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The Migration of Women Due to Imbalanced Marriage Market Sex Ratios in Asia: What is Known, What Remains to Be Known, and Why it Matters

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Abstract

This study discusses how obstructed marriage markets in Asia drive female migration and how this affects women, families, and origin and destination countries. In many Asian states, marriage markets are imbalanced due to abnormal sex ratios resulting in missing women, and cross-border marriages are a path to remedy the imbalances. Combining information from various sources, we identify gaps in knowledge, best practices in data, and numerous challenges to be addressed by governments, researchers, and NGOs. We show that a sizeable number of countries display severely skewed sex ratios in the cohort of the marriageable population and describe marriage immigration patterns for four major receiving countries between 1995 and 2022: Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. For other countries such as China and Vietnam, we face a shortage of administrative data and discuss anecdotal and qualitative evidence on immigration and emigration for marriage purposes. We highlight the current and future relevance of Asian marriage migration by evaluating how today's sex ratios at birth will affect marriage markets in the future and how marriage migration will shape both destination and sending countries in the region.

Keywords: marriage migration, sex ratios, sex imbalance, missing women

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Introduction

Throughout history, individuals have married outside of their home geographical area, and when this involves the crossing of state borders primarily for the purposes of marriage, it is termed “marriage migration.” The obstruction of marriage markets within a nation-state is often a cause of marriage migration. Marriage markets are considered obstructed when the society includes a sizeable number of individuals who want to marry but cannot do so for structural, not idiosyncratic, reasons.

There are many structural causes of obstructed marriage markets, including prevalent polygyny and spiraling brideprice trajectories (Hudson et al. 2020). However, the most difficult cause with which nations grapple is that created by highly abnormal sex ratios. Whether that abnormality favors males (e.g., India and China), or whether it favors females (e.g., Russia), such imbalances often lead to international migration, which can be voluntary or forced in nature. Our research focuses on the migration of women for the purposes of marriage in the East and Southeastern regions of Asia, where migration has been significantly “pulled” by the sex ratio-driven marriage market obstruction in China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Researchers studying international population flows often focus on labor migration and refugee movement; but research more recently has turned to marriage migration and its socio-economic, political, and demographic impact. With reference to Asia, there is a burgeoning marriage migration literature using primarily ethnographic, survey, and interview methodologies,¹ but there are few empirical investigations of Asian marriage migration patterns and the size of those migration flows.² However, in an age where some estimate over 120 million women are missing in Asia, marriage markets in several Asian nations have become profoundly obstructed (Bongaarts and Guilmo 2015). Marriage migration may actually now be of a scale in Asia that it is time to take stock of what we know, what we do not know, and why it matters.

We pause to consider the delimitation on migration that we use in this exploration: migration for purposes of official marriage. Imbalanced sex ratios not only catalyze marriage migration, but also international sex trafficking, which can involve high levels of coercion. While we believe sex trafficking is an extremely important phenomenon globally and in Asia,³ we find this illegal and shadowy practice is almost impossible to quantify in any meaningful sense. In contrast, several countries with sex ratio-driven marriage market obstruction do keep detailed records of migration for purposes of official marriage. In fact, from the viewpoint of destination nations, marriage market migration may be a matter of explicit government policy incentivization, as we shall see. And from the viewpoint of source nations, migration for the purpose of official marriage may be one of very few legal ways for those from economically distressed nations to enter

¹ Two path-breaking edited volumes utilizing qualitative methodology appeared in the early 2000s: Piper and Roces (2003), and Constable (2004). Most recently, marriage migration in Asia was the focus of special issues in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Citizenship Studies* (see introductory articles by Yeung and Mu 2020; and Chiu and Chiu 2021).

² One excellent, though now dated, empirical article is Jones and Shen (2008). Yang and Lu (2010) is yet another excellent example of empirical work on this issue. Using a theoretical assortative matching model and testing it empirically, a recent paper looks at Vietnamese-Taiwanese marriages (Ahn 2023).

³ According to estimates from the International Labour Organization, Asia and the Pacific accounts for 70% of the victims (most of them women and girls) of forced sexual exploitation worldwide. ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM (2017). Also, labor migration may be highly interconnected with trafficking, as argued by Bélanger (2014).

certain wealthier nations. We suspect that even given the delimitation of only examining official marriage migration, this exploration will prove worthwhile.

The Scale of Sex Ratio Abnormality in the World Today

Over the course of the last 50 years, we have seen the number of countries with sex ratios abnormally favoring males increase, both globally and regionally. At birth, sex selective abortion and female infanticide come into play; in early childhood, passive neglect of female children due to withholding of adequate food and medical care may be a threat. The early childhood (0-4) sex ratio in an unmanipulated population is approximately 105-107 males per 100 females (because more males are naturally born than females).⁴ In 1995, only three states had observably abnormal young childhood sex ratios (above 107), and all of these were located in Asia (China, India and South Korea). Examining the most recently available national statistics for birth and childhood population figures shows that 16 states now have abnormal ratios, including several outside Asia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, India, Kosovo, Montenegro, Nepal, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam (United Nations [UN] 2022). To date, South Korea is the only country to have fully normalized its birth and child sex ratios after a period of grave abnormality (Den Boer and Hudson 2017).

Drawing on research by demographers Bongaarts and Guilmoto (2015), Erken's *State of World Population 2020* report for the United Nations estimates that 142.6 million women were missing in 2020 due to practices of birth sex selection and excess postnatal female deaths; China has accounted for approximately 50% of global missing female births annually since 1970, though China's imbalance has somewhat decreased in recent years due to the lifting of the one-child policy (Chao et al 2019). Female demographic imbalances arising from discriminatory practices are further exacerbated by the highly feminized emigration patterns observed in some nations. Marriage market migration may ameliorate marriage market obstruction in the destination country while simultaneously worsening it in the source country, as we shall see.

Abnormal Sex Ratios Obstruct Marriage Markets

While women are missing from all age groups, a significant proportion are missing from the young adult subpopulation, who largely comprise the marriage market. Using UN figures for the world's population in 2020, the sex ratio for the 20-39 age group is 104.91, with men outnumbering women by 56 million in this age group, but this global figure is skewed by Asian states. If we exclude Asian states from the global population figures, we find that the sex ratio for this age group in the rest of the world is 101.09, with men outnumbering women by 4.9 million, revealing that 51 million of the world's missing women in this age group are missing from Asia (UN 2022). China alone accounts for 15-20 million of the missing women in the 20-39 age group.⁵ China's 2020 census revealed that the sex ratio among the unmarried population aged 20-29 was 139.3, but increased to 234.1 for those aged 30-39.⁶ The sex imbalance in China's population has a significant impact on international marriage migration patterns observed across Asia.

While we can detect an obstructed marriage market from population statistics alone, we also see ancillary phenomena confirm this obstruction. For example, brideprices in China have risen astronomically, from an average of 2,000 RMB in 2005 to 200,000-300,000 RMB today, with significantly higher prices in some

⁴ Throughout the rest of the paper, a sex ratio figure should be understood to be the number of males per 100 females.

⁵ China's tabulations place the figure at 15.3 million more men than women in the 20-39 age group, but the UN's estimates are higher, at 20 million. See National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022) and the UN (2022).

⁶ China's 2020 data is based on the 10% sample survey which included questions about marital status. National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022).

areas, prompting government efforts to crack down on this phenomenon (Chen and Pan 2023; Tan 2023; and Woo 2019). China sees a brisk trade in trafficked women and marriage migrants, fueling chattel markets for women across the region (Barr and Kamler 2019; Griffiths 2019).

However, China is not the only country attracting marriage migrants. Major destination countries for marriage migration in Asia include China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Cross-border marriage brokers now go far afield to find marriage partners for men in nations with abnormal sex ratios (Kawaguchi and Lee 2012). One recent report noted that young women from Pakistan are now being “brokered” into China to become brides (Gannon 2019). These cross-cultural marriages often bring great challenges, even when both parties are willing (Grillot 2012).

Astonishingly, we also find young women emigrating from countries with abnormal sex ratios favoring males to other countries in the same predicament—Chinese women, for example, emigrate in search of better marriage prospects, despite the skewed sex ratios in their home country. Obstructed marriage markets make it easier for women wishing to better their economic situation to do so through marriage migration, even if such migration deepens the obstruction in their home country. Constable (2004) refers to this as “global spatial hypergamy.” Enterprising businessmen have created a bustling regional “commercial marriage market,” which is often, but not always, different from the market for involuntarily trafficked women.⁷

Why is this Important? Effects on Women and on Nations

Why should nations care about marriage market migration? This question can be answered on at least two levels. At one level we are concerned about the effects of trans-border marriage migration on the women themselves. But a second level of inquiry would additionally be concerned about macro-level effects for source countries of heightened out-migration of women, as well as effects for destination countries coping with heightened in-migration of women for the purposes of marriage.

Effects on Women. What information we have of the effects of marriage market migration on women is primarily qualitative in nature, revolving for the most part around information gathered from focus groups, interviews, and surveys. According to this literature, cross-border marriage involves several sources of insecurity for women.

First, not all such marriages are consensual. There are many cases of women being trafficked to become brides, especially into China from poor regions in Myanmar and Vietnam (Robinson and Branchini 2018; Le Bach et al. 2007). A survey of 213 women sampled at the border between Vietnam and China highlights that in this region, the line between voluntary and trafficked marriage migration is often blurred (Le Bach et al. 2007). The majority of respondents wanted to go to China, mostly hoping for economic improvement or the opportunity to build a family. However, in the end, many reported having ended up being trafficked, not having any choice concerning where to go and whom to marry, being highly vulnerable to abuse and having little access to institutional support or services. Their situation is both desperate and dreadful. Beatings, rapes, and attempts at forcible impregnation always accompany such trafficking. Some women develop STDs; others may be forcibly sterilized after giving birth. As Barr and Kamler note (2019), “Many of the trafficked women and girls interviewed said that the families who bought them really did not want a wife, but rather a child or children.” Indeed, some are told they are free to leave after giving birth, but the

⁷ For female migration as a reaction to improve their own situation see Ruyssen and Salomone (2018). For discussions explicitly including marriage migration, see Piper, (1999); Kawaguchi and Lee (2012). For the role of brokers, see Yeoh, Chee and Baey (2017).

child must be left behind. Sometimes the marriages are formalized, but often they are not in order to elude authorities. The lack of legal standing often leads to a precarious situation for the bride, who can be subject to abrupt deportation if discovered. Trafficking of women is not the focus of this research, but must be acknowledged as a severe violation of human rights arising from marriage market obstruction.

Second, since most Asian cross-national marriages involve a foreign bride (as versus a foreign groom), these marriages are perforce patrilocal. Patrilocal marriage is risky for women for many reasons (Hudson et al. 2020), but becomes even more so when borders are involved. As a representative from one women's advocacy group expressed it, "in traditional matchmaking, the husband knows he is answerable to the bride's family. But when these brides are removed from their communities, they are vulnerable. Who are the husbands answerable to? Nobody."⁸ A foreign, patrilocal marriage setting facilitates exploitation of the bride. In their survey on Vietnamese families with daughters married in Taiwan, Graeme and Nguyen found that the marriage had led to an increase in housework and the women reported being treated like servants, care-givers or baby machines (Hugo and Nguyen Thi 2007). Cheng (2013:168) explains that while Taiwanese women in a patrilocal household are permitted to seek employment, migrant wives in Taiwan are confined to the home, adding that "this boundary is purposefully maintained by the in-laws in order to reap their free labour." Le Bail's (2017) research on Chinese brides in Japan reveals that migrant brides are more likely to marry into patrilocal households than Japanese brides, and while some in-laws may treat their daughters-in-law with respect, others subjected them to controlling behaviors, preventing them from seeking employment or joining their husbands when working abroad. Patrilocal marriages also revolve around exclusive male rights to land and other valuable property, which affords little economic security for a foreign wife (Pan 2015).

Third, cross-border marriage often involves cross-cultural, cross-religious or even cross-racial marriage, which may also carry risks for women. Since the flow of women is typically from poorer countries to at least somewhat more well-off countries, women might be in a doubly subordinate position in terms of sex and also in terms of nationality. Said and Kaka (2022) find that language barriers, cultural conflict (including gender norms), and racism, were common problems in cross border marriages that increased the risk of domestic violence. Studies analyzing the effect of inter-ethnic marriages on the foreign brides in South Korea, for example, find evidence of high levels of domestic violence including abuse from in-laws, and depression (Chung and Kim 2016; Park and Morash 2017). A survey published by the Human Rights Commission in Korea (Ock 2019) reported that 42.1% of migrant wives had experienced domestic violence. The women did not report the violence, nor did they seek divorce from fear of losing custody of the children or risking their immigrant status (Ock 2019). Other studies have demonstrated that migrant wives experience ethnic discrimination and cultural prejudice in the home and wider community (Tang and Wang 2014) and are at risk for mental health issues (Shu, Lung and Chen 2011; Lee and Park 2018).

Fourth, cross-border marriage often involves a monetary transaction similar to brideprice, and these fees may be significant. The costs associated with using international marriage brokers in South Korea are substantial—average fees for Koreans were 13.7 million won (\$10,200) according to a 2020 survey (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family [MGEF] 2021). Payment of such a large fee may cause grooms to manifest a feeling of psychological entitlement towards their "purchased" brides, which may result in greater levels of domestic violence. For example, one foreign bride recounted, "He just kept saying, 'I bought you. You are my wife—I bought you'" (Barrowclough 2014). This type of controlling attitude is often a prelude to more physical forms of coercive control. Park and Morash (2017) interviewed Vietnamese migrant wives who were subjected to controlling behavior, physical abuse, and sex on demand that their husbands claimed they were entitled to because they had purchased their brides.

⁸ Braema Mathi, as quoted in Jones and Shen (2008), p. 17.

Fifth, even in the case of legal cross-border marriage, women may find themselves with fewer legal rights than native-born wives. They may have to wait years for citizenship, they may or may not be able to legally work or pursue education, they may have far fewer property and inheritance rights, they may find themselves at a severe disadvantage were divorce to be sought. While waiting for citizenship, which may take years, the bride's temporary visa status may be held over her head as a threat (Parke 2019). In their research into the situation of marriage migrants in Singapore, Yeoh et al. (2021) outline the complicated and expensive route from the social visit pass for migrant brides to long-term visit passes and permanent residency, a route filled with obstacles and lacking transparency—for some couples, divorce becomes the only option because of the high costs of applying for citizenship. Migrant brides in most Asian states require the approval of their husbands for extensions to their visa or residency, which increases their dependence on their husbands and can prevent women from leaving violent or unhappy relationships (Song 2016; Chen and Wang 2021). Furthermore, without their husband's sponsorship, migrant wives cannot obtain citizenship. As Kim et al (2017:42) explain, "If the foreign partner refuses to submit to her husband for any reason or leaves home, he can lodge a complaint of abandonment and report her to the immigration office as a runaway. In such cases the guarantee is automatically nullified, the marriage migrant's visa is cancelled, and she is subject to deportation."

The legal rights of migrant brides are further at risk when the marriages are not registered. Most of the marriages between Vietnamese women and Chinese men are not officially registered in Vietnam or China. For the women, remaining unregistered offers flexibility concerning where to register the birth of their children. This was considered beneficial under the one-child policy, as children not registered in China did not "count" towards the one-child limit. As a result, first-born children were often registered in China where education and health systems were comparatively better, and subsequent children were registered in Vietnam (Grillot 2015; Huang and Ho 2016). At the same time, maintaining an unregistered marriage also means that the women have little access to any government services in China and risk losing their residence registration in Vietnam once local authorities notice that they are no longer living in Vietnam. Thus, these women may end up unregistered in *both* countries, being unable to access health and other services in either land (Grillot 2015). The situation becomes even more difficult in case of unsuccessful marriages, for if there was no registered marriage, women may find it almost impossible to demand their legal rights if a divorce takes place (Grillot 2016).

Additionally, in situations of cross-border marriage where money has changed hands, any resulting children may be considered the "property" of the father, and the mother may have few rights to child custody in the case of a breakdown of the marriage (Chi 2019). For Vietnamese women returning from broken marriages in South Korea, a return to Vietnam after divorce is mandatory if they have not previously acquired Korean citizenship—that is, they will be deported. Kim et al. (2017) further describe that the situation of children is also complex: if a divorce is completed in South Korea, custody of the children will almost always be given to the father.

Nevertheless, while the threats discussed above pose real risks for migrant brides, not all cross-border marriages are necessarily bad for the brides. A 2013 Taiwan survey found that fewer than 8% of the surveyed female marriage immigrants responded that they were unhappy or very unhappy. However, the longer a bride stays and the lower the household income, the lower the happiness score (Li and Yang 2020). South Korea has been surveying the multicultural family population every three years since 2009, finding that couples with immigrant spouses report fairly high levels of satisfaction with their marriages. The 2021 survey (MGEF 2022) found high levels of satisfaction with marriage for multicultural couples—54.1% were "very satisfied", 29.2% were "slightly satisfied" and only 1.9% were dissatisfied. We note that the reported high levels of satisfaction may still hide significant marital and societal problems—52.4% of those surveyed in the 2021 survey (MGEF 2022) reported problems arising from cultural differences in marriage (everything from eating habits to raising children) with 46.3% of spouses indicating that they had a fight

with their spouse in the past year. Despite all of the obstacles, some women make a success of their marriages and thrive in Korean society—for example, Jasmine Lee emigrated to Korea as an 18 year old from the Philippines to marry a Korean man in 1996 and has since become a citizen, a popular television actress, and in 2012 was the first non-ethnic Korean to be elected to the National Assembly, where she champions the issue of migrant rights (Lom 2015). It should be noted, however, that Lee’s rise to power was seen as threatening by anti-immigration nationalists, who “warned that “poisonous weeds” from abroad were “corrupting the Korean bloodline” and “exterminating the Korean nation,” and urged political parties to “purify” themselves by expelling Ms. Lee from the National Assembly” (Choe 2012).

Cross-border marriages can also offer attractive economic opportunities for women and/or their families. Hugo and Nguyen Thi (2007) surveyed 635 Vietnamese households having at least one daughter married in Taiwan and found that the decision to emigrate for marriage is largely dependent on the economic situation of the family. Furthermore, it is not necessarily the women’s decision: in over 50% of the surveyed families, the parents were closely involved in the decision and 33.7% stated that it was the parents’ decision. Accordingly, the main motivation was “to help the family” (61%), followed by the hope “for a better life” (10.8%). Similarly, interviews with women married to Taiwanese or Korean men found that economic motives were dominant (Le Bach et al. 2014). In cases where governments have special programs to encourage in-migration of brides, such women may have a vastly easier time getting permission to immigrate to a wealthier nation than women not immigrating for marriage, and a somewhat easier time obtaining a work permit and/or citizenship rights once they have arrived. Governments may even sponsor language training and other perquisites for marriage migrants to help make it more likely that the women will be happy and want to stay in the marriage. Such support, however, is naturally limited to legally registered marriage in-migrants.

Furthermore, these cross-border marriages may be a source of significant remittances made to the bride’s family in her home country; remittances may persist for years, and may transform her family’s living conditions. In their survey-based research of marriage migrants in Korea, Heo and Kim (2019) find that remittances were more likely among Vietnamese and Uzbek migrants rather than Chinese, and were more common for those who work (half of those who were employed remitted compared to 9% of those who were unemployed). However, it is also true, as Kim explains, that “the wife’s financial commitment to her natal kin, whether using her husband’s allowance or her own income, can cause marital conflict if men feel that the woman’s natal family draws resources away from their own nuclear household” (Kim 2010 723). Bélanger et al. note (2011:102), “research on Vietnamese immigrant spouses who experience domestic violence has shown how, in most cases, conflict and violence erupt over the women’s desire to work outside the home in order to send money home.”

When marriages fail to provide economic security and high earning jobs are difficult to obtain, some migrant brides turn to sex work or other illicit activity rather than return home. Chen and Wang (2021) describe how foreign brides in Taiwan, mostly from Vietnam or Mainland China, become sex workers in Taiwan in the many hostess bars, restaurants, massage parlors and brothels along Taiwan’s west coast. They argue that cross-border marriage migration and sex work are closely tied together and may be seen as a way for women to improve their economic situation; the authors further explain that some women use cross-border marriage as a way to migrate to Taiwan for the purposes of sex work.

In sum, the effects of marriage migration on the women migrating for that purpose are dramatic. In many cases, benefits may outweigh costs for the individual woman, but whether it does may be completely outside of her control. In a structural sense, however, she is indubitably placed in a vulnerable situation, and must rely on others to safeguard her rights, such as destination country governments.

Effects on Source Countries

Prevalent out-migration of women for the purposes of marriage may reduce the number of women in their home nation's marriage market, leading to an alteration of the sex ratio of the source country. Depending on the resulting sex ratio of the non-migrant marriage-age cohort, marriage markets may tighten or even become obstructed. Vietnam not only has a highly abnormal birth sex ratio favoring males, but is also one of the greatest exporters of foreign brides in Asia.⁹ Vietnam's high sex ratios in the childhood population have not yet reached the marriage market, but will do so within the next decade, precipitating a far worsening marriage market for that country. China, which every year exports a sizeable number of brides to Taiwan and South Korea, also has one of the most distorted birth sex ratios in the world and an obstructed marriage market. Ancillary to this, it is important to note that the effects on marriage markets are not uniform across a country; rural areas will see their marriage-age sex ratios worsen far more than urban areas, given prevalent rural-to-urban migration. As Jones and Shen note (2008:14), "even where such [cross-national] marriages are only a very small proportion of total marriages . . . the geographical concentration of those marrying internationally may make it a much more important phenomenon in certain regions or among certain ethnic groups." A study by Bélanger and Haemmerli (2019) of four poor Vietnamese villages describes the consequences of this degree of imbalance: the villages experienced rising brideprices and men taking women from other regions of Vietnam, as *internal* marriage migration follows *external* marriage migration. Similarly, Le Bach et al. (2014:96) explain that young women in their sample report stated that they "'save' themselves for foreign husbands, leaving local men out of the marriage question."

This double-sourced masculinization of sex ratios, through both culling of female infants from the birth population as well as export of foreign brides at marriage age, has implications beyond marriage markets. It also has significant ramifications for source country stability. An increasingly large corpus of literature ties such abnormal sex ratios favoring males to increases in violent crime, property crime, and political violence (Hudson and Den Boer 2004; Edlund et al. 2013; Cameron et al. 2019). Furthermore, destabilization in one country can lead to regional instability, as well.

Prevalent out-migration of women for the purposes of marriage may also affect the nation's fertility rate, for the children of these foreign brides are unlikely to ever return to live in their home country. While there are some interesting studies on changes in fertility in destination countries due to immigration of brides (e.g. Kim 2018), we have found nothing in the research literature probing the effects on fertility in source countries subsequent to the export of brides. This is a clear lacuna in our knowledge about marriage migration and its effects.

Last, the topic of possible remittances may be an important one for poorer source nations (Hoang and Yeoh 2015). According to the estimates by the World Bank (Ratha 2023), remittances into low and middle-income countries (excluding China) exceed the combined inflow of foreign direct investment and development aid. For the case of Vietnam, this can be substantial. While we lack disaggregated data that would indicate the share donated by foreign brides, a clear lacuna demanding attention, in the case of Vietnam, remittances counted amounted to \$13.2 billion, about 3.2% of its GDP in 2022 (World Bank n.d.).

⁹ The sex ratio at birth in Vietnam rose from 107.3 in 2000 to 112.1 in 2020, peaking at 114.8 in 2018 (General Statistics Office 2022: 58).

Effects on Destination Countries

Destination countries are often (though not always; cf. Japan) countries with masculinized sex ratios, such as China, South Korea, and Taiwan, where men feel forced to seek brides from outside their own country due to scarcity of marriageable women, often coupled with extremely high domestic brideprice levels due to that scarcity. Jones and Shen note (2008:15), “it is less educated men, who are over-represented in rural areas and agricultural occupations, who face difficulties in finding suitable partners in the marriage market.” Governments may decide to formally assist such men to find foreign wives, and to integrate them into society once they arrive; South Korea is an instructive case worth a more in-depth analysis.

South Korea’s marriage market has been obstructed for several decades: the obstruction first presented itself as an imbalance in the sex ratio of the marriageable population in rural areas due to rural-urban migration, but this imbalance then intensified due to sex ratio imbalances in the birth population between 1970 and 2006.¹⁰ Despite currently normal birth sex ratios, decades of skewed birth sex ratios have led to a significant sex imbalance in the marriage-age population: population registration figures for 2022 point to a gap of 549,000 women in the 20-39 age group (equivalent to 9% of the women in this age group) (Statistics Korea, 2024b), although the overall imbalance may be as high as 800,000 (Poston 2024). This deepened the dearth of women in rural areas to an even greater degree as more women than men fled the countryside. One of the state’s responses has been the targeted use of marriage brokers to arrange international marriages from neighbouring Asian countries. Prior to 1995, the majority of foreign marriages in South Korea involved Korean women and foreign husbands, but since 1995, the number of marriages between Korean men and foreign women has greatly outnumbered marriages between foreign men and Korean women (Statistics Korea 2023a). The proportion of marriages to foreign women remained at high levels from 1995-2019, but then dropped during the global COVID-19 pandemic: in 2019 there were 5956 marriages to foreign men and 17,687 marriages to foreign women, but in 2022 these figures dropped to 4659 foreign men and 12,007 foreign women (Statistics Korea 2023a, 2023b). Between 1995 and 2022, there have been a total of 473,243 marriages to foreign women in South Korea.

While destination countries may see an amelioration of their abnormal sex ratios and their associated effects, it is also true that governments may incur costs to integrate not only the wives, but also the children of such cross-national families. There may be upfront costs, such as offsets of brokers’ fees, as well as later costs involved with language and culture lessons for new brides. There may be intangible costs, felt keenly in relatively ethnically homogeneous countries such as South Korea, in terms of the acceptance of these foreign brides, but more importantly about the acceptance of their children. Yoo (2017:365), notes that “according to recent polls by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the Asian Institute, nearly eighty-seven percent of South Koreans stress the importance of Korean blood lineage while thirty-two percent of Koreans consider mixed-race families as a ‘threat to social cohesion.’” Although the state recognized the need for seeking marriageable women internationally, they also feared the loss of Korea’s ethnic and cultural homogeneity. The increase in the number of migrants and discrimination against the foreign mothers and “mixed blood” children necessitated changes in state practices and policies, from removing references to the “ethnic homogeneity” from the school curriculum to campaigns to promote respect for migrants. The government discourse and set of policies around the new “multicultural society” sought to shift cultural attitudes concerning the offspring of cross-border marriages whom the press had begun to view as having the potential to one day cause political unrest (Kim 2007). Public awareness campaigns aiming to promote positive views of multicultural families have unintentionally reinforced images of migrant wives as “dependent, isolated, and linguistically deficient” (Shin 2015:171). Concerns

¹⁰ With the exception of the years 1973, 1977, 1979, 1980, and 1982, Korea’s sex ratio at birth was above 107 males per 100 females between 1970 and 2006 (Statistics Korea 2023c). For a more detailed discussion of sex selection and the high sex ratio at birth in Korea see Den Boer and Hudson (2017).

around social cohesion are not confined to South Korea; Taiwan is another case in point. Taiwan is very concerned that mainland Chinese brides bring a pro-reunification mindset with them that may be passed down to their children (Sui 2008).

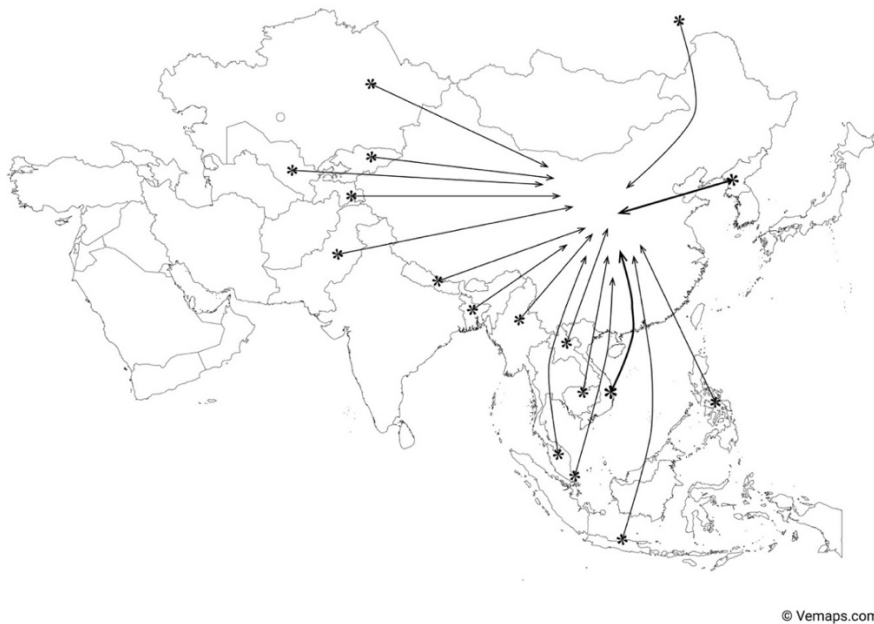
Third, remittances may entail a persistent financial drain from the domestic economy of destination countries. This is another lacuna in the literature, because there is no disaggregation that would enable the teasing out of remittances from foreign brides compared to those from labor migrants, nor any system that captures informal flows of money to relatives of such brides. Even so, the scale of remittances to Asia is enormous, with flows of \$130 billion to East Asia and \$176 billion to South Asia in 2022 (KNOMAD 2023). For example, figures show outflows from South Korea amounting to \$7.5 billion in 2021; in that year, China (\$3.8 billion) was the highest recipient of remittances from Korea, followed by Thailand (\$1.3 billion) and Vietnam (\$919 million) (KNOMAD 2022). This gap in our knowledge about the effects of marriage migration demands attention by scholars and policymakers.

Finally, intra-regional competition for brides among destination countries may be catalyzed. Kawaguchi and Lee note (2012:31):

Another important future research topic is China's possible impact on the world's marriage markets. We expect that China will soon face a demand for foreign brides like that of Japan, Korea, Singapore and Taiwan. China not only has imbalanced raw sex ratios but also shares similar cultural norms that discourage accomplished women from marriage markets. Once Chinese men less preferred by Chinese women can afford the associated cost of "importing" a bride (and relevant regulations allow them to do so), then, because of the population size, China's demand for foreign brides will immensely affect other countries' marriage markets and socioeconomic conditions, much more than what the four East Asian countries may have done. Furthermore, those four Asian countries may not be able to rely on foreign brides to clear their marriage market if China starts to be an importer of female marriage immigrants. First, the supply of female immigrants from China on which they heavily rely may be reduced if Chinese women get a better match from their own marriage market because of a sex-ratio imbalance favoring women. Second, based on our gravity model estimation, we expect that as a major source country of foreign brides, China is likely to turn to similar sets of countries as those on which the four developed Asian countries currently rely. This implies that these four countries may have to compete against China over women in Vietnam, for example, to meet their demand for foreign brides.

China, then, is poised to become the largest gravitational "pull" in this regional system of inter-linked marriage markets, though we know little about the scale of the movement of women into China for purposes of marriage. A recent report from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC 2022) maps the routes taken by thousands of women and girls who travel to China to become brides. While some know they are travelling for the purposes of marriage, others are deceived, and many suffer abuse upon arrival, as documented in reports from Cambodia (Blomberg and Meta 2019), Indonesia (Tisnadibrata 2019; Mei 2024), Myanmar (Barr 2019; Beech 2019), Nepal (Dhungana 2019), North Korea (Kim 2014; Kook 2018), Russia and Ukraine (Barabantseva 2021), and Vietnam (Stöckl et al 2017; Grillot 2015; Huang and Ho 2016; Qi 2023). Much of the cross-border marriages into China blur the boundaries between transnational marriage and trafficking, becoming what one study refers to as 'demi bride trafficking' (Lhomme, Zhong and Du 2021). There are even reports that the One Belt, One Road initiative promulgated by China is broadening the array of nations from which Chinese men are able to locate brides, such as women from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and also Kyrgyzstan, where there have been calls for a government ban on Kyrgyz women marrying Chinese men (Carvalho 2020). Figure 1 is an attempt to show the breadth of the pull that the sex ratio distortion in the Chinese marriage market has introduced into the region.

Figure 1: In-Migration of Brides to China



The bolder arrows indicate that the inflow of brides from these countries are especially large. This figure draws on the academic literature, newspaper reports, and migration statistics cited throughout this article. Pan estimates that approximately 15% of Chinese young adult men will not be able to find brides within their home country (2015). The scale of such a deficit will have an enormous effect on regional marriage markets for the foreseeable future—the birth sex ratio in China remains abnormally high despite recent decreases and there were 21.2 million more men than women in the 0-19 age groups recorded in the 2020 census (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2022).

The Scale of Cross-Border Marriage Migration in Asia

It is clear that the effects of cross-border marriage migration have the potential to be quite significant not only for the women involved, but also for source and destination countries. What do we know about the scale of that migration in the 21st century? Despite the extensive qualitative literature on transnational marriage migration, there is no empirical research that provides a precise overview of the current scale of cross-border marriage migration. As we set out to compile these data, we encountered numerous problems: few countries collect data on their citizens who emigrate for marriage purposes;¹¹ although some countries record marriage immigrants, these data does not always record the nationality of the migrant bride or groom,

¹¹ The Philippines is an exception to this: the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) (2022) collects information on Filipino marriages overseas, however, the data is not disaggregated by sex for each country. The Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) provides some statistics on marriages to foreigners conducted abroad, but these figures are much lower than the CFO data (Philippine Statistics Authority 2022). Neither the CFO nor the PSA data for marriages abroad match the immigrant figures for the destination countries.

and when nationality is recorded, it is often only done so for a small set of countries.¹² Singapore, for example, reports transnational marriages by region only (Asia, North America, Europe, Oceania, and Others) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2023a). The National Statistical Office in the Republic of Korea, and the Department of Immigration, Ministry of the Interior in Taiwan¹³ provide the most accessible and comprehensive data on marriage migrants, whereas Vietnam has no specific ministry collecting information on Vietnamese migrant flows,¹⁴ and marriage migrant data is unavailable for Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nepal. China's National Bureau of Statistics releases limited data on marriages to foreigners—while specific figures are provided for marriages to overseas Chinese, as well as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan residents, all other foreigners are grouped together and the data is not disaggregated by gender.¹⁵ We offer two brief descriptions here of the data available from a key source country—Vietnam—and one destination country—South Korea—to identify good practice and gaps in the collection and publication of marriage migration data.

Vietnam. The state of Vietnam tracks all exit and entries at the border, however, these figures also include regular travelers, or people doing business abroad and, surprisingly, the state does not ask for the purpose of entry or exit (IOM 2017). According to a 2017 report from the International Organization for Migration, the Ministry of Justice records Vietnamese marrying foreigners but does not track whether the couples remain in Vietnam or migrate out of the country (IOM 2017). The report, which provides data collected from 2008 to 2016, reveals that 89% of the marriages between Vietnamese citizens and foreigners involved a Vietnamese woman marrying a male foreign national. According to the report, the number of such marriages has been declining slightly each year from 21,805 in 2008 to 16,223 in 2016.¹⁶ While the report provides some data on the country of origins of spouses, the figures are not disaggregated by gender, and only a small set of countries are named. In 2015, for example, 555 Vietnamese (men and women) married a Chinese national, 3840 a Taiwanese, 4158 married a Korean national and 4455 married 'other' nationals (IOM 2017:40). Unfortunately, the underlying data for the report or any comparable data for the time afterwards are not publicly available and no report including such figures has been published since 2016. Thus, the available data for Vietnam as a main origin country for brides is limited, however, research suggests the flows from Vietnam to China are likely to be significantly greater than reported by these figures (Huang and Ho 2016; Liang 2023).

South Korea. South Korea, as a destination country, provides a sharp contrast to Vietnam in terms of record-keeping. Korea's National Statistics Office collects detailed information on all border crossings by

¹² Japan, for example, records the country of origin of brides and grooms for a small set of countries only, leaving the 'other' category with a significant proportion of the brides (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2023)—there is no record of the number of Vietnamese women who migrate to Japan for marriage purposes in the Japanese data, yet a report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) noted that "the Vietnamese Embassy in Japan estimates 3,400 Vietnamese nationals had married Japanese and settled in Japan in 2015" (2017:39).

¹³ Taiwan has a particularly sophisticated system for internal data collection, including a "Foreign and Chinese Spouse Database" and "Foreign Population Dynamism Management Database" (Ministry of Interior 2016).

¹⁴ The lack of a central authority to collect information on migrant flows, and the use of different definitions and concepts concerning migration was noted in a 2012 report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam. According to the IOM, "No agency of the Government of Viet Nam has accurate and comprehensive data on migration abroad for marriage," indicating that improved data collection by the Ministry of Justice, the Immigration Department, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs is necessary to collect appropriate data (2017:13). Vietnam currently collects data on marriages with foreigners conducted in the state but lacks data on whether these couples stay in the country or migrate.

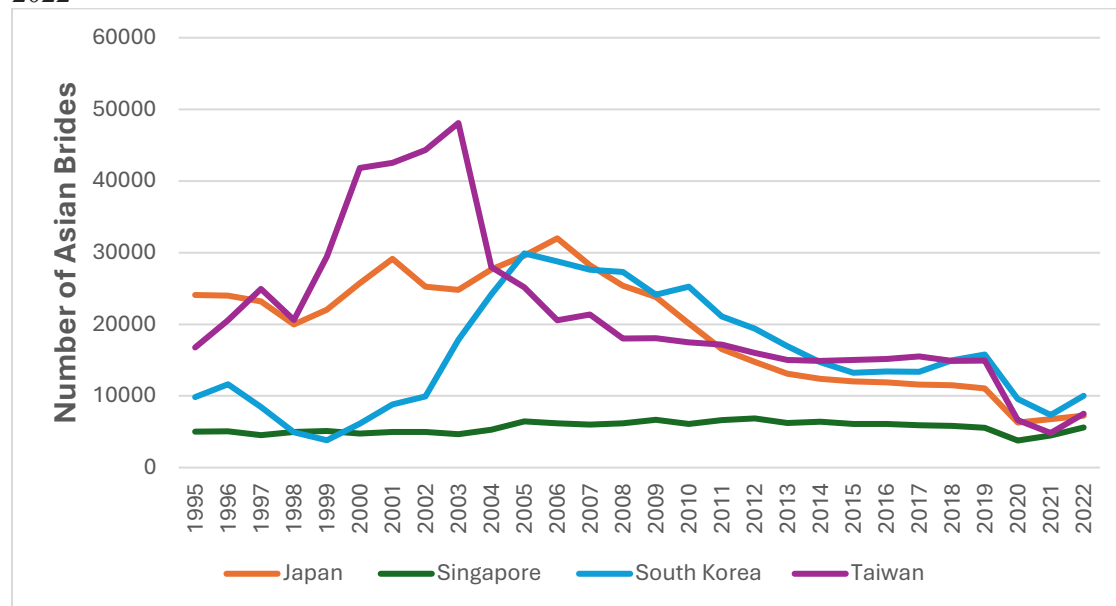
¹⁵ The total marriages to foreign citizens from 1998-2017 add up to 463,605 marriages (or 1.16 million when all categories of Chinese are included), but news reports suggest that the number of unregistered marriages exceeds the number of registered marriages. For an examination of the available data, see Wang, Zou and Fan 2019.

¹⁶ The drop in marriages with nationals from the Republic of Korea seems to be largely responsible for the overall decline, as marriages to foreigners from other countries show little change (IOM 2017:40).

gender, including marriage migrants. Information recorded at the border or through censuses and social surveys records the age, level of education, and country of origin of marriage migrants, how the marriage was arranged (through marriage brokers, friends, or religious institutions), the costs of brokering the marriage, the number of divorces between marriage migrants and Korean citizens (including the reasons for divorce), migrant satisfaction with their marriage, as well as information on their spouses (particularly whether they are from rural areas or employed in agriculture or fishing industries) and on the children resulting from migrant marriages (the children's levels of education and employment, for example) (Statistics Korea 2024a). Examining this information by the country of origin for foreign brides, we can see that China was the main foreign source of brides for South Korea until 2010, when brides from Vietnam equaled the number of brides from China; Vietnam overtook China as the main country of origin for foreign brides in 2015. The most recent immigration data from 2022 shows that 28% of foreign brides in that year were Vietnamese, 19% Chinese, and 16% originated from Thailand (Statistics Korea 2023a). The decline in the number of marriage migrants from China corresponded with the lifting of restrictions on ethnic-Korean workers from China in 2005, which suggests that the motivations for entering into cross-border marriages with Koreans could now be met through labor migration (Bélanger, Lee and Wang 2010:1111). Of the 473,243 marriages with foreign wives from 1995 to 2022, 46.2% have been with women from China, 23.9% with women from Vietnam, 6.1% from Japan and 5.5% from the Philippines (Statistics Korea 2023a).

To help understand the scale of cross border marriage migration in Asia, we examined migration figures for the past two decades, drawing primarily from data on citizen marriages to foreigners obtained from national statistics offices for Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, which are the four dominant destinations for female transnational marriage migrants where data is available. With the exception of Singapore, which categorizes marriages to foreigners by continent, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan record the country of origin and gender for foreign spouses. A summary of the trends in marriages to foreign brides in the since 1995 can be found in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Foreign Marriages with female migrants in Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, 1995-2022



Sources: Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare [Japan] 2023; Statistics Korea 2023a; Department of Statistics Singapore n.d-a; Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior [Taiwan] 2023b. Data from 1995-1997 for Taiwan are from Wang and Chang (2002). (Wang and Chang's figures for these three years included male spouses, which they claimed comprised less than 10% of the total).

As Figure 2 shows, flows of foreign marriages to Asian brides vary greatly by country until 2014, when female Asian migrants arriving in each of these four countries appear to stabilize at similar levels. The COVID-19 global pandemic had a significant impact on marriage migration across Asia; most states closed their borders in the early months of 2020, with some easing of controls as early as 2021 or 2022, but there were differences in restrictions across the region. China, which implemented the strictest ban on international travel, closed its borders in March 2020 and did not reopen them until January 2023 (Zhou and Tian 2023), although those with visas for business travel or family reunions (including foreign marriages) were permitted entry from September 2020 (OECD 2021). Singapore closed its borders to foreigners for a period of nine months in 2020, following which controls were eased to allow a new category of “spouse-to-be” into the country, but the high fees introduced may have deterred some potential brides from applying (Ng and Wong 2020); travel restrictions eased further at the end of 2021. In January 2020, Japan closed its borders, even to long term foreign residents, finally opening its borders to those engaged to be married in June 2022 (Takahara 2022). South Korea adopted a flexible border policy and remained open to travel from most countries, only banning entry from states that had imposed travel bans against South Koreans (Schwak 2022). While the numbers of transnational marriages declined significantly during the 2020-2022 pandemic restrictions, as Figure 2 shows, small numbers of these marriages did continue to take place in all four countries.

Taiwan received large numbers of Asian brides in the early 2000s, peaking at over 48,000 in 2003 (which constituted 28% of all marriages that year) (Department of Household Registration 2023b). The sudden drop in Asian brides arriving in Taiwan after 2003 can be explained in large part by a drop in brides arriving from China in that year as a result of a surge in economic growth in China coupled with the introduction of new Taiwanese immigration policies in that year. Taiwan sought to crack down on illegitimate marriages by requiring migrant brides to undergo a rigorous interview at the airport—one-third of interviewees failed the interview and were refused entry (Wang 2011; Jeffreys and Pan 2013). From 2010 to 2019, the number of foreign Asian brides to Taiwan remained at a fairly constant level of approximately 15,000 migrant brides from Asian states. In 2020, due to the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns, we see a drop to 6621 Asian brides and a further drop to 4829 in 2021 before rising again to 7531 in 2022.

The decline in foreign marriages in Japan mirrors the state’s overall decline in marriages for the past two decades, which has dropped from 6.4 (marriages per 1000 population) in 2000 to 4.1 in 2022 (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2023). Since 2010, the flow of foreign brides to Japan has remained at a steady 3-4% of all marriages, and 87% of all marriages to foreign women are to women from Asia. Marriage remains a key route to employment in Japan, particularly for Chinese women, because although there are strict regulations on unskilled labor migrants, there are no restrictions on employment for foreign spouses, making marriage migration an attractive route for Chinese women seeking greater economic opportunities (Le Bail 2017). Similar to other countries in Asia, Japan experienced a decrease in the number of marriages to foreign brides in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID lockdown, resulting in approximately 33% fewer marriages in those years.¹⁷

South Korea has followed a pattern similar to that of Taiwan; the number of marriages with foreign brides in South Korea peaked at 30,719 in 2005 (29,497 were to Asian brides), which corresponds to 9.8% of all marriages that year. The number of marriages to foreign women decreased steadily until 2015 but then began to rise again, due in part to the effects of the high sex ratios at birth in the 1980s and 1990s. COVID-19, however, resulted in a drop in the number of marriages to foreign wives in 2020 and 2021, but with a marked rise again in 2022.

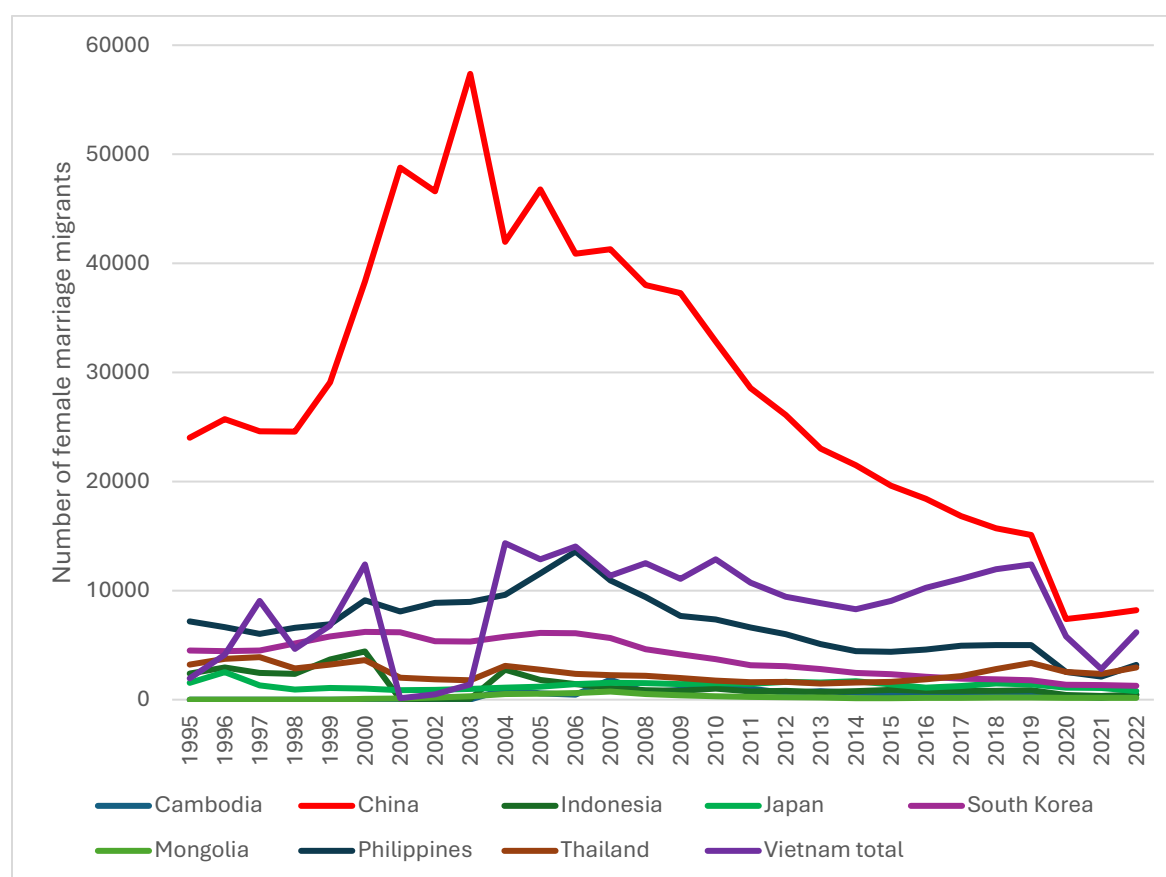
¹⁷ There were 14,911 marriages to foreign brides in 2019 but 9229 in 2020 and 9814 in 2021; figures rose to 10,907 in 2022 (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2023).

Finally, we see that Asian marriage migration to Singapore has been fairly constant throughout the period, averaging 5750 per year from 1995 to 2022. While the number of foreign brides is much smaller than other states, they constitute an average 31% of all marriages to Singapore citizens in a given year. Singapore has very strict legal restrictions in place to control marriage migration: “The Singaporean state plays a critical role in regulating citizenship by restricting who can reproduce or marry and under what circumstances, thus controlling parameters of citizenship and belonging in the city/state” (Constable 2020:3493). Marriages, including foreign marriages, dropped in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, but have since risen to typical levels in 2022.

Between 1995 and 2022, 595,338 marriages to foreign Asian brides were registered in Taiwan, 525,735 in Japan, 438,459 in South Korea, and 156,301 in Singapore, totaling 1.7 million women (same sources as for Figure 2). The official statistics capture only a small part of Asia’s marriage migration, because we lack figures for China and other Asian states as destinations.

For origin countries we use data on marriages registered to foreigners in Japan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan to track flows of female marriage migrants from their country of origin from 1995 to 2022. As Figure 3 shows, China is the dominant sending country, with over 803,000 women leaving mainland China for the purposes of marriage migration to these five countries. The second largest group representing 237,000 women migrated from Vietnam, followed by 190,000 from the Philippines.

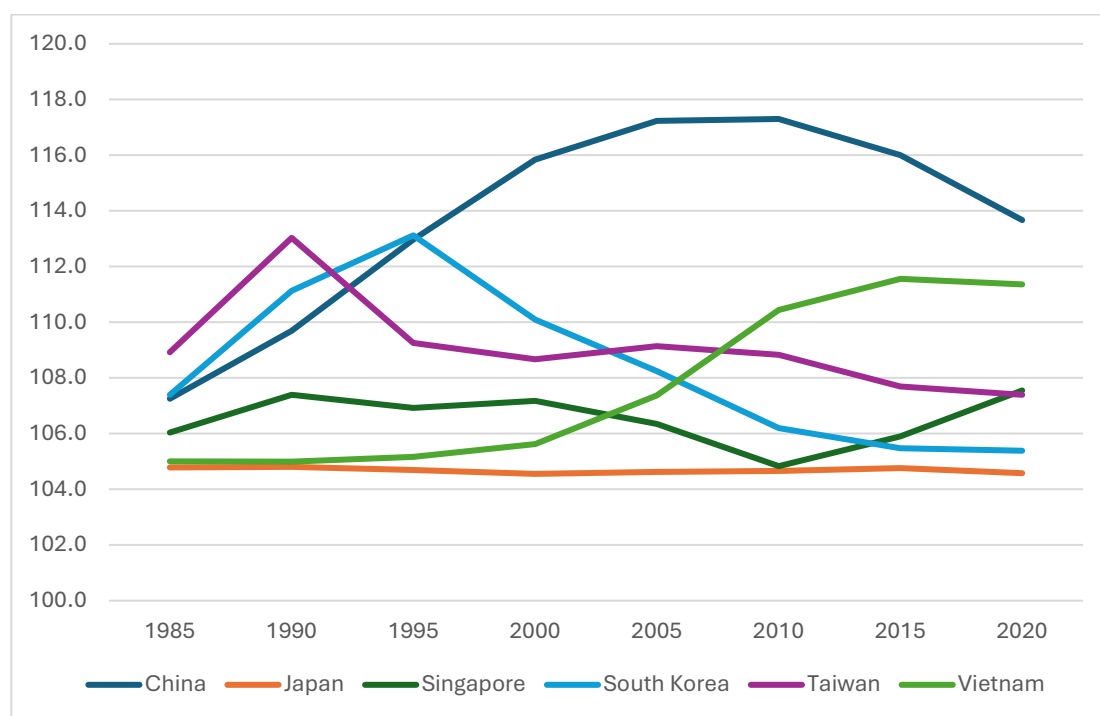
Figure 3: Female Asian Marriage Migration by Country of Origin and Year, 1995-2022



Sources: Japan, Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2023; Statistics Korea 2023a; Department of Statistics Singapore, n.d-a and n.d-b; Taiwan: Department of Household Registration, 2023b; and data for marriages registered in Taiwan from 1995-2000 were obtained from Wang and Chang 2002.

While Figure 3 suggests a general decrease in the number of migrant brides across the region, that trend may not continue as younger age cohorts continue to manifest abnormal sex ratios. Childhood sex ratios are expected to be between 105-106 males per 100 females, yet as we can see in Figure 4, the sex ratios for the 0-4 aged population in China, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam are currently above this norm. These high sex ratios in the childhood population may perpetuate the pull for brides from other states in the future.

Figure 4: Sex Ratio Age 0-4 in Selected Asian States, 1985-2020



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Population Division* (2022), (World Population Prospects, Online Edition, 2022).

Additionally, using UN data for the sizes of male and female populations in recent years as well as projections for the next twenty years, we can observe the size and relevant significance of the possible sex imbalances that may affect future marriage migration flows (UN 2022). Calculations of the percentage of the male imbalance for East Asian states are summarized in Figure 5. However, the overall effect on the marriage market depends on a number of factors, including demographics (particularly mortality patterns), the gendered effects of labor migration, economics (including brideprice, urbanization, employment, etc.), ethnicity, politics (especially government policies pertaining to marriage and family), and social/cultural factors (including marriage rates, levels of education, religion), which can affect marriage practices across populations.

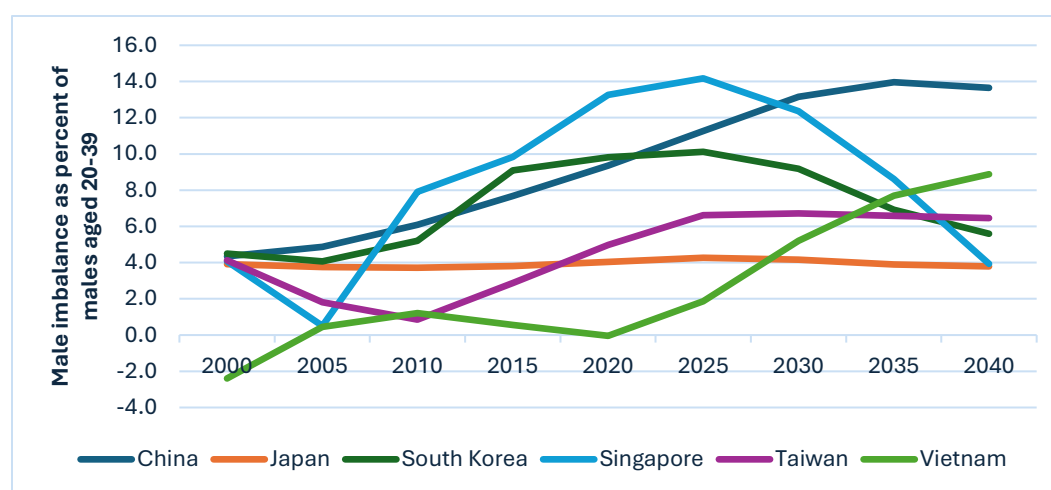
If we examine UN figures for the population aged 20-39 in China for 2020, we calculate an imbalance of 20 million males.¹⁸ This imbalance represents 9.4% of the male population aged 20-39. Using population

¹⁸ Note that China's 2020 census records a smaller imbalance of 15.3 million in the 20-39 age group. National Bureau of Statistics of China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2022).

projections to the year 2040, this imbalance will rise to 24 million, which represents 14% of the male population aged 20-39.

Vietnam's population is also heading for an increasing sex imbalance in the adult population due to a recent rise in the birth sex ratio—UN estimates for Vietnam's population aged 20-39 projects an imbalance of 1.3 million men in 2040 (equivalent to 8.9% of men in that age group) (2022). These figures do not include estimates for the outmigration of Vietnamese females for the purposes of marriage, which will only increase the size of the imbalance if existing flows continue.

Figure 5: Male/female imbalance in the adult population aged 20-39 as a percentage of the male population in that age group



Source: UN 2022.

Although the available data points to a decline in marriage migration in East/Southeast Asia, the rising imbalance in multiple countries as shown in Figure 5 suggests that the flow of women for the purpose of marriage is likely to rise over the next two decades.¹⁹ An overall deficit of 26 million women aged 20-39 in just these six countries in 2040—larger than the entire population of Taiwan—has the potential to be a destabilizing force in East Asian societies.

Discussion and Conclusion

Marriage migration in Asia is now and will continue to be an important phenomenon, with ramifications not only for the women who migrate, but also for the nations involved as source and destination countries. From what we have been able to analyze or infer, important decisions face many countries in Asia with respect to marriage migration as we analyze the trends. Obstructed marriage markets are certainly a driver of cross-border marriage flows, as shown in Figure 5. Hovering over the entire region is the enormous dearth of women in the People's Republic of China, due to sex selective abortion, female infanticide, and female outmigration in marriage. There is an almost complete lack of reliable data concerning how many women are in-migrating and out-migrating for marriage purposes. The scale of the abnormal sex ratios in China has led to significant regional marriage market consequences, including for Southeast Asia, North

¹⁹ Of course, projections are always subject to uncertainty as for example future fertility or mobility are potentially volatile. For a discussion of the pitfalls of population projections, see for example Vanella, Deschermeier and Wilke 2020.

Korea, and other nations, and yet the scale of the marriage migration produced is almost completely unknown. The One Belt, One Road Initiative has expanded opportunities for Chinese men to find brides, but these nations, such as those in Central Asia, are not indifferent to this new development and largely oppose it.

As Figure 5 shows, China's female deficit will remain at high levels for the next several decades, which has the potential to significantly drive marriage migration in the region. As noted in a UNFPA China country office report on the problem of cross border marriages between Vietnam and China, "as an advocate for human development, articulated by the Chinese President as building a 'community of shared future for mankind,' China must face up to and actively respond to the social, economic, gender and human rights challenges underlying skewed sex ratio at birth and cross-border marriage" (UNFPA 2018:10-11).

Despite the issue's importance, from the regional overview presented in this paper, along with a more detailed look at South Korea and Vietnam as examples of destination and source countries respectively, we see that researchers seeking to track marriage market migration and its effects are at a disadvantage: the data needed for analysis are lacking. Data for destination countries is decidedly uneven—South Korea and Taiwan's intensive efforts to track marriage immigration can be contrasted with very unreliable and grossly underestimated data for China, the nation which is likely the largest destination country in the region. Data for source countries is even worse: we are particularly struck by the almost studied indifference shown by source countries about tracking these trends. For example, in the case of Vietnam, while significant female marriage outmigration in the context of highly abnormal birth sex ratios might be considered a critical national security matter, official Vietnamese statistics appear to ignore the matter entirely.

The majority of origin states in the region do not keep marriage migration statistics—for example, although news reports and social science researchers have pointed to female marriage migrants from Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, North Korea and Thailand to other Asian states, there is no available data on these migrants from their countries of origin. Transnational marriages are sometimes registered in the source country, sometimes in the destination country, less frequently in both, and sometimes in neither. As a result, the data is rarely consistent between countries, and when the marriage is registered in the country of origin of the bride, we do not then know if the couple stays or leaves.

In addition to a paucity of information on marriage migrants entering and/or leaving states (including data on spouses who return following failed marriages and whether they retained custody of their children), there is little data on the characteristics of marriage emigrants (and how they compare to labor migrants), such as age, education level, household income prior to migration, occupation (although some countries, such as South Korea and Taiwan, collect this information for marriage migrants entering their states). There is also little data on remittances by foreign spouses to their home countries, making it impossible to study some of the economic impact of marriage migration. Unsurprisingly, information on how and whether laws banning commercially brokered marriages are enforced is also unavailable. Finally, while it would be important to view the subnational geographic patterns of female marriage emigration, often missing are local sex ratios in total and for the never-married population.

Some nations have begun to tackle this dearth of data in a serious fashion. For example, in the Philippines, in order to renew a passport, a Filipino national is now required to tell the government if they have been married abroad in the intervening period. Studies on the assimilation and trajectory of mixed-nationality marriages is lacking for some destination countries, while others, such as South Korea and Taiwan, have been very interested in this topic. More remains to be done. We feel to issue a call to action to the United Nations Statistical Division, UN Women, UNICEF, the IOM, and to national statistical offices to undertake a stronger effort to track marriage market migration, particularly as we expect this demographic phenomenon to increase in size and significance in the coming decades.

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