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**Hypotheses on the Impact of  
International Marriage Migration  
on International Relations**

## Introduction

A dramatic increase in international marriage rates has resulted from the steady lowering of barriers to trade and movement of people in the last few decades. East Asia has seen the largest jump, as demographic pressures<sup>1</sup> and social circumstances (such as educated women delaying marriage) have driven many of the region's more developed countries to import brides to fill the gender gap. The statistics tell the story: in Japan, for example, there has been a steady increase from about 5,000 cases of international marriage in 1970, to 10,000 in 1983, 20,000 in 1989, over 26,000 (or about 3.4% of all marriages) in 1993 and to 4.5% of all marriages by the year 2000 – a 700% increase in the last three decades (Piper 1997, 325 and Burgess 2004, 224). Taiwan has seen a similar, but more dramatic, trend – from 1998 to 2003, foreign brides rose from 15% to 32% of all marriages performed (Tsay 2005, 20).

Despite this rapid increase over the last two decades, the modern phenomenon of international marriage – the marriage between a first generation immigrant and a native citizen – has not been a common topic of study for scholars of international relations. Political scientists like to work in areas where there is a substantial amount of data and a well developed historical record; as international marriages have only occurred in significant numbers since the early 1990s, and since there are (as of yet) only a relatively limited number of countries driving the phenomenon, it is not an ideal area of study. Without an empirical record, it is quite difficult to engage in the sort of causal inference called for by King, Keohane, and Verba in their path-breaking book on methodology (1994).

International marriage has not gone completely unstudied by scholars of IR, however. In the formative years of the discipline, classical scholars such as Machiavelli and Hobbes were

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<sup>1</sup> The male to female sex ratios at birth are 1.09/1 in Taiwan, 1.11/1 in China, 1.06/1 in Japan, and 1.08/1 in South Korea, compared to 1.05/1 in the United States, France, and the Philippines (data from the CIA Factbook, accessed 4/29/2007)

very aware of and interested in the political repercussions of royal marriages. The move away from the monarchical tradition, however, led to a lessening of interest in the political repercussions of international marriage in recent years. This neglect is puzzling, however, as marriage is one of the most ancient forms of contractual relations, and it has historically been used to cement alliances and build trust between families and even states. Marriage also has traditionally had a strong economic component that is very noticeable in the dowry practices that continue to be a part of everyday life in many non-western societies. Given that law, economics, and culture have all been considered to have important impacts on international relations, it seems likely that international marriage, as it involves all of these concepts, would be a useful area of study.

Additionally, international marriage, by its nature, requires substantial migration of persons (usually female) from one state to another. Migrations in these numbers for any other reason would likely warrant attention and study. For instance, there are approximately as many Vietnamese brides in Taiwan (about  $\frac{1}{2}$  of 1% of the population) as there are Cubans in the United States (data from Tsay 2005 and Pew 2006), but the nature of these migrants (female and poor) has made them invisible to a field that often has blinders on when it comes to studying subjects that cannot be quantified in terms of physical power.

To address this gap in the research, this study will argue that international marriage, particularly when it occurs as a large scale phenomenon, is a potential source of both international friction and social change. International marriage is a unique example of international migration, and, as with any large scale movement of peoples, it has the potential to impact international relations both directly and indirectly through changes in state preferences. Although it seems unlikely that many countries will invade their neighbors specifically to claim

brides for themselves (as myths hold the founders of the ancient city-state of Rome did), there are multitudes of ways in which marriage can affect the international realm.

To tease out the argument, I will first survey the international relations literature to understand some of the ways in which international marriage might impact international relations. From this survey, I will develop a theoretically eclectic argument about the possibilities that may evolve, focusing specifically on the economic, political, and identity based impacts that international marriage can have on the countries in question. Next, I will examine some instances of the impact of international marriage in East Asia to try to situate, as much as possible, my hypothetical arguments into the real world of cases. Finally, I will conclude with a case study focusing on Taiwan, as it provides an especially interesting example of how international marriage can have large consequences for a state's national identity and security.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on International Marriage**

While mainstream theories of international relations have had little to say directly about what the impact of international marriage might be on international relations, we can infer quite a bit by examining the extent to which they privilege the ability of the domestic sphere to influence the international, as well as the importance that they give to state-to-state economic relations and the importance of identity. International marriage provides the basis for both strong formal and informal institutional connections between nations, and thus even the most hard-nosed realist analysis can find at least some motivation for studying its impact. This section will briefly survey some of the insights that these traditional theories of international relations can give us about the potential impact of international marriage.

*Realism and Neo-Realism*

Despite the importance of international (monarchical) marriage to the forefathers of traditional realist thought, modern iterations of realism and neo-realism have the least interest in the study of international marriage, as they largely focus on the state as a black box and give little credence to domestic factors. In both cases, the struggle for power and resources is important above all else in international relations (Morgenthau 1985, 4-7 and Waltz 1986, 117-122), and it is unlikely that such a tertiary issue as international marriage could be seen as having any substantive effect. This is especially true in the case of neo-realists, who focus almost exclusively on an abstract view of the balance of power between states.

Traditional realists do give some emphasis to the importance of national population levels (Morgenthau, for example, notes that “no country can remain or become a first-rate power which does not belong to the more populous nations of the earth” (1985, 143)), which suggests that marriage might have some importance due to its role in fostering reproduction. This interest in marriage is purely instrumental and biological, however – there is no discussion of how international marriage migration might change the makeup of the state. Other than as a possible site for alliance building (within the general framework of the existing balance of power), international marriage is of little interest to practitioners of these theoretical traditions. The dominance of the materialist / realist paradigm has meant that there has been little theoretical consideration of the impact that mass migration of such a sensitive sort can have on international relations.

*Marxist & World Systems Theories*

Another materialist approach that we must examine comes out of the Marxist tradition. These approaches focus on economic structural factors, and particularly examine the ways in

which asymmetries of economic power advantage the more developed nations. These theories explain the international bride phenomenon in purely economic terms – the structural inequality of the system drives women from less developed countries to sell themselves into marriage for the opportunity to increase their economic well-being. This approach is quite common in many discussions of the international marriage phenomenon, particularly those that focus on East Asian examples.<sup>2</sup> While there is a great deal of truth in this analysis, it does not explain why many receiving countries have reacted poorly to the imported brides, why so much of the debate over the brides is focused on issues of identity and human rights, rather than economics, and how in many cases the foreign brides have emerged as independent economic and political actors.

### *Neoliberal Institutionalism*

Regime theory / neo-liberal institutionalism shares a common focus on material concerns with both the realist and Marxist traditions, but the importance of legal and economic contact to this theory suggest some areas in which international marriage might have an effect on the international realm. Regime theorists argue that international organizations “perform the valuable functions of reducing the cost of legitimate transactions, while increasing the costs of illegitimate ones, and reducing uncertainty” (Keohane 1984, 107). Although there are no international organizations that deal strictly with international marriage, a strong argument can be made that international marriage has long existed as a semi-formal interstate regime. States typically recognize legally performed marriages that took place in another state, and wives or husbands of current citizens or legal residents are often given preferential treatment when immigrating.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wang and Chang (2002) and Davin (2007) strongly argue this position, but it is a subtext of many other studies, such as Tsay (2005), Ko and Chang (2005), and Lu (2005).

<sup>3</sup> A quick perusal of governmental websites shows that this is customary for most states.

These informal structures are increasingly being formalized into interstate agreements, and this formalization has often provoked contestation. This is particularly evident in the case of the EU, where questions over the rights of married partners to receive social welfare benefits when they migrate internally has been heavily debated (Ackers 1996). The inclusion of international marriage laws into these formal institutions suggests that states see international marriage as having potentially significant economic consequences, and thus are both interested in the issue and willing to devote political will and resources towards managing it. If the theoretical postulates of regime theory hold, we should expect that the informal and formal structures developed around marriage will serve as sites of both conflict and cooperation between states.

### *Liberal Theory*

While regime theory can give us some insights as to how states regulate the international marriage trade, it has difficulty in stepping back to analyze the prior conditions which explain why states might be interested in international marriage in the first place. Regime theorists analyze international agreements based on motivations at the state level, but the international marriage trade is driven by the individual level desires of men to have brides and the brides' desires to better their lives through immigration. Of all the major theories of international relations, traditional liberal theory, with its emphasis on the importance of the domestic, gives us the strongest tools for analyzing the internal dynamics behind the international marriage phenomenon.

Liberal theory, by "taking preferences seriously", gives us some insight as to why states would be interested in the international marriage phenomenon (Moravcsik 1997). Prospective husbands, immigrant brides, and the families those brides leave at home are all potentially

powerful societal actors in both the sending and receiving countries. By focusing on and empowering the individual, liberal theorists suggests that members of these groups will serve as increasingly important voting blocs or pressure groups in the countries in question, and could in time come to change their country's preferences through individual or collective action. Still, liberal theory may focus too much on the voting power and material strength of specific interest groups, while ignoring the more deep seated changes in identity that international marriage can foster.

### *Constructivism*

Liberal theory's emphasis on the need to understand preferences is shared by constructivists – both theories recognize the ways in which large groups of migrants can challenge settled national identities. Constructivism, however, adds another layer by considering the impact of international norms and shared understandings (Wendt 1999, 1). Although some constructivist approaches focus largely on state level understandings, one of the most cited articles on the developments of international norms argues that they can originate from actors at any level of analysis (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

This emphasis on the normative environment leads constructivists to look at the phenomenon from two angles. The first focuses on how international norms have shaped the ways in which states find it acceptable to react to international marriage migration, as well as analyze how various actors (brides, husbands, families, etc.) serve as norm entrepreneurs or otherwise act as social vectors. The second approach looks at the ways in which the norms of the international system have changed in ways that make previously “domestic” issues (such as marriage), which were protected by state sovereignty norms, more open to outside scrutiny and interference. This approach adds much more depth to our analysis, but constructivist theories

still tend to ignore the role of gender, and the specific roles that women are often asked (or forced) to play in forming and perpetuating norms and identities.

### **Forming a Theory on International Marriage**

While traditional theories of international relations all have at least something to say about international marriage, none can tell the complete story of the phenomenon. To develop a strong argument about how international marriage can affect interstate relations, one must examine all levels of analysis – system, state, and individual. To this purpose, in this paper I will bring in arguments from feminist theory, sociology, and studies of nationalism and identity. I will generally argue from a constructivist position, but, while I strongly value the power of ideas, I will also argue that material and economic motivations go a long way towards explaining the international marriage phenomenon. These economic motivations, however, are typically bound by their cultural context, and their impact on foreign relations cannot be understood without stepping back to see how economic concerns intertwine with cultural and identity based issues.

International marriage's impact develops out of its ties with economic modernization, development, gender relations, and identity. In developing societies, traditional gender roles shift away from strongly patriarchic structures. Women gain more freedom to work outside of the home and have independent lives that are not justified strictly through their relationship with men. This new freedom, however, makes them less attractive marriage partners for the men of their society (who still hold a large portion of societal resources due to residual patriarchal structures).<sup>4</sup> These men exercise their economic and political clout to import foreign brides from less developed states which are thought to have women more in tune with traditional values.

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<sup>4</sup> Here I draw upon the unpublished work of Leonard Schoppa, presented at the University of Delaware Colloquium on Global Governance Speaker Series. Schoppa has drawn upon Albert Hirschman's exit, voice and loyalty framework to explain the choice of women in industrialized, yet traditionalist societies to "exit" the system and refuse to breed, thus impacting the system in the only way in which they are able.

One scholar of international marriage, for example, notes that men seeking foreign brides typically favorably contrast their “commitment to marriage” to that of available native brides, who are viewed as unattractive partners due to their more liberal views on gender roles and relations (Constable 2003, 168). Foreign brides, then, are brought in to continue traditional gender roles, and also to assist in biological reproduction (as falling reproductive rates seem to be a typical characteristic of developed societies).

These purposes for international marriage are largely uncontested, and in and of themselves should have little impact on international relations. A simple study of just these instrumental factors, however, does not illuminate the impact these brides have once they arrive in the receiving nation. Once in their new country, foreign brides cannot be expected to passively carry out their assigned roles. As discussed above, most theories of international relations expect such large scale migration to have at least some impact— it has clear repercussions in the economic, political, and social realm. To understand how these factors matter, however, we must bring in a discussion of gender roles, something that international relations scholars generally ignore.

Feminist scholars have done substantial work on the ways in which women have impacted the international sphere, and above all they have argued that we must move “beyond knowledge frameworks that construct international theory without attention to gender and...search deeper to find ways in which gender hierarchies serve to reinforce socially constructed institutions and practices” (Tickner 1997, 621). These concerns clearly resonate in the issue of international marriage, an area that has often been (and continues to be) a site for the exploitation of women. Feminist insights into the enabling power of women to legitimize and

support social orders (Murphy 2005, 519) give the context to any study that has women at its center.

This recognition of the importance of women flips our view of international marriage on its side. Rather than looking at international brides as passively fulfilling the desires of their male counterparts, we instead see them as exercising potential power in two ways. First, the brides often have active economic and political agency. As they are being imported to help continue an economic system that relies on women as housewives and domestic workers, by refusing to exist merely as cogs within the traditional system they have the ability to impact the very economic and political structures that they were brought in to sustain. Second, the brides are being imported to assist in the continuation of traditional national identities. Again, by acting as anything more than the passive biological vessels for the continuation of national culture, the brides can become active agents for change in culture and identity.

Although immigrant brides clearly have the capability to change economic and political structures, the importance of their impact on national identity requires more exploration. Immigrant brides can affect national identity in three main ways. First, they serve as sites for biological reproduction. If native women are unwilling to marry and reproduce, thus providing new members of the nation, then immigrant brides can be brought in to serve that purpose, thus allowing for the continuation of the identity. Second, in their role as primary caregivers, immigrant brides can shape the identities of their children, potentially introducing new elements into their children's understanding of their own identity. Finally, the identity of the children of immigrant brides will be molded by how society perceives them; this perception, in turn, will be shaped by their mother's interactions with society, in that these interactions will decide how society writ large views the immigrant bride population.

Before exploring these ways in which brides can shape national identity, we must define it. Benedict Anderson provides what is perhaps the most broad, yet succinct definition of a nation. He argues that a nation “is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1991 [1983], 6). The nation is imagined – it does not exist as an empirical, timeless entity, but rather instead as a shared understanding of what the nation is, held in common by its members. It is limited and sovereign – there are those who are in the nation and those who are out, and those who are out have no legitimate authority over those who are in. “Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991 [1983], 7). Key to this definition is an emphasis on shared language, mass communication, and the development of national myths to help bind together these intellectual constructs which we call nations, and especially to foster that sense of comradeship which makes them so powerful.

These national identities require biological continuation. States have long recognized the importance that women as mothers play in carrying on national traditions, and their necessary role in biological reproduction. Examples include the American ideal of Republican Motherhood in the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as efforts by eugenics groups to encourage “proper” American men and women to reproduce in the early twentieth century. This movement saw its pinnacle in the Nazi obsession with encouraging certain ideal German mothers to bear children to maintain racial purity, but more recent examples also abound, including the efforts made by the Serbian state to encourage Serbian women to act as “mothers of the nation” in reproducing their national identity, both biologically and socially (Bracewell 1996). Other studies have shown how national identity is reliant on traditional family structures; Anne

McClintock, for example, argues that “family offers a ‘natural’ figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative organic *unity* of interests” (1993, 64). This tie of identity to family structure places women as “the atavistic and authentic ‘body’ of national tradition... embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity” (66).

This conflation of biological and social continuation of national identity is often seen because the mother – the site of biological reproduction is also typically the primary caregiver and the first to socialize the new child into his or her national identity. The importance of primary caregivers has long been recognized by states looking to shape national identity. For example, in the Greek government’s campaign to create a Greek national identity in Slavic-speaking natives of the Florina region following the area’s incorporation into Greece in 1913, the state focused on women’s ability to shape national identity because of their roll as primary care givers and teachers of “norms, roles, and expectations” (Karakasidou 1996, 103). The importance of this insight is born out in anthropological studies of mixed-marriages in the United States. A 1989 study found that the ethnic identity of mixed-marriage part-Japanese and part-Hispanic children found that continuation of the minority identity depended in large part on how strongly the children were socialized into their particular group culture (Stephan & Stephan 1989, 516). Immigrant brides thus have an ambiguous role in terms of cultural continuity. They have the ability to embrace either their native or adopted national identities when socializing their own children, and thus in turn have a powerful ability to shape the identity of the new generation that they have often been imported to bear.

In addition to their role as caregivers, immigrant brides can affect the identity of their children through their own interactions with the receiving society. Children develop their identity through their interaction with their peers and the ways in which they are treated by

society writ large. Studies of mixed race marriages between Chinese expatriates and Caucasians living in the United States, although not an exact analog to international marriage, are suggestive of the ways in which societal perceptions of immigrant brides might impact their children's identities. Sociologist Nikki Khanna, who has done substantial work in analyzing the patterns of international marriage in Asian-Americans, focuses on this subject in the context of racial identity; however, her analysis is applicable to the case of national identity as well. Indeed, many of the factors which she notes as important to racial identity are also strongly implicated in national identity. As Khanna explains, "it [racial identity] gives people a sense of identity with one group or another, a feeling of community and belonging, and a sense of self" (2004, 115).

Khanna draws upon the social psychological concept of "reflected appraisals" to explain identity formation in mixed-race Asian-Americans. This concept argues that identities are formed when "individuals first imagine how they appear to others. Second, they imagine others' judgment of that appearance. Finally, they develop some sort of self-feeling or self-concept from this process. In short, individuals come to see themselves as they *perceive* significant others to see them" (2004, 117). Mixed race Asian-Americans who believe that others view them as Asian are more likely to identify as Asian, while those who believe the inverse are more likely to identify with their other race. In addition, mixed-race children who receive more exposure to the Asian parent's culture and traditions are more likely to identify as Asian, and vice-versa. This research, when generalized to the study of national identity, tells us that in cases of international marriage we can expect that national identity will be both contested and malleable. The identity that children of immigrant brides will form depends on two factors – the direction of their formative cultural exposure, and the ways in which they internalize the judgment of society writ large on their ability to conform to a given identity.

We can see, then, that a host society which is hostile to its immigrant brides could very easily drive the children of immigrant brides to create new identity groupings based on their cultural and ethnic identities, rather than integrate with their birth society. This insight ties us back to the ability of brides to act as independent economic, political, and cultural actors. The more agency the brides exhibit in any of these areas (acting in contradiction to the reasons which they were brought into the country), the more we may expect society to view the brides as outside of the national community. The more the brides are distanced from the nation, the more likely they will be forced to develop their own independent identities, and the less likely their offspring will be to take on the national identity of their fathers. The impact of international marriage, then, hinges on the ability of the receiving society to consider the wishes of the imported brides to better their own lives, while also integrating them into the hegemonic national culture and identity. Failure to do so – creating a minority identity group of immigrant brides – could lead to tensions both within the nation and between the receiving nation and the sending states where its brides originated from.

### **Hypotheses on International Marriage**

To understand how these theoretical understandings of international marriage can have a concrete impact on the real world, this section will examine how the phenomenon of international marriage has developed in and impacted East Asia over the last two decades. International marriage is not just limited to a few countries in the region. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have all received attention for their demand for brides in recent years, while the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and mainland China have sent the majority of brides abroad. The rapid modernization of the bride importing societies created imbalanced expectations of gender roles in each case, leading to delayed marriage and lower birth rates,

pushing the desire to import more traditional brides. To discuss the details of this trade, we will first look at some real world examples of the economic impact of international marriage, and then follow up with an examination of the social and cultural / identity implications.

### *International Marriage and Economics*

Looking at international marriage as an economic phenomenon provides valuable insights about the ways in which a subject that is as culturally bound as marriage can nonetheless have a very real material impact. In the East Asian context, international marriage has typically had two interrelated economic consequences. It has served as a site for the trade in and commodification of women and it has served as a means for guaranteeing household labor and production.

There is clear evidence that the international marriage trade has done much to promote the commodification of brides. Substantial scholarly work has been done to explain the process of commodification, including Gates (1989) and Lu (2005). Wang and Chang offer the most detailed study of how the process occurs. They argue that the well developed networks of international marriage brokers have led to a point where “the process of international marriage...is gradually being transformed to enhance profits to various intermediaries” (2002, 95). This commodification is leading to women being seen as products to be traded. In the year 2000 alone, the marriage business in Taiwan was worth approximately \$46 million US dollars (Wang and Chang 2002, 97). This sort of commodification of women encourages the receiving countries to see foreign brides in economic terms, which leads to their dehumanization and ill treatment. The commodification of these women makes it much more difficult for them to assimilate into their host societies, and thus breeds resentment in both the immigrant bride and host communities. Since immigrant brides have an indeterminate position – they both represent their sending country to their host country (through their actions) and they represent their

receiving country to their sending country (through the way they are treated), the ill treatment that commodification encourages will create poor impressions on both sides. From this we can derive our first hypothesis:

*H1: In situations where international marriage is industrialized and brides are viewed as a commodity, the receiving country will view the brides as less than human, and by extension will view the sending country in more negative terms, increasing the likelihood of abuse and potential inter-state tensions. The sending country, upon seeing the poor treatment of its migrant brides, will also develop negative feelings towards the receiving country.*

### *Brides as Economic and Political Agents*

This economic reading of the international marriage phenomenon largely removes agency from the foreign brides involved, however. Although the fact of commodification is very real, most (although not all) international marriages are voluntary; the women involved typically choose to put themselves on the market because it is the best of the options which they find available to themselves. Once in their new country, brides often join the workforce and contribute to the local economy. Viewing brides as agents allows us to look at a wide variety of areas in which brides may intentionally impact economic relations both within their new host country, as well as at home.

One of the most common ways in which foreign brides exercise economic agency is through the sending of remittances back to their home country. These brides are not passive consumers assimilating into their new society; rather they are leveraging their new economic status to further their own interests in helping family members back home. This issue has become especially acute for one of the largest “sending” countries in East Asia – the Philippines – a situation which Cynthia Enloe drew attention to in her book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (1989). By 2005, the Philippines was the third largest receiver of international remittances in absolute terms, behind only India and Mexico, and as a percentage of the economy they account

for almost 9% of the Philippines GDP (Burgess & Haksar 2005, 4). This reliance on foreign income has led the Philippines to be very active in working to promote the migration of its citizens abroad and to be concerned about their wellbeing once abroad (Piper 1997, 333). This leads to our second hypothesis:

*H2: Countries sending brides abroad may become economically reliant on their remittances, and thus feel compelled to protect their rights abroad to continue the flow of money back to home, leading to tensions between the sending and receiving countries.*

The large communities of foreign brides in countries such as Japan and Taiwan have also led to an increasing level of participation in the official economy by foreign brides. For example, in Ko and Chang's study of Vietnamese brides in Taiwan, they found that by their eighth year of residence, 44% of Vietnamese brides were employed full time and another 18% were employed part time (2005, 15). This sort of participation has led to independent action and organization by groups of brides in support of their economic rights. By exercising this independent agency, these migratory brides have the ability to directly facilitate social change. This ability suggests another hypothesis:

*H3: Brides, as independent economic actors, will attempt to better their lot by pursuing paths that may not fit with the ones envisioned by the governments encouraging their migration. This may lead them to organize to promote changes in labor conditions or job opportunities in ways that may directly affect policy outcomes.*

#### *Immigrant Brides as Maintainers of Traditional Systems*

Foreign brides are imported by their prospective husbands to maintain traditional social and cultural roles that their domestic counterparts are seen as being unable or unwilling to fulfill. In Japan, farmers have brought in immigrant brides to allow them to continue their traditional farming lifestyle (Piper 2003, 461), and eldest sons often pursue immigrants brides because they are seen as being more willing to take on elder-care roles mandated by cultural tradition (Piper

1997, 238). Foreign brides are also valued because they are considered to be more traditional and compliant than domestic women – features attractive to men who are intimidated by the new gender power structures promoted by Westernized women (Piper 1997, 328). They are also viewed as being more likely to reproduce, thus serving as a biological site for the continuation of national and cultural identity. For example, a Taiwanese scholar recently wrote:

Why would an unskilled, low-income, middle-aged man think of getting married, especially to someone he has never met, from a strange country he has never been to? The crude truth stems from traditional family ideology. Having children to continue the family line is one of the fundamental values of Chinese culture...Notions that “having no heir is the greatest offense against familial piety”, and that “continuing the family line is a mandatory responsibility” seem axiomatic for the husbands who go abroad for a foreign bride (Sheu 2007, 188)

While we may dispute that this is the *entire* reason Asian men wish to marry traditional brides, it is clearly a very important factor. Since these brides are viewed as having such an important role in cultural continuation, if they are perceived as subverting that role it may lead to tension or resentment towards the sending country.

*H4: Since the family is a primary site for cultural continuity, and the importation of foreign brides is largely being carried out by conservative men, foreign brides will be expected to assimilate into the dominant national culture and biologically reproduce. If they do not live up to these expectations, they will be treated poorly. This poor treatment may cause domestic or international tension.*

#### *Immigrant Brides as Outliers*

To further understand why the expectation that foreign brides will serve to continue traditional culture will likely cause tension, we must look at the motivations of the brides themselves in their immigration. In the case of Taiwan, for example, foreign brides from the mainland often come seeking a new life and a leg up in the world; a popular news account quotes one mainland wife as claiming, “When I came to Taiwan, I supported Chen Shui-bian...I thought one difference in being here is having a democratic government, something we don't have back

home.” (*Inter Press Service*, 2004). Prospective Philippina brides often share similar motivations for leaving their country – one notes, for example, that:

“I came here because the salary is better than in the Philippines. I have graduated from college...I majored in accounting. I worked then in a company for one year, but it did not lead to anything. No good salary...friends of mine told me: Why don't you go to Japan for some time? So, I came here and I met my husband.” (Piper 1997, 332).

Such a bride – college educated and upwardly mobile – does not fit the traditional picture of a bare vessel for cultural and biological reproduction.

These accounts suggest that while receiving societies often expect foreign brides to carry out traditional roles, in reality these brides can serve as agents for social change. In a detailed study of the impact of marriage migration on Japanese society scholar Chris Burgess has noted that immigrant brides are rarely content to simply carry out their assigned roles. “Because the women had a standard of comparison and clear ideals – perhaps brought into starker relief through marriage to a ‘country’ man in a conservative rural area – they felt the low status of their ‘new’ roles acutely” (2004, 234). These women would not be passive, but rather active agents in promoting economic, social, and political change – in fact, they may well have more in common with the native women they are imported to replace than the men who desire to marry them.

*H5: If the volume of foreign brides should become large enough, their status as cultural gatekeeper may lead to changes in national identity towards a more cosmopolitan viewpoint.*

If immigrant brides are often outliers, unwilling to maintain traditional economic systems, then we should expect that there will often be a substantial backlash against immigrant brides in the receiving nation. There are numerous examples of this. In Japan, for example, “public discourse has dealt almost exclusively with their presence in terms of problems experienced as hostesses, prostitutes, or [brides of farmers]. They are hardly ever portrayed as

the ordinary wives of Japanese citizens...” (Piper 1997, 322). Our examinations of sociological perspectives on identity suggest that in such cases immigrant brides and their children will begin to perceive themselves as a separate identity group rather than integrating with the main national identity.

*H6: If foreign brides exercise political or economic agency or are perceived as maintaining a strong connection with their original national identity, this may lead to a hostility towards the brides and their children that will force them to form independent identity groupings.*

### **Taiwan Case Study**

To understand the economic, social, and political impacts of bride importation, I will look more closely at the case of Taiwan to help illustrate the mechanisms through which international marriage impacts national identity and international relations. Taiwan is an ideal example for this case study because of the importance the immigrant bride issue and national identity have assumed in domestic politics. Because of this added attention, we can more easily see the mechanisms that propel Taiwanese men to marry foreign brides, motivate the formation of national identity in the individual, and impact the ways in which identities formed through international marriage challenge and are contested by pre-existing Taiwanese national identities.

Taiwan provides an especially good case for examining the impact of immigrant brides on identity because of its unique situation as legal claimant to the entirety of Chinese territory, while in fact ruling only one province. This situation has led to the creation of at least four distinct types of national identity which are exhibited on Taiwan. We can see evidence of pan-Chinese nationalism, Taiwanese nationalism, Republic of China (ROC) nationalism, and People’s Republic of China (PRC) nationalism.<sup>5</sup> While these categories are somewhat arbitrary, and perhaps controversial (for example, by my definition not all proponents of PRC nationalism would

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<sup>5</sup> One could also argue that there is an “indigenous Taiwanese nationalism” (coming from the small minority of Polynesian aborigines that still live on the island) and perhaps a pan-Asian nationalism. I find these questionable; however, as while they may satisfy some parts of my definition of nationalism, neither makes a strong claim for sovereignty, which I feel is the key way in which national identity can be distinguished from other identity groupings.

necessarily support the PRC government), I feel that these categories provide the most useful rubric for discussing the subject. I use Pan-Chinese nationalism to refer to the national identity which binds together peoples of Chinese descent, whether living in mainland China, Taiwan, or as a member of the Southeast Asian diaspora community.<sup>6</sup> Taiwanese nationalism is exhibited by those (mainly of the pre-1949 descendant population) who aspire to Taiwanese independence. I define ROC nationalists as those who desire a reunification with China, but only once China democratizes and reaches Taiwan's level of development. Finally, PRC nationalists are defined as both mainland nationalists as well as citizens of Taiwan who desire reunification with China on lesser terms (for example, the "one country, two systems" solution). Taiwanese nationalism is thus at a cross-roads – with political independence, it may become fully internalized, but until then it remains a tenuous and contested (but nonetheless very powerful) intersubjective understanding.

*Why Foreign Brides? or, Where are the Taiwanese Women?*

These identities have become a source of contestation in large part because Taiwan has, along with many other developed nations in East Asia, experienced a declining birthrate over the past several decades (currently Taiwanese women bear roughly 1.3 children on average, which is well below the replacement rate) (Tsay 2005, 12). The reluctance of Taiwanese women to marry and reproduce points us to the possible conclusion that Taiwanese national identity is contested by Taiwanese women. Unable to change traditional conceptions of national identity (which emphasize women's roles as domestic workers and housewives) from within, Taiwanese women have decided to exit the system by refusing to marry and reproduce the national identity which they choose to reject. Popular accounts back up this interpretation; a 2003 *Asian Times* article on the subject notes that:

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<sup>6</sup> While some may question this grouping, as it is not strictly sovereign, one can argue that pan-Chinese nationalists *aspire* to be a sovereign community. One can see evidence of this in the call for the PRC and Taiwan to protect Chinese diaspora communities from persecution during the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

[Taiwanese women are increasingly unwilling] to jeopardize this freedom through marriage, especially in a country where the legal resolution of marriage problems usually favor the husband. Long gone is the idea of marriage in one's early 20s; Taiwanese women - who tend, in any case, to be better educated than their male counterparts - are increasingly moving into their 30s with little interest in tying the knot.

From this we can see that Taiwanese women have, through their reproductive choices, become an important arbiter in how Taiwanese identities will be constructed. Unable to pursue their favored interpretation of Taiwanese identity (which, no matter the flavor, appears to include more Western conceptions of women's rights and gender roles), they have instead chosen to exit the system.

This choice to exit, however, has had unintended consequences on the question of Taiwanese national identity as a whole. By choosing to exit from the system, Taiwanese women have chosen to disclaim further influence on identity formation. Their choice has led to more short term individual freedom (by allowing them to avoid the traditional male dominated household and gender roles), but the long term impact appears to be more ambivalent. By choosing not to marry and reproduce, Taiwanese women have lost the ability to impact their children's early development (through cultural exposure) and shape these children's identities towards their desired preference. By exiting the system they have surrendered this right to immigrant brides, who, we can expect, will certainly raise their children differently than a native Taiwanese mother would have. Thus we can see one potential impact of the increasing use of foreign brides in Taiwanese reproduction.

Of course, the role of parental child rearing in identity formation, while important, is not the only way in which identity is formed. The impact of society writ large is also quite important – indeed, as identity is a social construction the importance of societal factors cannot be understated. To better tease out the details, however, I have chosen to analyze each factor separately, starting with an analysis of the impact of parenting and then following with an examination of the broader

social context. I will begin with a discussion of the ways in which marriage arrangements directly impact the primary socialization of Taiwanese children (without discussing the larger social-psychological implications), and then follow this analysis up with a discussion of the ways in which Taiwanese societal reactions to foreign brides have additionally impacted national identity formation.

### *Taiwanese Families & National Identity*

Although Taiwanese nationalists fear that the international marriage phenomenon will dilute Taiwanese identity and lead to a strengthening of those identities which support reunification with the mainland, the impact of international marriage on the portion of national identity formation which comes from child rearing practices is not completely clear. An analysis of all the possible combinations of immigrant brides and Taiwanese husbands will show that the answer is not cut and dry, and depends on both the origin of the foreign bride in question and her motivation for coming to Taiwan.

Foreign brides that come to Taiwan from the mainland seeking a new life and a leg up in the world will be sympathetic to Taiwanese (or at least ROC) nationalism and unlikely to promote PRC nationalism to their children. Since these brides are presumably coming to escape the PRC system, they are unlikely to teach their children to glorify it. Of course, the case of mainland wives who come to Taiwan for more traditional reasons (i.e. simply to marry a successful man and raise a family within the traditional Chinese family structure, with little care for politics) offers the counter result. In either case, these mainland wives will pass on stories of their life on the mainland, mainland cultural traditions, and other ties which promote identity-connections between their children and the mainland. Thus, although they may not directly promote PRC nationalism, they

will create sympathetic conditions for it in their children. In any case, they will be unlikely to promote a strongly Taiwanese nationalism.

We can see, then, that the importation of mainland Chinese brides has a potentially mixed impact on the question of Taiwanese nationalism, but that as a whole the trend of importing brides from the mainland (at least in its current form) is likely to produce closer ties to the mainland and thus increase support for ROC and PRC nationalism, while decreasing support for a pro-independence Taiwanese nationalism. In any case, it will also almost certainly increase support for pan-Chinese nationalism, and thus sympathies on Taiwan for the Chinese diaspora community as a whole.

While the impact of mainland brides on Taiwanese nationalism is relatively easy to deduce, the question becomes much more complicated when analyzing the impact of Southeast Asian brides. The immigrant bride in this category brings with her a different set of cultural traditions, and also faces a different set of challenges in integrating into Taiwanese society. Coming from neither Taiwan nor the mainland, these brides, when raising their children, almost certainly will not directly promote PRC nationalism (as they have absolutely no connection with mainland China). As with the case of the mainland Chinese wives, there is some evidence to suggest that some Southeast Asian immigrant brides come to Taiwan to pursue the political freedom and economic mobility offered there, and thus desire to integrate into Taiwanese society (and hence would likely be proponents of Taiwanese nationalism). As one Cambodian bride claimed, “Most people don’t realize that new immigrant women, who preferred to be referred to as such instead of as ‘foreign brides,’ are not here for the money.<sup>7</sup> This is our home. This is where we want to be” (*Central News Agency – Taiwan* 2006). One may deduce, then, that these brides would likely promote

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<sup>7</sup> Here she is refuting the direct claim that immigrant brides are “gold diggers” only interested in their husbands’ money, rather than addressing overall opportunities for economic mobility.

Taiwanese nationalism; when examined as a whole, however, it is not clear that this is the result we should expect from this category of brides.

To understand why this is so, we must look at a group that we have not yet examined, a group that is equally important in identity formation – the husbands of immigrant brides. To determine how immigrant brides will affect national identity formation, we must also examine the national identities of the male sponsors of these immigrant brides. Popular press accounts suggest that there are two main groups which have drawn upon immigrant women for brides: former KMT soldiers, who immigrated to Taiwan as bachelors and were initially barred by law from marrying into the native Taiwanese population, and less educated lower class workers who are well enough off to import a bride, but not so well off as to be an attractive mate for a cosmopolitan Taiwanese woman. The preferred national identity of the first group is clear – former KMT soldiers are most likely to support reunification with the mainland, and thus are likely to be supporters of either ROC or PRC nationalism. Indeed, Dr. Antonia Chao notes that “It was these old KMT guards who pleaded fervently with the parliament in 1987, after martial law was lifted, to be given the right to go back to mainland China and visit their relatives” (Quoted in *Inter Press Service* 2004). Thus we can expect a reunificatory nationalism to be promoted in families formed by immigrant brides and these old KMT soldiers.

This group, however, is slowly dying off – the youngest of these former soldiers are in their late sixties and early seventies. The larger and potentially more important group is the lesser educated underclass that is at the forefront of bride-importation. A press report states that about half the men marrying Vietnamese brides are between the ages of 30 and 40 years old, with another quarter coming from the 41 to 50 year old age bracket. This group is very under-educated; this same press report claims that “Nearly 67 percent of the Taiwan men marrying Vietnamese

women have a junior high school level of education, and about 20 percent have a senior high school education” (*Central News Agency – Taiwan* 2005). Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine just what nationalism this group would promote, as it cuts across identity lines and includes both native Taiwanese males as well as mainland descendants.

In either case, however, we can expect that these husbands are supporters of the national identity to which they subscribe. Cosmopolitanism – the rejection of national identity – is generally viewed as an elite phenomenon, and as these Taiwanese men are anything but elite they are likely to be strong adherents of whatever national identity they subscribe to. In the case of Taiwanese men taking immigrant brides, then, while the mother’s received identity will have some impact, the father’s identity will have more of an impact than if he had married a native Taiwanese woman. If these immigrant brides were not an attractive option (either due to their unavailability, or the increased availability of native Taiwanese wives) the impact of the father’s identity wishes would be at least partially balanced out by that of the mother. Thus we are again led back to the importance of the choice of Taiwanese women to exit from the reproductive system – without that choice the entire dynamic would be quite different.

### *Immigrant Brides in Taiwanese Society*

Having analyzed the potential impact of various marital combinations on the primary socialization of the children of immigrant brides, we can next turn our attention to a discussion of the ways in which societal pressure has had a shaping and framing effect on the formation of national identities. In the case of Taiwan we can see that social pressure has come in two main forms – first, a conviction that immigrant brides are coming to China mainly as ‘gold-diggers’ that are only interested in a free ride to prosperity and will thus be a drag on society, and second, a fear that these immigrant brides will dilute Taiwanese identity.

The first conviction – that immigrant brides are engaging in some sort of deceit when entering into the country – is interesting because it implies a rejection of the possibility that these immigrants can or would ever integrate into one of the broader Taiwanese identities. There is substantial evidence that this is a common perception among the Taiwanese population, as multiple popular news sources have extensively covered the issue. One would expect that mainland Chinese brides would be somewhat immune to this accusation, as they share a similar culture and language with the Taiwanese, but they are often the subject of equal or greater suspicion; BBC coverage of the trend notes that, “They have been called gold-diggers, prostitutes and communist spies...” and goes on to quote Huang Jiang-nan, director of The Marriage Association of the Two Sides of China, who claims that “Chinese brides are treated as worse than second class citizens... Many regulations discriminate against them. The treatment they receive is far worse than other foreign wives” (*BBC News* 2004).

Of course, the “other foreign brides” are not immune to these accusations as well; they too are often accused of coming into the country only for self-gain. In sum, this trend puts into the public consciousness the notion that immigrant brides are not people who can be socialized into becoming nationals of their new homeland, but rather more neutral “wife commodities” that exist in the country only for the instrumental goals of creating Taiwanese children and servicing Taiwanese husbands. This trend is best exemplified by the ubiquitous matchmaking programs which can be found on late-night Taiwanese cable television. A *Taipei Times* article describes an average episode:

In a typical late-night ad...titled 'Good Marriage within a stone's throw,' about 20 Chinese village women line up in a studio waiting to be introduced. But they hardly look relaxed as they are paraded on a poorly-produced show broadcast on Taiwan's least popular cable channels. Trying to squeeze out a smile, the women, said aged between 18 and 25, pose awkwardly for the TV cameras while an eloquent host markets them by touting their attentive personalities and distinctive talents for household duties. From time to time, they women are asked to walk a few steps and turn round and round to further demonstrate their 'health and fertility.' Customers can place an order with the brokerage company to arrange a trip to 'examine' the 'goods' (*Taipei Times* 2004).

Although the government has made some effort to crack down on these sorts of programs, they have mainly focused on those that feature mainland Chinese brides (ironically, using a statute which bans Chinese *merchandise* from being advertised on Taiwanese television).

While the first societal response dehumanizes the immigrant brides and denies the possibility of them becoming Taiwanese, the second response takes quite the opposite track. It focuses on the fear that the new brides can and will integrate, but that this integration will change what it means to be Taiwanese. A fear of this problem has been evident in the policies of the Democratic People's Party, the main political proponent of Taiwanese nationalism. Although the DPP has paid lip service to the rights of immigrant brides, in general the party has been unsympathetic to their plight, and has worked to make it both more difficult for immigrant brides to enter and more difficult for them to become citizens when they do. Indeed, the current immigration laws are very focused on keeping immigrant brides (particularly mainland Chinese immigrants) out of society. Currently, mainland immigrant brides must wait eight years to become residents, and are barred from working for the first six years of residence. Other immigrant brides have it somewhat easier; they are barred from working for the first six months of residence, and can become citizens after six years. In 2004, the DPP proposed extending the waiting period for mainland Chinese women to twelve years, as well as raising the asset threshold for prospective husbands from around \$11,000 USD to nearly \$160,000 USD. The DPP is not the

only party to politicize the issue, however; for example, there is evidence that the KMT is attempting to use the discriminatory practices that are currently codified against mainland brides as a campaign platform (and implicitly promote cross-straight ties). A recent *Taipei Times* article notes that “Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Chairman Ma Ying-jeou said yesterday that he will ask the party's legislative caucus to push for revision of a law concerning the relations between people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to offer fairer treatment for Chinese spouses of Taiwanese nationals” (2006).

This bias has taken a somewhat different track in the case of Southeast Asian brides. Although the fear that immigrants will push Taiwanese sentiment towards reunification with the mainland is less evident, there is nonetheless a strong opposition to Southeast Asian immigrants on the grounds that they will weaken Taiwan. The bases for this fear range from those that appear to be on the surface reasonable, such as the claim that immigrant brides tend to be under-educated (which is generally true) and will thus serve as a drag on Taiwanese development, to those that appear to be blatantly racist, such as the opposition to Vietnamese brides based on the fear that they will bear deformed babies. This second claim has become a heavily contested issue in the immigration debate; a Taiwanese politician from the Taiwanese Solidarity Union (perhaps ironically, the most blatantly pro-independence Taiwanese nationalist political party in Taiwan) recently caused a controversy by claiming that “there were over 100,000 deformed children in Vietnam, [and that] he was worried that children born to Vietnam brides could ‘inherit’ the deformity” (China Post 2006).

Both of these social responses (the dehumanizing commodification of immigrant women, and the fear that they will change what it means to be Taiwanese) are in some sense a self-fulfilling prophecy. Immigrant brides who come to Taiwan expecting to assimilate into the culture receive

little assistance or encouragement to do so; viewed as a commodity, they are less worthy of public assistance and aid. We note from our definition of nationalism that one of the key elements is a common language, yet the Taiwanese government has offered no assistance in this realm, and although surveys have shown that immigrant brides desire to learn the local language, their husbands can rarely afford the expensive language classes which would be required (*Asian Times* 2003). Immigrant wives are not allowed to pursue jobs and Chinese mainlanders are viewed as a fifth column, while Southeast Asians are viewed as criminals or degenerates. These attitudes tend to become self-reinforcing – if the brides are discouraged from integrating, they will not integrate. Indeed, we can see evidence that these immigrant brides have become excluded from the Taiwanese political culture and skeptical of Taiwanese nationalism. Recent press accounts report that Southeast Asian brides have been creating their own sub-society, replete with loan shark businesses and ethnic oriented gambling houses (*Central News Agency – Taiwan* 2006 and *China Post* 2006). Unable to join the mainstream culture, these brides are slowly creating their own.

We can see, then, that the societal pressures against immigrant brides will necessarily limit the possibility of their integration into a Taiwanese national identity. Identity is intersubjective – it requires the internalization by all (or at least most) members of the nation of the same concept of the imagined community. Immigrant brides may desire to be seen as Taiwanese – indeed, they may even view themselves as such, but until Taiwanese nationals accept their ability to be part of the nation, they cannot be considered part of that identity group. This implies that, unless Taiwanese nationalists change course, we may see the development of yet another nationalism on Taiwan – one that is alien to the current possibility set. These children of Southeast Asian brides (and the children of some mainland Chinese brides as well, particularly those that do not have

strong family connections to the mainland) will likely grow up with little connection to either mainland Chinese or Taiwanese nationalisms.

## **Results**

The hypotheses as applied in the Taiwan case study give us mixed results. There is very strong evidence for the first postulation of *H1* – immigrant marriage migration has been heavily industrialized in Taiwan, and the brides in question are often treated as little better than commodified goods, and this has led to more negative views of mainland China in Taiwanese society. There is less evidence to suggest that the countries sending brides to Taiwan have reacted negatively to their treatment, but some countries which send many brides abroad (such as Vietnam) have begun to more heavily regulate the process (*Reuters* 2007).

Our second hypothesis – that remittances may become an issue of contention between the sending and receiving countries – does not receive strong support from the Taiwan case. Although Taiwanese brides do often send remittances to their home countries, there is little evidence that their home countries have done much to lobby for their rights in Taiwan. This is likely because immigrant brides to Taiwan come in large part from authoritarian countries, such as mainland China and Vietnam, which put less emphasis on human rights. If Taiwan imported brides from countries in the region with freer presses and more developed civil societies, such as the Philippines or Indonesia, we might expect to see more tensions.

Hypothesis three receives more support from the Taiwan case. Immigrant brides to Taiwan often pursue work outside the home, and do not seem content to simply maintain traditional economic roles. Our examination also shows strong evidence of social organization, particularly among Vietnamese brides. This suggests that as their numbers increase, immigrant brides will

become an increasingly important domestic constituency in the economic realm, both as consumers and producers, as well as organized laborers.

The last three hypotheses, concerning the impact of brides on national identity, receive the strongest support from our case study. Immigrant brides are expected to continue Taiwanese culture by carrying out traditional family and gender roles, and they are viewed with suspicion when they attempt to exercise their own cultural agency. *H5* – the postulation that a critical mass of immigrant brides may lead to a cosmopolitan identity shift – also receives some support. Taiwanese nationalists are more afraid of a shift towards a Chinese identity than a cosmopolitan identity, but this fear has led to action. Although there is no strong evidence that a shift is occurring, its possibility as an outcome has led Taiwanese nationalists to enact policy (such as restricting the number of mainland brides) which assumes that it is a phenomenon in progress. Whether an identity shift does occur will depend largely on the outcome of *H6* – in other words, whether immigrant brides are included or excluded from Taiwanese national identity. Their treatment thus far suggests that they, and their children, will likely be excluded from joining an inclusive Taiwanese national identity at least in the near future – and as the hypothesis suggests, this seems to be leading to the rejection of Taiwanese identity by the brides in question.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of international marriage is not likely to diminish in the near future, as the demographic, economic, and cultural trends which have driven it continue to impact both the developed and developing societies of East Asia. Indeed, as regional economic inequality begins to impact Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East we may also see similar patterns emerge world-wide. Considering these trends, the three general hypotheses that I propose above should be kept in mind when approaching the subject of international marriage.

While on the surface the international ties and increased interaction promoted by international marriage would appear to be an unqualified good, the sensitive nature of marriage as a special site for the continuation of culture and identity, as well as the economic function performed by brides in both their traditional and host societies, suggests that marriage migration may become a source of tension for the countries involved. This is especially true if the host country receives most of its brides from one place, and has or develops a deep suspicion towards that country (as in the case of Taiwan vis-à-vis mainland Chinese and Vietnamese brides). The potential for this tension to spill over into foreign policy is very real, as the Taiwanese case again exhibits. While marriage migration is unlikely to be a prime causal factor in international relations, this essay has shown that it deserves further investigation as a potential source of economic friction and cooperation, identity change, and societal transformation.

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