

Transnational Marriage as a Solution to a Double Marriage Squeeze?

Hyunok Lee, Lindy Williams, and Florio Arguillas

Abstract

This research analyzes conditions surrounding a marriage squeeze in South Korea and one in Vietnam in the context of rapid social change and persistent gendered cultural norms. It then provides evidence of increasing transnational marriage as one solution to uneven access to marriage partners. While we consider numerical imbalances in both countries, we assess them in conjunction with socio-economic factors such as education, occupation and place of residence because these factors are potentially important in marriage markets in the East Asian contexts of interest in this research. We examine Korean census data from 2000 and 2005 and Vietnamese census data from 1999. We then discuss ethnographic data that reveal some of the important processes underlying the recent growth in transnational marriage migration streams from Vietnam to Korea.

Background on the Marriage Squeeze

The term “marriage squeeze” describes “the effects of an imbalance between the number of males and females in the prime marriage ages” (Schoen, 1983, p. 61), and is generally measured by examining the sex ratio (the number of males per 100 females) at these ages (Schoen, 1983, p. 62). Although early research into potential marriage squeezes often focused strictly on numerical differences between men and women, recent analyses have also considered compositional matters such as availability of suitable spouses by education level, and analysts have also examined geographically-based marriage markets. This approach enriches our understanding of a marriage squeeze in relation to the social, economic, and often political context in which it occurs. Recent studies on marriage in East and Southeast Asia suggest, for example, that a marriage squeeze exists in many contexts at both tails of the distribution on educational attainment; highly educated women and poorly educated men are those most likely to remain unmarried (Jones, 2004).

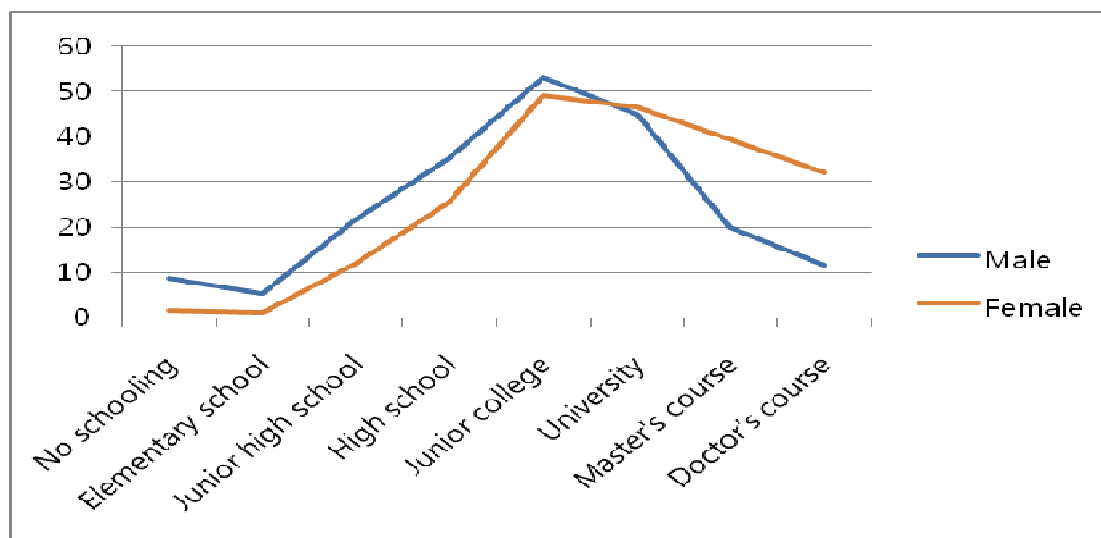


Figure 1. Percent never-married in Korea by education and gender (Census 2005, National Statistical Office).

As Jones (2004) has argued, a marriage squeeze is observed in Korea at both ends of education distribution; highly educated women and poorly educated men tend to remain unmarried. While acknowledging that there exists a marriage squeeze on highly educated (often urban-based) Korean women, however, this research focuses on the marriage squeeze for rural Korean men, their quest for marriage partners, and some solutions that have been offered by the state.

Data and Method

The data used in this analysis are from several sources, including already compiled secondary data sources from both countries, the three percent microdata sample of the 1999 Vietnam Census of Population and Housing, the 2000 and 2005 Korean censuses, and ethnographic interview data.

In our analyses of the census data sets we examine determinants of non-marriage in Korea and Vietnam. We restrict our analysis to those ages 40-49, since by this age marriage becomes unlikely. In particular, entry into marriage in order to have children generally occurs earlier in a person's life in both countries.

Census Data:

The dependent variable for both data sources is a dichotomous measure of marital status; we compare those who have ever been married and those who have not. The independent variables that we examine include socioeconomic (education, labor force participation) and geographical (urban-rural and region) variables, along with controls for sex of respondent in both sets of analyses. We also control for religion, occupation, and migration status.

Our education variables have five categories: (1) no schooling, (2) some primary completed, (3) primary (6 yrs) completed, (4) lower secondary general completed, and (5) at least secondary, general track, completed (including some/completed college). The occupation variables follow the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). There was no category for 'not in the labor force' in the original occupation variable. This category was created by recoding the value "not in universe" into "not in the labor force" if the person's employment status is either unemployed or inactive. For Vietnam, we excluded the three cases where the employment status was unknown or missing. For all other independent variables, those listed as "not in the universe" are excluded from the analysis.

For Vietnam, our migration measure compares those persons who lived in the same commune 5 years prior to the census with those who lived elsewhere, including abroad. With four out of every five Vietnamese having no religious affiliation, we also controlled for religion comparing those with no religion, with Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and other religions. We also included geographic variables in the model to examine urban, rural and regional variations in the marriage market and culture which may influence marriage behavior. In early analyses, we have also compared northeastern Vietnam with the seven other regions of the country.

We plan to make our analysis of the Korean census data as comparable as possible to what we have just described. If completely comparable data are not available, some changes may be made to the Vietnam analysis.

Ethnographic Data

The ethnographic component of this research is based on fieldwork that was conducted between October 2007 and July 2008 in South Korea and Vietnam. The fieldwork included participant observation among Vietnamese and Korean couples in one rural county in Korea. Much of this research was based at the site of a local community organization that provides support services to marriage migrants. In addition, the lead author on this paper conducted in-depth interviews with 14 Vietnamese marriage migrants and 11 of their husbands in Korea. Following up on the interviews in Korea, a field site was identified in Vietnam. Participant observation was conducted among Vietnamese and Korean couples during family visits to Vietnam. 22 parents of marriage migrants and 15 single women in a primary sending neighborhood were also interviewed. 3 brokers of commercial match making industry in Korea and Vietnam were interviewed and the match making process was observed.

Antecedents of the Korean Marriage Squeeze on Men Nationally

There has been substantial demographic change in Korea over the last five decades. While the fertility rate has decreased dramatically, the sex ratio at birth remains high due to a strong preference for sons (Park and Cho, 1995). The average sex ratio at birth from 1970 to 2005 was 109.89 (National Statistical Office, Trends in Vital Statistics 1970–2005), and as such, it belongs to high end of the natural sex ratio at birth (104–110) (Weeks, 2005, p. 327). Although fertility preferences have changed significantly and the norm of a small family is firmly established, son preference has remained strong in Korean society. As a consequence, the sex ratio at birth has been distorted by the use of technologies for the sex determination of fetuses and sex-selective abortion. Park and Cho (1995) contend that one of the social implications of the high sex ratio is the marriage squeeze on men, which they predicted early on.

What we know so far about the marriage squeeze on rural men in Korea

Agricultural census data from 2005 indicate that there is a severe marriage squeeze on men in the farming population. According to the census, there were 122,717 never-married males between 25 and 34 years of age in farming communities, compared to 55,972 never-married women. The sex ratio was 219 (Agriculture Census 2005, National Statistical Office). A severe sex ratio imbalance is observed throughout the age groups as well. This marriage squeeze in the farming population is rooted in structural changes that occurred during the process of industrialization, rural to urban migration, and the shrinking agricultural sector within the industrial structure. This phenomenon of marriage squeeze has become a national issue, gaining prominence in campaigns concerning the "rural bachelor's marriage problem" or "bride famine" during the 1980s. The problems facing the rural bachelors have been seen as linked to the sustainability of agriculture and rural areas more generally.

Table1. Never Married Farming Population by Gender (Agriculture Census 2005, National Statistical Office)

	Male	Female	Sex ratio	Sex ratio*
20~24	76,014	66,506	114	
25~29	75,605	43,288	175	114
30~34	47,112	12,684	371	109
35~39	24,035	3,987	603	189
40~44	12,529	1,649	760	314
45~49	6,082	848	717	369
50-54	1,977	456	434	233

* sex ratio between male and female of 5 year younger cohort¹.

Based on total numbers along, this table would suggest that the worst of the marriage squeeze on men may be over. We will say more about this in the paper.

The Case of Vietnam

The data in the following table place Vietnam in context with its neighbors. It is clear that non-marriage is much more prominent among women than among men.

Table 2 – Trends in Percentage Never-Married at ages 40-44 and 45-49

<i>Country</i>	Women					
	40-44			45-49		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
Philippines	7.0	7.1	7.1	6.7	6.1	6.2
Thailand	5.3	7.0	9.3	4.1	5.2	8.0
Indonesia	1.4	2.0	2.4	1.2	1.5	2.0
Vietnam	n.a.	6.0	8.3	n.a.	3.5	9.9
<i>Country</i>	Men					
	40-44			45-49		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
Philippines	6.1	5.9	7.5	4.7	4.5	5.7
Thailand	3.7	4.7	7.8	2.7	3.2	5.1
Indonesia	1.6	3.4	2.2	1.1	2.9	1.5
Vietnam	n.a.	1.9	1.9	n.a.	1.3	1.1

Data are derived from Jones, 2005

Until recently, in Vietnam, to “live a single life was unacceptable, except for a small number of Buddhist monks or some people who were considered marginal unfortunates” (Bich, 1999:111). Results of a recent qualitative data analysis based in Hanoi and

surrounding rural areas suggest further that non-marriage by choice remains quite anomalous; it is seen as a duty to both family and society and it is considered a centerpiece of life (Williams, 2009). Focus group participants recognized that there had been a shortage of potential partners for women brought about by the war years and that some had faced permanent celibacy as a result. But the pattern of non-marriage particularly among highly educated women was not as identifiable to focus group participants in Vietnam, as it was to those in comparison groups in the Philippines and Thailand.

The data in Table 3 summarize patterns of non-marriage by education for both women and men.

Table 3: Vietnam census data showing percent never-married ages 40-44, 1989 and 1999

	<i>1989</i>		<i>1999</i>		
<i>Level of Education</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
No schooling	7.5	8.3		8.8	11.4
Some primary completed	1.5	4.7		1.7	6.2
Primary (6 yrs.) completed	1.2	5.2		0.9	5.1
Lower secondary general completed	2.8	10.0		2.5	7.3
At least secondary, general track, completed	2.2	9.3		2.7	8.6
<i>Total %</i>	2.0	6.0		1.9	6.5
<i>Total N</i>	41,656	49,128		66,382	73,264

Conclusion

This paper will examine the demographic factors that are contributing to the growth in transnational marriages between Korea men and Vietnamese women. We will focus on the antecedents of the marriage squeeze, particularly in Korea, and recruitment of international spouses as the perceived solution.

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