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Cross-border Marriage and Religion in South Korea:

A Study on Foreign Brides and their Membership in Local Protestant Churches

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the current trends of transnational marriages taking place in South Korea. It reveals the way cross-border marriages are being practiced and illuminates the possible reasons some foreign wives decide to join a local church upon settlement. The paper also interrogates how the Korean government and the Protestant churches are addressing the issue of foreign spouses and multicultural families in the country and argues that some foreign brides find the local churches attractive, despite being treated as perpetual foreigners. This is because, apart from the essential social practical services that they provide, churches have exclusive competence in that they assist the spiritual needs of the wives and answer the existential questions that they face upon their marriage-migration. their marriage-migration.

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This contribution stems from the question of why some foreign wives would decide to join a local Protestant church when they move to South Korea (hereafter Korea). Korean Statistical Information Service reports that in 2016, the number of marriage immigrants comprised 9% of the total foreign population in the country.¹ To be specific, the number of marriage

¹ Marriage migration is a migration trajectory where marriage plays a decisive role in a person's migration. Often times it involves women who cross borders for marriage from less developed countries to more developed ones.

immigrants in Korea was 159,501 in 2016, the vast majority of which were foreign brides.² In fact, statistics reveal that the number of female marriage immigrants has been in constant growth since 2002, despite the country's law enforcement regarding marriage immigration, also known as the F-6 visa.³

Along with the growing influx of foreign brides in the country, the Korean government started to implement policies and programs aimed to facilitate the integration of the foreign wives. At the same time, some Protestant churches have been articulating the importance of immigrant missions or multi-cultural missions since 2007, as a way to overcome the crisis and decline of overseas missions.⁴ Such missionary strategies not only focus on foreign brides but also other foreign residents such as migrant workers and international students.

As a matter of fact, it seems quite unusual for immigrant wives to join a local Protestant church due to a number of reasons. First, unlike immigrant workers who still do not enjoy full legal protection afforded by Korean labor laws, foreign brides receive more support and resources from the government regarding integration, protection, and cultural education. Additionally, other competing organizations like local NGOs and government-funded multicultural centers have specialized resources dedicated to assisting them. Second, most local churches are not equipped with multilingual services that would aid the women in becoming more engaged in church activities. Lastly, most immigrant wives are from countries like Vietnam and China where Christianity is a minority. However,

² According to Kawaguchi and Lee, "foreign brides currently comprise 4 to 35 % of newlyweds in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan." See Daiji Kawaguchi and Soohyung Lee, "Brides for Sale: Cross-Border Marriages and Female Immigration," *Economic Inquiry* 55 (2017): 633. See also Korean Statistical Information Service, "Report on the foreign population by cities and provinces [si-gun-gu-byeol oe-gug-in-ju-min hyeon-hwang]," last modified December 29, 2017, accessed April 13, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=110&tblId=TX_11025_A001_A&vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE&list_id=110_11025_2015_10&seqNo=&lang_mode=ko&language=kor&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ZTITLE.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Seung-Jin Jang, "Missiological Diagnosis to Migrant Missions in Chaos," *Theological Thought*, [shinhak-sa-sang] 149, no. 14 (2010): 209.

some specific case studies reveal that there are women who are becoming members of local Protestant Korean churches.⁵

This study's presentation on cross-border marriage in South Korea intends first to reveal how cross-border marriages are being practiced in Korea and then illuminate the possible reasons some foreign wives join a local church. It argues that Protestant churches have two dimensions—religious and non-religious—that motivate foreign wives to consider membership. Though numerous immigration scholars have already confirmed the dual role of immigrant congregations, the scope and effect of such role appear rather limited in the case of foreign brides in South Korea.⁶

Divided in two parts, this study will first explore the current trends of transnational marriages taking place in Korea, focusing mainly on three questions: How have transnational marriages flourished in Korea? How do grooms and brides meet each other? What are the common problems women experience when they move to Korea? Second, the study moves to interrogate how the government and the Protestant churches are addressing the pressing issue of foreign spouses and multicultural families in the country. Special attention will be given to how the churches approach migrant missions and what challenges they usually face when interacting with foreign congregants within their Korean-dominated congregations. We will deduce some possible reasons that the women may find the local churches attractive. In other words, this study aims to demonstrate that, despite being treated as perpetual foreigners in the mainstream society and their local churches, foreign brides find church membership attractive. This is because, apart from the essential social practical services that they provide, churches, as religious institutions, have exclusive competence in that they assist the spiritual needs of the wives and answer the existential questions that they face upon their dramatic

⁵ Hee-Joo Kwak, "Case Study: *Sang-Ju* Church [sang-ju-kyo-hwe-seon-kyo-sa-rye]," (paper presented at the conference of the 94th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, Jeong-ro Gu, Seoul, December 15, 2009).

⁶ Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh, "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications," *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 2 (April 2001): 270.

life-changing event called marriage migration, through the prism of an other-worldly perspective or the divine providence.

From a Migrant-sending Country to a Migrant-receiving Country: How Have Transnational Marriages Flourished in Korea?

Korea is going through an unprecedented demographic shift. Once known as a migrant-sending country, it is now becoming a migrant-receiving country.⁷ Historically, until the 1990s, Korea has been considered an immigrant-sending country mainly to Western Europe and North America for diverse reasons. Some of those reasons include: transnational marriage, adoption, overseas labor as coal miners, nurses, and construction workers, among others.⁸

Nevertheless, a slow but gradual reversal of this transnational movement between emigrants and immigrants is now taking place. Statistics reveal that there are three major reasons of extended stay in Korea: study, marriage, and work.⁹ The number of marriage immigrants, occupies the smallest portion among three. However, it can be argued that their presence has a stronger impact on the Korean society in the long run, particularly when it comes to the recent demographic shift in Korea. This is because they are expected to settle down in the country with their native spouses and, unlike their migrant-worker counterparts, marriage immigrants are eligible to naturalization or permanent residency.¹⁰

⁷ *Statistics Korea* reveals that since 2006, the number of immigrants has already exceeded that of emigrants. For instance, in 2016, the number of entrants with the purpose of staying in the country for longer than 90 days was 714,000, whereas the number of emigrants was 639,000. See Statistics Korea, *Statistics on National Population Mobility 2016* [2016-kukje-yingu-yidong-tonggye], 2017, accessed April 17, 2018, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/korea/kor_nw/2/2/5/index.board.pdf.

⁸ Chang Won Lee, *Statistics on Korean Emigration: Current State and Limitations*, IOM MRTC Policy Report Series, no. 2015-04 (Kyunggi-do: IOM Migration Research & Training Centre), 2; Doug K. Oh, "History of the Korean Diaspora Movement," in *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission*, ed. S. Hun Kim and Wonsuk Ma (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 190.

⁹ Specifically, migrant workers take the lion's share: 128,000 out of 223,000. See Statistics Korea, *Statistics on National Population Mobility 2016* [2016-kukje-yingu-yidong-tonggye], 2017.

¹⁰ Yonson Ahn, "Gender Under Reconstruction: Negotiating Gender Identities of Marriage Migrant Women from Asia in South Korea," in *After Development Dynamics: South Korea's Contemporary Engagement with Asia*, ed., Anthony P. D'Costa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 247.

On the other hand, according to “The Annual Statistics of the Multicultural Population,” in 2015, transnational marriages between foreign wives and native men accounted for 62.6% of total transnational marriages, making it the most common case of international marriage in Korea.¹¹ The same statistics report that the two largest countries of origin of the cross-border wives are China (27.9%) and Vietnam (23.9), together exceeding the half of transnational marriages comprised by foreign wives and native men, followed then by a pocket number of the Philippines (4.7%) and Japan (4.6%). Hence, cross-border marriages, commonly consisting of a native man and a foreign woman, still play a major role in the recent demographic shift in Korea, though its number is the smallest among the three populations with the purpose of extensive stay in Korea. With that being said, we now want to examine the manifold factors of transnational marriages in Korea.

The Norm of Hypergamy: How do Grooms and Brides Meet Each Other?

When it comes to cross-border marriages, most scholars repetitively use gender imbalance and the norm of hypergamy as the framework for constructing the pattern that explains how transnational marriages work.¹² As Constable suggests, hypergamy is a pattern of marriage mobility which commonly involves the movement of brides from less developed locations to more developed ones.¹³ Here, we want to explore how this pattern of hypergamy or, colloquially, “women marrying out and marrying up” functions in Korea.

In October 2017, the *Japan Times* published an article about a Vietnamese bride called Huynh Thi Thai Muoi (hereafter Muoi) who

¹¹ Statistics Korea, *Statistics on the Dynamics of Multicultural Population 2015* [2015-Damunhwa-yingu-dongtae], 2016, accessed April 17, 2018, http://kostat.go.kr/smart/news/file_dn.jsp?aSeq=357477&ord=1.pdf.

¹² See Daiji Kawaguchi and Soohyung Lee, “Brides for Sale: Cross-Border Marriages and Female Immigration,” *Economic Inquiry* 55 (2017); Caren Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 31-47.

¹³ Nicole Constable, ed., “Introduction: Cross-Border Marriages, Gendered Mobility, and Global Hypergamy,” in *Cross-Border Marriages, Gendered Mobility, and Global Hypergamy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 10.

married a Korean man she barely knew.¹⁴ This short news article hints at some of the significant elements characterizing international marriages in Korea: husbands were nearly twice the age of the brides, weddings were held within days of meeting each other, the couple settling life in rural areas, frequent conflicts with parents-in-law and marriage ending in divorce. Above all, one of the things that most captivated my attention regarding Muoi was how “she is one of some 40,000 Vietnamese brides in South Korea, a top destination for women looking for love and a ticket out of poverty.”¹⁵ Although the news may frame this as a matter of fact, such a statement actually insinuates a great deal of the current transnational marriages hinges upon the norm of hypergamy.

Scholars theorize that the rapid economic growth of Korea, along with its neighboring counterparts such as Taiwan and Japan, has produced some difficulties for men when it comes to finding a spouse in their own country.¹⁶ As native women are enjoying increased access to higher education and economic independence, they increasingly refuse to marry rural men who possess relatively limited economic resources. On the other hand, Kawaguchi and Lee rightly point out that it is the slow adjustment of cultural norms to the women’s socioeconomic achievements in a patriarchal society that still expects them to fulfill the traditional roles of women (e.g. doing most of the household tasks, choosing between marriage and work). This phenomenon is part of what makes women choose to remain single.¹⁷ In other words, women who choose to remain single believe that they do not gain much from marriage, especially where the cultural norms regarding gender roles have much to catch up with the current economic independence and high labor participation of women.

¹⁴ “Vietnamese Brides say ‘I do’ to South Korea,” *Japan Times*, October 04, 2017, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/10/04/asia-pacific/social-issues-asia-pacific/vietnamese-brides-say-south-korea/#.WtmFR9RubIU>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship*, 34-36. See also Daniele Belanger, “Marriages with foreign women in East Asia: Bride Trafficking or Voluntary Migration?” *Population & Societes*, no. 469 (July 2010): 1; Duong Bach Le et al, “Transnational Marriage: Migration and the East Asian Family-Based Welfare Model: Social Reproduction in Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea,” in *Migration, Gender and Social Justice*, ed., Thanh-Dam Truong et al (Berlin: Springer, 2014), 91; Grace H. Chung and Joan P. Yoo, “Using the Multicultural Family Support Centers and Adjustment Among Interethnic and Interracial Families in South Korea,” *Family Relations* 62 (February 2013): 242.

¹⁷ Daiji Kawaguchi and Soohyung Lee, 635.

In addition, Kawaguchi and Lee claim that in general, educated women with high socioeconomic status do not choose to “marry-down,” meaning that they refuse to have a less-educated husband, though they would marry men with high socioeconomic status.¹⁸ Women with socioeconomic independence might marry up, but they preferred to stay single rather than marrying down. This phenomenon, in turn, creates gender imbalance in rural areas, with bachelors who cannot find a native spouse within the country. Moreover, such imbalance is not merely an individual issue, but it is a problem of concern for the Korean government.¹⁹

Clearly, Korea’s fertility rate keeps falling and the country is already facing a rapidly aging population. Though the government is focusing on public appeals with several campaigns and policies to overcome the low birth rate crisis, data shows that the rate is still sinking.²⁰ As a measure of recovering the fertility rate, the government has been encouraging transnational marriages in rural areas since the early 1990s. As Freeman notes, the demand for cross-border wives increased, and with the support of local governments, numerous matchmaking agencies flourished throughout the country.²¹ Similarly, scholars argue that the majority of female marriage immigrants seek better socioeconomic position through marriage migration. Primarily, they seek ways to financially support their families in their home country while additionally, they hope to improve their own lives in Korea.²² In other words, they “marry out and marry up.” As the news article claims, Muoi is one of thousands women who

¹⁸ Ibid., 636.

¹⁹ Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship*, 47-50.

²⁰ “Total Birth Rate [hapkye-chulsan-ryul],” Statistics Korea, last modified September 04, 2017, accessed April 06, 2018, http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtIPageDetail.do?idx_cd=1428.

²¹ Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship*, 73-82. See also Daniele Belanger, “Marriages with foreign women in East Asia: Bride Trafficking or Voluntary Migration?” 3; Hye Yeon Cho, “The Cost of Rights: Migrant Women, Feminist Advocacy, and Gendered Morality in South Korea,” *Gender & Society* 27, no. 4 (August 2013): 450.

²² Daniele Belanger, “Marriages with foreign women in East Asia: Bride Trafficking or Voluntary Migration?” 2. See also Grace H. Chung and Joan P. Yoo, “Using the Multicultural Family Support Centers and Adjustment Among Interethnic and Interracial Families in South Korea,” 242; Yugyun Kim et al, “Don’t ask for Fair Treatment? A Gender Analysis of Ethnic Discrimination, Response to Discrimination, and Self-rated Health among Marriage Migrants in South Korea,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 15, no.112 (2016): 2.

decide to cross border looking for love and for economic support. Statistically, however, by remaining married, Muoi is clearly one of the lucky ones. Thousands of foreign brides file for divorce within the first five years of marriage, meaning that many of them divorce before they fully adapted to married life in their new country.²³

Before moving on, it is worth clarifying that it would be mistaken to regard the foreign brides simply as passive recipients of assistance or victims of powers beyond their control. Without overlooking the fact that in many cases the wives face a variety of challenges, including various forms of violence, it is important to note that these women are active agents who make constant choices to improve not only their own lives, but also those of their families in their home countries and even of their future children. Many of them choose their places of residency, carefully considering the possibility for upward social mobility, the education of their future children, and transmission of cultural values. Many are also the breadwinners of their families in their originating country and support them by sending remittances, facilitating transnational activities between two countries.²⁴ Hence, while we should never neglect the hardships and all types of injustice the wives face upon arrival, as we will see next, we should also avoid the blind labeling of them as people who, without agency, are entirely dependent on their spouses.

Conflicts Upon Arrival: What Are the Common Problems that the Women Experience?

Most international marriages rely on specialized marriage agencies. As Belanger notes, although often times migrant spouses who have already settled down in host countries would find a husband for their siblings, also known as chain migration, such cross-border marriages play a minor role in comparison to the marriage agencies.²⁵ This means that most migrant women who come to Korea rely on specialized brokers or agencies to find

²³ Kyung Sook Kim and Min Kyeong Kim, "Maternal Acculturation Process of Married Immigrant Women in Korea," *Journal of Korean Academy of Nurses* 44, no. 1 (February 2012): 1-2.

²⁴ Melody Lu, "Transnational Marriage in Asia," *Ilas Newsletter* 45, (Autumn 2007): 3.

²⁵ Duong Bach Le et al, "Transnational Marriage," 96; Daniele Belanger, "Marriages with foreign women in East Asia: Bride Trafficking or Voluntary Migration?" 3.

their husbands. Brides and grooms meet each other for the first time during the grooms' match-making tours. The match-making tour arranged by marriage agencies usually takes place within around a week. In some cases, the progression from meeting to filing the paperwork for marriage takes only two days.²⁶ They marry without enough information about their spouses.²⁷ Additionally, in many cases, as these profit-oriented agencies' primary goal is to connect clients to their future spouses and to take care of necessary documentation for marriage and migration, some of them would exaggerate information to facilitate the process.²⁸ For instance, agencies would portray a favorable image of brides from South East Asia as "traditional," "virgins," and "virtuous" in contrast to Korean men who, in turn, are portrayed as "modern."²⁹

Scholars argue that many women encounter deception and face disappointment when they move to Korea, largely because the information about their husbands (e.g. their economic assets, income, health, personality, job, and education) they had received was not true. For example, in a survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, one out of five women answered that the information on their husband was false.³⁰ Foreign wives also encountered other types of difficulties on top of their disillusionment of marriage upon arrival. As a spouse to a Korean man, they are expected to fulfill a three-fold social role as wife, mother,

²⁶ Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship*, 52. See also Nancy Abelmann and Hynhee Kim, "A Failed Attempt at Transnational Marriage: Maternal Citizenship in a Globalizing South Korea," in *Cross-Border Marriages, Gendered Mobility, and Global Hypergamy*, ed., Nicole Constable (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 115-116; Hyun Mi Kim, "Migration of Love? The Process of Transnational Marriage of Vietnamese Women [Sarang-oe-yiju? kukje-kyoron-betunam-yosongoe-kyoron-iju-kwajong]," in *Women Crossing the Border* [kukyong-eul-nonneun-asia-yeosongdul], ed., Yeong Ok Kim et al (Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 2009), 25.

²⁷ Hien Anh Le claims that the Vietnamese women who marry Korean have limited exposure to foreign culture, meaning that their understanding of Korea is largely based on mass media; they only know a certain aspect of the country. This implies that often times the women not only have limited information about their future husband, but also have an over-expectation of their lives in Korea. See Hien Anh Le, "Lives of Mixed Vietnamese- Korean Children," in *Marriage Migration in Asia*, ed., Sari K. Ishii (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 178-179.

²⁸ Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship*, 52; Dong-Hoon Seol, *Foreign Wives' Life in Korea: Focusing on the Policy of Welfare and Health*, Ministry of Health and Welfare (Gyonggido: Ministry of Health and Welfare), 76.

²⁹ Duong Bach Le et al, "Transnational Marriage," 94.

³⁰ Seol, *Foreign Wives' Life in Korea*, 78-81.

and daughter in-law. It almost seems like their degree of cultural assimilation into the Korean society is measured on how successfully they fulfill those gendered roles.³¹ To that end, men imagined their brides to be passive, submissive women who will sacrifice for their new family, take care of their parents-in-law, and secure the future of the patrilineage.³²

In fact, cross-border wives in Korea suffer from various hardships, ranging from racial discrimination and domestic violence to mental burden and financial difficulties.³³ Many women claim that they found out the socioeconomic status of their husbands were very different from what they had expected it to be, meaning their images of having “modern” husbands with stable jobs and incomes were in direct conflict with reality.³⁴ Korea is still considered one of the most ethnically intolerant countries. Hence, although cross-border brides are more likely to become naturalized, society generally regards them as foreigners from less developed countries.³⁵

In sum, some of the most common stressors among the foreign brides are:

1. Communication difficulties due to language barriers and cross-cultural misunderstandings;

³¹ Karen L. Kim, “Korea and the Gender Construction of Female Marriage Immigrants,” *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no.1 (August 2016): 16.

³² Abelmann and Kim, “A Failed Attempt at Transnational Marriage,” 112-113.

³³ Scholars note that cross-border brides experience high levels of domestic violence. For instance, in July 2019, a video showing a Korean man beating his Vietnamese wife incited public outrage. See “South Korea Shocked by Abuse of ‘Marriage Migrants,’” *BBC*, July 10, 2019, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48917935>. Also, studies report that mental and financial burdens the brides experience while adapting to a new society have resulted in serious mental health problems such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem. See Hyuk Im, Ki Young Lee, and Hyo Young Lee, “Acculturation Stress and Mental Health Among the Marriage Migrant Women in Busan, South Korea,” *Community Mental Health* 50, no. 497-503 (December 2013): 498; Also see Grace H. Chung and Joan P. Yoo, “Using the Multicultural Family Support Centers and Adjustment Among Interethnic and Interracial Families in South Korea,” 246-247, Duong Bach Le et al, “Transnational Marriage: Migration and the East Asian Family-Based Welfare Model: Social Reproduction in Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea,” 97-98.

³⁴ Duong Bach Le et al, “Transnational Marriage: Migration and the East Asian Family-Based Welfare Model: Social Reproduction in Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea,” 98.

³⁵ Kim et al, “Don’t ask for Fair Treatment? A Gender Analysis of Ethnic Discrimination, Response to Discrimination, and Self-rated Health among Marriage Migrants in South Korea,” 3; Hyun Mi Kim, “Migration of Love? The Process of Transnational Marriage of Vietnamese Women [Sarang-oe-yiju?:kukje-kyoron-betunam-yosongoe-kyoron-iju-kwajong],” 32.

2. Their roles confined to biological reproduction and care provisioning;
3. Domestic violence;
4. Economic hardship after marriage;
5. Exclusion, discrimination and mistrust against foreign brides;
6. Homesickness

Fortunately, the government, local NGOs, and religious institutions are constantly implementing integration projects geared towards cross-border spouses and multicultural families. They are also actively engaged in providing them with different types of assistance in order to facilitate their settlement in the Korean society. For instance, Muoi hopes to make friends at a nearby community center for foreign brides. Next, we will discuss how government and churches are dealing with the integration of foreign spouses.

Cross-border Wives in Korean Society

Here, we will examine how two institutions, government and church, are assisting foreign spouses. Since the government is predominantly in charge of helping the wives to integrate in the society, we will first explore how the government is running its multicultural family support centers across the country along with its goals and limits. Then we will examine some of the Korean Protestant churches' migrant missions efforts; specifically, how they recruit immigrant members. Finally, we will identify the most salient elements of migrant missions that the women find attractive and also some challenges migrant missions commonly face when dealing with cross-border wives.³⁶

Government: Integration through Assimilation

Certainly, the Korean government is showing high interest in the integration of the foreign wives in the society. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family reports that currently, there are 217 multicultural

³⁶ Migrant mission here refers to the specific type of ministry of churches aimed to assist migrants in their communities.

family support centers [다문화 가족 지원 센터] throughout the country.³⁷ In turn, these centers offer multiple activities and programs for the foreign wives and are divided into five big areas of support: family, gender equality, human rights, social integration, and counseling. Their services are geared towards five sub-divisions of education and assistance: Korean language courses, cultural education, computer education, counselling, and emergency call-centers. In addition, they are running seven call centers that are available in thirteen languages. Some centers also provide services like visiting teachers, translation, and mentoring.³⁸ Besides these multicultural family support centers, local community centers have Korean language courses and counseling sessions open to their foreign residents.³⁹

As we can see, the government seems to have a lot to offer to foreign wives in order to aid their integration in mainstream society as well as its enthusiasm for teaching the language and facilitating the settlement of multicultural families in the society.⁴⁰ However, criticisms arise among scholars who claim that such services are rather family-oriented and hardly consider the foreign spouses' voices as individual rights. In other words, the guidelines the government offer for the integration of female immigrants are largely based on their family-support policies. This means that they still consider immigrant women as members of multicultural families that should be assimilated to "normal Korean families" rather than individual women with rights and dignity. Hence, the primary goal of the governmental policy regarding immigrant women is to facilitate their process of assimilation so that they would quickly become "Korean

³⁷ "Multicultural/Foreign Resident Support Centers [Damunhwa/Oekukyjin-jiwon-sento]," Multicultural Family Support Portal [Damunhwa-kajok-jiwon-potal], last modified March, 2017, accessed April 26, 2018, <https://www.liveinkorea.kr/portal/KOR/page/contents.do?menuSeq=211&pageSeq=42>.

³⁸ Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Introduction to the Multicultural Family Support Service 2017 [2017-damunhwa-gajok-jiwon-saop-annae], 2017, accessed April 26, 2018, <http://www.mogef.go.kr/kor/skin/doc.html?fn=4cd56bdaa549403192eb1ce9ae5433b4.pdf&rs=/rsfiles/201804/>.

³⁹ For instance, in the case of Korean language courses, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Education are participating in the Korean language education for the country's foreign residents with their own curriculum and activities.

⁴⁰ According to a survey conducted by Korean Statistics Information Center with 27,120 multicultural families, 42.3% responded that they have attended programs run by multicultural family centers and 73.9% said they have attended other community centers too. This means that most foreign wives at least know where to go when they need language, cultural education and other forms of help from government-funded institution.

mothers” who would support and maintain Korean families. The government’s goal behind this is closely related to their desperate attempt to overcome the birth rate crisis, rather than to protect the foreign women’s rights from a humanitarian perspective or as a part of human dignity.⁴¹

Another criticism is that the multicultural family centers are open only on weekdays from 9 am to 6 pm, which means that women who have full time jobs would likely have difficulty in participating in any program. Additionally, most programs are focused on language and one-time-event-like culture learning, leaving the women without many opportunities to express themselves and share their own cultures and traditions.

Lastly, a study reveals that, for the successful adaptation of the cross-border brides to the society, it is necessary to create more spaces outside of language courses and other typical integration activities where they can just relieve stress and receive support among their co-ethnic friends.⁴² Interestingly, a survey conducted by Korean Statistics Information Center reveals that 33% of the marriage immigrants responded that they did not find any programs of personal interest, while 45% said that they were willing to participate in co-ethnic social meetings.⁴³ This tells us that, even though the integration programs offered by the government and civil organizations might support their lives in Korea, the women want to have more spaces and opportunities for co-ethnic socialization to preserve their culture and tradition, spaces which might function as a haven for expressing their ethnic identities freely.

The government’s policy to support cross-border wives is wide-ranging and multidimensional. It provides a variety of services and programs that not only aids the integration of the female immigrants but also assists them with parenting issues and job finding as well. However,

⁴¹ Soon Young Moon, “An exploratory study on the social support system for marriage immigrants women: laws of social security and tow alternative laws for multi-cultural families support to be enacted,” *The Women’s Studies* 72, no. 1 (2007): 129.

⁴² Hee Kyung Kim, “A subjectivity study of types for stress in immigrant women of multicultural families who married to Korean men,” *The Women’s Studies* 78, no. 1 (2010): 149.

⁴³ Korean Statistical Information Service, “Intent to Participation of marriage/naturalized immigrants in meetings and activities [kyoron-iminja/kwihwaja-dung-oe-moim-hwaldongbyul-chamyo-euihyang],” last modified August 17 2016, accessed April 24, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=154&tblId=DT_MOG_1001300869&conn_path=I2.

they seem to neglect the problems of the immigrant women as individual cases of human rights. Most programs the support centers offer are focused on the family over individual. Their education programs include Korean language learning, cultural experience, and parenting that are intended to assimilate the wives to Korean society as fast as possible, which run the danger of solidifying the roles of the cross-border wives as mother, wife, and caretaker of the family.

Church: Migrant Missions

Whereas the government utilizes the tools named “multicultural family support centers” to deal with the integration of the cross-border wives, churches approach this issue through the prism of migrant missions. Since there are only a few academic resources about Korean churches doing migrant missions that are focused on immigrant women, we should be careful not to over-generalize their missions, goals, and limits. In fact, there are more resources about churches actively engaged in migrant missions geared towards temporary migrant workers, partly because, as was mentioned in the introduction, immigrant women have more chances to receive support from the government and local NGOs, even though they are rather family-oriented. Thus, churches are unlikely to be their primary choice when they require support, unlike the migrant workers who tend to rely more on religious institutions because they seldom enjoy full legal protection and support from the government.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, we have case studies of churches with immigrant women becoming members. Hence, we will now turn to the church’s migrant mission towards cross-border wives, and what makes them decide to join a church.

Ho Ti Tuyet Suong (hereafter Tuyet Suong), a Vietnamese marriage immigrant, confessed during the annual meeting of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Korea that when she first came to Korea, she suffered a lot from physical and mental hardships, especially after marriage and giving birth to her two children. She then met a Korean visiting teacher who introduced Tuyet Suong to her church, of which she became a

⁴⁴ Bashir Zahangeer, JaengSaeng Bae, and Moon Kyung Kang, “A Study on the Protection of the Migrant Worker’s Rights in Korea,” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 20, no. 6 (June 2015): 92-98.

member and was baptized.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that our focus here is not on her conversion or whether her personal hardships had made her more open to religious experiences, but how Tuyet Suong got to know a local church and embedded herself in a local church. Her story reveals the most common way in which a cross-border wife is introduced to a local Protestant church: interpersonal evangelization.

Hong-Ryul Hwang, who has conducted a study on the current state of female migrant missions in the province of Busan, claims that since most foreign wives from South East Asian countries are not familiar with Christianity, except those from the Philippines, churches should focus on gaining their trust as a way to “open their heart” first before they begin to proselytize.⁴⁶ In other words, the key is to build rapport first by means of teaching or opening classes at church without direct proselytism, and then when the time is opportune, they might invite women to visit the church. This was the case with Tuyet Suong, whose first contact with the Korean church was through her visiting Korean teacher.⁴⁷ In most cases the membership of cross-border brides does not happen through the churches’ active proselytism, but it occurs more as a by-product of their relationship of trust with their Christian friends and family members.

Once settled into a church, they seldom become passive church attenders. Rather, they tend to take part in activities and programs that they find useful, like Korean classes and counseling. Unlike migrant workers who stay in the country temporarily, migrant women come to settle down with their Korean spouses, making more likely for them to settle into a local church and make positive contributions to the congregation in the

⁴⁵ Dae Eung Lee, “An immigrant wife says: ‘I bursted into tears when I walked into the church... [Kyoilhon-yiju-yosong]’ kyo-hwe-choum-gatunde-jodo-morul-nunmuri,” *Christian Today*, December 09, 2017, accessed April 24, 2018, <http://www.christiantoday.co.kr/news/295555>.

⁴⁶ Hong Ryul Hwang, “Current Situation of Immigrants and Tasks for Immigrants Mission in Busan and Kyungsangnam-do Area—Focused on Marriage-related Immigrant Woman/Multicultural Family,” *Theology of Mission* 29 (2012): 226.

⁴⁷ Another survey with a sampling of 204 immigrant wives who currently attend a church reveals that 48.15% responded that their primary channel to the church was through the suggestion of a co-ethnic friend they met Korea. Then, 19.75% said they came to know Christianity through the Korean class held in the church building. Similarly, another 19.5% claimed that their in-laws invited them to the church.⁴⁷ Given the small sample size, it might be difficult to generalize the ways immigrant wives come to church. Yet, we can assume that most immigrant wives’ first contact with the church happens through interpersonal relationship, be it a co-ethnic friend, Korean teacher, or in-laws.

long run. Like Tuyet Suong who gave her public confession at a church meeting, Hwang claims that there are women who become actively engaged in church activities.⁴⁸ This phenomenon shows that among church activities, most women find multicultural worship services and meetings the most attractive (55.55%), followed by Korean classes (18.56%) and computer classes (7.73%). Another survey with a smaller sampling reveals that all respondents participated in worship services, and then with a vast majority (84.6%) also engaged in outreach activities, Sunday school programs for their children (69.2%), Korean courses (46.2%), and bible studies (46.1%).⁴⁹ Moreover, they find the church more attractive when they worship and fellowship with their co-ethnic congregants, when the church provides them with courses that are useful in their daily lives (e.g. Korean courses), and when they are given opportunities to take active roles in church events.

It should be clarified that the benefits the women find in local churches are not unique to Korea. On the contrary, scholars argue that most immigrant churches provide a place for ethnic preservation, social capital, and a sense of status within the church.⁵⁰ For instance, R. Stephen Warner has famously argued that immigrant congregations in the U.S. structure themselves primarily according to *de facto congregationalism* as a way of adaptation, meaning that they involve: salience of lay leadership in church organization and decision-making, and multi-dimensional roles that reach beyond religious sphere: preservation of culture and ethnicity, education, socialization, and civic engagement.⁵¹ Other scholars such as Fenggang Yang and Ebaugh have later expanded this concept, but for our

⁴⁸ Hwang, "Current Situation of Immigrants and Tasks for Immigrants Mission in Busan and Kyungsangnam-do Area," 233.

⁴⁹ Yoon Sun Song, "A Study of Marriage-Immigrant Women's Reality and Point of Effective Mission Contact through Welfare Corporation" (Ph.D. diss., Chong Shin University, 2013), 105.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Y. Kim, "Migration and Conversion of Korean American Christians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 195-198. See also Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 47-53.

⁵¹ Stephen R. Warner, "Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5: 1066-7. See also Stephen R. Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the American Religious Configuration," in *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 145-82; and Peter Kivisto, *Religion and Immigration* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 54-58.

research it suffices to say that religious congregations serving as houses of worship and a community center is a common structure especially among immigrant congregations.⁵² Similarly, immigrant wives in the Korean church are not passive recipients of aid from church, but also participate in different events and form their own ethnic communities within the congregations, creating their own spaces of expression and self-realization.

Another aspect of the church they find beneficial lies in its religious dimension. Tuyet Suong believes that God has called her from Vietnam to Korea to be his daughter. In a way, her sense of call could be explained that it is the migration and the drastic shift in her life that engendered a sense of disorientation and, thus, has given her a predisposition for religious experiences. As Timothy Smith argues, "Migration is a theologizing experience" in the sense that the migrant is exposed to intense and even traumatic events that re-shape their identity including religious orientation.⁵³ Similarly, Ann Swidler claims that in unsettled times, when people start seeking to reorganize their lives, their culture becomes more salient, functioning as the ideology that provides them with new strategies of action and ways of thinking.⁵⁴ If that is the case, marriage followed by migration can be an extreme case of an unsettled time. A person's sense of belonging and identity, which had been unquestioned when living in their home country, gains salience and becomes an existential question that must be answered using different tools, religion being one of them. Carolyn Chen, in her book on Taiwanese immigrants in the U.S., states that "migration... draws religious questions to the forefront and elicits an openness for change that many not exist in the normal course of life."⁵⁵

Hence we can claim that cross-border wives, who struggle with all kinds of stresses in their daily lives, not only rely on their culture to reorganize their lives in Korea, but are also often exposed to religious experiences when they become church members, which, in turn, transform their perspectives on life. Similarly, Hye Jeong Oh conducted research on

⁵² Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and The New Immigrants* (Lanham, MA: Alta Mira Press, 2000), 49-59.

⁵³ Timothy Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 5 (Dec 1978): 1175.

⁵⁴ Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 89-92.

⁵⁵ Chen, *Getting Saved in America*, 9.

the experience of spirituality in the lives of marriage immigrants in Korea, based on in-depth interviews with five Christian immigrant women and five non-Christian immigrant women. The Christian participants in her study claimed that even though their lives were still hard, they received hope and comfort from God, believing that God had a purpose in all and the current hardship they were going through was a mission that one must endure.⁵⁶ The close interplay between migration and religious experiences is found among migrant wives in Korea; their faith gives a new set of meaning to their migration experience and their identity in the host country.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations regarding the dual function of local Korean churches. Unlike other immigrants who form their own ethnic churches in foreign lands, foreign brides in Korea do not create their own congregations, but they become part of already-existing local Korean churches. Consequently, the challenges they face when adapting to the church might be different from those that other immigrants face in their ethnic churches. For instance, whereas immigrants who attend ethnic churches can regard the church as an ethnic haven within the larger society where they are the minority, the foreign wives are minorities even within the church. Fortunately, Tuyet Suong claims that she has a lot of fun at church and that the church people are very nice to her. However, while many immigrant congregants receive benefits and heartwarming assistance from the church as Tuyet Suong did, others struggle with marginalization and prejudice from their native congregants.⁵⁷

Immigrant women feel discriminated when the church sees them merely as passive recipients of help who came from less developed countries rather than authentic church members with full rights within the congregation. Even though the church teaches that there is no Gentile or Jew in Christ, meaning that they are all equally brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of their class, race, and status, reality shows that there is indeed Gentile and Jew. There are Korean members and the “non-Koreans.” Foreign congregants feel uncomfortable when native

⁵⁶ Hye Jong Oh, “A Qualitative Study on the Experience of Spirituality in the Lives of Marriage-Based Immigrant Women in Korea: Through Comparison between Christians and Non-Christians,” *Faith and Scholarship* 23, no. 1 (March 2018): 99-111.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

congregants see them with prejudice.⁵⁸ While their feelings of marginalization might be somewhat comparable to those of second-generation Korean Americans in the U.S. who attend immigrant Korean churches but yet feel like second class citizens within their congregations, there are critical differences.⁵⁹ In the case of the immigrant wives, their level of frustration should be higher because unlike the second generation Korean Americans who can share the culture, tradition, languages, and ethnicity with the first generation, the foreign wives come from a completely different ethnic backgrounds, culture, tradition, and languages. Religion is the only unifying factor between them and the Korean members.

Other major obstacles they face inside the church include: language barriers, lack of church leaders who speak the native languages of the wives, tension among immigrant congregants who use different native languages and are from different cultures, problems of access for women who live in remote rural areas, inflexible work schedules that make the women unable to attend services, and in the case of churches with limited resources, lack of quality programs to attract and retain cross-border wives.⁶⁰ Though some of these obstacles are shared by many immigrant congregations outside of Korea, they are intensified in the case of the foreign wives in Korea, chiefly because they do not have a congregation of their own and, in most of the time, fail to reach a critical mass to make the church consider introducing a variety of quality programs and trained native leaders.

Other issues outside the church are the overall low interest on the part of the immigrant women to participate in any church-related

⁵⁸ Hwang, "Current Situation of Immigrants and Tasks for Immigrants Mission in Busan and Kyungsangnam-do Area," 235.

⁵⁹ Although second-generation Korean Americans enjoy certain degree of autonomy in choices of worship services and style, they are still very much dependent on church members of the first generation, who dominate and control church administration and finances. See Sharon Kim and Rebecca Y. Kim, "Second Generation Korean American Christians' Communities" in *Sustaining Faith Traditions*, ed., Carolyn Chen and Russell Jeung (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 178-179.

⁶⁰ Chang Hwan Sung, "Status of Married Immigrant Women and their Children in Korea and an Approach of Christian Education" (Ph.D. diss., Baek Seok University, 2011), 71-72.

programs.⁶¹ Therefore, we can infer that although churches certainly have some points that attract cross-border wives, on average, a small number of women actually decide to attend a local church. This reality is largely due to the internal challenges within the congregation like language barriers coupled with some external obstacles such as their low interest in church-associated programs and because of their adherence to a different religion or no religion at all. Again, their situation is significantly different from immigrants who find their ethnic churches more attractive because, as Hirschman writes, immigrant churches fulfill their primary need for refuge, respectability, and resource.⁶²

Dual Function of the Churches

We are now ready to answer the question of why some cross-border wives would join a local Protestant church. Although we should bear in mind that, as already mentioned above, there is an overall low-interest among the wives in joining a local church and that most of them are from countries where Christianity is a minority religion, we can still claim that the wives would join local Protestant churches for their dual function fulfilling both their spiritual and secular needs. This dual function clearly serves as a point of attraction, though to a much lesser degree compared to other immigrant ethnic congregations elsewhere, and also distinguishes them from other non-religious organizations.

Whereas secular organizations such as local community centers provide the women with a variety of social programs and services that help their integration in the mainstream society, churches can maximize their dual function to facilitate adaptation and eventually smooth the path for

⁶¹ Statistics show that whereas 45% of the women were willing to participate in co-ethnic fellowship meetings, only 13.5% showed interest in programs run by religious institutions. Also a different survey with the sampling of 106 non-Christian immigrant women reveals that above other reasons, many of them are not interested in joining a church simply because they are atheists (39.6%) or they belong to a different religion (23.6%). See Korean Statistical Information Service, "Intent of Participation of marriage/naturalized immigrants in meetings and activities [kyoron-iminja/kwihwaja-dung-oe-moim-hwaldongbyul-chamyoeuihyang]," last modified August 17, 2016, accessed April 24, 2018, http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=154&tblId=DT_MOGE_1001300869&conn_path=I2. See also Yoon Sun Song, "A Study of Marriage-Immigrant Women's Reality and Point of Effective Mission Contact through Welfare Corporation," 105.

⁶² Charles Hirschman, "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptations of Immigrant Groups in the United States," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1228.

the conversion of their immigrant members. Hence, on one hand, they help the wives with adaptation, socialization, and civic engagement by offering diverse social programs and as other secular organizations do, but on the other, their uniqueness as a religious institution fulfills the spiritual needs of the wives and paints their lives in Korea with transcendental meanings by answering existential questions such as their *raison d'etre*, identity in the new country, and the ultimate *telos* of their lives.

It might be the task of the local churches to develop adequate programs, both religious and non-religious, and find balance between this dual function when dealing with the cross-border wives. For instance, the pastor of *Sang-Ju Church*, a local Protestant church that has been working with foreign wives and native members, rightly suggests that it is important to encourage more involvement of Korean lay members with expertise in social welfare to lead informal activities so it can address the needs of the wives more effectively, and to recruit pastors who can speak the native language of the wives in order to offer quality pastoral care.⁶³

Lastly, we can suggest that the attempt of the churches to assist and recruit the immigrant wives is an ongoing process that already has borne some fruit but still needs several improvements. Cross-border wives and their initial encounters with the church rely heavily on interpersonal networks with Christians who happen to bring them to the church, and not necessarily out of their trust in the church as the primary institution that will assist them when they need help. Nevertheless, some churches have succeeded in creating spaces for the immigrant wives to express themselves, preserve their culture, form ethnic communities, and acquire the social capital and education they need. Also, the women who attend a church are more likely to have religious experiences that would eventually transform the way they interpret reality and create meanings in their lives.

We also have noticed some critical drawbacks. Internally, the churches struggle with inner friction between Korean members and immigrant members. The immigrant wives feel uncomfortable when the native congregants consider them with prejudice. In addition, they face

⁶³Jae Kwang Kye, "A Study on a Church Community for Embracing Multicultural Family [Damunhwa-gajok-eul-poyong-haguiwihan-kyohwe-gongdongchae-daehan-yongoo]," *Theology and Praxis* 52, (2016): 729-739.

other obstacles such as language barriers and lack of specialized church leaders. Externally, the churches should deal with the overall lack of interest on the part of cross-border wives in terms of religious institutions. Therefore, while it could be said that the churches have been partially successful with their migrant missions, they nonetheless still have a long way to go if they want to retain their migrant members and hopefully, recruit more.

Conclusion

Cross-border marriage is no longer an unusual phenomenon in Korea or in other Asian countries such as Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore. In this study, we have discussed the multiple factors that trigger cross-border marriages in Korea, its process, and its negative implications on the women. We have also explored how the government and the Protestant church are dealing with the integration of the foreign wives using different methods. Lastly, we have explored the most common way the women come to a local church, its dual function, and the manifold challenges they face. Perhaps our next step would be to find out how the immigrant women live out their faith once they become Christian, not only in the religious setting but outside the sacred realm. For example, we should ask how their faith affects their relationship with their husband, in-laws and close friends, and what their conversion means to their families in the home country. Finally, since the women are from different countries, it would be necessary to do a comparison that examines the similarities and differences in the way the women understand religion and make sense of their faith, based on their country of origin.

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