practices of the caste system. On the other hand, migration experiences, both internal and international, uproot IT professionals from their social and kin networks and place them in an isolated working environment that demands long working hours and flexibility. The IT professionals are able to break away from the practices of arranged marriage within the same caste and choose their marriage partners with the families' permission (what Baas calls 'arranged love marriage') due to the economic benefits and social prestige associated with the industry. However, rather than based on romantic love, their mate choice is a result of practical considerations such as maintaining the lifestyle the transnational business practice requires.

Further reading

Constable, Nicole ed. 2005 *Cross-border marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia.

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Piper, Nicola and Rocas, Mina eds. 2003 *Wife or workers? Asian women and migration*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Willis, Yeoh and Fakhri 2004 *Introduction: transnationalism as a challenge to the nation*, in Brenda, S.A. Yeoh and Katie Willis (eds.) *State/Nation/Transnation: Perspectives on Transnationalism in the Asia-Pacific*. Routledge: London and New York.