

**Female Marriage Migration to Japan from Countries
in Economic Transition in Asia:
Cases of the Family of a Chinese Student and the Family of a Vietnamese Refugee**

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Abstract

This paper aims to consider whether marriage migrants exercising agency, and analyze how they are exercising. In order to analyze marriage migrants' agency, this paper attempt to examine in what way the agency of marriage migrants including the wives of Chinese high-skilled professionals and the wives of Vietnamese refugees is to be exercised.

Marriage migrants have long been recognized improperly, as they are considered as dependent. However, they are sure to decide whether they move or not by their own will. That's the reason why this paper focus on exercising agency, Agency, the authors mean by "an ability to make whatever impact on one's own lives by one's own will based upon one's understanding of the structure. It has become clear from this study that marriage migrants tried to control their lives with their own decision in the given situations. Therefore, this study has clearly shown that marriage migrants are certainly exercising their agency.

Key words: Marriage migrant, Women's agency, Chinese high-skilled professionals, Vietnamese refugees wife, Women's story

1. Introduction

This article aims to consider the agency of marriage migrants who have come to Japan from countries in economic transition in Asia such as China and Vietnam, focusing on the gender relation both in sending and receiving countries.

In the last 30 years, especially in the Asian region, the increase in the number of migrants who cross national boundaries to marry partners in other countries is

remarkable. And Japan is the pioneer in the region to receive so called "Asian Brides" from neighboring countries such as Taiwan, Province of China, Korea and the Philippines. Various agencies not only commercial match makers but also local governments have played a leading role to find women to be introduced to Japanese men as their future spouses. "Asian Brides" from Taiwan, Province of China or the Philippines in Japanese rural areas were seen in as early 1980s. Completely the same phenomena can be seen in Taiwan, Province of China, Hong Kong and Korea.

On the other hand, the global demands for high-skilled professionals have given a rise to an increase in the number of students or researchers on the move, and they often accompany their families.

However, the study on the marriage migration has not had much progress until very recently. This is mainly because the women's cross-border movement is often recognized as the motion of the dependents or family reunion. Especially women's movements through marriage have been explained by the social custom or the rules among the kinship in each society, and considered as having nothing to do with the modern market economy or political economy. Even feminist scholars who have studied on women's autonomy/agency, or women's economic roles, have long been indifferent to marriage migration due to their images as dependents.

Are marriage migrants truly simple dependents? Do they play no role at all? Are they really the person with no agency in any process of migration including their departure, their movement, and their resettlement? There are no doubt that the meaning of the marriage among the kinship in each society and the social norms on marriage play as significant factors deciding the movement of marriage migration. However, within such social structure, marriage migrants are not necessarily powerless. They can choose their own ways to create their own future.

In this article, we recognize the female marriage migrants as independents exercising agency. And this article attempts to reveal how the gender relations both in sending and receiving countries give influences on their exercising the agency.

We deal with the spouses of Chinese students in Japan, and the spouses of Vietnamese refugees as case studies. Both of their sending countries are communist countries, in which gender equality is considered as the principle of the nation state. The focus will also be on whether the gender structure in the communist countries makes any different impact on their migrant process.

2. Theoretical Framework for Analyzing the Agency of Marriage Migrants

Prior to considering each case, this section will focus on the theoretical background on the agency of marriage migrant.

(1) Marriage migration in migration studies

Migration studies have contributed to making the migration mechanism clear. Unfortunately, however, the existence of woman migrants has not been taken into consideration in migration studies. So some factors including women's motivation, the form of their migration, their progress of integration, and the gender differentiation in the migration process have not been well studied.

Since early 1980s, numerous studies to make the women's migration visible have started. However, to make women's migration visible means to recognize women as single laborers to move. As the marriage migration is recognized as the movement caused by family reasons, the agency and the economic roles of the marriage migrants have not been considered. Thus, various studies focusing on the women migration have long failed to encompass marriage migration in order to highlights their economic role as well as their independency. As a result, marriage migration has been explained in the anthropological view as hypergamy or in terms of the sex ratio, or argued as gender issues.

(2) The discussions on the agency of marriage migrants—Agency as analytical framework

It is desirable that marriage migration is analyzed with the framework/theory of migration studies as it is a form of migration. However, as mentioned, there have not been any established studies which recognize marriage migrants appropriately. Thus, this study will put emphasis on the concept of the agency of immigrants.

The concept of agency is often used as one of the central concepts in sociology or philosophy. There has been a long debate over whether the action of human beings is decided by the structure or the agency. In the feminist theory, the concept of agency has been often used since Judith Butler showed her effort to theorize it. Also, in the field of development studies, the term agency is often used by various international aid organizations to promote women's empowerment.

Then, what is agency really about? In this section, the definition by Yamane (2010) will be referred to. In her works, she used agency to show the practice of care workers. She defined the agency as "active practice of actors based upon their understanding of the structure" (Yamane, 2010: 31). The point she made shows that the actors of practice are not necessarily the victim of the structure; rather to some extent they make their

daily practice based on their interpretation of the social structure. If this perspective applied to analyze the marriage migrants, it can be said that they understand the social and economic structure which surround them, and make daily practice along their interpretation of such structure. In addition, the World Bank defines agency as “an individual’s (or group’s) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes” (World Bank, 2012:150).

Thus, the authors regard these two definitions as a key concept to analyzing women’s agency. The first point is that actors understand the social structure surrounding them and make their own interpretation of it. The second point is that based upon their interpretation, the actors normally make their own choices to control their own lives and to make them desirable. The authors argue that the importance for women to exercise their agency is to make whatever impact on their own lives by their own will based upon their understanding of the structure.

This article attempts to reveal to what extent the female marriage migrants understand the multi-layered structure which they face, and how they act to deal with the structure individually based on their understanding. Through analyzing this, their ways to exercising agency within the structure will be described. To support this argument, Chinese wives of high-skilled professionals as well as Vietnamese wives of Vietnamese refugees in Japan are to be subjected to analysis as case studies. Conducting interviews is adopted as method for analysis.

The reason for adopting the interview as a method for this study is based on Williams’s argument (2010). According to Williams (2010: 35), to take an agency approach is “for the purpose of understanding events and histories but also to validate the humanity of the vulnerable and the marginal”, and listening to the story is important as “telling of stories publicly and privately reflects the agency of individuals and groups as they negotiate structures.” Thus, as she argues, one of the main aims is to analyze marriage migrants’ agency by listening to their voice.

2. Career Development of Chinese Women in Japan- Cases from “Accompanying Women Migrants” of Chinese High-skilled Professionals in Japan.

(1) The downward mobility among the wives of Chinese high-skilled professionals who move crossing national boundaries

In China, the number of the people who move to other countries, especially to economically advanced countries, has sharply increased. This is because the regulation on going abroad has eased since 1980s. There was a boom in studying abroad in 1980s, and one in investments and transferring technology in 1990s. As a result a globalized recruitment system has developed in China.

There are increasing numbers of Chinese who migrate to North America, Asia, or Europe for employment or for training courses (Tsuboya 2008: 41-43). Many of Chinese women have also started to go to foreign countries including Japan. Within these flows of women, there are also increasing numbers of the wives of students or high-skilled professionals who have decided to migrate following their husbands' requests. For Chinese women who go and live abroad, international migration means good opportunities to improve their living standard or to pursue their career. Normally it is recognized as means leading to improvement of economic and social status. In China where the gender equality and women's employment are recognized as the social norm, going abroad is seen as one way for women to develop their career. Thus, women who migrate on their husbands' requests are often also highly educated.

They normally anticipate joining the labor market in the countries of destination. However, they often find it is very difficult. There are some studies which show that highly-educated Chinese women are forced to have a job in manufacturing or service industry as manual wage labor, or to be housewives (Tsuboya, 2004; Man, 2004; Cooke, 2007; Salaff and Greve 2007). This is often the case in Japan.

According to Tsuboya (2004: 71-72), Chinese women in Japan often have such barriers to employment as age, gender and being a foreigner. Therefore, many of them have experienced downward mobility in Japan. Women's downward mobility often reflects gender structure in the host society.

(2) Women's strategy to negotiate their career interruption

In this study, nine Chinese women were interviewed. Some are currently staying in Japan and the others have left Japan after staying some time in Japan. Interviews were done in one city in Kanto region where many of high-skilled professionals live. Participatory observation was also done in this city to see the lives of those interviewed. In order to analyze the factors which have made them leave Japan, interviews were also done in China with the women who had returned to China after staying in the city some time. It was attempted in the interviews to show their experiences in Japan and also the reasons for leaving Japan. The interviews were conducted in Chinese once or twice for one person.

Of the nine interviewees, four were born in the 1970s and five were born in the 1980s. Everyone has at least the college degree; three have completed the master's program. Most of them had a desire to have a job in Japan. However, due to lack of resources and information to enter the Japanese labor market such as Japanese language skills, many of the interviewees could not find any jobs suitable for their qualifications. And they had to be temporarily engaged in unskilled labor, and subsequently to be a housewife. Not only their career interruption but also the changes in the relationship with their husbands became a burden on them. As their social status became relatively

lower, the power relation between their husbands and them also changed.

Faced with these changes, most of the interviewees told that they had tried to either go home or to proceed to higher education in Japan. But as for higher education, their husbands rejected their desire for economic reasons. When they found it difficult for them to study or to have a job, they tried to ensure their independence in various ways. For this ends, they normally used social networks including 1) networks of Chinese who stay in Japan, 2) transnational networks which include their relatives in China, and 3) networks of the host society. There are some studies which show that migrant women obtain necessary information and emotional support through such networks. And the same situation was also observed through this interview.

Among the Chinese network in this city, Christian organizations which conduct their missionary works in Chinese had played an important role. Evangelical Church is one example. Their activities include not only propagating but also daily life support such as visiting Chinese migrants or providing scholarship. These activities done by Christians offered Chinese accompanying migrants an access to Japanese society as well as emotional support. To have a network with people itself has given significance as Miyagaki (2010:127) points out. For highly educated Chinese women staying in Japan, providing assistance for Chinese new comers itself means their contribution to making solidarity among Chinese women. Such acts seem to be deeply related with their agency.

In addition to the church, in this city, there are quite a few groups organized by highly educated Chinese families who are working or studying in this city. Dan (2005) points out that these organizations are offering and exchanging useful information through mutual help activities.

On the other hand, it is the transnational network involving wives' parents which affects the gender perspective of the couple. Most of the immigrant women who were interviewed accepted their parents visit for a short period during their staying in Japan. Women often used this opportunity on purpose to put pressure on their husbands so that the gender value in China should be realized in the family living in Japan. Ms B, for example, became a housewife in Japan. Her career was interrupted due to her accompanying her husband to Japan. Her father was very worried about his daughter's situation in Japan, and thus complained about it when he visited his daughter. The marital relationship between Ms B and her husband was tense, but after her father's visit the relationship had been improved. Her husband, who had been opposed to Ms B's participating in Japanese schools or her entrepreneurship, started to show his consideration towards her career development.

In addition, there are many activities to promote networks of the host society for migrants in this city. As a lot of students and researchers from abroad are living in this city, the municipality often takes initiative in implementing various events to facilitate multicultural exchanges. Through these events, many migrants find close relationship

with Japanese friends, and such close relationship is said to make a positive impact on the degree of satisfaction of immigrants. Taking part in networks of Japanese will afford immigrants incentives to master Japanese or to learn Japanese practice and culture. Such incentives can indirectly make positive impacts on improvement of their professional ability resulting in occupational achievement. On the other hand, making close relations with Japanese could give a rise to the risk of assimilating themselves into the Japanese values in which women's staying home and being a housewife is considered as norm. Highly-educated marriage migrants who aim to develop their careers are considered to make a network with Japanese selectively depending on how the network brings them resources and what it costs them.

There are a certain number of Chinese migrants who use such networks to pursue more satisfactory live. However, some Chinese women decide to be out of the status of "aliens" as well as the harsh gender structure in the Japanese society by returning to China or moving to other countries. For example, Ms F, who had thought coming to Japan would be a nice opportunity to improve her career prospects, described her experience in Japan as "unlucky". She decided to leave Japan with her husband for another European country when her husband's period for study in Japan came to an end.

"I was stuck with everything in Japan. Job hunting, studying Japanese, or proceeding to higher education. In Europe the wage is higher so I like to try my fortune. I'm asking to some of my friends about the job hunting in Europe and checking web sites for recruiting."

After staying in another European country for a year, Ms F and her husband found posts in a Chinese University and returned home.

Many of the interviewees completed higher education and had gained work experience in professional fields in China. At the departure, they recognized moving to Japan as a great opportunity for them to improve their career. However, as soon as arriving in Japan, they found it was difficult for them to continue their career. In facing such downward mobility, they tried to understand their situation and to make their lives in Japan better through various networks. They tried to have connections with the Japanese society strategically and to negotiate with the harsh social structure in Japan to keep themselves autonomous. Such negotiations they made can be regarded as their exercising agency.

3. Marriage Migrants from Vietnam and their Agency

(1) The background of the marriage migrants from Vietnam in Japan

In Japan, there are some Vietnamese women who came to Japan as the wives of Vietnamese refugee men. Refugees from Vietnam were the first refugees ever accepted by Japan starting in 1978. Recognition of the refugee status for Vietnamese ended in 2005. The estimated number of the Vietnamese refugees who have resettled in Japan is about 9,000. Especially since 1995, the number of the women who have come to Japan as family members of male Vietnamese refugees has increased. Although their husbands have refugee experiences, the women do not have such experiences. Thus, they are not refugees but should be considered as marriage migrants.

Vietnam has carried out the economic reform called “*Doi Moi*”, however, the vast majority of the women are still engaged in agriculture. Their income from agriculture is often unstable. Therefore, many of the women try to find wage labor or to be a micro-entrepreneur in the informal sector. In Vietnam, gender equality is guaranteed and often implemented as a national policy. However, such policies do not necessarily meet women’s benefits especially in the labor market. In addition, after “*Doi Moi*”, the tendency to return to their traditional values based on the Confucianism is rising, which is typically seen in the rural society. When young women in the rural area try to find wage labor, there are quite limited opportunities for them in their villages. So they have to move to urban areas or overseas.

One of the major characteristics among the Vietnamese marriage migrants in Japan is that they often have economic motivation to move. Another one is that their natal families are in Vietnam, and it is difficult for them to receive any social resources from their natal families at the very beginning of their marriage life in Japan. Marriage migrants will be surrounded by their husbands’ families, and their settlement processes in Japan vary depending on the way how their husbands’ families treat them. Vietnamese marriage migrants in Korea or Taiwan, Province of China where the Confucian value is the basement in the society also share similar experiences such as being abused by their mothers -in-law. This research focuses on how marriage migrants with motivation for economic improvement exercise agency after migration.

(2) Bargaining power of Vietnamese marriage migrants within their families

This study consists of interviews as well as participatory observation. Three marriage migrants were interviewed. The oldest interviewee was 48 years old, and the youngest one was 42. One of them, who had stayed in Japan for 17years, needed help of our interpreter only for certain difficult expressions. All of them had stayed in Japan more than 10 years.

In this interview, the main questions are as follows; the way of sharing domestic duties, managing their incomes and the relations between remittances and their employment situations. All interviewees had a job at the time of the interview, and also had spent some time with their husbands out of job and thus they had to be the breadwinner of their households.

The first question was about what Vietnamese men in general think of their wives having a job outside the house. All the interviewees answered that Vietnamese men often want their wives to do domestic work. The quotations from their interviews are as follows;

Interviewer (Hereafter I) "What do Vietnamese men think of their wives having a job?"

Thin "I think that it is difficult for wives to be respected when they are only at home. Men, of course, believe that they are the breadwinner and supporters of the family and want the other family members to respect them. But they respect persons who bring money home!"

I "But if you have a job outside, you sometimes come back home later than your husband. In such a case, does your husband cook dinner for you?"

Thin "No, all he can do is steaming rice! Even if I put some vegetables on the table to cook, he won't touch them and I have to cook. Once I asked him the reason why he doesn't cook, he answered he doesn't know how to cook!"

Interesting enough, Thin is mentioning that men will respect persons bringing money home. In the World Development Report (2012), there is a column quoting Vietnamese men's comment, which is completely the same as what Thin says.

Women's bargaining power in their households or with their husbands will become stronger when they have income from outside the home.

Women's having a job means not only simple income but also the social connection to obtain information. It is Tran who said these social connections can increase women's bargaining power in the household.

Tran "When we have a job outside the house, we can have a connection with the society. When we are only at home, it is very stressful, and we will lose social knowledge, and also lose opportunities to know anything in the world. As a result, we cannot do anything but obeying our husbands. It is better to have social connection to broaden our views. Definitely we should have information."

Asked the same question, although she admitted the importance of having information, she answered that the husband did not like his wife to be disobedient. Two of the interviewees showed their ideas that having a job is not only to contribute to family budget but also to improve their status in the household.

Then the next focus is on the way of using the money in the family. As mentioned,

they have been an only breadwinner in the household when their husbands were out of job. Tran answered that she would not buy anything before she consult with her husband. She told me that she lived very steadily. She was the only one among the three who still has a child in her minority. She saved most of her income as her child might go on to higher education. And she added that it was important for her to make her look obedient to her husband when she used her money.

All the interviewees definitely have some freedom to use their money, but they answer they manage on their income well to avoid useless quarrels with their husbands. They tried not to buy anything very expensive or what they want prior to their consultation with their husbands. This means that their freedom of using money is secured but they are not necessarily exercising this freedom in fear of damaging the relationship with their husbands.

Such way of thinking will be seen in their attitudes towards remittance to their natal families. All interviewees have experiences of remitting but not regularly. Tran answered that remittance is not the duty for Vietnamese living outside their home country. She said that children in Vietnam try to show their devotion to their parents giving them New Year's allowance. And remittance is same act as this.

Tran "(When asked if she has a right to remit freely), I can do it freely, but I won't do so every month. I will remit at very important occasions like a wedding party. Maybe if someone is in hospital, I will remit. In these occasions, my husband will not get angry with me sending money home. But I won't send money every month. My family now live in Japan, and my husband might sometime lose his job. I have a daughter, and she will need a lot in near future. So I save money instead of remitting. But on New Year's day, I send money to my parents every year. I do this in order to show my parents my devotion for them at the New Year but not because of my living abroad. I think remittance is not duty for the Vietnamese living abroad."

All marriage migrants who have answered my questions showed that they felt free to use their money in the household when they had a job. Only Tran showed her strict control on her spending to save money. But this might have relationship with her reason for migration. Most of the marriage migrants, as mentioned, have economic motivation for the movement. However, Tran explained her marriage had been decided by her parents without her own will. Thus, at the departure, she did not have any will to remit, nor to migrate and marry. Since her arrival in Japan, she has been surrounded by her in-laws and difficult for her to live without their understanding. It would be essential for her to gain respect from her husband by bringing money home rather than sending money home to reduce their family budget.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the authors examined in what way the agency of marriage migrants including the wives of Chinese high-skilled professionals and the wives of Vietnamese refugees is to be exercised. Although their social backgrounds or their human capitals are totally different from each other, both the Chinese marriage migrants and the Vietnamese marriage migrants had to face with structural barriers in Japan. They negotiated to make their lives in Japan desirable and to keep their autonomy in various ways. While Chinese women tried using the network to get information and to change the gender relations between husband and wife, Vietnamese women tried to have a job to keep social connection with the Japanese society, and they tried to have confidence over household budgeting for building a good marital relationship.

Marriage migrants are sure to be an “accompanying migrant” and in some sense, their movements are more like passive. However, it has become clear from this study that marriage migrants tried to control their lives with their own decision in the given situations. Therefore, this study has clearly shown that marriage migrants are certainly exercising their agency.

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