Trends of Studies on Southeast Asian Women married to Korean Men*1

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1. Introduction

During the last two decades, the Korean society has experienced significant demographic changes, which include a low birth rate, an increase of the elderly, and the increase of international marriage². As of 2007, international marriage takes up 11% of the total marriages in Korea. As presented in Table 1, the number of international marriages in 2007 was 3.12 times compared to that in 2000. In particular, international marriages between Korean men and foreign women have increased approximately 4 times during the same period (National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Further, about 41% of marriages among Korean men working as a farmer or fisherman in 2006 married to foreign women, and many foreign women come to Korea as immigrant brides or as marriage based immigrants (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2005). The Korean society faces the multicultural and multiracial era as the influx of foreign brides will continue to grow due to changing roles of Korean women, changes in attitudes toward international marriage, and shortages of Korean women in...
agricultural and fishery areas.

<Table 1> Trends in international marriages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total marriages</th>
<th>International marriage</th>
<th>Foreign brides</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># of marriages</td>
<td>%</td>
<td># of marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>334,030</td>
<td>12,319</td>
<td>7,304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>320,063</td>
<td>15,234</td>
<td>10,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>306,573</td>
<td>15,913</td>
<td>11,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>304,932</td>
<td>25,658</td>
<td>19,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>310,944</td>
<td>35,447</td>
<td>25,594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>316,375</td>
<td>43,121</td>
<td>31,180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>332,752</td>
<td>39,690</td>
<td>30,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>345,592</td>
<td>38,491</td>
<td>29,140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The increase of foreign brides particularly from Southeast Asian countries (hereafter, brides) requires not only individual adaptation but also various economic, social, political, and cultural changes in dealing with their settlements in Korea. In academia, studies on them have been significantly increased since the late 1990’s and those studies mainly focused on adaptation and social integration of brides to the Korean society.

The influx of foreign brides based on marriage in Korea is not a unique phenomenon, as this has been occurred in the Western countries for a long time. ‘Mail ordered bride’, ‘cyber-bride’, and ‘photo bride’ were frequently used terms in relations to social phenomenon of industrialization and capitalism (So, C., 2006) or in relations to sex roles and human rights from feminist perspective (Schaeffer-Grabiel, 2006; Vergara, 2000). In addition, intercultural marriage or cross-cultural marriage has received a great deal of interests in terms of adaptation, acculturation, social integration, roles and changes of roles between husband and wife (Oh, Y. J., 2007).
Unlike Western countries, the Korean society has strong nationalist views based on a homogeneous ethnic group, and it increases the likelihood of discriminations and cultural biases against others. Further, Korean families in agricultural and fishery areas strongly uphold traditional patriarchal values, which may make it difficult for foreign brides to adapt to Korean men and the Korean society. Therefore, it would be worthy to examine factors contributing to their adaptation in previous studies and to identify current trends of studies on this population in order to direct future studies.

2. Methods

For the purpose of this study, the authors searched scholarly articles and thesis in master and doctoral levels published in Korean journals from 2000 to 2008. A reason to set the period as above was that studies in the early 1990’s were mainly short essays reporting their life conditions. Many scholarly articles were published since the late 1990’s as more foreign brides came to Korea during that time. This study however excluded news articles and research reports because of two reasons: one was due to the nature of those studies that most of them simply presented descriptive statistical data, which did not provide rich information for comparison with other articles; the other was due to accessibility to those reports as this study basically pulled data from scholarly data bases.

The authors first looked into four data bases such as National Congress Library ([www.nanet.go.kr](http://www.nanet.go.kr)), Korea Education and Research Information Service (KERIS, [www.riss4u.net](http://www.riss4u.net)), Korean Studies Information System (KISS, [http://search.koreanstudies.net](http://search.koreanstudies.net)), and DBPIA ([www.dbpia.co.kr](http://www.dbpia.co.kr)), using ‘marriage based immigration’ and ‘immigrant women/brides’. This yielded the total number of 291 articles (maters’ and doctoral thesis – 118, peer reviewed articles – 159). Out of the total, studies on North Korean female defectors and brides who initially came to Korea as foreign
workers and then later married to Korean men were excluded, which left 188 (masters’ and doctoral thesis – 88, peer reviewed articles – 100) for final analysis.

The authors first searched the titles, keywords, abstracts, and the main texts and then looked into dependent variables in order to categorize main themes. The reason the authors used dependent variables was that many studies simultaneously used several variables such as adaptation or adjustment, family relations, social system, and social programs, etc. During the process of categorization, authors did cross-checks in order to verify their coding methods using inter-rater reliability and together reviewed codes, themes, and categorizations. The authors then re-categorized the articles into times of publication, disciplines, and research methods for detailed purpose of the study.

3. Results

1) Overall trends

Despite a short period of time in publication on this population, it is difficult to mention an overall trend of articles in few words. However, as presented in Table 2, there were 97 articles in 2007 whereas there were 5 before and on 2004, which indicates a significant increase in quantity of articles on this population.

<Table 2> Articles by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>~2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008. 9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social welfare was the leading discipline in the number of published articles, sequentially followed by others, sociology, education, and studies on feminism. Other
disciplines include anthropology, life science, linguistics, politics, psychology, geography, nursing, theology, and public administration, to name a few. In social welfare, studies mainly focused on cultural and social adaptation (e.g., Yu, 2007), life circumstances and life satisfaction (e.g., Chae & Hong 2007), whereas in sociology, studies places emphasis on adaptation (e.g., Jeong, S. A., 2007; Yang, S. M., 2006) and conflicts (e.g., Lee, H. K., 2005; Park, K. D., 2007). In education, articles mainly dealt with development of teaching instruments and programs for Korean language education. Overall, various topics on this population have been covered by various academic disciplines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Social welfare</th>
<th>Sociology</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Feminism</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of pub.(%)</td>
<td>76(40.43%)</td>
<td>17(9.04%)</td>
<td>16(8.51%)</td>
<td>10(5.32%)</td>
<td>69(36.70%)</td>
<td>188(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Research methods

Most studies used purposive or snowball sampling methods in particular regions due to limitations in time, research costs, and accessibility to this population. Seol and Yoon (2008) however conducted a nationwide study (except Jeju island) using systematic and weighted sampling methods recruiting 885 participants. It is noteworthy that although 74.4% of brides live in the Seoul Metropolitan area and in large cities, their overall portion compared to the general Korean population is relatively small. Meanwhile, their proportional rate in agricultural and fishery areas is 20.3% and more than 40% of marriages in those areas were international marriages. Thus, sampling in a particular area may reflect regional
characteristics and trends, which may provide an advantage in understanding the overall characteristics of brides in that particular region.

In addition, random sampling in a particular area may also provide insights on research methods and representativeness of participants. Except Park, J. K.’s study (2006), many studies (e.g., Kim, Y. S., 2007; Lee, J. S., 2006; Moon, E. H., 2007) used purposive or snowball sampling methods through community welfare centers or family support centers, which make it difficult to generalize to the whole population of the international marriages.

(2) Quantitative vs. Qualitative methods

Out of 188 studies, eighty five studies used quantitative methods relying on surveys and face-to-face interviews, whereas 56 studies were qualitative studies using in-depth interviews and case managements. Further twelve studies used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thirty five studies dealt with literature reviews for policy issues. The total number of quantitative studies was slightly more than that of qualitative studies. Qualitative and/or quantitative methods used for understanding of experiences of this population may provide rich information for triangulation.

Most quantitative studies used self-administered questionnaires. But many researchers set the length of stay in Korea as a requisite for participation in a study in order to facilitate research process and to accurately measure the level of adaptation to the Korean society. The range of length of stay set by researchers varies from at least 6 months to over and above 48 months (Koo, C. S., 2007; Lee, M. S., 2007).

(3) Scales

Close examination on scales used in studies raised several questions. These questions include the use of an original and translated version, accuracy of understanding and
answering by participants, and the impact of research environment on answers.

First, many studies (e.g., Chung & Yoon, 2007; Kim, Y. S., 2007; Kweon & Park, 2007; Park et al., 2007; Shin, M. J., 2006; Sung, J. H., 2008) used standardized instruments such as Beck’s Depression Inventory (BDI), Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS), Quality Marriage Index (QMI), Rosenberg’s Self Esteem Scale. Yet, studies did not specifically indicate the process of translation and back-translation. For example, Sung, J. H. (2008) did not mention how BDI in her study was translated. In addition, Shin, M. J. (2006) used both a Korean version of BDI, which was used in Lee, Y. H. & Song, J. Y. (1991) and an English version. However she did not mention whether the English version was an original or the back-translated version. Chung & Yoon (2007) used a self esteem scale used in Oh, S. H. (2001)’s study, although they did not indicate the exact number of items. Ahn, S. Y. ’s study (2008) and Ryu, M. O.’s study (2007) provided translated instruments but did not report the translation-back translation process.

Second, several studies set the length of stay as a requisite for participation in the study. It is done so because oral and written communication skills are very important in survey and face-to-face interviews and it is likely that the longer they stayed in Korea, the better their language skills are. However, whether participants might accurately understand questionnaires and answer them accordingly is a question. Park, G. W.’s study (2007) did not provide a professional translator while using field workers at social service centers as translators. Kim, Y. S. (2007) expressed her worry about the impact of congruency problems in a scale due to cultural gaps in the process of translation of self esteem scale into 6 different languages.

Third, as most quantitative studies used survey and face-to-face interview methods for data collection, social desirability in answering questions may be inevitable, particularly when bride’s husband is present for translation or assistance during the data collection
process. In addition, data collection in many studies was done in group format, in which group influences by same ethnic friends on answers could be possible.

3) **Acculturative Stress**

In measuring acculturative stress, many studies used Acculturative Stress Scale for International Student (ASSIS), which was originally developed by Sandhu & Asrabadi (1994) and then translated into Korean by Lee, S. J. (1995). Sandhu & Asrabadi(1994)’s original study is a 36-item scale in Likert format, designed to assess acculturative stress among international students. The scale includes sub scales such as perceived discrimination, homesickness, fear, guilt, perceived hatred, and stress due to change (cultural shock). Table 4 presents a summary of results in various studies using ASSIS. It shows somewhat confusing results. For example, Park, G. W.’s study (2007) reported a high level of acculturative stress among participants and above the median of acculturative stress in the sub scale of perceived hatred, homesickness, fear and culture shock. Na, I. S.’s study (2008) used the same instrument as the instrument in Park, G. W (2007), targeting participants living in four cities. Her study also showed a similar result, indicating that mean scores of the items showed above the median (3.53 out of 5 points) and perceived hatred showed the highest mean score among the sub scales.

Meanwhile, Yang et al.’s study (2007) recruited participants living in the Seoul Metropolitan area. The participants showed a mean score of 2.3 out of 5 points, which indicated a low range of acculturative stress. In her study, participants showed the highest means score in homesickness and the relatively low score in perceived hatred. Meanwhile, Lee, J. S.’s study (2006) was conducted in Chunbuk province and participants showed a relatively low range of acculturative stress while a high level of stress in homesickness.
Several interpretations on contradictory results can be possible. First, differences in results may reflect regional characteristics. In fact, compared to participants living in metro cities, participants in Park’s study lived in mid size cities and one large city while showing a relatively higher mean score of acculturative stress, particularly in homesickness. Thus, a place of living may affect acculturative stress. Second, differences in results may inherently include errors in measurements due to the use of translated questionnaires to a different population. That is, the original acculturative stress scale (ASSIS) was developed for measurement of international students’ acculturative stress. The question ‘Whether or not ASSIS might accurately measure acculturative stress among international and intercultural brides’ needs to be answered. Further, when ASSIS was translated into various languages and back translated into English and/or Korean, inter-rater reliability needs to be warranted. Yet almost no studies reported inter-rater reliability. Whether an original or translated or back-translated version of questionnaires was used, the level of linguistic understanding of questionnaires by participants raises a separate question. This indicates a need for the development of standardized multilingual instruments for the study of acculturative stress.

<Table 4> Summary of studies using ASSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th># of items</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>mean (sd)</th>
<th>Predictive factors</th>
<th>comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lee, Y. H. (2006)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>National study</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>2.36 (.63)</td>
<td>- calls to mother country</td>
<td>- relations with same ethnic backgrounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4) **Adaptation**

Adaptation can be defined in various terms according to scholars and purposes of studies. Generally speaking, adaptation may include psychological adaptation and social adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1990; as cited in Koo, C. S, 2007). Psychological adaptation may be defined as psychological and emotional wellbeing and may be influenced by personality, changes in life, coping methods, and social supports. For example, psychological adaptation may be positively influenced by personal resiliency, internal locus of control, relational satisfaction, and use of humors. Many factors such as frequent changes in life, loneliness, stress, and avoidant coping style may cause psychological discomforts.

Socio-cultural adaptation based on social learning theory may be influenced by cultural learning and acquisition of social skills, which may include the length of stay in a new culture, knowledge on a new culture, interaction with people in a mainstream culture, and identity (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Searle, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1994; as

For the purpose of this study, the authors searched such words describing adaptation to Korean culture as cultural adaptation, social adaptation, socio-cultural adaptation, adaptation to Korean life in association with life stress, depression, mental health, social support, life satisfaction, family stability, quality of life, and life satisfaction among brides. Then, authors categorized the articles into acculturation, psychological and emotional adaptation, and social adaptation.

In our analysis of articles from 2000-2008, we found 58 articles related on adaptation. Out of 58, eighteen articles dealt with emotional adaptation mainly focusing on acculturative stress and depression. Studies (e.g., Koo, C. S., 2007; Noh, H. N., 2007) commonly indicated that cultural adaptation is a natural process as the mainstream culture and the motherland culture of the brides interact, and in the process of interaction, cultural conflicts and acculturative stress may inevitably occur. Park, E. J.’s study (2007) and Ahn, S. Y.’s study (2008) similarly reported that acceptance of Korean culture was positively related to the level of communication with husband and family’s understanding & acceptance of bride’s culture. Further, Yang & Kim’s study (2007) and Park, G. W.’s study (2007) indicated that age, acculturative stress, the experience of domestic violence were positively related to the level of depression and mental health.

Out of 58 articles, forty nine articles were related to socio-cultural adaptation. Kim, N. Y.’s study (2007) and Park et al.’s study (2007) indicated that age, the length of marriage, the length of stay in Korea were negatively related to perceived life satisfaction among brides whereas the level of family income, social support, participation in social activities, and self esteem were positively related to life satisfaction. Kim, S. W. (2007) and Lee, M. S. (2007) reported that group counseling program made a significant progress in amelioration of acculturative stress and increased coping and problem solving abilities. Yoo et al. (2008)
reported that value system of brides on adaptation, personalities, motivation for international marriages, and support by husband and mother & father in-laws positively contributed to successful adaptation among brides. Nevertheless, most studies (i.e., Han, G. S., 2008; Park et al., 2006) heavily focused on phenomena of and factors on mal-adaptation from pathological perspective. Thus, more studies focusing on protective factors and resiliency or factors contributing to positive adaptation among the brides are in need. Table 5 is a summary of studies on mal-adaptation among brides.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yang, O. K. (2007)</td>
<td>depression</td>
<td>- education, duration of marriage, and self esteem negatively related to depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- acculturative stress family life stress, and experience of domestic violence positively related to depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son, E. R. (2004)</td>
<td>Couple conflicts</td>
<td>- health, communication, affectional and sexual factors, economic factor, value system, indifference, narcissistic personality, etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- domestic violence, heavy drinking, smoking, communication styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- the level of education, monthly family income, Korean language proficiency, support from friends were negatively related to conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife abuse</td>
<td>- acculturative stress, attitudes to cultural identity were positively related to conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- living in rural area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Korean language proficiency, the level of assimilation and adjustment in identity, mother-in-law and friends from the same ethnic background, and support by NGOs were negatively related to wife abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- acculturative stress, attitudes to marginalization, couple conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park et al. (2007)</td>
<td>Family conflicts</td>
<td>- ages 31-40, having children, married more than a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- self esteem was negatively related to family conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- the number of children was positively related to family conflicts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5) Family relations
Despite the nature of marriage to a Korean man by a foreign woman, many studies on this population selected immigrant brides as the main target, frequently excluding their husband and in-laws. To brides, husband and his family members are the significant others, whom they have close interactions on daily basis. Thus, adaptation of brides to the Korean society may need to be understood in relation to family relationships and family interactions among family members. In particular, brides frequently depend on their husbands for daily chores in the early stage of their adaptation due to language difficulties and other circumstantial reasons. Kim, B. R. (2008) and Lee, J. H. (2006) reported distorted expectation by brides on their husbands and Korean lives, language difficulties, misunderstanding, domestic violence, and poverty. However, little attention has been paid to family relationships with in-laws, particularly with mother-in-laws who seems to have control over daughter-in-law in family matters in a patriarchal family structure.

Not much is known about the parent-child relationship in this population. Due to a relatively short period of marriage and immigration, children from brides and their husbands remain in young ages, making it difficult to participate in research. Future research may need to be directed to mother-child interaction and role changes in raising children and use of bilingual skills.

6) Human Rights

Approximately 12% of brides end up separation or divorce (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2005). Consequently, we were able to find many articles on human rights issues. For example, Lee, J. H. (2006) conducted case analysis of counseling sessions in human rights agencies whereas Park, J. Y. (2008) reported limitations of current laws and legislations in terms of protection of human rights among this population and made suggestions for revision
of related laws. Meanwhile, Kim, S. A. (2007) conducted study on legal and social support for the victims of domestic violence and sexual exploitations. These studies not only covered descriptive data but also placed an emphasis on social integration and social protection of this vulnerable population, on social and personal identity, and social services.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions for future research

The purpose of this study is to identify trends of past and current studies on Southeast Asian women (brides) married to Korean men and to examine issues related to research, adaptation, and family relations in order to provide directions for future research and policy and practices.

The authors found a significant increase in the number of articles on this population during the last 7-8 years, particularly in Social Welfare. Quantitative research method was frequently used to identify predictive factors for mal-adaptation, although qualitative research focused on life stories among them providing real aspects of their adaptation process. Instead of random sampling method, purposive and snowball sampling methods were frequently used due to limitations in accessibility and costs. Use of standardized instruments, however, was very limited, and the translation and back translation process was not well reported. The authors here make several suggestions.

First, despite the use of the same scale, studies showed somewhat contradictory results. Whether such results were due to problems in instruments, the level of understanding of languages and linguistic problems, or provision of translator, or other research environments are not known. Thus, it is necessary to conduct more robust research in terms of use of instruments, translation and back translation of scales, and sampling methods. There is a strong need for the development of standardized research instruments to accurately
measure the level of acculturative stress, mental health, and the life satisfaction etc.

Second, despite many research methodological limitations, it may need to compare and contrast multiple studies in order to find similarities and differences. Use of meta-analysis may advance our understanding of the differences of acculturative stress, the level of depression, and other social and psychological adaptation.

Third, many studies approached this population with pathological perspectives, lacking attention on protective factors or resilient factors that make them adapt well to the Korean society as well as family & marriage life. Little is known on their family interactions, parent-child relationship, relationships between brides and in-laws, views of husband on brides, etc. Future research may need to address these issues.

Fourth, we were able to find many articles on human rights, limitations of legal and social services, and the need for social services for this population. Yet little is known to what extent their social activities are limited by social, economic, political, and cultural systems and to what extent their lives are affected by institutional barriers. Future studies may need to focus more on specific human rights issues such as immigration policies, social discrimination and biases, participation in politics at local and central government levels, etc.

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