

Marrying into South Korea:
Female Marriage Migrants and Gendered Modes of National Belonging

In recent South Korean public discourses on the growth of diversity within the country, the female marriage migrant emerges as a key figure. Remarkably, one out of ten marriages in South Korea today are transnational; in three quarters of these marriages, the foreign spouse is a woman (MoGEF 2012:19).¹ Introducing national, cultural, and often ethnic/racial others into the intimate spheres of Korean society, the increasing commonality of such conjugal unions has prompted citizens' reevaluation of longstanding nationalist fantasies of a homogeneous nation-state.

Nevertheless, the influx of foreign women marrying into South Korea requires an account more complex than the narrative of globalization leading to a cosmopolitan nation. State-generated media representations of exemplary foreign wives tout them as contributors to the reproduction of the patriarchal family. Providing a glimpse into the array of government media depictions of and policies addressing the growing population of marriage migrants, this article examines how the Korean state impose well-worn modes of female national belonging: they are premised upon the imperative of turning foreign women into Korean wives, daughters-in-law, and most importantly, mothers of Korean children. Hence, marriage migrant women come to occupy a complex position in a structure of *stratified reproduction* (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:3) in South Korea. National leaders' interests in replenishing the nation-state's population,

¹ This means that in a total population of approximately 5 million, about 200 thousand are marriage migrant women (MoGEF 2012:19).

perpetuating the structure of the family, and transnational marriages elevate migrant women in the hierarchy of reproductive subjects. Nevertheless, the encouragement to reproduce also presupposes that to do so is to receive recognition as members of Korean society. (Marriage) migrant women then come to occupy a paradoxical position as essential but marginalized individuals in the South Korean nation.

The transnational marriage that I focus on here has specific classed, geographic, and ethnic/racial contours. Most commonly, it is the marital union between a Korean man of lower socioeconomic status and an Asian woman hailing from a country in the global south. Families created by such marriages are the ones targeted by the multicultural family policies of the South Korean government, which reports that more than 75 percent of marriage migrant women of the some 200 thousand currently residing in South Korea are from China and Vietnam (MoGEF N.d.). Hence, I situate the phenomenon of transnational marriage in South Korea within larger contexts of *global hypergamy* and the *commodification of intimacy* as defined by anthropologist Nicole Constable (2005, 2009). In other words, I consider the recent influx of female marriage migration into South Korea to be a part of the recent pattern of labor migration in which certain women are permitted to cross borders into a more prosperous country in exchange for establishing relations and performing acts of physical and/or emotional intimacy. At the same time, the influx of female marriage migrants into South Korea is made possible and shaped by culturally and historically specific notions of femininity and instances of other gendered, and at times feminist, nationalisms in South Korea.

In order to remain attentive to these specificities as well as the broader contexts that give rise to transnational marriages in South Korea, I ground my analysis upon the methodology of *robust social constructionism* (di Leonardo and Lancaster 1997:3). In their introduction to *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*, Micaela di Leonardo and Roger Lancaster call

dwindling population, the demise of the traditional family, and more recently, the desire to
lqkp"vjg"tcpmu"qh"gvjpkecn{"fkxgtug"öc fxcpegf"pcvkqpuö. The recent burgeoning of *damunhwa*
* o wnvkewnvwtgl o wnvkewnvwtcn+"tjgvqtke"cpf"rqnekku"qp"vjg"ö o wnvkewnvwtcn"hc o kn {ö"ecp"vjgp"dg
characterized as reactions to these internal and international contexts, which call upon the
o cttk ig"oki tcpv"y q o gp"cu"pqv"qpn {"uqnwvkqpu"vq"vjg"pcvkqpøu"uqekcn"knmu."dwv"cnuq"cu"
individuals bringing diversity to a South Korea thought to be ethnically and culturally
homogeneous. Therefore, the female migrant becomes visible and worthy of membership in
South Korean society and nation only when she cooperates with the following intertwined
rtqlgevu"qh"vjg"uvcvg<"tgrngpkujkpi"Uqwvj"Mtgcøu"fykpfnkpi"rqrwncvkqn through the structure
qh"vjg"hc o kn {"cpf"oqxkpi"vjg"eqwvpt {"kpqv"vjg"tcpmu"qh"öc fxcpegf.ö"equ o qrqnkvcp"pcvkqpuø"

On one hand, recent studies on the phenomenon of transnational marriage in South
Korea largely focus on people's essentializing fantasies about the future bride and the her
nation of origin (Freeman 2005, 2011, Abelman and Kim 2005). On the other, Korean-
ncpiwc ig"uwvfkgu"jcxg"o c f g"uqekqni kecn"kp swtkgu"kp vq"vjg"ko rcev"qh"ö o wnvkewnvwtcn"hc o kn {ö"
policies on the marriage migrant population, largely through interviews or surveys of the
migrant women (Seol et al. 2005, Eom 2006, Lee H.K. 2008, Jeong et al. 2007). Both these
uvtgc o u"qh"rtgxkqwu"uejqnctujkr"vcmg"vjg"kp f k x k f w c n ø"gz r g t k g p e g u"cu"vjgkt"egpvtcn"o cvgtkn"hqt"
analysis. As an examination of state policies and rhetoric on marriage migrant women, my
essay occupies a middle ground between these past studies, while drawing from the
illuminating findings of both.

Marriage Migration as Gendered Labor Migration: the Commodification of Intimacy

In her 2009 essay of the same title, Nicole Constable defines the *commodification of intimacy* as the rendering of relations of physical and/or emotional proximity, of love and care, as objects for market exchange (50). She names transnational marriage, sex work, and

migrant from one nation-state to another, whose entry and residence in the country she arrives in are strictly regulated by the policies of the receiving country. An examination of step toward demystifying the phenomenon of transnational marriage. I hope to show that the South Korean state has high stakes in the business of transnational marriage ô after all, it is a phenomenon state policy helped spark from the very beginning.

Origins: Rural Bachelors and Marriage Tours to China

The first waves of transnational marriage between Korean men and Asian women emerged in the 1990s, as the South Korean government promoted it as a solution to the social in the 1960s, many young women left their homes in rural areas to work in urban factories

the *Chos njok* woman as untainted by the polluting forces of modernization: coming from a less developed country, they were said to possess virtues of traditional femininity that the

wtdepk|gf"Mqtgcp"yqo cp"fkf"pqv"*Htgg o cp"4233<64+0"Vjg" o qfgtp"Mqtgcp"yqo cp."öurqkngf"
by cq o o qfkv{"hgvku jku o .ö"jcf"dgeq o g" o qtcnn{"cpf"ugzwcnn{"swguvkqpcdng."dww"vjg"Chos njok
woman embodied the feminine virtues of docility and chastity (Freeman 2011:42).

Descriptions of their innocence were also attributed to their upbringing in a relatively poorer, less urbanized country (Freeman 2011:42).

In addition, the linking of life in a less developed country with the preservation of the feminine virtues of docility and innocence or purity allows such essentialistic characterizations to be applied to foreign brides from other countries of the global south. In

Pcpe{"Cdgn o cpp"cpf" J {wpjgg"Mko ou"gvjppqitcrj {"qh" c"Mqtgcp" o qvjgtøu"hckngf"cwgo rv"vq"
hkpfc"Hknkrkpc"ykhg"hqt"jgt"fkucdngf"uqp."vjg" o qvjgt"öfguetkdgu_"vjg"Hknkrkpc"hkpe²g"cu"-rwtgø"
for having lived kp" c"nguu"fgxgnqrgf"uqekcn"tgcnk{"vjcv" o cru"gcukn{"qp vq"Uqvwj"Mqtgcøu"] í _"
rcuvö"*4227<333+0"Uwej" c"ejctcevgtk|cvkqp"ceeqt fu"ykvj"vjg"chqtg o gpvkqpgf"tjgvqtke"
describiF3 12 9D004B0005004C004o04840055>6<156x8001D0014001048400 11B9(in491.74 673.42 6v005

recruited to fulfill the model upon its perceived disintegration in the Korean female population.

The demise of so-called traditional Korean femininity and the difficulty lower-class men³ have in finding spouses are intertwined branches of what might be identified as a larger national crisis: the dissolution of the traditional family. In the wake of rising divorce and declining birth rates, South Korea faces a predicament shared by many post-industrial countries. Its native population is aging and growing smaller. Acts of care traditionally provided by the family now increasingly need to be supplied by non-kin others: through the private sector, organizations of charity and humanitarianism, and welfare programs of the state. To some extent, upholding the traditional family through the recruitment of foreign wives allows the modern state to deflect its responsibility for the well-being of its citizens.

Ugeqpf{."kv"cfftuugu"vjg"rtqdn go"qh"dknqi kecn"tgrtqfwewkqp" y jkn g"gpuwtkpi"vjg"õeqpvkpwkv {" of Kqtgcp"rcvtknkpgc igö"*Cdgn o cpp"cpf"Mk o "4227<334+0"Hqtgkip" ykxgu."gxgp"kh"vjg {" oc {" disrupt the imaginary of an ethnically homogenous nation, permit the perpetuation of a Korean patriline, whereas foreign husbands would not. Abelmann and Kim point out that "it was only in 1998 that non-Korean husbands gained legal rights to naturalize, [while] non-Korean wives...have been able to do so for decades" (2005:108). In other words, transnational marriage between Korean men and foreign women makes certain that new citizens fall under the established organizing principle of South Korean society and nation.

Family as Building Block, Nation as Family

That the patrilineal family operates as a basic unit of the South Korean nation is

³ Vjqwi j"vjg"õ o cttk ig"rtqdn go" ycu"kpvkcm {"kf gpvkhkgf"kp"cpf"eqpvkpwgu"vq"dg"cuuqekcvgf" with rural areas, in 2006, 75 percent of marriage migrant woman were recorded as living in urban areas (Kim Y.J. 2011:14). Kim Young Jeong writes that this misconception that vtcpupcvkqpcn" o cttk ig" o ckpn {"qeewtu"kp"twtcn"ctgcu"õeqpvtkdwvgu"vq"vjg" ykfgur tgef"qvjgtpi"qh" the rural from the point of view of urban tgukfgpvuö"*4233<36+0"K" yqwnf"cff"vjcv"vjku"pqvkqp" contributes to the othering of marriage migrant women as well.

organizer not only among her peers but of the protests held in Ch n an at large, she is

õhgpegf"kpö"*4228<35+0"Nqqmkpi"dg{qpf"vjg"dkpct{"qh"vjg"rcuukxg"gzrnqkvf"xgtuwu"vjg"cevkxgn{"
 resisting, Wardlow explains tjcv"yqogp"cu"gpq"rcuugf"uwdlgevu"jcxg"õecrcekvku"hqt"cevkpi"
 qp"vjg"uqekcn"qtfgt"] í "dvw"vjgug"gpgtikgu"cpf"cevu"ctg_"eqpvckpgf"ykvj"kp"cpf"oqdknk|gf"hqt"
 rncpu"nctigt"vjcp"vjgougnxguö"*4228<34+0"

In Korea, a commensurate notion of encompassment can be identified in not only the above-mentioned family-jgcf"u{uvgo."dvw"cnuq"cfci"gu"uwej"cu"õc"yqocp"fkgu"chvgt"cnkhg"cu"ci jquv"qh"vjg"jqwugjqnfö"qt"õgxgp"y jgp"]c"yqocp_"fkgu."jujg_"owuv"fkgdgjkpf"vjg"hgpegu"qh" [her] family-in-law⁵ Both idioms restrict the realm in which women are active to that of the household; the first goes further to deny the woman full participant status even in the domestic sphere by likening her to a ghost (Bang 2004:72). The latter proverb, in its invocation of the family-in-law, expresses the patrilineal expectation for women to marry into the family of her husband. From the point of marriage onward, the family-in-law becomes the mkp"itqwr"vjcv"encko"u"gzewukxg"rquuguukqp"qh"ci"yqocpø"dqf{"cpf"gpgtikgu

In this context, the female marriage migrant as encompassed subject is always seen as participating in or contributing to society as part of what the government calls the õowwkwewnwtcn"hcokn{.õ"ykvj"jgt"jwudcpf"cu"kvu"gzrgevfg"jgcf0"Okitcpv"yqogp"ctg"pqv"xkukdng" until they come to create c"õowwkwewnwtcn"hcokn{õ0"Jgpeg."vjg"ottkci"g"okitcpv"yqocp" occupies a paradoxical position in the hierarchy of *stratified reproduction* (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:3). She is encouraged to reproduce within her marriage to a Korean male õ first, kp"vjg"uvcvgøu"nterest of replenishing the dwindling population, and second, to provide the pcvkqp"ykvj"ejknftgp"yjq"yknn"ncvgt"itqy"wr"vq"dg"õCukc"dtkfi"guö"qt"cv"ngcu"kpfkcvqtu"qh" Uqvwj"Mqtgcøu"uvcvwu"cu"cequ"oqrqnkvcp"pcvkqp0"Dvw"rqnkekgu"vjcv"vcmg"vjg"õowwkwewnwtcn

⁵ The first proverb in Korean is õ "vjg"ugeqpf."
 õ "Vjqwi"j"vjg"ncvgt"fqgu"pqv"gzrnkekvn{"pcog"ci female subject, the word (*sijib*), which is only used to refer to the family-in-law of a woman, indicates that the subject of the proverb is female.

ejknftgetkpi"cpf"]hcokn{"_fkukpvgitcvkqp"jcxg"ogtigfö"*4235<6+0"Vjqwij"qpg"okijv"ctiwg"

The latter goal comes into view more starkly in light of sociological observation that a number of *damunhwa* policies came into being just before the visit of football player Hines Ward in April 2006. As the first Korean-American player to win the Superbowl MVP award, Ward received much attention from Korean media and was greatly welcomed when he visited Seoul (Jung 2006). Prior to his visit, then-president Roh Mu-hyun ordered a series of policies addressing the foreigner and biracial population in South Korea. What triggered these policy decisions, it is argued, is that Korea is constantly comparing itself to the status of Korean peoples [in the international community] (Jung 2006). This inclusion of Ward in the community is an ethnic vision that calls for diversity in projects intertwine in the effort to establish South Korea as a nation of global renown, with international networks within and beyond the territory of the nation-state.

In the context of transnational marriage, the former vision can be identified as what justified the government-sponsored matchmaking of *Choson* women with Korean farmers in the 1990s; the latter is part of the motivation underlying the recent proliferation of multicultural family policies. The 2013 MoGEF Operation Implementation Plan states one of its goals is to strengthen the capacity of children [from multicultural families] to grow into talented *Language-Gifted Children* that provide

in original).⁶ Jgtg."ngctpkpi"vjg"ncpiwcig"qh"qpgøu"pqp-Korean parent is recognized as valuable, but only because this will help the children develop into internationally competent individuals who can serve South Korea in its diplomatic relations. The goal of developing this potential for global talent overshadows the sub-ck o "qh"hceknkvcvki"vjg"ejknftgpøu"rqukvxg" self-understanding: it turns the latter into another step in the project of national gain, rather vjcp"c"xcnwcndng"gpf"kp"kvugnh0"Vjg"fguetkrvkqp"qh"vjg"ejknftgp"cu"õncpiwcig-ikhvgfö"cv"hktuv" glance seems to support linguistic diversity, but such a characterization also discloses the assumption that learning the language of their foreigner parent is an extra-ordinary step. It k o rnkekn{"cuugtvu"vjcv"vjg"ejknftgpøu"hktuv-acquired language must be Korean. Finally, we might note that non-Korean fathers are included in this goal, but as an anomaly, in parentheses.

Domestic Interests: Reproducing the Nation/Family

The South Korean state perceives female marriage migrants as solutions in the reproduction of its population and the preservation of the family as an institution. The two goals are tightly intertwined, in the sense that reproduction must occur within the structure of vjg"hc o kn{0"C"422;"iqxgtp o gpv"dnqi"rquv"kvngf"õ Y j cv" I qxgtp o gpv"Uwr rqtvu"Ctg"Vjgtg"hqt" Ownvkewnvwtcn"Hc o knkguAö"qwnkpgu"y gnhctg"rtqi te o u"cxckncdng"vq"hc o knkgu"qh transnational o cttkig0"kv"eqpvckpu"vjg"hqnnqy kpi"uvcvg o gpv<"õ Ownvkewnvwtcn"hc o knkgu"j cxg"vjg"rtqrgt"rqukvxg"

8 South Ko 0 The South Ko(lae)498.5289.46 n-US

would have become just another statistic in the elderly population counter a looming dark future through their marital unions. This rhetoric parallels the slogan of the Marriage Aid Rtqi tc o "qh" rtg xkquw" {gctu<ödtkpi kpi "vjg" uqwpf" qh" et {kpi "dcdkgu" dcem" vq" vjg" eqwpyt {ukf gö" (Freeman 2011: 39).

The use of the word *soongineung* is significant in that it reveals a heterosexist belief about the function of the family: biological reproduction. The latter two syllables of the word eq o rqug" vjg" E jkpgug" nqcp y qtf" hqt" öhwpevkqpö=" vjg" öuqqpö" rtghkz" k o dwgu" vjg" y qtf" ykvj" c" vgnqngiq i kecn" vkpv0" öUqqpö"*) ecp" dg" vtcpuncvgf" cu" uk o rn { "örqukvxg.ö" dwv" vjg" rqukvxeness must be understood as deriving from fulfilling a correct or appropriate function. The antonym of öuqqpö" ku" ö { k" (), which has the meanings " against the order/current" or " contra" . Hence, the government document suggests that a family that

Dwv" dkngiq i kecn" tgr tq fwevkqp" qh" kvu" rqr wncvkqp" ku" pqv" vjg" uvcvgøu" qpn { "eqpegtp=" reproduction must occur within and in maintenance of the traditional family structure, and hence its support of multicultural families and marriage migrant women. After all, the industry of transnational matchmaking is a marriage industry, rather than one of sex or domestic work. Though all three are instances of the commodification of intimacy (Constable

well-rc{kpi"lqdu"* J y cpi "422;<34+0"Vjg"uvtqpi"dgnkgh"vjcv"ejknftgctkpi"ku"c"oqvjgtøu"fwv{"cnuq"
make it unlikely for Korean women and their families to envision delegating the care of a
child to another woman, albeit a linguistic and ethnic Other (Hwang 2009:12). Sociologist
Hwang Jung-Mee notes that migrant women hired as domestic workers in South Korean
homes are primarily *Chosonjok* women, who are thought to be ethnically and culturally
Korean (2009:12-3).

With the encompassment of the (marriage) migrant woman within the multicultural
family, femininity becomes nationalized in a familiar way. If former Prime Minister Lee
Kuan [gy"qh"Ukpicrqtg"rtqenckogf"vjcv"ðo ctt{kpi_"cpf"dgct}kpi_"ejknftgp"}ku_"c"rcvtkqvke"
fwv{ð"hqt"gfwevcgf"yqogp"qh"Ukpicrqtg"* Jgpi"cpf"fgxcp"3; ;9<333+."vjg"Uqwwj"Mqtgcp"
government through its policies on the multicultural family insinuates that female migrants
can only belong to the nation by exercising their reproductive capacity within the family. In
comparison to the 37 support centers for multicultural families established by MoGEF, there
were only two government-run centers for migrant women nationwide in 2006 (Kim H.M.
4229<327.32;+0"Cv"vkogui"iqxgtpogpv"qticpk|cvkqpu"wug"vjg"vgt o "ðokitcpv"yqocpö"cu"c"
u{ppp{ o "hqt"ðo cttkig"okitcpv"yqocpö"OqIGHøu"ðRqnke{ "Iwkfg ô Okitcpv"yqogpö"
webpage lists a series of programs that solely address marriage migrant women (MoGEF
N.d.). While migrant women were included in the 2005 Natural Basic Livelihood Security
Law, they could only become eligible to receive benefits as mothers of children with Korean
fathers (Kim H.M. 2007:109). Such policies do not recognize migrant women as members of
society in any form outside their role as mother, despite the fact that marriage migrant
women comprised just 35.2 percent of all women migrants in 2011, and there are over 270
thousand female migrant laborers currently in South Korea (Eom 2013). Furthermore, even
among mothers, only certain ones can qualify as potential members of the nation. Marriage
migrant women divorced from their Korean spouses and those in common-law marriages are

pcvkqpu"] í _"ukpikpi"qh"itgcvgt"ftgcou"cpf"jqrqu"kp"vjg"Tgrwdnke"qh"Mqtgcö⁷ On the right, vjg"hktuv"vyq"nkpgu"qh"vgzv"rtqencko"vjg"ô:dgcwvkhwn"jct o qp{ø"qh"vjg"Tgrwdnke"qh"Mqtgc" eqgzkuvkpi"ykvj"o wnvkewnwvwtcn"hc o knkguö"Vjg"eqpuvtwevkqp"qh"vjku"ugpvgpeg"rncegu"vjg"rjtcug" ô o wnvkewnwvwtcn"hc o knkguö"cu"ceqwpvgtrctv"qh"ôTgrwdnke"qh"Mqtgcö."eqpegrvvcnk|kpi" multicultural families as entities that the country accompanies. In other words, the families ctg"uwdvn{"rncegf"qwwukfg"qh"vjg"pcvkqp0"Vjku"ku"kp"eqpvtcu"ykvj"vjg"wug"qh"vjg"ctvkeng"ôkpö"*an) in the description of the Rainbow Choir singers. The children of the multicultural families are certainly part of the nation ô they are here the representatives of the family as a whole ô but the position of the family remains ambiguous. It is an entity now considered for integration. To encourage the viewer to think of the multicultural family as part of the whole, the smaller vgzv"dgnqy"tgo kpfu"vjg"tgcfgt"qh"ceq o o qp"hcevtq<"ôQwt"jgctvu."ftgcokpi"vjg"ucog"ftgc o " toward happiness, are the same. A society living together with multicultural families ô as one,]yg_ o cmg"ce"itgcvgt"Tgrwdnke"qh"Mqtgcö⁸. The pursuit of happiness unites all, but o wnvkewnwvwtcn"hc o knkgu"ctg"ci ckp"fguetkdgf"cu"cp"gpvkv{"ugrctcvg"htq o "ôuqekgv{ö0"Vjg{"ctg"ce" group that may coexist *with* Korean society, but which remains outside its borders. Even the image of the Rainbow Choir is placed within a frame that further adds to the stagnant tone of the advertisement; the multitudes of difference are neatly sealed off from the world of the viewer. The diverse cultural backgrounds of the children are first simplified into clothing, then the children as a group are distilled into an image within the larger image that is the advertisement itself.

⁷ Original text: 7

True to the conception of *damunhwa* here also glosses difference of race/ethnicity. The children of multicultural families are raised in Korea as Koreans, speaking Korean. Nevertheless, they are marked as somehow different, a part of a rainbow in which no child born of two native, ethnic Koreans is involved. We are reminded that *damunhwa* replaced the term *honhy l* (mixed-blood), and ethnic/racial difference is an appealing measure of diversity because of its relative visibility.

migrant woman to express her concern yet still manages to disregard it. Organized in the
htq o cv"qh" c" hgy " swqvgf" õxqkegu" htq o " vjg" hkgnfö" ngc fkp i " vq" c" nkuv" qh" uw i i guvkqpu" hqt" rqnke { "
tgxkukqp. " vjg" Rncpøu" ugevkqp" qp" õcr rtqcej]kpi_ " o wnvkewnvwtcn" hc o knkgu" cu" c" y ct o " pgk i j dqtö" "
dgikpu" ykvj" c" Ec o dqfkc p" o cttkci g" o kitcpv" y q o cpøu" cpgef qvg" cdqww" jgt" fkhkewnv { " ceeguukpi#

nnq y u

Freeman, Caren.

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Republic of Korea

2009 Gy Ihonjunbibuto yukakkaji, damunhwa gaj ng dobneun j ngbujiwon mw itna araboni [What government supports are there for multicultural families?: from marriage preparation to childrearing]. *Hello Policy: Representative blog of the government of Republic of Korea.*