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# Marriage Migration in China and East Asia

DELIA DAVIN\*

*This paper explores the connections between the shortage of women in China that is making it more difficult for men to find brides and the growing phenomenon of long distance marriage migration. It argues that marriage migration has tended to be from the poorer areas toward the richer ones. The movement satisfies demand from men too poor or disadvantaged to afford a bride from their local community. Women undertake marriage migration in the hope of achieving a better life for themselves or being able to help their families. A similar phenomenon can be observed in international marriage migration chains such as those from the Philippines, China and Korea to Japan, from the Chinese mainland, Vietnam and Thailand to Taiwan, and from North Korea and Vietnam to China. Marriage migration puts the women who engage in it into an especially vulnerable position.*

## Introduction

Marriage migration in China and East Asia is a form of migration chiefly undertaken by women. For the women concerned it offers a form of upward social mobility although this may be bought at a high personal cost. It has a negative effect on sex ratios in sending areas leaving them short of women.

As communications improve and travel becomes easier, the area and population from which people pick their marriage partners grows. Marriage migration across very long distances has been facilitated by modern economic development. The result both in China and some other parts of East Asia seems to be that richer areas and better off men are able to attract wives from poorer areas and less well off families with the result that a pre-existing deficit of women becomes concentrated in the poorest communities and lowest status families. In this article, data from the Chinese censuses of 1990 and 2000 are used to discuss these effects within China. In a final section some comparisons are drawn with international marriage migration in other parts of East Asia.

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## Marriage migration in China

Marriage migration is often ignored in the study of migration. Studies of migration in China usually focus on labour migration. Yet the definition of migration usually employed in China is a move across administrative boundaries. If one applies this to migration statistics then marriage migration is a major form of migration and the primary cause of long-term female migration. Marriage migration is recorded as migration in the Chinese census.<sup>1</sup>

In the collective era when peasants were virtually tied to the land, marriage was one of the few reasons the state would allow a peasant to move for and marriage migrations outnumbered all other migrations. As the Chinese marriage system is virilocal, unusually, rural men tended to be less mobile than women in the Maoist era. Even in post-Mao China where there has been an enormous increase in labour migration, marriage remains a significant cause for migration. According to census data, 14% of both intra- and inter-provincial migration recorded for 1985–1990 could be attributed to marriage.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, 12% of inter-provincial migrants were recorded as having moved for marriage.<sup>3</sup> The actual *numbers* recorded as having been involved in inter-provincial marriage migration were over 1.5 million in the 1990 census (1,511,857) and just under 1.5 million (1,498,901) in that of 2000.<sup>4</sup>

Marriage migration is highly gender specific. The number of male marriage migrants recorded in the 1990 census was a tenth of female marriage migrants. In the 2000 census the number of male marriage migrants was an eighth of female ones. In percentage terms, marriage accounted for 28% of female migrations within the same province recorded in the 1990 census, while 30% of female migrations between provinces were attributed to marriage (see Table 1). By contrast it accounted for only 2% of male migration. In 2000, marriage migration was still significant as a cause for women's inter-provincial migration at 20.5%. For men it was 2.8%. The 1990 census

1. There is now a growing literature on marriage migration in China. See for example: Han Min and J. S. Eades, 'Brides, bachelors and brokers: the marriage market in rural Anhui in an era of economic reform', *Modern Asian Studies* 29(4), (1995), pp. 841–869; Cindy Fan and Youqin Huang, 'Waves of rural brides: female marriage migration in China', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88(2), (1998), pp. 227–251; D. Davin, *Internal Migration in Contemporary China* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Lin Tan and Susan E. Short, 'Living as double outsiders: migrant women's experiences of marriage in a county-level city', in Arianne M. Gaetano and Tamara Jacka, eds, *Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2004).

2. State Statistical Bureau (SSB), *Tabulation of the 1990 Population Census of the People's Republic of China [Zhongguo 1990 nian renkou pucha ziliao]* (Beijing: Statistics Publishing House, 1993). The census figures have shortcomings as a source of migration data. The general principle of the censuses is *de facto*, with people registered where they were at the time of the enumeration but a *de jure* element remained. Of those living away from their place of registration, only those who had been away for more than a year in 1990, or six months in 2000, were registered where they were actually living. These censuses thus covered permanent, formal migration involving a change of *hukou*, and also the longer term informal migration involving prolonged absences from home. They may fail to capture the millions of temporary and seasonal migrants who move backwards and forwards between the sending and destination areas. As most marriage migration does ultimately result in a change of *hukou* for the spouse who moves, the census is a better source for marriage migration data than for labour migration data. The reader should bear in mind that when marriage is compared with other causes of migration in this paper, the census data used essentially refer to longer-term migration.

3. This may reflect the change in census methodology noted above rather than a reduction in the comparative importance of marriage migration.

4. SSB, *Tabulation of the 2000 Population Census of the People's Republic of China [Zhongguo 2000 nian renkou pucha ziliao]* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2003).

MARRIAGE MIGRATION IN CHINA AND EAST ASIA

**Table 1.** Marriage as a percentage of all reported causes of migration by destination of migrants (1990 residence)—1990 Census data

<i>Intra-provincial</i>			
Destination	Both sexes	Men	Women
All	14	2	28
City	3	1	6
Town	8	1	15
Rural areas	19	3	35
<i>Inter-provincial</i>			
Destination	Both sexes	Men	Women
All	14	2	30
City	2	1	6
Town	8	1	18
Rural areas	20	3	40

Source: Calculated from SSB (1993) *Tabulation of the 1990 Census IV*, Table 11.16.

shows that marriage was much more important as a cause of female migration to rural destinations than to urban ones. It accounted for 35% of rural to rural female migrations within the same province and 40% of those between provinces. Where the destination was urban, only 21% of female migration within the same province and 24% to other provinces was due to marriage. This reflects the difficulty that rural people have in finding urban spouses.<sup>5</sup> Marriage was a minor cause of male migration, both intra- and inter-provincial, whether the destination was rural or urban (see Table 1).

### Receiving and sending provinces

The 1990 census showed that four provinces for which marriage is an important cause of out-migration are all important origin areas for labour migration. Of total female out-migration, marriage was the cause in 72.7% cases for Yunnan. For Guizhou it was 71.2%, for Sichuan 48.6%, and for Guangxi 42%. The provinces receiving the highest proportions of marriage migrants among total female migrants were Hebei (63%), Anhui (59.1%), Jiangsu (54.5%) Fujian (50.6%) and Zhejiang (47.2%).<sup>6</sup> The flow was clearly from the less developed west to the more developed east. Of all female inter-provincial marriage migration, 84.8% was from the western and central regions, and the eastern region was the destination for 60%. However, this does not mean that the developed areas all have large numbers of marriage migrants. Marriage migration is predominantly a rural phenomenon. Factors other than development play

5. Davin, *Internal Migration in Contemporary China*. Unfortunately, the *Tabulation of the 2000 Census* gives the reasons for migration by age and sex but not by type of origin or destination area (city, small town or rural area) or by province. Tables 1 and 2 and the accompanying discussion are therefore based only on the census of 1990 using both the main tabulation and SSB, *Ten Per Cent Sampling Tabulation of the 1990 Population Census of the People's Republic of China* [Zhongguo 1990 nian renkou pucha 10% chouyang ziliao] (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 1991).

6. Fan and Huang, 'Waves of rural brides', p. 241.

**Table 2.** Marriage migration as a percentage of total inter-provincial out-migration and in-migration by province (both sexes)—1990 census

Destination or origin	Out-migration from	In-migration to	Destination or origin	Out-migration from	In-migration to
National	14	14			
Beijing	2	6	Henan	10	15
Tianjin	7	10	Hubei	16	9
Hebei	10	34	Hunan	12	17
Shanxi	7	15	Guangdong	6	11
Neimenggu	17	26	Guangxi	27	13
Liaoning	10	10	Hainan	4	9
Jilin	12	9	Sichuan	24	15
Heilongjiang	10	11	Guizhou	50	14
Shanghai	2	3	Yunnan	51	11
Jiangsu	7	25	Tibet	2	No data
Zhejiang	3	24	Shaanxi	17	6
Anhui	10	30	Gansu	14	10
Fujian	3	23	Qinghai	7	7
Jiangxi	11	10	Ningxia	11	13
Shandong	9	20	Xinjiang	4	9

Source: Calculated from SSB (1991) *Sampling Tabulation of the 1990 Census*.

a part in the marriage market. The *hukou* system still presents a formidable obstacle to marriage migration to cities. Moreover, the strong position that city residents enjoy in the marriage market makes them unlikely to be interested in a peasant bride. The great municipalities had among the lowest proportions of marriage migrants among total female in-migrants: Beijing, 11.3%; Tianjin, 10.5%; and Shanghai, 5.1%.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless the geographical pattern of marriage migration is instructive. We can see that women are using marriage to escape poverty and to move up through the spatial hierarchy to more prosperous areas. Marriage into a wealthier area is thus a form of upward mobility for women and this explains the strong correspondence between marriage migration and the spatial hierarchy of development in China. Table 2 shows the big differences between provinces in the relative importance of marriage migration in total migration.

### Out-marriage: choices and calculations

Village exogamy or marrying outside the village used to be a general rule in much of China, although the strictness with which it was observed varied considerably. The introduction of consensual marriage after 1949 may have increased the incidence of marriages within villages, but exogamy or out-marriage remained the norm. Lavelly's work on the Shifang county in Sichuan province at the beginning of the 1980s showed that market principles governed the movement of brides in this area.<sup>8</sup> In-marrying

7. *Ibid.*

8. W. Lavelly, 'Marriage and mobility under rural collectivisation', in Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Ebrey, eds, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

brides to prosperous Shifang tended to be from low-income counties, whereas women who married out of Shifang went to other high-income counties. Women who were moving up the spatial hierarchy by marrying-in also tended, according to Lavelly, to be better-educated than average, whereas those who ‘married down’ had fewer years of schooling. The workings of the market could be seen in other ways. Men in Shifang who married women from poorer areas had incomes lower than the average for Shifang making it harder for them to find a local bride. Moreover the bride-price paid for women from poorer areas was only about 60% of what had to be paid for a Shifang woman.

### **Marriage migration, labour migration and the spatial hierarchy**

Although many of the trends Lavelly observed in Shifang early in the reform period remain relevant, marriage migration, like other forms of migration, has grown and adapted to new circumstances in the social and political climate of post-reform China. One of the most striking changes has been the great increase in the distance travelled by brides. Whereas in the past marriage migration might have meant a move to a nearby village, in recent years a new long-distance inter-provincial marriage market has grown up and women involved in the new flows may move across several provinces to marry. Complex and uneven social change is responsible for this new development.

On the push side the following factors have clearly been important:

- greater contact between regions because of trading and labour migration;
- improved communications and knowledge of better conditions elsewhere;
- continued existence of very poor regions and increases in regional inequality;
- wish of young women for more prosperous future; and
- advantages to families of having daughters in more prosperous areas.

On the pull side we can list:

- the attraction of prosperous areas increased by growing regional disparities;
- the high value attached to marriage for both females and males in China;
- the shortage of women everywhere in China;
- the high bride-price and other marriage costs in prosperous areas;
- the marriage market—the least desirable men in prosperous areas find it increasingly hard to marry local women and look further afield;
- more mobility (labour migration, trading, etc.) creating necessary contacts; and
- spiralling effects of marriage chains.

So a brief, crude explanation of long-distance marriage in China today would be that the general shortage of women everywhere in China and the improvement in communications have created a nation-wide marriage market. In this market, women from poor regions, villages or households (or their families) are able to use their scarcity value to achieve more prosperous lives by exercising spatial mobility within this market. Men from better-off regions are able to make up for the deficit of brides that makes local marriage expensive for them, or in the case of the poor and disadvantaged puts it beyond their reach, by importing brides from poorer, cheaper regions.

### Sex ratios and the shortage of women

China, like many other countries of East Asia, had long suffered a deficit of females due to a variety of factors but above all to the cultural preference for sons. It is worth emphasising that this is not just about the one child policy; unbalanced sex ratios long predate that policy. In the past, this was due to the better care lavished on boys, and even to neglect of girls, or female infanticide. In the last years of the twentieth century modern technology has combined with the continuing preference for sons, and a new reluctance to have large families, to make this deficit of girls more serious than ever. Not only in China with its one child policy, but also in South Korea, India and many other countries the distortion in the infant sex ratio increased as foetal scanning and sex-selective abortions replaced the cruder practices of the past to bring families the boys they wanted.<sup>9</sup> The deficit of females is serious in China, and if one looks at it across age groups it seems clear that it will inevitably influence marriage practices for a considerable time to come.

The figures in Table 3 reflect the changing sex ratios among children in China since 1982.<sup>10</sup> They are not easy to interpret with any certainty. We know that female children are often under-declared, probably making the ratios seem worse than they are. Evidence from this table is conflicting. There is a general tendency for the recorded sex ratio for each age group to get worse over time. Thus the sex ratio for almost every cohort in 2000 is worse than its equivalent in 1995. 1995 is worse than 1990 which in turn is worse than 1982. If, however, a single year cohort is traced from one census to another, in some cases the sex ratio appears to be improving as the children grow older, whereas in others it gets worse. Thus one-year-olds in 1990 had a sex ratio of 116.6 but this had improved to 109.8 in 1995 when they were six and to 109 in 2000 when they were 11. Yet the cohort born in 1990 with a sex ratio of 111.8 had a (worsening) sex ratio of 113.0 in 1995 and 114.4 by 2000. The shocking sex ratio of 121.1 recorded for one-year-olds in 1995 had improved to the still dire 116.6 by 2000.

A clear conclusion must be that China is indeed, as so many authorities have confirmed, suffering from deteriorating sex ratios in succeeding cohorts of children. However, this deficit is difficult to quantify with confidence.<sup>11</sup> The recorded sex ratios are also affected by the desire of parents, and also sometimes of officials, to conceal the births of female infants so that they can keep trying for a boy. Once these children have grown older and their parents have had other children, the concealment, which has other costs such as exclusion from school, may cease. Thus generally speaking, the sex ratios for older children are better than those for younger children. Other fluctuations in the statistics may reflect changes in the severity with which the population policy has been implemented over time. But although the accuracy and meaning of the sex ratio statistics may be debated, the overall message of the table is certainly that the enduring deficit of women is set to get worse. The 14-year-olds of 1990 and 1995, with their comparatively slightly distorted sex ratios, began to reach

9. E. Croll, *Endangered Daughters, Discrimination and Development in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2001).

10. Cai Yong and William Lavelly, 'China's missing girls: numerical estimates and effects on population growth', *The China Review* 3(2), (2003), pp. 1–17.

11. For a detailed discussion of the problems see Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China 1949–2000* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 288–298.

**Table 3.** Sex ratios of children by age as shown in Chinese censuses 1982–2000 (males per 100 females)

Age	1982	1990	1995	2000
0	107.6	111.8	116.6	117.8
1	107.8	111.6	121.1	122.7
2	107.4	110.1	121.3	122.1
3	106.7	109.1	119.2	120.4
4	106.2	108.5	115.0	118.5
5	106.3	108.7	113.0	117.8
6	106.3	108.6	109.8	116.6
7	106.2	108.7	109.9	115.2
8	106.1	108.8	109.3	114.6
9	106.0	107.4	109.0	113.5
10	106.2	107.4	107.8	114.4
11	106.2	106.5	107.9	109.0
12	105.8	106.5	108.4	108.3
13	105.9	106.5	108.0	107.6
14	106.2	106.2	107.5	107.7

*Source:* 1982, 1990 and 2000 census data.

the normal age for marriage in China some years ago. Their generation has already been involved in large-scale marriage migration. The sex ratios among the children born in the 1990s are clearly worsening. These children will reach maturity from about 2015 and their distorted sex ratios will drive an ever-greater demand for women that is likely to increase marriage migration and long-distance marriage.

### **Likelihood of marrying and social stratification**

I have already asserted that it is more difficult for poor, underprivileged or disabled men to marry in China. As educational level is related to social stratification, in Table 4 data from the 1990 and 2000 censuses on educational level and marital status at selected ages are used to put forward some statistical evidence for this assertion with a low educational level being used as a proxy for low status and comparative poverty.

The first thing any demographer trained on European data would remark of these figures is that they reflect an extraordinarily high marriage rate with marriage rates of over 95% for all Chinese, both men and women, who reach their late thirties. Relevant to this particular study is the observation that men marry at a later age than women, and that for each age group the percentage of men remaining unmarried was greater than that of women, with the difference increasing with age. The most popular age range for marriage for men is the late twenties. For women it is the early twenties in the case of the least educated, and the late twenties for the rest, even including the majority of college-educated women. Age at marriage appears to have increased for both sexes between the censuses of 1990 and 2000 at all levels of education.

The figures confirm that Chinese men with little or no education have the greatest problem in marrying. Fully a third of all illiterates and semi-literates and almost one in ten males with only primary education remain unmarried in their late thirties,

**Table 4.** Percentage of population never married by educational level and sex for selected age groups: censuses of 1990 and 2000

<i>Males</i>												
Age Education	15–19		20–24		25–29		30–34		35–39		All 15+	
	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000
Illiterate or semi-literate	(95.1)	97.0	(66.6)	71.9	(40.1)	45.0	(26.0)	35.7	(21.8)	33.7	(15.0)	14.8
Primary	(97.6)	98.8	(60.8)	70.2	(21.6)	26.1	(10.8)	11.6	(6.7)	9.2	(25.7)	14.0
Junior middle	(98.4)	99.8	(57.1)	74.5	(13.3)	19.9	(4.8)	5.2	(2.7)	2.7	(36.5)	27.1
Senior middle	(99.6)	100	(76.0)	86.8	(14.0)	29.3	(3.5)	6.43	(1.9)	2.0	(31.2)	30.5
Vocational school	(99.8)	100	(84.5)	89.0	(22.7)	32.0	(2.6)	5.9	(0.57)	1.4	(27.3)	40.3
College	(100)	100	(94.6)	95.6	(35.8)	38.2	(5.5)	6.5	(0.96)	1.5	(34.7)	29.0
All levels	(98.2)	99.7	(62.5)	78.6	(16.7)	24.6	(7.2)	7.45	(5.7)	4.1	(29.0)	23.7
<i>Females</i>												
Age Education	15–19		20–24		25–29		30–34		35–39		All 15+	
	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000	(1990)	2000
Illiterate or semi-literate	(87.3)	88.1	(24.6)	28.0	(2.4)	5.7	(0.5)	2.0	(0.28)	1.2	(4.5)	0.16
Primary	(93.8)	95.8	(35.0)	38.1	(2.5)	4.2	(0.2)	0.64	(0.9)	0.24	(23.1)	6.7
Junior middle	(97.3)	99.0	(42.2)	54.7	(4.2)	8.0	(0.6)	1.2	(0.5)	0.39	(35.7)	25.4
Senior middle	(99.4)	99.9	(66.0)	72.2	(6.8)	14.7	(1.3)	2.8	(0.8)	0.8	(30.8)	29.8
Vocational school	(99.7)	99.9	(74.5)	76.7	(13.3)	15.1	(3.0)	2.6	(0.25)	0.09	(33.5)	45.0
College	(100.0)	100	(88.7)	87.4	(22.0)	27.3	(7.2)	4.0	(2.9)	1.5	(38.1)	34.3
All levels	(95.2)	98.8	(41.4)	57.5	(4.3)	8.7	(0.6)	1.3	(0.34)	0.5	(21.1)	16.7

*Source:* Calculations from the 1990 census are partly from Rose Maria Li and Susan F. Newcomer, 'The exclusion of never-married women from Chinese fertility surveys', *Studies in Family Planning* 27(3), (May/June 1996) and partly made by the author. Calculations from the 2000 census data have been made by the author.

compared with a small percentage of men educated to junior middle and above, and negligible percentages of women at the same educational level in their late thirties or indeed even their early thirties. Clearly most of these men will never be able to marry. There are no partners left for them. The situation for the least educated men worsened considerably between 1990 and 2000 with significantly greater percentages remaining unmarried in the 25–29 group and all higher age groups in 2000. By contrast tiny percentages of men with junior middle education or above remain unmarried in their thirties.

High levels of education make men much more likely to marry. It has been observed of women in many societies that the higher their level of education, the later they will marry, and the less likely they are to marry. The Chinese census data certainly confirm that education is associated with later marriage for women in China. In addition to college education, senior middle school and even junior middle school are all associated with larger percentages remaining unmarried in each age group. However, the main effect is the postponement rather than the avoidance of marriage. The percentages remaining unmarried by 30 at any level of education are small, even among the college-educated; 96% of the 30–34 age group are married. In 1990 college education for women was associated with a significantly higher percentage remaining unmarried in their thirties than among males at similar levels of education, but by 2000, college-educated women in their early thirties were *more* likely than their male counterparts to be married, while only 1.5% remained single in their late thirties—exactly the same percentage as for college-educated men in the same age group.

The relevance for this study of the link between the probability of marriage and the educational level is that the educational effect is likely to increase, albeit only slightly, the problem of low status unmarried men. The tendency of Chinese men to be tolerant of marrying ‘down’ in terms of the social and educational status of the bride has the effect of transferring the shortage of brides down the social scale. The statistical association of low levels of education with a failure to marry among men revealed in Table 4 clearly reflects this social reality.

### **Likelihood of marrying and spatial stratification**

Once the marriage market is envisaged in spatial, as well as socially stratified terms, it can be seen that with marriage migration and the demand for brides in the wealthier parts of the country that draws women from the interior, the deficit of potential brides is likely to worsen in rural areas than in urban ones and be worst in the poorest regions of the country. It is worth bearing in mind that education also plays a role here. Generally speaking educational levels are higher in wealthier regions than in poor ones and in urban areas than in rural ones. Table 5 shows the percentage of females in the never married population over 15 years of age by type of residence for selected provinces. It provides clear statistical evidence of regional variations in the deficit of women.

Unmarried men outnumber unmarried women in every province whether in city, small town or rural area except in the two great cities. However, the variations in the size of this gender gap make a very predictable pattern. The rural areas and the poor

**Table 5.** Percentage female of never-married population 15+ years

	All	Cities	Small towns	Rural areas
National	40.8	44.9	44	37.9
Beijing	42	74.9	42.6	39.9
Shanghai	42.3	78.1	46.9	40.4
Jiangsu	42.4	44.6	44.3	40.2
Zhejiang	40.2	41.6	42.2	36.6
Sichuan	35.2	42.4	40.6	31.72
Yunnan	37.1	43.55	41.0	35.14
Guizhou	35.4	41.5	38.2	33.7

Source: 2000 Census 1V, Tables 5-1a, b and c.

provinces show the greatest deficit of unmarried women. The urban areas overall have a significantly smaller deficit but the difference between cities and small towns is small and inconsistent. However, the city areas of the two municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai stand in clear and total contrast to all the other geographical categories featured in this table with their large majorities of women in the unmarried population. A number of factors may explain this phenomenon. The relatively equal sex ratios found in these cities mean that they do not start with the 'surplus males' found elsewhere in China. Residence in the municipalities is felt to be the most desirable in China. City-born girls will be more reluctant to move elsewhere either for work or marriage whereas their male counterparts may sometimes bring brides in. Another important factor is probably the huge service sector in these cities which draws in a labour force that is young, unmarried and disproportionately female to work in restaurants, shops, hotels and so on.

Table 5 shows that the deficit of unmarried women is most serious in the rural areas of the poorer provinces. Thus Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou, all poor provinces from which heavy marriage migration takes place (see Table 2), have the lowest proportion of women among the unmarried. However, all the rural areas have significant deficits compared to the small towns and cities within the same province. Even in Zhejiang, a bride-importing province, the shortage of unmarried women in the rural areas is greater than the national average. A part of the deficit in the rural areas can doubtless be explained by the serious deficit of females both married and unmarried in all the younger age groups in the rural areas. But the size and distribution of the deficit also indicates that women are using marriage to move up through the spatial hierarchy and that the shortage of women is therefore worst 'at the bottom' in the rural areas.

### **The experience of marriage migration elsewhere in East Asia**

Social scientists from East Asia are often accused of treating China as a unique case and of explaining social phenomena in China only with reference to specifically Chinese factors. I will try to break with this tendency here by making some tentative comparisons between marriage migration within China and examples of marriage migration elsewhere in Asia.

There has been plenty of media coverage of the phenomenon of Japanese and Taiwanese men seeking foreign brides from China and Southeast Asia in recent years as a search of the Web will quickly reveal. However, it is not always realised that these practices are not restricted to a small number of the marginalised poor; they are indeed statistically quite significant. In Japan, marriages between a foreign and a Japanese partner increased from less than 1% of all marriages in 1965 to almost 5% in 2001. As the number of marriages to foreigners increased, another fundamental change took place. In 1965, 75% of these marriages involved a foreigner marrying a Japanese woman, and only 25% involved a Japanese man marrying a foreign woman. By 1975, the proportions were equal, and between 1990 and 2001, 75–80% of these marriages involved a Japanese man marrying a woman of another nationality. Of all foreign wives in 2001, 44% were Chinese, 22% were Filipinas, 19% Korean and 6% Thai. US and Peruvian brides were just 1% each of the total.<sup>12</sup>

Of course in a number of these marriages the couple will have met and decided to get married as anyone else might do, but Japanese society is still not very cosmopolitan, and many Japanese are still very much opposed to interracial marriage. The evidence indicates that most of the increase in international marriages is to be accounted for by the importation of foreign brides by Japanese men who cannot find Japanese brides.<sup>13</sup> This is in part because some urban highly educated Japanese women are opting out of marriage altogether, and also because when Japanese women do wish to marry, most want to avoid the heavy farm work and traditional family roles associated with marriage to rural men. It is therefore low status rural men who are most likely to bring in foreign brides.

If imported brides have become a noticeable phenomenon in Japanese life, they are even more significant in Taiwan. Marriages involving a Taiwanese and a foreigner already stood at 7.13% of all marriages contracted in Taiwan in 1998, and this had increased to 11.65% by 2001.<sup>14</sup> The countries of origin of Taiwan's foreign spouses are, in order of importance, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand.<sup>15</sup> These figures, already surprising, in fact greatly understate long-distance marriage migration because they exclude brides brought in from the Chinese Mainland who, for obvious reasons, are not counted in government statistics as 'foreigners'. Once these marriages are included, the percentage of cross-border marriages in all marriages in Taiwan is even higher. It was 16.2% in 1998 and had increased to an extraordinary 27.4% by 2002.<sup>16</sup>

According to Lu, well over 90% of such marriages are of Taiwanese men marrying brides drawn from outside Taiwan. No doubt, in Taiwan, as in Japan, some of these marriages are of couples who meet, develop a relationship and decide to get married,

12. Hsien-Hui Chu, *Opening the Door: An Analysis of International Marriage in Japan*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Leeds, 2003. I am indebted to Chu for this data which she drew from the Japanese Ministry of Welfare and Labour.

13. Nicola Piper, 'Labor migration, trafficking and international marriage: female cross border movements into Japan', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 5(2), (1999), pp. 69–99.

14. Chu, *Opening the Door*.

15. It is likely that in many cases brides from south-east Asian countries who marry into Taiwan are themselves ethnic Chinese.

16. Melody Chia Wen Lu, 'Commercially arranged marriage migration: case studies of cross-border marriages in Taiwan', unpublished paper presented to the *International Conference on Women and Migration in Asia*, December 2003, New Delhi.

but there are well-established brokerage chains that promote the movement of women between Taiwan and the bride-supplying countries, primarily south China and Vietnam. Taiwanese men travel to south China where a number of introductions will be arranged, usually at their hotels. Migration takes place after the marriage terms have been agreed. In Taiwan, it is again the less marriageable men who seek cross-border marriages. This may mean predominantly poor, rural men as in Japan, but other groups such as widowers, and the undereducated or disabled are involved. Mainland women brides sometimes complain that their elderly husbands were looking more for a nurse than for a wife. In-marrying women seek to share in Taiwan's affluence. They live better than they would have been able to in their areas of origin and they often arrange for regular remittances to be sent back to their families. Taiwan's shortage of brides appears to arise from the fact that Taiwanese women are selective about whom they will marry, but also from numbers of highly educated women who never marry and perhaps from the numbers marrying foreign men abroad and settling there.

## Conclusions

Long-distance marriage migration is becoming an important phenomenon not only within the borders of the PRC, but also elsewhere in East Asia. The direction of the migration flows, and the behaviour of the principals, to a large extent fit the market model. Richer regions and countries draw women away from the poorer ones. Women and their families attempt to enhance their life prospects through marriage migration and men try to obtain brides even where their market position is weak and their ability to pay low. The greater the shortage of women in the marriage market, whether caused by demographics or an unwillingness to enter marriage under the conditions applying in their own society, the more men will look elsewhere for brides. I discussed some of the better known marriage migration streams here; there are of course many others. The Philippines is the leading country for the export of brides to other countries in Asia and beyond. According to Vietnamese sources at least 22,000 Vietnamese women and children were sent to China through brokers between 1991 and 2000.<sup>17</sup> North Korean women who enter China illegally end up marrying Chinese men in remote rural areas who cannot find a wife. South Koreans import ethnic Korean women from China.<sup>18</sup>

The generalisation that can be made about all these migration streams is that they tend to involve women leaving poorer regions and countries to go to richer ones. The communities that they leave behind suffer unbalanced sex ratios. Outcomes for the women who undertake marriage migration are variable. Where their gamble is successful, they may gain materially. Like labour migrants they are prepared to accept short-term hardship for long-term gain, but the costs may be high even when they succeed and they are undeniably vulnerable. They have to settle far from families and kin and to cope with changes of language and culture. They may be

17. Ministry of Public Security, Hanoi, quoted in *Asia Times*, (12 September 2001); Tran Dinh Lam, 'China's booming trade in Vietnamese brides', *Asia Times*, (12 September 2001). The tone of Vietnamese reports on the phenomenon is disapproving and they tend to portray the Vietnamese women involved as victims.

18. Barbara Demick, 'North Korea's brides of despair', *Los Angeles Times*, (18 August 2003).

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hoodwinked or deceived about the marriage they are making and the conditions they are marrying into. Labour migrants can go home, change jobs or try a new destination if all does not go well in their first try. Given prevailing attitudes to virginity and marriage in East Asia, and the fact that migrant brides are likely to have children soon after marriage, these women are making a far more binding commitment than labour migrants. In the long term their hope must come from self-help groups. Where strong migration chains are established it must be easier for prospective brides to get the information that they need before making a commitment, to enjoy support in settling down from an established group on their arrival, and help from this circle when things go seriously wrong.