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### Bargaining for Love and Power in Arranged International Marriages

International or interracial marriage from a distance may seem particularly romantic because it is the result of each partner falling in love with the other despite the barriers between them. But behind this simplified assumption, there are power dynamics due to socioeconomic and cultural status or class. While arranged marriages in the past were to maintain an actual hierarchy in royalty, the modern version is there to exploit the weaker party to maintain the social hierarchy and structure that people often deny the existence of. Since marriage does not exceptionally have to involve love, it can become a purchased product. The purchaser and purchased are not surprisingly each man and woman respectively with patriarchy in existence. Sex tourism, matchmaking services, and mail-order brides have been on the rise since the 2000s in South Korea, where people and social structures still mostly hold up to rigid patriarchy and have been affecting people disproportionately.

Marriage and birth rates have been very low in South Korea since the 2000s. 2005 marked 1.08 births per woman of childbearing age, making South Korea the country with the lowest birth rates in OECD (OECD, 2022a). The OECD average in 2005 and 2020 were respectively 1.67 and 1.59 whereas it was 0.81 in South Korea in 2021 (OECD, 2022a). Without considering migration and unexpected changes in mortality, a rate of 2 guarantees a stable population (OECD, 2022a). A decline in birth rates is a trend in most wealthy countries, but the rate of 0.8 is exceptionally low. To address this, public media have been attributing this fall to

surging living costs, especially housing prices, and have pressured the government to come up with policies to drive housing prices down. However, interviews with men and women showed disparate, if not opposite, responses. Men go in line with the media, reporting that they do not plan to marry because it is simply unaffordable but women reported otherwise. They believe marriage is a structure that benefits men at the expense of women and that society and its policies ignore the structural discrimination and inequalities women face. While maternity leaves exist and are legally enforced, corporate climates pressure women to return early or impose penalties for their promotion (McCurry & Kim, 2021). As a response, they now feel that childbearing is detrimental to their career and social status, not to mention that the country also has the highest gender pay gap in OECD at 31.1% (OECD, 2022b). If society was changing to remove such a burden from women, the rates would not have been so bad, but policies are moving backward.

One of the major campaign strategies for the new president elected in 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol, was a promise to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which men in their 20s and 30s were very fond of. Gunia (2022b) asserts that such capitalization of antifeminism or backlash toward feminism contributed greatly to his win in the elections. *Idaenam*, a new term for men in their 20s was coined to elucidate the particular phenomenon. *Idaenam* demonize feminism through the lens of meritocracy, that women want to be paid better, or as equal to men when they get compensated less because they put less effort into their careers—also believing that the poor suffer due to their shortcomings—and commit misandry to support themselves (Hines & Song, 2021). Then there was cybersex trafficking Nth Room case and *molka*—spy cameras often hidden in women’s public restrooms, hotels, and changing rooms to illicitly film women and distribute the content—resulting in more general mistrust and other

stalking and murder cases which were hate crimes adjoint with misogyny (Gunia, 2022a). The public along with an unresponsive government that refused to acknowledge the gender correlations and to set adequate policies did not help either. For instance, there is the 2021 Kim Tae-hyon case where he murdered two sisters and their mother after stalking one of the sisters even after being reported to the police because they did not consider it a serious crime (Park, 2021). Likewise, Jeon Ju-hwan, an employee at Seoul Metro murdered his female coworker in 2022 in the women's restroom despite the victim filing multiple police complaints for threats, stalking, and illegal filming (Park, 2022). Most women now believe these crimes were preventable if only stalking, blackmailing, and illegal filming of women were sentenced more strictly, and treated as serious crimes, but instead, people and legislation argued to attribute these crimes to mental illnesses of the individual perpetrators, ignoring the social failure where they failed to educate people to have appropriate discussions towards hate crimes and misogyny, and came to now pretend it does not exist. With the current political and social climate, women believe childbearing, dating, and being a woman are all unsafe in current South Korea.

However, men still want wives, to form families, and to have children. When the women in their country were not willing to provide that, men turned to the international market. The popular demand is often met in developing nations like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand. Some men migrate to these countries for marriage and more pay for mail-order brides. Cohen (as cited in Kim, 2021) points out that the majority of migrants are male in the retirement migration and tourism industry directed at the Philippines and Thailand due to its "tropical paradise" entertainment and sex industry. Also believing that women from subordinate cultures and developing countries would be more tolerant of patriarchy and therefore would take the gender roles—that are becoming outdated for many developed countries—well: for wives to be

submissive, respectful, loyal, appreciative, and non-feminist. Naturally, men visited these countries for what they called the ‘3 G activities’ which are girls, golf, and gambling and thereby coining the term ‘ugly Korean’ after the term ‘ugly American’ as some Korean troops sent to Vietnam during the Vietnam war were violent and irresponsible to the civilians, especially harassing and abandoning Vietnamese women after impregnating them (Kim, 2021). These kinds of ordeals were widely broadcasted in Korea because the country had developed very fast in a short period of time and the president with a military regime focused on what Kim refers to as developmentalism, where they intended not only fast economic growth for the country but also wanted similar levels of growth for sociocultural factors (Kim, 2021). To achieve the so-called first-world ethical standards, they wanted to narrow down who these ugly Koreans were—to sort out the ethical and unethical—and therefore supported the critiques of unethical behaviors for monitoring and preventative purposes. Media favored non-government organizations like WLK (We Love Kopino) when they published websites of lists including identities of Kopino—children born between a Korean man and Filipino women, where the Korean father often abandoned the mother and child—fathers and was sued in return (Kim, 2021). As a result, men were shamed for not only irresponsible sex tourism but also for interracial marriage as a whole.

Kim (2021) interviewed several Korean men living in Vietnam with either Korean or Vietnamese wives, and while husbands in homoethnic couples typically preferred to interview at their house, involving their wives and children as well, the husbands from interracial marriages preferred to interview at golf club townhouses and their offices, not revealing about their family or marital status until they grew comfortable with Kim and were ensured that she would not be judgemental about their marriage and family-making. The couples and families settled in Vietnam, are given better support for the bride as domestic violence was to occur, as they are still

in their original community and the family was expected to mostly adhere to Vietnamese traditions.

On the contrary, when Korean men and Vietnamese women are to marry and settle in Korea, situations become more complex as the patriarchal and familial order has heftier expectations for the migrant woman. The migrant men in Vietnam usually have financial abilities and that is about the most important thing they need to provide for their families. But in the migrant woman in Korea's case, they usually lack the economic means and therefore depend on the husband and are implicitly obligated to fulfill patriarchal and familial duties in their marriage. Vietnamese brides bargain for their position in the household through marriage mobility by expressing that they will help their families in Vietnam, and the family of the host family partially understands this as the capitalistic motivation behind engaging in an arranged marriage (Lee, 2014). The mother-in-law who faced deprivation and inequity in the traditional family and social structure that normalizes the exploitation of women to maintain patriarchal order internalizes patriarchy and eventually gains a similar kind of authority above their daughter-in-law (Kandiyoti, as cited in Lee, 2014). Kim (as cited in Lee, 2014) explains the cycle of exploitation and movement of power as generations pass by: the men, the father and son are the first class citizen, the woman, the mother-in-law is a second citizen, and the foreign bride which they conceptualize as poor, traditional, and is unequally benefitting from the marital exchange are to become a third class citizen, who they can rightfully expect to perform domestic and reproductive duties, and if these conditions are not met, the mother may threaten, punish, or exclude the daughter-in-law. The problem arises because of the disparities between their expectations. The mother expects and anticipates that the daughter will oblige to her traditional beliefs, but the daughter would think that she is being coerced to provide more than what she

bargained for. Besides labor, the Vietnamese bride is providing marital status. According to Martin and Nakayama (2022), a high-context society communicates more through non-explicit contexts and nonverbal cues and a collectivist society focuses to preserve the dignity and harmony of the community. Korea is both and marital status is almost necessary to conform to the normatives. This gives more power to the family to pressure the Korean man to marry. Another reason they prefer Vietnamese brides compared to women from other countries besides the dominant position is that Vietnam is also high-context, collectivist, and has high power distance, where people are more accepting of imbalanced and unequal power distribution (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). For that reason, the Korean family with a relatively dominant culture and economic status feels that the brides would feel less repulsive about being subservient to their husbands and parents-in-law. The husband and his family also rarely tried to learn Vietnamese as they consider it is from a subordinate culture, demonstrating the power imbalance (Lee, 2014).

Furthermore, Lee (2014) interviewed some Korean men that married young Vietnamese women and settled in Korea. One interviewee, Yong-su was in a hurry to get married as he was approaching 40, but was feeling sour after two divorced women had turned him down, and assumed that they wanted a husband with a white-collar job, college education, an apartment, and no elderly parent they had to take care of (Lee, 2014). Under the impression that it was hypergamy for a divorced woman to marry a bachelor, he was even more irritated at being rejected by these women who he perceived to have low status in the marriage market. This is where the mother intervenes. The mothers often in these cases were the breadwinners of the house, having dominant opinions about the overall operations of the family, including her son's marriage.

Marriage is not only the contract between two people but is an important facet of facework, to save the faces and dignity of self or others (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). In this case, Yong-su is trying to do facework for himself and his family, especially for the superiors—notice that this is not always elders considering how elders without the dominant breadwinner position are disregarded—in the collectivist society he is in. The facework does not stop with marriage itself but continues to impact their lives disproportionately. One interviewee who married a Vietnamese woman mentioned how they should have gone to Uzbek or Russia and married a white woman instead and they would have felt so proud and glorified as if it would have elevated their social status (Lee, 2014). However, they attribute their marriage choices to cultural distance when comparing Southeastern and white women. Triandis (as cited in Triandis, 2000) defines cultural distance as the tendency for conflict to grow bigger when differences in two interacting cultures are greater. These men were afraid that they have very little in common with white women and build deeper conflicts and therefore ruin the facework during their marriage. Their choice is one that involves intersectionality in that it incorporates physiological traits based on ethnicity and economic order. First, under the idea of global hypergamy, women from countries they perceive as less wealthy are viewed as more attainable despite their whiteness (Lee, 2014). Such perception mixed with hypersexualization, colorism or white supremacy, and a national preference for ethnic homogeneity made them shy away from marrying a white bride. According to Moon (as cited in Lee, 2014), Korea's modernization is intertwined with colonialism and imperialism in the process of westernization, and the nationalism that emerged to make up for the westernization made men desire and despise—due to perceived sexual freedom and hypersexualization—the white women's body at the same time.

In the same line of thought, they also chose Vietnamese brides who they describe as having fair skin and other appearances that could possibly pass them as Koreans to avoid xenophobia. But just white skin is not enough to pass, they attempt to assimilate, prescribe and transform their appearances and identity to look more urban, modern, western, and sexy by changing their hair, makeup, outfit, and even names (Lee, 2014). The ultimate goal that underlies is to change the arranged marriage to a romantic one. They feel that arranged marriages, especially with Southeastern women mark themselves as undesirable or incompetent, and therefore want to save their faces by reinventing the bride, to display that they have not married down due to incompetence but love.

To sum up, the political and societal climates in South Korea and Vietnam—or any other country that buys and sells mail-order brides—make international marriages, and brokered transnational marriages more popular but the marriage itself and its products including family and children are yet very stigmatized. The denunciation from outside and internalized patriarchy that keeps them down, especially the woman, have detrimental effects on healthy family-making and cultural inclusion and integration. The widespread xenophobia and racism have no easy solutions but must be tackled for their sake.



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