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LOVE

for Sale

THE MAIL-ORDER BRIDE INDUSTRY

She is Filipino, from the crowded metropolis of Manila; she is Thai, the stock of rural rice farmers. She comes from many places – but mainly places where abject poverty and unemployment leaves her dreaming of a life elsewhere. She marries in search of true love; she marries in search of a better life. She marries out of familial duty – knowing, or hoping, she’ll be able to send funds back home once she is established abroad.

She faces many difficulties in her daily life as an immigrant, from ethnic prejudice to communication barriers. She is often stereotyped as meek, ignorant or opportunist – though her true character is often marked by courage and tenacity. And though her story of luck, hope and hardship may resemble that of her thousands of sisters living in foreign lands, she has a story all of her own. The term often applied to her – “mail-order bride” – doesn’t really tell it.

Arranged marriages have existed throughout Asia and elsewhere for thousands of years. The dowry to the bride’s family, some might argue, is not so different from the fee a husband now pays a professional matchmaker today.





Cheryl Tan & Melvin Sim

▲ (from left to right) The trend of marrying foreigners has evolved into a highly profitable business for brokers and matchmakers. This has led to women being commodified as objects for sale across the globe.

International marriages accounted for 14 percent of all marriages in South Korea in 2005 – up from just four percent in 2000. Similar trends can be found in high-income countries across Asia. Australia received a record number of 29,421 foreign brides in 2006-7, up from 16,527 in 2001-2.



Across Asia, tens of thousands of women leave their homelands each year to resettle everywhere from Australia to America, Taiwan to Hong Kong, with a foreign spouse – foreign not only meaning of a different nationality, but also foreign meaning unknown. At best, these foreign brides may have spent a week or two with the men to whom they’ve sworn their lives. The newly-weds may gotten acquainted via an online marriage-brokerage like Hearts of Asia, Thai Darling or Manila Beauty. Or they may have first met on a marriage tour organised by such a business in the lady’s hometown – the matrimonial equivalent of speed dating, with first date, courtship, engagement, wedding, and honeymoon crunched into a week or less.

Worldwide, the international marriage brokerage (IMB) industry is booming. Today, an estimated 400 IMBs operate in the United States alone, some estimated to make as much as US\$2 million a year, pairing American men with an estimated 11,000 to 16,500 women, mainly from Asia and Eastern Europe. That’s more than double the number of such women the US Immigration and Naturalization Services estimates to have entered the country in 1999 – yet still a mere percentage of the 150,000 women are actually believed to advertise themselves on such websites every year.

From a business standpoint, the mail-order bride trade has great appeal: it’s a relatively unregulated industry with low overhead, high potential profits, steady supply and rising

The mail-order bride trade in the US dates back to the 1800s – when women out West were far more scant than they are in the Korean countryside today. Such prospective brides were also prey to misinformation, as one schoolteacher answered an ad in 1873 that read “lonesome miner wants wife to share stake and prospects”, though the miner turned out to be a “scoundrel” and the marriage lasted less than an hour, according to *Hearts West*, a book on the topic by Chris Enss.

Web portals goodwife.com (“The Mail-Order Bride Warehouse”) and planetlove.com respectively link to 353 and 318 IMB sites, and receive 12 million and 10 million visits per year.



Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

demand. Increased web access makes surfing for wives as easy as a few mouse clicks, giving the so-called “consumer husbands” access to hundreds of profiles instantaneously, all but doing away with the need to print the expensive, quickly dated paper catalogs that gave rise to the term “mail-order bride”.

Many IMB websites offer one-stop-shops for husbands-to-be: translation services, express mail services, international calling cards, flower delivery, immigration legal services and more. On a typical site, a wife-seeker can pay a small fee, US\$10 or less, to access the email address of a particular beauty who

catches his eye online, or buy a premium membership for US\$100 or more per month, gaining priority access to new profiles, including hundreds of “teens and girls”, as the 18 to 19 and 20 to 21 age groups, respectively, are sometimes marketed. A prospective husband can also shop in person on a weeklong romance tour, perhaps combined with a golf or ski package, where he can choose his bride from potentially hundreds of women available to preview. Given the extensive travel, legal and other costs, a husband-to-be can easily spend US\$10,000 to US\$15,000 procuring a wife. What would impel him to make such a potentially risky investment?

IMBs Market Double Fantasies

One might say the parallel rise of the Asian mail-order bride industry and the women's liberation movement in the 1970s was no coincidence – the former provided an alternative for men put off by the latter. Some of the North American men enlisting IMB services today see the Pacific as a time machine – with Asian women hailing from a more traditional era, when gender roles were clearly defined. Some just see it as a chance to turn back the clock by basking in the beauty of a wife 20, 30 or even 40 years their younger.

Many IMBs market to these East-West fantasies, playing up the flawless, doting and devoted Geisha girl, equal parts

homemaker and sex kitten. As a testimony on one site boasts, “Yuyun wakes up with a beaming smile that stays with her the whole day.... She will always buy and prepare the food I like before she gets what she wants... She will initiate wrestling matches with me to be assured that I am stronger than she is... Sexually she is totally responsive. Never says ‘I’m tired or not tonight, Dear.’... I wish I had met her twenty years ago... but she would have been only four years old. :-)”

Meanwhile, women from Asian “source countries”, notably the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and China, may be lured online by their own fantasies of marriage to a foreigner.



In Singapore, the IMB industry remains unregulated and unmonitored, despite increasing incidents of fake marriage certificates being issued, agents running away with brides' dowries, and other problems. An estimated 70 IMBs operated within the small island nation.



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▲ Vo Thi Mai, 18, wants to marry a Taiwanese husband. Her neighbours have become rich after their daughters married foreigners, and she wants to do the same to help her farmer parents financially.

To address the record numbers of Filipina women marrying out of the country, the Philippines government outlawed the international bride trade in 1990.

However, the legislation has just driven the trade further underground, while some IMBs in the country continue to operate as “pen pal” agencies or simply evade the law.

While countries such as the Philippines are still a leading source of mail-order brides, the fall of the iron curtain saw a huge influx of Eastern European women to the West thanks to IMB-brokered marriages.

“Some have an idealised notion of American men as Prince Charming,” said Jeanne Smoot, Director of Public Policy for the Tahirih Justice Center, a United States-based organisation providing free legal services to immigrant women fleeing violence.

While women’s reasons for putting themselves on the international marriage market are often reduced to economics, the reality is more complex. “Some are accomplished women in their home countries who want professional men, and take up the services at the urging of their mothers and friends as they have little time to date. Some live in places where the ratios of men to women are vastly disproportionate,” said Smoot. “And for some women divorced or with children, opportunities in their home countries may be limited, whereas in the United States, blended families are common and accepted. Ultimately, these women are looking for the same reasons we all do: for love, for a good husband and father of their children.”

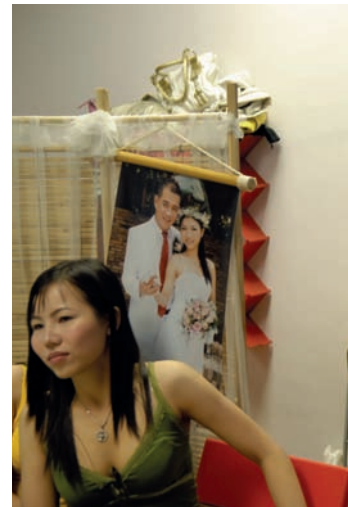
Some foreign brides do find their fairy tale endings. Perhaps more frequently, expectations of the two parties clash – the woman seeks a more progressive man than she thinks she can find at home, while the man seeks more traditional woman than he thinks he can find at home – leading to conflict the couple must struggle hard to overcome. At the extreme, some face endings taken from a horror movie. Take the case of Sergeant Jack Wayne Reeves, convicted of murdering his second and fourth wives, the latter being a Filipina named Emelita he married at age 18 through “Cherry Blossoms”, one of the oldest IMBs in the business. Or Thomas Robert



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▲ (from left to right) Matchmaking agencies are usually the only familiar place for Vietnamese girls who are brought in by their agents. Even after they are married, some Vietnamese brides like to return to their agencies to spend their afternoons while their husbands are at work. They usually chat with other Vietnam brides or girls who have just arrived in Singapore.

Mail-order brides are three times more likely to suffer abuse than in the general population. Take the case of Thomas Robert Lane, charged with drowning his estranged Filipina wife in a bathtub, who was trying to arrange yet another wife from the Philippines at the time of the murder.



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To try to prevent such worst-case scenarios of abuse, the United States Congress passed the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act (IMBRA) of 2005. IMBRA mandates both IMBs and US immigration officials handling the immigrants' visa cases to supply information on the criminal backgrounds of their new spouses or fiancés, and information about their rights and resources available if they are abused, which Smoot refers to as "caution and emergency exit signs". IMBRA also prohibits a petitioner from requesting more than two fiancée visas in a lifetime or less than two years apart – to keep "predators from churning through a succession of foreign fiancées," Smoot said.

Tahirih Justice Center began tracking cases of abuse through IMBs several years ago, when the organisation began to notice an increasing number of abused foreign brides seeking its services. A survey of legal-aid groups around the country confirmed the trend – with the majority having served women abused by men they met through IMBs. "What was particularly alarming was the predatory nature of the abuse. These men were looking for women from overseas who would be dependent, who would not speak English well, who would be isolated from help – women who would be unwitting victims to their long history of violence," said Smoot.

Smoot says that exact figures of abuse rates in these relationships are difficult to acquire, but estimates that these women are as much as three times more likely to suffer abuse than in the general population. Both the United States and Australia have provisions that allow a foreign partner to leave an abusive relationship and still be able to apply for permanent residency. But the threat of deportation can still be used to control a foreign spouse, who may be unclear about her rights and feel insecure about her immigration status – one of the imbalances of information and power IMBRA aims to change.

John Adams, president of A Foreign Affair, a site matching prospective Latin American, Asian and Eastern European brides-to-be with American bachelors, feels that such marriages are often depicted and judged unfairly. Adams complains that the foreign wives are depicted "like children, incapable of taking care of themselves. These are intelligent women. They know how to network. They know how to dial 911. They usually have more recourse here against domestic violence than they would in their own countries," said Adams, who met his own wife through one of the agency's Russian romance tours ten years ago. "If we want to stop domestic violence, we should just stop marriage."

Adams claims that these women are often less likely to encounter abusive relationships than in their home countries, where alcoholism and abuse are rife. "I think it's wonderful that these women don't have to settle for someone from their hometown... Thanks to the Internet, they are no longer limited by geographic boundaries in selecting a partner. What's so wrong with that?" said Adams. "We've matched thousands of couples. I'm proud of what we do."



Cheryl Tan & Melvin Sim



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The number of foreign brides in Singapore doubled from 2000 to 2006, with 42 times more Vietnamese brides immigrating to Singapore over this time period. “Today it is not just women being brought and paraded in the villages for marriage to rural and older men, but to be the ‘noon day china dolls’ for businessmen,” according to Tenaganita, an NGO protecting rights of women and migrants workers in Malaysia.

Intra-Asian Bride Trade Heating Up

Asian brides aren't just heading West to join their foreign husbands – an increasing number are marrying foreigners within the Asian continent. International marriages accounted for 14 percent of all marriages in South Korea in 2005 – up from just four percent in 2000 – and similar trends can be found in high-income countries across Asia.

In countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, with disproportionately high male birth rates and rising status of women, competition for marriage-minded ladies is becoming steep. Increasingly, bachelors in these countries are turning to international marriage brokers to expand their prospects.

“In South Korea, billboards advertising marriages to foreigners dot the countryside, and fliers are scattered on the Seoul subway. Many rural governments, faced with declining populations, subsidise the marriage tours, which typically cost US\$10,000,” reported the New York Times.

Although IMBs began matching ethnic Koreans in China with physically disabled or rural South Koreans in the late 1990s, today the business matches urban bachelors with brides of varying nationalities, including an increasing number from Vietnam. The same is true in Taiwan, where farmers and working class are “at an extremely disadvantaged position in [the] domestic marriage market,” according to Professor Hsiao-Chuan Hsia from Shih Hsin University, Taipei.

Regardless of the source or destination country, foreign wives often face a triple whammy – looked down upon for their gender, socioeconomic status and nationality. They may not speak the language, making it difficult for them to communicate with their spouse and in-laws, let alone function in society at large. Cultural differences can deepen the women's sense of isolation and insecurity, while overt

discrimination on an individual as well as institutional level may make them feel unwelcome.

“[In] Chinese-learning school... the classmates and teacher was very mean to me... They even said I come here just for money or selling my body,” said Chin-Hwei, a Vietnamese woman married in Taiwan.

While it may not eliminate such discrimination, many foreign brides find learning the local language is the key to social adjustment and smooth family relations. “My husband owns a grocery store and the customers... don't trust me counting money or they think that I couldn't find the stuff [they want]. As I come here longer, and having children, this indeed improves my living condition. I learn Chinese from my husband because we talk everyday and get practice. And the society is quite open, at least it is better than 10 years ago,” said Hong Fong, who was an immigrant bride to Taiwan.

Marites, who lives in Hong Kong, agrees. “I tried to get along with my husband's children and family and... become a suitable wife. My stepdaughter accepted me and brings me along when she has some activities... Learning Cantonese has helped me to integrate with my husband's family and friends,” she said.

Money matters are also a frequent source of stress in the relationship. While the bride is often expected to send money back home – and arrangement that may have been formally stated before the marriage – this is often a source of conflict, and reinforces the stereotype that the foreign women just marry for money.

While a foreign bride may have worked back home, the language barrier, new domestic duties and her immigrant status may make it difficult for her to find work outside the home, making her even more economically dependent on

her husband and family – an irony as she may have married outside her nationality in search of economic betterment.

“We are not encouraged to go outside the home. People here expect us to stay home and do the housework. It is very different between local brides and foreign brides. The local female are independent from housework and can decide what they want to do but for us, it is impossible,” said Jin, a foreign bride living in Taiwan.

The often-significant financial investment the husband has made in his foreign wife can breed a sense of ownership and entitlement on his part, while the IMBs may disregard the safety of the women in favour of their husbands – being more concerned with the satisfaction of the “paying customers”.

One 20-year-old Vietnamese woman applied for a foreign husband, but wanted out of the agreement because she didn't like her husband-to-be. As he had already paid the broker US\$10,000, she was trapped. “We got married in 2003. When my visa was approved, my husband would rape me every night. Many times, he would beat and maltreat me. I tried to contact the broker to send me back home. But all I got was verbal abuse and blackmail,” she said.

Despite the difficulties, disappointments and adjustments, many foreign brides still feel they are better off than back at home, according to a research study of foreign brides in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, by the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM). In the final analysis, 53 percent of the women surveyed felt that foreign husbands make good husbands. “I rarely go home to the Philippines because of the miserable conditions. I'd rather live and raise my children here,” said Helen in Hong Kong.



▲ South Korean men in rural areas are having difficulty meeting local women to marry, and are turning to brokers to find foreign brides. Several rural counties have even launched programmes to provide financial support to help the men pay for mail-order brides.

Foreign Brides: A Policy Problem – or Solution?

Cross-border marriages are not simply a matter of “I do” between two parties – the state has a huge say in the foreign bride's life. Policies – and the officials who enforce them – dictate immigrant women's access to visas, employment, citizenship, social services and benefits.

Some countries actually encourage immigration as a way to rectify population imbalances – as in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, where low fertility rates and high life expectancy rates mean a greying population. In this sense, Jane Corpuz-Brock, Executive Officer of the Immigrant Women Speakout Association in New South Wales, Australia spoke about the boom that foreign brides represent to the Australian economy – helping fill need for skilled care for the ageing and otherwise keep the economy booming. Australia is receiving record numbers of foreign brides as well – 29,421 in the period of 2006-7, up from 16,527 in 2001-2.

“Foreign brides can provide the answer to aging population and low birth rates, factors that affect the country's economic productivity and stability,” concluded the study by the APMM.

Meanwhile the cross-border marriages help rectify trade deficits on the part the brides' impoverished homelands, where remittances often comprise a considerable share of much-needed foreign currency. Remittances from Filipino workers overseas represent 15 percent of the country's GDP, according to the proceedings of the International Conference on Border Control and Empowerment of Foreign Brides.

Yet anti-immigrant policies persist in many of these countries that presumably need foreign women to boost birth rates and fill labour gaps. In Hong Kong, for example, foreigners must fulfill a seven-year residency requirement to receive public benefits. Taiwan requires immigrants to have savings of 410,000 NTD (approximately US\$12,500) or

a monthly income of 34,000 NTD (US\$1,050) to qualify for citizenship – a near impossibility for foreign brides of lesser means. Mainland Chinese immigrants are more directly targeted, with the number of Chinese migrant partners to Taiwan capped at 3,600 a year. The quota is a mere quarter of the total applicants, leading Taiwanese bachelors to Vietnam and elsewhere in search of wives.

Such policies may indirectly encourage women to stay in abused relationships, as many endure domestic violence from the fear of deportation and separation from their children. Foreign women in Taiwan who do not have citizenship, for example, would be deported if they got divorced, and custody of their children would likely fall to the father, according to TransAsia Sisters Association, a immigrant women's group in Taiwan.

"I reported my husband to the police due to domestic violence. After this, my husband confined me to the hospital and forced me to abort my baby. He also forced me to divorce him... Then I went back to my home country," said a foreign woman, previously married to a South Korean.

Increasingly, foreign brides are challenging these policies – and challenging stereotypes about themselves. They are lobbying foreign governments to provide free services such as

emergency shelter and legal assistance for victims of domestic violence. They are forming support groups, building coalitions, holding demonstrations, and otherwise raising their voices and awareness about the human rights violations, domestic violence and discrimination they often face.

"Organising is the foreign bride's biggest weapon," according to Butch Pongos, Spokesperson of the Filipino Migrants Center who works to rally Filipino migrants in Japan. "Immigrant brides are confronted with... urgent concerns that need immediate actions." If there are now more than 8 million Filipinos in around 200 countries around the world, and another 40 million who directly or indirectly depend on their income abroad, you can imagine the power they have."

"Women from the Philippines, Vietnam or Indonesia seeking a husband in a country like Australia or Taiwan are members of a larger section of the women of their countries facing tremendous change brought about by capitalism and globalisation," said Corpuz-Brock, who is not just an organiser but also an immigrant bride herself. "These women are coping with courage, innovation and assertiveness. They are certainly not passive and subservient now – and I would argue that such a picture of women in our countries was never an accurate picture." ■

According to a UNICEF report, 95 percent of Mongolians marrying foreign nationals are women; 65 percent are married to South Koreans. In a survey of 30 such women, 26 married through marriage intermediary services. The husbands were on average 20 years older than their wives.

These men were looking for women from overseas who would be dependent, who would not speak English well, who would be isolated from help – women who would be unwitting victims to their long history of violence.

Jeanne Smoot, Director of Public Policy for the Tahirih Justice Center

In Taiwan, infection with HIV, SARS, or syphilis are grounds for deportation – and until recently, even if the local spouse was the source of the infection. Death of their spouse can also lead to an automatic withdrawal of visa and right-of-stay.

One out of five marriages in Taiwan is between a Taiwanese national and a foreigner. More than 65 percent of these foreign brides are from Mainland China.

While just a few hundred foreign brides entered South Korea in 1990, a record 31,180 were received in 2005. As in Taiwan, 66 percent are Chinese, followed by Vietnamese at 19 percent.

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