

## **Cross-ethnic marriage migration in Asia**

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The world has seen migration in all sorts of ways and reasons—whether for education, for business, or even for marriage. It can be said that globalization has played a major role in global migration trends. Take Asia as an example, when national borders are becoming less relevant due to policies encouraging free trade and foreign direct investments, the more developed countries saw business opportunities in the less developed ones in Southeast Asia because of their lower cost of production ranging from rent to wages and other production inputs. Hence these wealthy countries have increased their business engagements with Southeast Asian countries, leading to closer social and cultural ties and relationships with the region over time.

This paper will discuss cross-ethnic marriage migration in the Asian region where the more developed countries serve as receiving countries and the less developed ones are sending countries. The main topics of discussion include: 1) patterns and processes, 2) push and pull factors, 3) impacts from cross-border marriage migration, and 4) practices and policies.

### Patterns and processes

Asia has recently experienced an increasing number of cross-border marriage migrants. It was estimated that Thai female migrants were accounted for over 50 percent of 70,000 female migrants in Japan during 1980-1990. By 2000, there was a large number of Thai female migrants in Japan. Population statistics in 2002 showed that there is 1 woman among 22 whose marriage is cross-border marriage, accounted for around 4.5% of total marriage in Japan (Yenjit Thinkham. 2009). In Taiwan, there are huge migrations through cross border marriage. In 1993, the number was less than 100,000 while it had increased to 330,000 in 2000. In early 2004, there were more than 300,000 cross border marriages. Among this number, 93% were women of which 92% were from China (two thirds of the number) and the rest were from other countries in South East Asia (one third of the number) (Tsay, 2004: 173-179). Among South East Asian countries, Vietnamese is accounted for 69 percent of the total of 78,391 of migrants through cross border marriage. Others included 15 percent from

Indonesia, 6.5 percent from Thailand, 4.8 percent from The Philippines, and 3.5 percent from Cambodia. There are many explanations about ascendant of Taiwanese who marry to Vietnamese women. The reasons are similarity in culture, religion, and lifestyle. These reasons attract Taiwanese men to young Vietnamese women. Hence many Taiwanese men look for Vietnamese brides who could take care of their family (Tsay, 2004: 184). There are differences of brides' ages from China and South East Asia. In 2003, over 50 percent of the brides from China were 30 years old or more. The average age of Chinese brides was 31.3 years old whereas 90 percent of the brides from South East Asia are younger than 30 years old with the average age of 23.6 years old. Taiwanese men who marry Chinese women were in their 40s or older. Some were of retirement age. Some were those who work in rural area who did not get marry when they were young. 67 percent of the brides from South East Asia were found at least 10 years younger than their spouses (Tsay, 2004: 180). Regarding education, men tend to have higher educational level than women. This finding confirms the suggestion that men tend to marry women who have lower level of education than themselves. The trend is common among South East Asian counties and China (Tsay, 2004: 181).

As far as the patterns of cross marriage in Asia are concerned, there are two major ones based on the means of encounter between the grooms and the brides—arranged marriage and non-arranged one. Arranged marriage can be done through agents/ brokers and personal social networks. The first sub category can be different in the process according to Wang and Chang (2002) who had investigated the business of match making in Vietnam. The agents in Vietnam mainly supply Vietnamese brides to Taiwanese grooms and often, after they have married, the brides will migrate to live with their husbands in Taiwan. There are organized agencies and individual agents. While the organized agencies are branches of Taiwanese match making companies in Vietnam that deal directly with their head quarters in Taiwan, the individual agents are those Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples who have been through the process and are quite familiar with the process. The individual agents are free to work for anyone or even on their own (Wang and Chang, 2002).

Despite the popularity of the business and how well structured it is, they are officially banned by the Vietnamese government. Hence the operations have to be somewhat underground and the agents need to keep their profiles low (Wang and Chang, 2002: 102).

Regarding the process, there are 3 major steps of match making in Vietnam: 1) the organized agencies or individual agents look for potential Vietnamese brides; 2) local brokers, who act as mediators between the agents in Vietnam and the companies in Taiwan, arrange a meeting between potential brides and the so called 'big matchmakers'; 3) big matchmakers arrange meetings between Taiwanese men and Vietnamese women at the last step (Wang and Chang, 2002: 102-105).

As for Japan, there is still a thin line between the roles migrant workers and cross-marriage migrants as the two roles are related and can be fluid over time—female migrant workers may be married to local men, or foreign wives may need to take up jobs to help supporting their families too (Piper 2003: 458).

According to a study of marriage patterns between Thai women and Japanese men, married couples are less likely to go through such structured match making process as the Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples do. They either meet in Japan—by chance and by social networks—where Thai women work in Japan, or in Thailand when Japanese men travel or work temporarily in Thailand. However, there are still some who rely on matchmaking companies (Yenjit Thinkham, 2009). Japanese local government has also involved in marriage brokerage especially in the rural area (Knight, 1995: 16).

And for marriages between Thai women and Japanese men, women seem to have more bargaining power than the case of Vietnamese woman who marry Taiwanese men.

### Push and pull factors

There are several factors that encourage cross border marriages—both push factors from sending countries and pull factors from receiving countries.

One of the major pull factors is economic factor. As we can see, most cross marriages in Asian region are between women from Southeast Asia (where there is less economic development) and men from East Asian countries( with advance economic development.) And most of the time, wives move to live with their husbands in East Asian countries which open up better opportunities. For example, given restriction on working visa and period of stay in Japan, many women see marriage with local men as a mean to get them out of such restrictions and allow them to have better job opportunities. Despite economic factor as

explained above, other factors are also taken into account, love for example (Piper 2003). On the other hand, others argue that it could be the mutual norm and culture of Asian countries which are male dominant society and women are normally married into men's families (Lu and Yang, 2010: 17) that encourage the migration of the brides. It is not entirely due to economic motivation.

Moreover, this assumption of economic development as a pull factor do not really apply in the case of China as it is a well developed countries, yet it still exports brides to other countries such as Taiwan. It is believed that the pull factors alone will not have much impact on the decision to migrate but also the push factors (Lu and Yang, 2010: 23). This could be the imbalance of gender in the sending countries where there are more women than men, resulting in excess supply of potential brides in the marriage market (Lu and Yang, 2010: 17) whereas there is shortage of women in the marriage market in the receiving countries which is also the result from gender imbalance.

Other factors can be due to the globalization that is followed by many economic agreements and development such as policies that attract foreign direct investment that brought capital investment from East Asia to Southeast Asia—where wages and other costs and inputs of production are lower. The impact from globalization could indirectly catalyze the development of international marriage market (Wang and Chang, 2002: 95).

Other study in cross border marriage between Thai women and Japanese men found that the main reasons for the marriage are;

1. Economic reasons which include 1) the need in financial support in living expenses 2) the need in visa which will allow working in Japan possible 3) the satisfaction of both parties in economic exchange.

2. Social and cultural reasons which are 1) love 2) the need in having life partners who will look after each other at old age 3) the need in having children 4) the need to be happy and to have a good family 5) compassion, understanding and compatibility of each other 6) the need in independence and changes in their lives (self identity) 7) the need to have descendants (Yenjit Thinkham: 2009. 67-73)

### Impacts from cross border marriage migration

Women migrating to other countries may face vulnerability. Sometimes they may face what Constable (2005) calls “paradoxical hypergamy” as Lu and Yang (2010: 17) referred to. It is a situation when a woman move to a more developed and wealthier country with better opportunity in life yet she is treated poorly as a second class citizen both by public and by her husband’s family in the receiving country.

### Practices and policies

On the one hand, there have not seen attempts to forbidden cross-border marriages in Taiwan and Vietnam despite the concerns about illegal migration and human smuggling. The governments tend to understand that individuals possess the right to choose whom they want to be married to (Wang and Chang, 2002: 95). On the other hand, match making agencies are banned by the government in Vietnam. Hence the business has to be operated underground and the process has become more complex in order to avoid the authorities (Wang and Chang, 2002: 102).

There have seen attempts in many receiving countries concerning social integrations to help the foreign brides adjust themselves to the new environment. However, despite the attempts of many civil societies to integrate foreign brides into the Taiwanese society, these immigrants and their children are still facing great challenges. These challenges are namely stigmatization and policy constraints. Immigrant wives are seen as uneducated and not capable of raising children. The locals fear that these children, not being raised properly, will hence become problems in the future. Another major challenge is policy related—citizenship and legal rights to be specific (Lu and Yang, 2010: 18).

In Japan, foreign brides are supported also by groups of the other migrants who had migrated to the country in the past. This group of people is referred to as the ‘old comers’. The group had published guidebooks for cross ethnic married couples (Piper, 2003: 459 referred to Kan Sonche 1998; Tsuji 1992).

However, female migrants, whether for marriage or for work, are experiencing similar challenge as these women are seen dependant and that the nature of women’s work is not considered economically productive e.g. cleaning, entertaining etc. But one particular

challenge foreign wives in Japan may face is the right to get a work permit in Japan (Piper, 2003: 460).

As for the case of Thai women who migrate to Japan through marriage, the tradition has become a significant barrier for social integration as wives in Japan are expected to be housewives who take care of the whole domestic affairs and well beings of family members' including the parents of the husbands'. Most of the time, wives are not allowed to work given the expectations mentioned above, whereas in Thailand husbands and wives meet half way with both of them sharing households responsibilities and both work to contribute to the family financially. Yenjit Thinkham (2009) pointed out that with conflict in different opinion; it could lead to non-agreeable arguments and hence lead to family problems. The constraint as such may also prevent foreign wives from interacting with other people in the society except for family members which can become a barrier to social integration.

### Conclusion

Cross marriage in Asia is not a new phenomenon as it has been practiced since in the past. However, the patterns and trends of cross marriage nowadays are different from practices in the past. In general, many utilize the brokerage agencies as channels to marry foreigners. The brides are usually from less developed countries, younger, and have lower level of education. These brides are normally married out—moving to the grooms' countries given reasons such as better opportunity or more advanced economic etc. Given these circumstances, it can be said that these migrant wives can easily be vulnerable with many challenges they may face in terms of stigmatization and legal rights etc. Despite supports by civil society, the migrant wives are still struggling with integrating themselves in the receiving countries as explained in the last section. The challenge is then how to minimize the challenges and vulnerability for foreign brides in the receiving countries as much as possible as we have seen increasing trend in cross border marriage nowadays.

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