

International marriage migration: The predicament of culture and its negotiations

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah¹  | Diotima Chattoraj² 

¹Geography, Environment and Development, University of Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam

²School of Social and Health Sciences, James Cook University, Singapore, Singapore City, Singapore

Correspondence

Diotima Chattoraj, School of Social and Health Sciences, James Cook University, Singapore, Singapore City, Singapore.
Email: diotima.chattoraj@jcu.edu.au

Abstract

Marriage-led migration or migration-led marriage was rarely discussed in public or private realms just over two decades ago. However, international marriage migration (IMM) has become a norm in today's globalised world. While a substantial body of literature deals with this growing practice, existing literature does not adequately address the role that ethnicity plays in the context of IMM. The purpose of this study is to explore the question of ethnicity in IMM in Southeast Asian contexts. It focusses on what we have called the 'predicament of ethnicity' and the negotiations around ethnicity, culture and identity among couples where at least one partner migrated for the purpose of the marriage. The study is based on interviews with international couples selected using a snowball sampling method and demonstrates complex and intriguing patterns of cultural and ethnic identity negotiations between international Southeast Asian couples.

INTRODUCTION

Between 2019 and 2020, Bangladeshi and international media highlighted tales of non-Bangladeshi women who flew to Bangladesh to meet and marry men with whom they had online courtships. The stories sparked a lot of public interest and led to public discussions on the motivations and prospects of such relationships. International marriages comprise a significant proportion of marriages in several Central, East and Southeast Asian countries, with numbers growing in recent years (Chiu, 2021; Jones & Shen, 2008). According to our research, nearly

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3.5 million men and women posted online profiles to look for an overseas wife/husband in 2020 on multiple platforms, double the number from just half a decade ago (Kerley, 2016).

The increase in international couples in Asian and Southeast and East Asian countries, particularly Singapore, South Korea, Viet Nam, China, Philippines, Japan and Taiwan has been well documented (Jongwilaiwan & Thomson, 2013; Ullah, 2013). In 2010, international marriage accounted for approximately 6% of all marriages in Japan, 13.5% in Korea and 10% in Taiwan in 2010 (Chung, 2020). Over the previous two decades, international marriages have also increased substantially in China (Liu, 2009). In South Korea, one of every twelve Korean men married a woman from outside of Korea, often from the Philippines and Viet Nam. In Taiwan, one of every eight marriages were between a Taiwanese man and an Indonesian, Vietnamese or Chinese woman (Kim, 2012). Approximately 300,000 Vietnamese women married foreigners between 2008 and 2010 (Li, 2020; Ullah, 2013). In Viet Nam, about 115,000 interracial marriages were registered between 2008 and 2014, with Vietnamese women accounting for more than 72% of the couples (Li, 2020). The wedding scene in Singapore is no exception. Between 1999 and 2009, international marriages accounted for 30%–40% of overall marriages in Singapore (West, 2014). According to another set of statistics, one in four Singaporean weddings involve a non-resident spouse (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2021). International marriage migration (IMM) has thus become more of a norm than an exotic phenomenon (Yeoh et al., 2013), with Sunanta and Angeles (2013) referring to it as an intimate manifestation of globalisation.

Yet IMM is not an entirely new phenomenon. Its historical existence has been well documented in both pre- and post-colonial periods (McDougall & Pearsall, 2017) and, as is the case in the contemporary context, was motivated by complex gender, social, economic and political realities. IMM, as well as the governance of inter-ethnic marriage, played an important role in many colonial contexts. For instance, while the colonisation of Australia initially seemed to require young men suited to the physical labour of colonisation, the resulting gender imbalance made the project of settler colonialism more difficult, prompting a drive for women to migrate in order to redress the imbalance (Gothard, 2002). Prohibitions on marriages between colonial and native populations in various colonial contexts likewise necessitated forms of IMM (Lovett, 1994; McDougall & Pearsall, 2017; Voss, 2008). In another instance of historical marriage migration, 1945 War Brides Act facilitated the migration of hundreds of thousands of women to the United States from countries in which American soldiers had previously been deployed (Kim, 2010; Yuh, 2003).

Despite its historical and contemporary prevalence, marriage was not considered a serious driver of migration until recently. Nor has it been the subject of scientific study. This has changed significantly over the past two decades, with migration-led marriage (i.e., the couples happened to migrate and that led to marriage) and marriage-led migration (i.e., any of the couples got married and that led them to migration) increasingly seen as key drivers of (and contributors to) international migration. The global rise in both intra- and international migrations, coupled with an exponential increase in women migrating alone, has also brought increased attention to this growing trend. IMM has been differently labelled by different literature. Existing literature refers to IMM as cross-border marriage, transnational, international, binational or intercultural (Chen & Huang, 2006), intermarriage (Roer-Strier & Ben Ezra, 2006), cross-cultural marriage (Wise & Velayutham, 2008) or mixed marriage (Rodríguez-García, 2006) to highlight the couples' cultural, ethnic, religious or societal differences (Williams, 2010). IMM could also be disaggregated into marriage-led migration and migration-led marriage, though this article focuses specifically on marriage-led migration.

Along with economic motives (such as wage differentials, lower taxes and greater employment availability), marriage-led migration is also driven by the partners' subjective desires, emotional goals and cultural values or perceptions (Kim, 2018). For instance, Western men's desire for Thai partners is often motivated by perceptions and stereotypes of Asian women as hyper-feminine, exotic, sexual, submissive, obedient and willing to provide care services (Jongwilaiwan & Thomson, 2013: p. 370; Maher & Lafferty, 2014). On the other hand, over 90% of Thai women who marry foreigners have previously failed marriages with Thai men. Often describing their ex-husbands as irresponsible slackers, they look to marry foreigners (*farang*), oftentimes backpackers on holiday in Thailand, because of their perceived financial security (King & Rotheray, 2019).

This article is specifically focussed on what some couples consider the dilemma or 'predicament' of ethnicity in Southeast Asian marriages that required at least one of the partners to move across international borders.

Our article is structured as follows: First, it briefly outlines the context and literature on IMM in Southeast Asia. Second, the empirical case study and the methodology, which was deployed in the study, have been detailed. The article, then, moves to exploring its main findings, focussing on the complex and intriguing patterns of cultural and ethnic identity negotiations between international Southeast Asian couples, suggesting that ethnicity is a dynamic force in IMM that is differently experienced based on different constellations of factors in sending and receiving countries.

CONTEXTUALISING INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE MIGRATION

Throughout history, families have planned marriages for couples, and most couples married not because they were in love but for economic reasons and to establish a family (Salaff, 1973). Hence, it is necessary to critically understand the social, religious, political and economic context for marriage practices (McDougall & Pearsall, 2017). Many reasons have been proposed as to why IMM is an increasingly frequent practice. As Ullah and Alkaff (2018) explain, more than 98% of the estimated 5 million female domestic migrant workers in Asia migrate unaccompanied due to migration policy restrictions to which they are subjected. They belong to a young demographic between the ages of 18 and 28 and frequently form marital and non-marital relationships with local men, regardless of their own marital status. According to Kojima (2001) and Nakamatsu (2004), other strong drivers for IMM include a sense of adventure, a desire to travel overseas and experience a different world, the experience of major failures (in romantic relationships or careers), escape from problems and family pressure, and a love of work.

In addition, total fertility declines and resulting demographic imbalance, and economic reasons are so far mostly pronounced in the literature (Japan's fertility rate in 2022 was 1.26) (See Figure 1). For example, in Japan, the total fertility rate declined from 28% to 9% of the total population between 1970 and 2010; in Korea, it fell from 59% to 18%, and in Taiwan, from 64% to 25% (Chung, 2020). China, for example, experiences a significant gender imbalance, i.e. 106.2 men per 100 women in 2015; Japan 95.5 men for every 100 women; and Korea 100.5

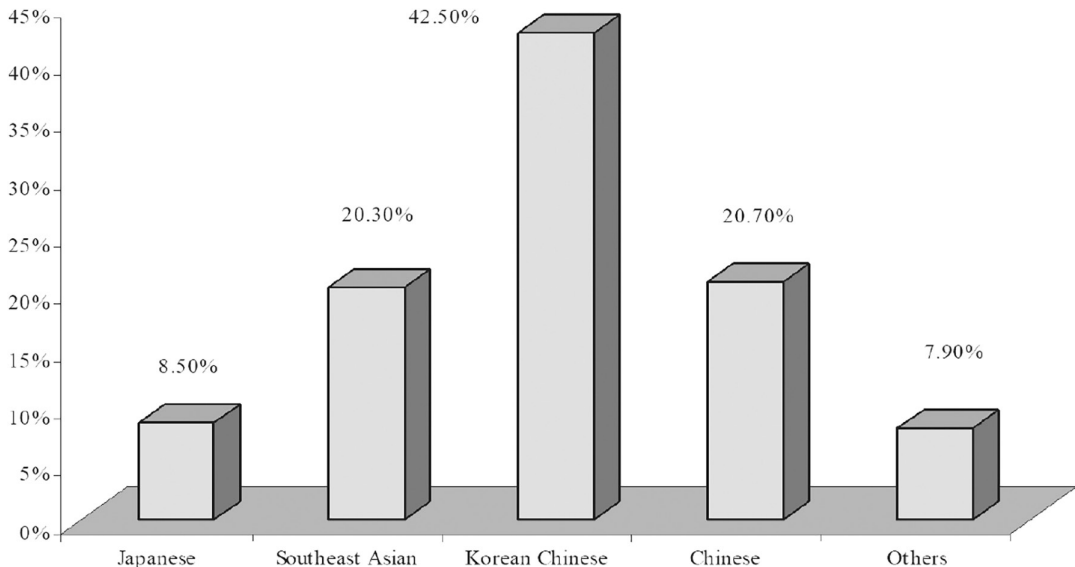


FIGURE 1 Nationality of female international marriage migrants, 2015. Source: Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, Korea.

men for every 100 women (Figure 2). In Korea, furthermore, people with common surnames such as Kim-Kim and Park-Park could not marry (about 4 million) due to the ban on common surname marriage, regardless of the distance of their relationship (Kim, 2016). This has though been changed. This means factors such as demographic, gender, cultural tradition and sex imbalance play a role in determining the marriage migration.

Yet marriage across cultural, religious, caste, ethnic, geographical and national boundaries has often been, and often remains a taboo in traditional societies (Chen & Takeuchi, 2011). Most Indian families, for example, still prefer marriage to be arranged within their religion and caste, and many couplings that have crossed these lines have ended in tragedy, including honour killings (D'Lima et al., 2020). In this context, attention to the 'predicament of ethnicity' and the power dynamics and complex negotiations around it is important to analyse in the context of IMM.

METHODOLOGY

When designing the study, we considered four main issues: (a) the relationships we established with the participants in our study; (b) the settings we chose for data collection; (c) the methods we used to collect our data; and (d) the techniques we used to analyse our collected data. We were aware of the potential alternate interpretations and validity concerns associated with the results and conclusions and how we planned to cope with them.

A qualitative approach was employed for this research that used both primary and secondary data. Between 2019 and 2021, primary data was collected through structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews of 22 couples (on Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp). Of the 22 couples (Table 1), 2 were Filipino-Japanese couples (Filipina wife and Japanese husband=2; and 1 was Filipina wife and Hong Kong husband=1); 5 couples were Chinese-Vietnamese couples (Chinese wife and Vietnamese husband=1; and vice versa =2; Chinese wife and Korean husband=1 and vice versa=1); 4 were Korean-Japanese couples (Korean husband and Japanese wife=2 and vice versa=2); 3 were Taiwanese-Korean couples (Taiwanese wife and Korean husband=1 and vice versa=1; Taiwanese wife and Vietnamese husband=1 and vice versa=1); and 7 were Thai-Western couples (Thai wife and Western husband=4 and Thai wife and Japanese husband=3). Pseudonyms have been used throughout to conceal the real identity of the interviewees.

The opportunities of digital technologies for research were highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as they provide both researchers and research participants with safe and accessible ways to remain engaged. The increased use of digital technologies during the pandemic also demonstrated that digital technologies often provide an affordable and accessible alternative to face-to-face research conversations, allowing and facilitating participation not only by a wider range of participants but also by vulnerable and marginalised groups and individuals who are unable to engage in face-to-face conversations due to the time and expense involved. WhatsApp is still used

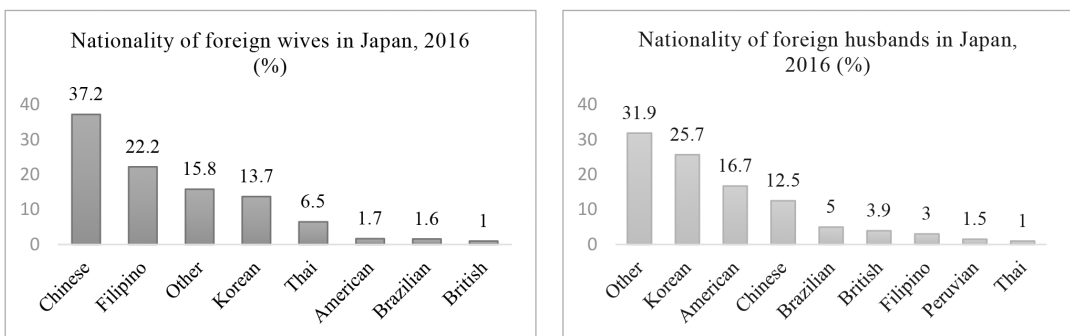


FIGURE 2 Nationality of foreign spouses in Japan. Source: Vital statistics report.

TABLE 1 Respondents' profile.

No. of respondents	Couples	Composition	Age (years)	Marital status	Marital age (years)	Who is migrant ^b
2	Filipino-Japanese	Filipina wife and Japanese husband	31	Divorced	2.5	Wife
	Filipino-Chinese	Filipina wife and Hong Kong husband	35	Failed marriage	1	Wife
5	Chinese-Vietnamese	Chinese wife and Vietnamese husband	37	Married	3	Husband
	Chinese-Vietnamese	Chinese husband and Vietnamese wife	28	Not disclosed	3.5	Wife
	Chinese-Korean	Chinese wife and Korean husband	36	Divorced and then re-married	3	Wife
	Chinese-Korean	Chinese husband and Korean wife	26	Married	2	Wife
4	Korean-Japanese	Korean husband and Japanese wife	25	Married	2	Husband
	Korean-Japanese	Korean wife and Japanese husband	32	Married	3	Wife
	Taiwanese-Korean	Taiwanese wife and Korean husband	35	Married	1	Wife
	Taiwanese-Korean	Taiwanese husband and Korean wife	34	Married	3	Wife
3	Taiwanese-Vietnamese	Taiwanese husband and Vietnamese wife	27	Married	2	Wife
1	Taiwanese-Vietnamese	Taiwanese wife and Vietnamese husband	30	Married	2	Husband
7	Thai-Western ^a	Thai wife and Western husband	36	Married	3	Husband
	Thai-Japanese	Thai wife and Japanese husband	26	Married	2	Husband

^aEuropean and North American.

^bWhether a spousal visa is granted depends on the country and policy, but often depends on the migrant's willingness and spousal support. Some spouses want to work after migration, but again it depends on the legal system.

less frequently than Zoom and Skype for conducting interview-based research, but its specific capabilities for asynchronous participation, end-to-end encryption and widespread use make it a useful, if underutilised, research tool (Colom, 2022).

To ensure that the responses fulfilled the research goals, in-depth interviews were conducted using a well-developed interview guide. We asked questions about demographics, migration history, marital or relationship history, family and social support, cultural adaptability, gender roles and expectations, legal status and access to resources. We began with some general questions like age, marital status, nationality which were then followed by some specific questions like: For how long are (were) you married? How did you meet? Being from different nationalities, what made you fall for each other? Do you face problems to cope up with each other's culture and traditions? How is/was your married life? (if divorced); Why did you get divorced? What kind of trauma did you face in your marriage? How is your life after divorce? Are you planning to get married again?

Although researchers often use statistical calculations to determine sample size based on factors such as desired confidence level and expected effect size, we relied on practical considerations such as participant availability and resources for data collection and analysis. To ensure that the study results were legitimate and significant,

we determined the sample size based on the topic, methodology and population studied. In general, we screened potential participants to determine whether they met the study's inclusion criteria, which included gender, age, marital status, country of origin and immigration status. Positionality and social location influenced our study approach in multiple ways, as personal and social variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic, cultural and political status influence perspectives and experiences. Data analysis used a systematic approach to organise, categorise and analyse data collected from study participants. To analyse our non-numerical data, such as the textual data from the interviews, we used qualitative analysis techniques such as content, thematic and narrative analysis.

The use of a combination of structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, in which we asked a mix of open- and close-ended questions within predetermined thematic frameworks provided us with rich empirical data relationships (Gomm, 2004). The hybrid technique provided us with both comparable and accurate data (from structured and semi-structured interviews) as well as the ability to probe the more subjective and emotional realms of participants' experiences of their marital relationships (from unstructured interviews). The unstructured interviews were of particular importance when exploring the roles that ethnicity and complex and layered marital negotiations played in international marriages.

We identified our sample by using the snowballing method, in which one respondent gave us the name of another, who then referred the name of a third, and so on. This is a useful method to deploy in research on IMM, as international couples are often part of communities and friendship groups comprised of other international couples or individual partners from their countries of origins. Relationships of trust and the rapport established with one couple or individual can enable access to other research participants, who might otherwise have been reluctant to engage with researchers because of a perceived or real vulnerability in their marriage or new country of residence. In order to analyse the data, qualitative methodologies were employed to explain the phenomenon.

POWER DYNAMICS AND NEGOTIATIONS

In this section, we focus on analysing the power dynamics and negotiations that our research revealed are at work in international marriages. Imbalances in power and processes of negotiation often revolve around questions of documentation, visas and work, and the dependence/reliance on the non-migrated spouse to ensure their validity and continuity. How do country of origin, ethnicity, religion, culture and skills influence these? Many people believe that a husband from a more 'traditional' or 'patriarchal' society may obstruct his wife's ability to participate in the workforce. Even within the same country, European research on this topic has yielded contradictory results (Eggebø & Brekke, 2019), such as that women who marry a man from a more culturally conservative country have lower employment rates. Of course, this is not always the case.

In most cases, migration is a selective process that calls for a specific number of resources (in terms, for example, of finances, skills or connections). People who migrate may be more enterprising and willing to take challenges than those who do not (Chiswick, 1999; Williams & Baláž, 2012). They also have access to capital (economic or social) or can leverage resources to enable their migration journey. It is argued that this vetting does not apply to migrants who are "connected" to family members already in the country or who move to join them (Chiswick, 1999). Nevertheless, migrant spouses must be chosen from among a large pool of prospective spouses, and their attractiveness may be linked to education. Aside from language requirements, which have only been implemented in the United Kingdom since 2010 and are a relatively recent development in European spousal immigration legislation, it is commonly believed that immigrant spouses limited educational resources are a structural barrier to marriage migration. However, this is not always the case (Kofman & Raghuram, 2006).

Ethnic bridges, as they are referred to in the literature, can help immigrants integrate into mainstream society, but only if they have strong social ties with native population and other immigrant groups (the so-called ethnic bridges). Theoretical discourse on the implications of bonding and bridging social capital have been paramount in relation

to marriage migration. Most international marriages are part of larger transnational networks (Charsley, 2013). Ethnographic research on intra-ethnic transnational networks by Carling (2008) and Charsley (2013) challenges the premise of a basic shared community. Opportunities for dramatic social mobility through migration are frequently cited as one of the key benefits of transnational marriage for overseas partners. Yet international marriages are not always easy, and many of those who have married someone from a different cultural or ethnic background attest to their complexity. Conflicts can arise between transnational couples due to religious and political differences, cultural expectations, as well as a language barrier. Trivial issues, such as a partner's eating habits or how to commemorate holidays, can spark an argument. Some individuals may simply be more adept at managing and resolving conflicts than others. As a result of both parties' cultural expectations, certain problems can potentially reappear.

It stands to reason that marrying someone from the same culture, language, skill set and religion makes acclimating easier for the couple. However, we believe that if people choose to leave their own country and settle in another for having a successful marriage, other social and cultural aspects will not be a barrier. Ishii (2016) and Mu and Yeung (2018) argued that the more diversified the reasons for migration, the more dynamic the integration processes have become due to the shifting distribution of migrants' qualifications. This means that, in addition to financial stability and security, they are looking for new ways of life, such as finding a spouse with whom to have a family and to settle permanently in the receiving country. When marriage migrants integrate into receiving societies in all keyways – socially, culturally, legally and so on – classic assimilation theory usually assumes a unilineal integration trajectory (Massey et al., 1993).

The profitable international sex trade is one of the reasons for women's migration. Too often, moral outrage at 'profiteering' by intermediaries and exploitation by men who, presumably, have little currency in their own domestic marriage markets overshadows women and their efforts to accomplish their own dreams and objectives (Robinson, 2007). Power differentials, the sexual division of labour, and the social patterning of desire in the real world all contribute to the production of gendered expectations. Hegemonic gender norms lay far too much focus on male–female distinctions and far too little emphasis on the marriage dynamic. Because they are low on the power hierarchy of the nation-state and the gender norms hierarchy, such migrant women have few resources to fight being abused. One of the international (Filipino-Japanese) couples (35 years of age) we interviewed reveals the following divorce details:

I have been with him for two years and a half. It was just a matter of time before I received my residency permit, which had previously taken two years to obtain. They then kicked me out in order for me not to acquire the permit. And returning to the Philippines was quite difficult. What was going to happen to a young woman who was married and then divorced? What would happen next? He had not wanted me, and he had someone else I think; it was his family who had forced him to marry. Finally, they drove me to my elder sister and dropped me off. They told me I could go back home from there. The plane ticket was purchased by my sister's father-in-law. I was distraught and depressed.

It is not always the case that women are in a fully agentic position and make the decision to move internationally to get married or accompany their spouses. This frequently occurs with parental agreement and facilitation. Some parents frequently attempt to marry off their daughters to affluent grooms from other countries in order to safeguard their daughters' futures (Aamir, 2019). However, there is evidence that the majority of these marriages fail (United Nations, 2019).

After a year of marriage, one of our Korean respondents discovered that her Taiwanese husband was "dragging his feet" when it came to applying for her residency permit. She had "many times" urged him, but he allegedly "did not want" to do it. She perceived this as meaning that the marriage had "no long-term goals." There were a few instances similar to this respondent's where husbands hampered the wives' efforts to obtain permanent residency

in the country of destination. While many husbands supported their wives' efforts to obtain permanent residency, many did not want to, or were unable to do so due to financial constraints.

In another case, Lam (Vietnamese) and her 37-year-old (Taiwanese) salesman husband married her the promise of a "better life" for her, and a monthly salary of S\$3000 from their union. Lam's husband lost a third of his commission-based income and had to pay child support to his ex-wife as a result of the recession and their divorce. The newlyweds were forced to share a rental with another Singaporean-Vietnamese couple because the husband's apartment belonged to his ex-wife. Despite her desire to return to work, Lam's opportunities for advancement in public relations were limited.

Another Taiwanese respondent reported how the newlyweds' happiness waned and how their squabbles intensified, in part due to the wife's desire to send money to her Vietnamese family. The ensuing quarrels prompted the husband to take action: "I opted to go to my father and say, 'We buy her a plane ticket – or I do it myself – and then we send her home, because I cannot stand for this.'" Although the father encouraged the husband to give his wife a second chance, the issue persisted, and the husband reported "grow[ing] enraged...slap[ping] the table and tell[ing] my father, 'Now buy this plane ticket or I will, and we will have it tomorrow!'" The ticket is then purchased by her father-in-law, and his daughter-in-law returns home. The wife's perspective, predictably, is quite different to the husband's:

I did not have a job. I needed a job so that I can send money to my family back home. I was asking for help about finding a job. I was undermined and mocked by him. He says I failed to pick [up] the language and culture, and my degrees I obtained in my country [are] worthless. This pain was not easy to digest. I believe I have been looked down upon I believe because of my social status as a female and that I came from a relatively poorer country.

Another participant, Lek (a 36-year-old Thai wife having a couple-identity), was discussing her previous unsuccessful marriage. She had an uncomfortable marital relationship with a Thai man that ended in divorce. As she thought she had lost any re-marriage opportunity in her province, she decided to start a new life and returned to Bangkok to work, where she met a European man. They got married and later relocated to Europe. This shows that if local Thai girls are unable to locate a well-paying career or a spouse with whom they can live peacefully, marrying a foreigner is seen as one of the best possibilities for their life. However, like Lek, few of them know what awaits them. Upon moving to Europe, Lek's husband sold her to another man. As Yongcharoenchai (2017) discovered in her research that many women who think they will happy and prosperous life in Europe with the man have married are, in fact, living in misery.

Despite the inherent challenges faced by all marriages, international marriages seem more challenging because the couple need to content with and negotiate over a greater number of issues and complexities, including those related to the migrating spouses' precarious migration status and conflicting social, cultural and economic expectations. Greater power imbalances, often resulting from the precarious immigration and financial status of the migrating spouse (more often than not, the female partner) intersect with already existing gender inequalities to produce more difficult circumstances. While some couples find harmony and a happy balance, managing to negotiate their way out of difficult situations and rebalance (or at least acknowledge and work on) unequal power dynamics, many do not. As some of our interview extracts show that divergent social and cultural expectations can become very problematic.

THE 'PREDICAMENT OF ETHNICITY': NEGOTIATING ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY

We compile the results based on some parameters (composition of the couple, nationality, cultural differences, different experiences, differences in migration status and ethnic composition). We could also have ordered them

by region, ethnicity, national affiliation or marital status, since our respondents had complex ethnic and national backgrounds. Therefore, the results are organised according to a general theme of predicament and privilege.

While ethnicity is always used to describe people with similar cultural characteristics (such as language, cuisine and dress), the concept of ethnicity can vary from society to society because it is socially defined. Marriage rates are often used to determine the social distance between two groups. Generally, these marriages occur in significant numbers only after a minority group has adopted the cultural norms of the majority. They not only reflect the assimilation and ethnic acceptance of the marrying parties but also lead to inter-ethnic mixing among family members, acquaintances and broader social networks, resulting in additional assimilation (Qian et al., 2012). According to Becker's (1973) and Lam's (1988) marriage theories, individuals with stronger ties to their ethnic background are more likely to marry within their ethnic group. According to exchange theory, individuals who are less integrated may require higher compensation before agreeing to marry outside their social group (Chiswick & Houseworth, 2011; Qian et al., 2012).

The body of work on marriage migration has revealed links between structural – economic, social and legal – factors leading to cross-border marriages and individual agency (Kim, 2019). Culture is not one-dimensional since it varies according to the surroundings. Cultural history defines the fundamental concepts of “love” and “relationship” which influences our emotional, social and even sexual desires (Di Giovanni et al., 2014). Couples of various ethnicities, of course, have more obstacles than couples within the same ethnicity (Dewi et al., 2019). Married couples face four hurdles: the first is adjusting to a new partner, the second is a sexual adaptation, the third is a financial adaptation and the fourth is adjusting to the couple's family (Hurlock, 1990). Cultural differences could also be an issue. We investigate cultural distinctions in international families, specifically how international spouses identify and reinvent their culture while living with their foreign spouses (Kim, 2019).

Our research revealed that international marriages frequently include complex and nuanced negotiations around ethnicity and identity. The hybrid methodological approach we deployed allowed us to gather rich and nuanced accounts of the negotiations that take place between international couples, and shed light on the more micro- or sociological aspects of IMM, particularly those pertaining to what we have referred to as the ‘predicament of ethnicity’. In this section, we focus specifically on the negotiations that take place between international couples around identity, including issues of differing cultural expectations, ethnicity and religion. Prior research suggests that international marriage migrants have maintained a line of ethnic, racial and religious affiliation through cultural, historical or colonial legacies that also influence marriage migration decisions. Perhaps the 4Cs paradigm (community, colony, culture and cash) partially explains why IMM follows similar paths. Some academics are surprised as to why South Asians are not included in this trend. The “four Cs” can help us understand actual flows and non-existent flows.

At the end of the twentieth century, there was a tendency towards researching migrants' and their descendants' identities and sense of belonging (Hall, 1995). The increased interest in transnationalism has aided academics in accepting the notion of multiple attachments occurring concurrently. A prevalent [mis]conception is that having a strong sense of belonging to an ethnic or religious group is detrimental to social cohesion since an international marriage may demonstrate a lack of commitment to the place of residency (Rytter, 2010, 2012; Schinkel, 2011). Some scholars believe that the disparities between identities based on race, culture and language are irreconcilable for ethnic groups in different countries or continents. Keeping this in mind, Wimmer gives an alternative perspective by demonstrating that the bulk of ethnic boundary-making strategies are found in groupings characterised by ‘race’ or culture, in eras far removed from the current period of globalisation (Wimmer, 2008: p. 1027). The formation of ethnic boundaries is primarily ascribed to political activities or daily interactions between individuals. This shift in focus towards ‘boundary making’ is possibly a result of the wider trend away from structural determinism and towards theories emphasising ‘agency’ (Wimmer, 2008).

For this constructivist tradition to thrive, more research into how ethnicity is made and unmade in everyday interactions between individuals is required. These efforts are referred to as boundary expansion and contraction strategies respectively (Wimmer, 2008). Expansion and contraction can be accomplished in two ways: first, by

fusion, which reduces the number of categories while expanding current boundaries, or second, by fission, which adds a new one while contracting prior bounds. Second, a more inclusive or restrictive level of categorical distinction can be highlighted without changing the number of categories. The segmentary, nested nature of many ethnic classification systems allows for such a shift in emphasis. As a result, the ethnic border formation is crucial in IMM. For example, while Korean and Japanese men marry foreigners, we show that they keep their wives within their own culture, race and language.

IMM has resulted in various Asian countries diversifying their ethnic composition, including Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Viet Nam and Singapore (Yeung & Mu, 2020). In addition to ethnicity, IMM is highly impacted by a preference for 'farang' or 'orang pote' or white spouses. Asian brides have a particular place in their hearts about the *farang* because they believe that 'farang' must be decent people and wealthy because they are 'white'.

Nhi's [the 34 years-old Vietnamese women] husband attempted to preserve patriarchal control by 'paying' her not to work, despite his willingness to abandon his insistence that she has children. When she insisted on working, despite his entreaties, he ultimately agreed to pay her \$200 per month for her services. "If I were unemployed," Nhi said, "he would pay me \$500 per month. Despite my concerns, he was compelled to sign the forms authorising me to work."

The patriarchal bargain had to be renegotiated in Nhi's advantage, so she spent time and effort developing her social and linguistic capital. Six months after her marriage, she was able to obtain employment at a food centre with the assistance of her Vietnamese friends. She emerged from behind the counter to accept client orders and collect payment as a full-fledged employee despite her lack of language skills and her manager's continuous criticism.

Recent studies have examined how governments in receiving countries are dealing with marriage migrants in light of the massive influx that is changing the ethno-scape of these countries (Tan, 2008; Toyota, 2008). When it comes to promoting and monitoring marriage migration, the state has an active role just like it does for labour migration (Robinson, 2007; Turner, 2008). The entry of marriage migrants to South Korea, in contrast with contract labour migrants, is encouraged in order to provide spouses for rural bachelors and to soothe the vociferous demands for economic security of the rural population (Park, cited in Freeman, 2005). But in order to maintain the ethnic nationalist solidarity of the receiving country, government policies towards women marriage migrants set out a specifically gendered and ethnicised trajectory; these trajectories may produce conflicts and tensions around racial and ethnic identities.

The process of obtaining legal citizenship is a major concern for marriage migrants after they migrate. When a woman has the right to demand rights and social benefits, it can have a significant impact on her life and the family. Germany and the United States mandate that international marriage migrants wait for 2 years before applying for permanent residency or naturalisation in their countries of origin.

Constable (2005) used the phrase "global imagination" to describe how people in international marriages perceive themselves in a distinct social-geographical context. This imagined socio-geographical place aids in creating global 'marriage-scapes,' which are influenced by one's social imagination of gender, sexuality and modernity (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011; Jongwilaiwan & Thomson, 2013; Kim, 2010). Religion and culture have long been considered, as two of the most potent identification markers used by people to differentiate themselves from one another. However, transnational brides and grooms routinely cross religious and cultural boundaries. Is it appropriate to research whether interfaith marriage influences a couple's migration pattern and direction? According to Bohm (2008), if inter-religious marriages cause difficulties, couples may decide to remigrate.

While for some couples, religion is not necessarily a source of contention, history might be. One of our research participants, a Japanese wife [of a Korean husband] stated that while religion is not a source of contention (especially as the couple are not religious) when history comes up in their casual banter, the topic becomes heated and can end in silence for a week:

... .. my case has been interesting. My vision was clear. My husband has supported me in pursuing my dream and vision. In some cases, my voice was stronger than him, and he was stronger than mine in another case. Major decisions are made based on my thoughts and opinions ...

When I say, "It has to be this way," my husband usually accepts it. It doesn't imply he is a coward, but he does not have a big ego. He is an extremely adaptable person. He does not have the kind of ego that makes him brag about himself. He simply does not care what work he performs or where he lives as long as he and his family are happy. That is why I am able to live with him.

The Chinese wife [of the Korean husband] appeared to be content with her husband. She claimed that she tried to avoid talking about religion and culture. If there is love, these disparities may fade away. She also noted that staying under the same roof necessitated a great deal of compromise from both ends:

I find it much simpler to communicate my emotions in my native tongue than in English because I can put my heart and soul into it. However, I must give my children an English-speaking environment. Because my children have an American father, it is preferable that they be fluent in English.... My husband definitely wants our children to be English native speakers. He said if they can handle English perfectly, they can work anywhere in the world. That's why he wants English to be their first language.

The preceding excerpt explains all about the compromise, being nostalgic, her own language, adapting to a new culture, and the children and their future. The wife admitted that her husband is occasionally irritated by her accent. She recognised that her husband undercuts her English proficiency and accent:

... I am the one who makes compromises. Most of the time, we are not in a position to combine our ideas about whether or not to go somewhere or whether or not to buy something on that particular day. Those are the occasions in which we must make a black-or-white choice...

After a year of courtship, Nok (a 35 years-old Thai woman) married a European man. Her parents were pleased when they heard the news because numerous other women in their town had married foreigners and appeared to have a better life. Nok travelled to Europe and discovered that her foreign husband was destitute and lived in a motor trailer in a park. They were struggling to make ends meet and did not have much money to send home. Nok's marriage was a nightmare for her and her family. Of course, this does not have anything to do with his ethnicity, but it shows how the dream of the bride gets shattered.

Some of the husbands disagree on whether or not to send money home to help their families. Some female-spouses make rash decisions to boost their income and register as sex workers while still living with their husbands (Duangkumnerd, 2009). While, several others were pleased with their accommodations, despite being subjected to weather circumstances that were markedly different from those in Thailand. Intermarriage was becoming more acceptable in Thai society, and the exemplary behaviour of the women married to foreigners would contribute to their improved image. Some Thai women who strongly hold on to traditional societal norms were, however, opposed to marrying foreigners in order to become wealthy because in reality, several of them have been duped. Some Japanese, Korean and Thai women believe that marrying foreign spouses indicates a smooth relationship, seeing foreigners as more responsible to their families than locals and even going so far as to build nice relationships with their in-laws.

Despite the fact that IMM has been more prominent in recent decades, "ancient notions of collectivism, strong in-group commitment, familial allocentrism, and sexual conservatism – all influence how Thais handle interpersonal globalisation" (Hynie et al., 2006, p. 14). Thailand is deeply nationalistic and proud of its heritage, but it is also significantly impacted by Western values like independence, autonomy, idiocentrism and sexual liberalism, which influence attitudes on love, partnership, and transnational marriage (Darren, 2021; McKenzie & Xiong, 2021).

Most of our respondents, mostly brides, mentioned that their goal is to marry a middle-class, single foreigner who can give them financial security.

Marriages between people from other countries are frequently considered a way to preserve cultural practices and boundaries, as well as a demonstration of a person's loyalty to their country's values. For European ethnic minorities, transnational marriage is frequently motivated by the desire to maintain cultural ties to their own countries (Charsley, 2013; Lievens, 1999; Timmerman, 2006). It is anticipated that 'Homeland' marriage will revive traditional concepts of household relations of power such as women's employment (Charsley et al., 2017).

Some husbands who have Japanese wives said,

every marriage has its difficulties. An international marriage has different challenge from a regular one. But if both parties are willing to work at it and compromise, any marriage should succeed. My (Japanese) wife has her eccentricities, but I'm confident I would find the same if she were from a different country. Despite this, I continue to be baffled by her preoccupation with doing laundry on a regular basis. However, she appears to enjoy it. So, I do not bother.

This implies that any marriage can succeed if both parties are willing to compromise. We share their personal experience of being married to a Japanese woman and recognise that their wife has idiosyncrasies, but they believe they would find similar quirks in any partner from another country. The importance of mutual understanding, compromise and acceptance of differences for a successful marriage, especially in the context of an international marriage is critical.

Another respondent said,

they are difficult, particularly if your partner insists on doing things his or her way or in accordance with the culture of his or her country. The biggest problem with an international marriage to a Japanese woman is that she has a very high probability of ending sexual relations unilaterally at some point. Some men though may say that they continue to enjoy a sexual connection with their Japanese wife. However, I believe that they are in the minority. Sexless marriages are so prevalent in Japan that they have essentially become the norm. Many Japanese women decide they no longer need/want/enjoy sexual activity and simply stop having it. When it's gone, it's gone forever. Forget trying to convince her to change her mind, attending counselling together, or doing anything else. She is uninterested, and Japanese women are notoriously obstinate; it's game over once she makes up her mind. Japanese guys may be accustomed to it and therefore more receptive to it. However, for a non-Japanese guy married to a Japanese woman, this is a serious blow.

The problem of sexless marriages in Japan and that it is widespread among Japanese women. For non-Japanese men married to Japanese women, this can be particularly challenging, as Japanese women are notoriously stubborn once they have made up their minds. This paints a negative picture of international marriages with a Japanese partner, especially when it comes to sexual relationships. However, it is important to note that these are generalisations that do not apply to every person or relationship:

I'm happily married, yet there are some things that test my patience occasionally. I occasionally hear "since you are not Japanese, you cannot understand". Other than that, our problems are unrelated to our differences. Language is definitely a problem, and it destroyed a few of my relationships when I first got here because we grew tired of not being able to express ourselves fully and honestly, or even having to struggle with an electronic dictionary. I believe that cultural differences on which people are unwilling or unable to compromise are the ultimate killers, but it is this unwillingness or incapacity to compromise that kills. Indeed, if two exceptional

people can find common ground, their differences can result in a truly enjoyable and productive partnership.

Occasionally, frustration arises when a partner uses the phrase “Since you are not Japanese, you cannot understand” However, these challenges do not necessarily cause problems in their relationship, and compromise is the key to overcoming cultural differences. Cultural differences where people are unwilling or unable to compromise can be the ultimate killers of a relationship, but ultimately it is the unwillingness or inability to compromise that causes the problem.

CONCLUSIONS

While a substantial body of literature deals with the growing practice of IMM, it does not adequately address the role that ethnicity plays in the context of IMM. This article explored the question of ethnicity in IMM in Southeast Asian contexts. It focussed on what we have called the ‘predicament of ethnicity’, and the negotiations around ethnicity, culture and identity among couples where at least one partner migrated for the purpose of the marriage.

In doing so, the article has contributed to the literature of IMM in three ways. First, our research has explored the power dynamics at play in the marital life of international couples. Migrant wives’ social position in their home countries and husbands’ social standing in theirs are crucial in the power dynamic. Second, previous studies on international marriage have mainly used marital instability or susceptibility of couples as key influences on the decision to continue with relationship. This study broadens this beyond the world of “problems” and into the realm of “well-being.” Third, previous research that used a qualitative methodology has focussed on the complexities of gender, family and migration. This study, on the other hand, highlights the importance of how ethnic and cultural differences to marital dis/satisfaction and explores how international couples negotiate these predicaments.

Migration is about people, their dreams and worries, their triumphs and tragedies, making migration stories interesting, relevant and compelling. In recent decades, there has been an explosion of research on cross-border marriages between Asian women and men from foreign/wealthier countries. Marriage migration has become a growing phenomenon. As a result, marital migration has emerged as a crucial topic for migration studies. Power dynamics in husband-wife partnerships have a significant impact on the quality of the marriage, as well as the well-being of the couple and other family members. An imbalance of power in a marriage produces tension and stress, which has a disproportionate impact on the physical and mental health of the partner with relatively less power. Most IMM involves women from developing countries marrying men from developed countries, resulting in a type of “global hypergamy” in which women marry men who are older. When moving to the husband’s place of residence, women have to navigate the immigration system, which requires spousal sponsorship. Because the legal right to remain in the host country is based on the husband, this offers men an advantage over their foreign spouses.

We recognise that culture encompasses more than just race and ethnicity; it also encompasses religious, political and other components of society. Culture and ethnicity can influence marriage and family goals. It is critical to monitor the evolution of a partnership over time since it affects the two people’s life chances in a mutually interdependent and socially embedded way. Women must contend with an economic gender gap and a disparity between their career and marriage expectations and realities. Long working hours, restricted childcare access, unequal care responsibilities, lack of employment opportunities and sexism intersect to produce greater difficulties. Many potential husbands marry outside of their country, culture and religion due to women’s lack of willingness to marry locals.

Due to differing values, people from differing cultural backgrounds may face substantial obstacles in their marriage. This issue may present itself in their expectations of everyday responsibilities, holiday celebrations, career progression, child-rearing responsibilities and the personal sacrifices they must make for the sake of

their marriage. Failure to communicate expectations and an inability to compromise may lead to frustration and the breakdown of multicultural marriage. Due to their ethnic and cultural origin, a spouse may be compelled to make significant concessions to avoid family disruption. Every marriage, whether domestic or international, needs open and transparent lines of communication to function effectively. Language barriers may make it difficult for someone to articulate their cultural and societal expectations, desires and intentions. For instance, if an international couple marries without being aware of any of the aforementioned factors, the marriage may fail miserably. However, the relationship has a strong chance of enduring if one person can deal with the inevitable misunderstandings and misperceptions that develop when two diverse cultures are brought together through an international marriage.

The research makes a distinctive addition by focussing on the intricate interplay of culture and migration in the context of international marriage. The study recognises that migration shapes and is shaped by culture and that negotiating cultural differences is an important component of the immigration process. The study looks into the lives of immigrant women who married foreign men and moved to their husbands' countries. It investigates how these women navigate cultural divides and adapt to new cultural standards while retaining components of their own culture and identity. The study also looks at how gender roles and power dynamics affect these agreements.

This study emphasises the necessity of understanding the unique challenges that immigrant women confront in international marriages, as well as the need for policies and interventions that promote cultural adaptation and integration. It also emphasises the importance of recognising the variety of experiences among immigrant women and the necessity for a nuanced approach to addressing the difficulties they encounter.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13172>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

A. K. M. Ahsan Ullah  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1441-141X>

Diotima Chattoraj  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8397-8765>

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