



# The Marriage Migration Regime of Vietnamese Women in South Korea: Evolving Roles of Governments, Matchmakers, and Migrants\*

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Recent studies have clamored for measures to avoid the victimization of women in marriage migration. Thus, an important question entails how to consider marriage migrant women and their decision-making while acknowledging the current settings for international marriage between Vietnamese women and South Korean men. The present research establishes the following findings based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with Vietnamese marriage migrant women (including candidates) in South Korea and Vietnam. First, this study uncovers how governments, matchmakers, and migrants *informally* interact, form, and reform the marriage migration regime. In particular, this study focuses on how illegal marriage matchmakers take part in the regime and how they exploit marriage migrants owing to tightening immigration policies. Second, this study highlights the role of ethnic networks in the decision-making of marriage migrants. Thus, the discussion challenges the meaning of active governmental policies vis-à-vis the domination of illegal matchmakers. This study contributes to the literature on international migration by discussing the intermediate mechanism of marriage matchmakers and considering the agencies of marriage migrants.

**Keywords** marriage migrant women, marriage migration, regime, Vietnam, South Korea

## I. Introduction

This article employs the regime concept to explore the dynamics of the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to South Korea (hereafter Korea). The regime results from the relations between various actors and presents the condition that governs behaviors and decision-making (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Krasner, 1982). By combining diverse perspectives from various actors

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in the analysis of political dynamics, the regime concept does not simply bridge the gap between the discourses and practices (Guiraudon and Joppke, 2001; Sciortino, 2000; Zolberg, 1999) but further interprets the contradictions between the different scales as well as the interplay of state and non-state actors (Castles and Miller, 2009; Engbersen et al., 2007; Samers, 2016).

While international migration—in all of its forms—has never been a simple individual decision but rather the combination of many actors having their own influences on the migratory process (Castles and Miller, 2009), the existing literature on the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to Korea seems to consider the push and pull factors individually. On the one hand, based on the historical-structural theory, many previous studies have focused on strong state-led policies on marriage migration; meanwhile, others have generally pointed at marriage matchmakers as dominating actors in the Asian international marriage market (see Bélanger, 2016; Kim, 2013; Lee, 2008; Lee, 2012; Lindquist et al., 2012; Mee, 2007; Wang and Chang, 2002; Yang, 2011; Yang and Lu, 2010). On the other hand, based on the economic approach, scholars have long agreed on individual and/or family-related motivations of marriage migration in which the women dream of better lives for themselves and their families (Lee et al., 2016; Hoang, 2013b; Onishi, 2012). Furthermore, this line of research continues with the studies on the contributions of these women to their natal families and societies (Bélanger and Linh, 2011; Bélanger et al., 2011; Hoang, 2013b).

While the historical-structural approach pays more attention to the world and the state's orders instead of human agency, the economic approach focusing on migrants, or their surroundings, could downplay the role of the state and neglect history-related factors (Castles and Miller, 2009). Additionally, the questions of how marriage matchmakers have become dominant in the market, as well as how marriage migration has bloomed under the tightening policies of governments have not been carefully covered.

Nevertheless, in line with calls to avoid victimizing women in marriage migration, another important question is how to consider marriage migrant women and their decision-making, while acknowledging the current setting for international marriage between Vietnamese women and Korean men.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the relations between various actors in the marriage migration regime, which includes the large-scale institutional actor—governments, the intermediate mechanism—marriage matchmakers, and the agency of marriage migrants.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the present research asks the following questions: 1) How did governments guide the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to Korea? 2) How did matchmakers strategize their work through governmental policies and regulations? 3) How did marriage migrants make their decisions in the abundance of policies and domination of matchmakers?

Based on ethnographic research methods, the current research highlights the following findings: first, by diving into the marriage migration regime, this study establishes the evolving roles of governments and unlicensed matchmakers, which direct the growing number of Vietnamese female marriage migrants in Korea. Second, this study highlights the role of ethnic networks in the self-governance of marriage migrants. Thus, the discussion challenges the meaning of active governmental policies in relation to the domination of illegal matchmakers.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section introduces the historical background of the marriage migration of

<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the participation of Korean husbands in the marriage migration regime as they demand and sponsor the arrivals of Vietnamese women to Korea. However, in this study, the author chooses to focus on the agency of Vietnamese women only. As the agency refers to the capacity of an individual in making their own decision independently and freely, the agency of Korean husbands appears quite visibly in many matchmade marriages. They decide which matchmaker to work with and pay a fee to participate in the marriage tour provided by the matchmaker.

Vietnamese women to Korea. Next, the author briefly discusses the research methodology and introduces the participants of the study. Regarding the findings, the research first analyzes the process through which the three actors, that are, government, matchmaker, and migrant, *informally* interact, form, and reform the marriage migration regime. Here, the study particularly focuses on how illegal marriage matchmakers are a part of the regime and how marriage migrants are exploited by matchmakers owing to tightening immigration policies. Furthermore, this study discusses how marriage migrant women make their decisions despite the challenging context in which it highlights the role of ethnic networks. The conclusion proposes academic and practical implications of this study.

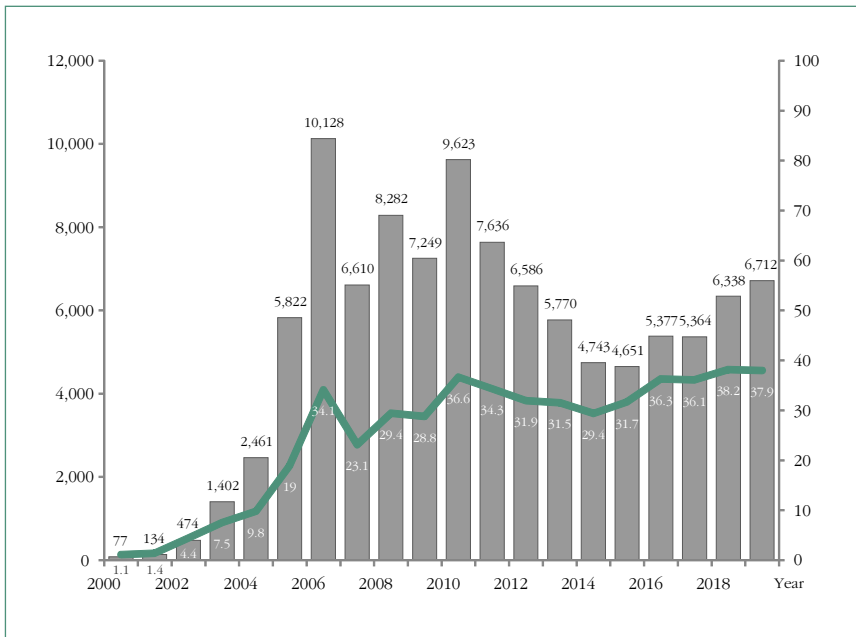
## II. The History of International Marriage of Vietnamese Women: The Path to Korea

International marriage might have started in Vietnam a long time ago; for example, many Vietnamese women in southern Vietnam have gotten married to American officers, soldiers, or Viet Kieu, that is, Vietnamese diasporas in the United States, due to the influence of the Vietnam War (Hidalgo and Bankston, 2008; Thai, 2010). However, the increasing volume of international marriages mediated by matchmakers began after the Vietnamese government implemented the Đổi Mới (Renovation) policy in 1986. Đổi Mới is the name given to the economic reform of Vietnam in 1986 in which the country aims to change to a socialist-oriented market economy. Đổi Mới has brought about not only new economic opportunities but also the exchange of people and culture whereof international marriage is one of the results.

Notably, prior to the wave of marriage emigration of Vietnamese women

to Korea, there was a phenomenon of international marriage between Vietnamese women and Taiwanese men during the 1990s and early 2000s. Taiwan, back then, was one of the earliest reported foreign investors who came to Vietnam after *Đổi Mới* 1986. Along with economic exchanges, other cultural and social aspects have also been interchanged. With the help of the Chinese ethnic population in southern Vietnam, many marriages have been arranged between Vietnamese women and Taiwanese men (Phan, 2005). Thousands of marriages have been reported, with the majority of women originating from the Mekong River Delta, along with poverty as one of the most important motivations (Nguyen and Tran, 2010). Furthermore, due to other cultural aspects, such as the diversity of ethnicities in southern Vietnam and the influence of the Vietnam War period, Southern people are described as being more open-minded with transnational marriage (Thai, 2010; Tran, 2006). However, in 2004, the Taiwanese government restricted the number of international marriages between Vietnamese women and Taiwanese men to avoid human trafficking (Chen, 2006; Hoang, 2013b). The shift then moved to Korea, with thousands of marriages reported annually since then.

Korea and Vietnam established formal relations in December 1992. Within a short period of time, Korea has become the fourth largest foreign investor in Vietnam in the mid-1990s, after Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong (Balfour, 1996). In addition to the huge amount of Korean capital inflow to Vietnam, there is the arrival of Korean cultural products and social values. Among all, international marriage between Vietnamese women and Korean men is a significant case of study as the number of Vietnamese women undergoing international marriages with Korean men accounted for up to 95% of the total number in the last 20 years. This gender imbalance has long been recognized in the literature, as it is mostly women who go through marriage migration (Yang and Lu, 2010).



Source: Statistics Korea, 2020

**Figure 1** Marriages between Vietnamese women and Korean men

Figure 1 indicates, since the early 2000s, the presence of Vietnamese marriage migrant women in Korea has become increasingly visible. From 95 cases in 2000, the number rose to 2,471 in 2004 and continuously doubled in 2005 and 2006. Notwithstanding having fluctuated since then, tens of thousands of Vietnamese women have come to Korea for the purpose of marriage over the last twenty years. Meanwhile, since 2015, the number of Vietnamese marriage migrants has accounted for the largest among foreign wives in Korea.<sup>2</sup> Notably, in 2015, Vietnamese brides

<sup>2</sup> Until 2014, the number of Chinese brides has accounted for the largest percentage among foreign wives in Korea, including a large number of Joseonjok brides. Joseonjok refers to ethnic Koreans whose ancestors migrated to China during the 1850s and 1950s due to Japanese colonization and famine (Shin, 2017). International marriage with foreign women in

accounted for 31.7% meanwhile Chinese brides accounted for 31%. In 2019, this gap increased significantly. Accordingly, the percentage of Vietnamese marriage migrant women was 37.9%, while that of Chinese brides was only 20.6%. The next section briefly presents the research methodology and introduces the participants whose stories will be discussed in this article.

### III. Research Methodology

This study draws on qualitative methods wherein policy analysis, participant observation and in-depth interviews are employed. To articulate the environment on how international marriages between Vietnamese women and Korean men are matched, an archival study is employed to analyze governmental policies. For a deeper analysis and understanding of marriage migrants' stories, eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted. As a member of a non-governmental organization working for the rights of Vietnamese migrants in Korea, the author had opportunities to acquaint herself with the interviewee pool. The author first conducted interviews in Korea in November and December 2018, and later in Vietnam in January 2019. The interviewees included twelve marriage migrant women in Korea, three marriage migrant candidates in Vietnam, and three marriage migrant activists. Among marriage migrant women in Korea, the oldest interviewee has been in Korea since the late 1990s and the most recently arrived interviewee came in 2012. Other details of the study participants are described in Table 1. Furthermore, the author conducted meetings with members of the Korean Association in Hanoi, Vietnamese employees of a Korean language and culture center for marriage migrants designated by

Korea was initially encouraged with ethnic Koreans in China in the 1990s (Onishi, 2007).

Table 1 List of Interviewees

	Description	Interview place Hometown	Details	
			Year of entry	
1	Marriage migrant 1	Seoul, Korea	Dong Nai	the late 1990s
2	Marriage migrant 2	Seoul, Korea	Ho Chi Minh City	the late 1990s
3	Marriage migrant 3	Seoul, Korea	--	2002
4	Marriage migrant 4	Seoul, Korea	Long An	2003
5	Marriage migrant 5	Seoul, Korea	Hai Duong	2006
6	Marriage migrant 6	Seoul, Korea	Hai Duong	2006
7	Marriage migrant 7	Seoul, Korea	Hai Phong	2009
8	Marriage migrant 8	Seoul, Korea	Hai Phong	2009
9	Marriage migrant 9	Seoul, Korea	Binh Phuoc	2011
10	Marriage migrant 10	Seoul, Korea	Binh Phuoc	2010
11	Marriage migrant 11	Seoul, Korea	Hai Phong	2012
12	Marriage migrant 12	Seoul, Korea	Ho Chi Minh City	2010
13	Marriage candidate 1	Vietnam	Thanh Hoa	2019
14	Marriage candidate 2	Vietnam	Hai Duong	2019
15	Marriage candidate 3	Vietnam	Hai Duong	2019
16	Activist 1	Siheung, Korea	Working at a non-governmental organization on supporting marriage migrant women and multicultural families in Korea	
17	Activist 2	Hanoi, Vietnam	A manager of a non-governmental organization that supports the Korean language and culture education for marriage migrant candidates	
18	Activist 3	Vietnam	Managing a Korean language and culture center which is assigned by the Ministry of Justice of Korea	

the Korean Ministry of Justice, local authorities, and marriage matchmakers. However, the diverse perspectives provided by these meetings only served as references for the author, rather than quoted in the discussion of this research.

Regarding participant observation, the author visited a Korean culture center in Hanoi and a Korean language and culture center for marriage



migrants assigned by the Korean Ministry of Justice. These centers provided Korean language and culture classes for marriage migrant candidates. While the center in Hanoi provided the author with a summary of the situation of the Korean language and culture education for marriage migrants in Vietnam, the designated Korean language and culture center for marriage migrants was where the author participated in the class, visited the dormitory, and conducted interviews. All the students in the center had gotten married to their Korean husbands prior to attending the classes, according to one of the center managers. They participated in the classes to satisfy one of the requirements of their spouse visa applications. The center, at that time, managed approximately 150 students divided into Class A, which was the 24<sup>th</sup> class held by the center, and Class B, which was the 25<sup>th</sup> class. Class A, with nearly 70 students, was preparing for graduation by the time the author visited. All three marriage migrant candidates participated in this study were from Class A.

#### IV. Findings

This article views the marriage migration regime as a result of the relations between governments, marriage matchmakers, and migrants, drawing on the concept of the regime. This regime governs behaviors and decision-making in the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to Korea. In the subsequent discussion, the study aims to gain an understanding of how these actors at different levels informally cooperate and how such cooperation influences the activities of marriage matchmakers, the decision-making of marriage migrants, and vice versa.

## 1. The Large-scale Institutional Actor: Governments

The wave of Vietnamese women migrating to Korea for marriages has started since the middle of the 2000s, especially after the migration of Vietnamese brides to Taiwan was restricted by the Taiwanese government in 2004 to avoid human trafficking (Chen, 2006; Hoang, 2013b). Meanwhile, many local governments, especially in the Mekong River Delta region with a huge number of women migrating to Taiwan, decided to tighten the marriage emigration of women due to the gender imbalance among the marriage ages in the area.

Coincidentally, in 2005, the Korean government conducted a national-scale survey with the participation of approximately 1,000 foreign wives (Lee, 2008). In April 2006, the government announced, “The Comprehensive Plan for the Social Incorporation of Female Marriage Migrant Families and Multi-ethnic People”, which was widely known as the Grand Plan. Its aim was to support foreign wives and multicultural families in Korea (Lee, 2008). In 2008, the government took a further step by establishing multicultural family support center systems, which aimed to provide Korean language education, counseling services, translation services, and so on for marriage migrants and multicultural families. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of these centers increased from 21 to 217 throughout the country. However, even prior to these comprehensive plans, the Korean government had long been paying attention in attracting the inflow of marriage migrants in order to mitigate the domestic bride shortage (Kamiya and Lee, 2009; Kim, 2009; Lee, 2006). In the 1990s, local rural governments were among the first ones to promote international marriage, which was later supported by the central government with the campaign named, “let the rural bachelor get married” (Kim 2011; Lee 2008; Yang 2011). These rural bachelors were encouraged to get married to ethnic Koreans in China during this time (Onishi, 2007). Lee et

al. (2006) further mentioned that some local rural governments even look for international marriages through sister-town relationships or marriage matchmaking firms. Noteworthily, marriage agencies in Korea could work freely without a license during this time. This led to a rapid increase in the number of international marriages between Korean men and foreign women, mostly Chinese brides (Lee, 2008). Witnessing a large number of foreign spouses in Korea, the government began to provide aid to multicultural families, starting with the revision of the Nationality Law in 1997.

In Vietnam, regarding international marriage, the legal focus has been on managing the activities of marriage matchmakers. The first legal document specializing in international marriages was Decree No. 68/2002/NĐ-CP on Marriage and Family Involving Foreigners in Vietnam which was dated July 10, 2002. The Decree stated that, according to the provisions of Vietnamese law and international treaties that Vietnam has signed, profit-earning marriage matchmaking activities were not recognized as legal in Vietnam. Decree No. 68 emphasized managing the activities of illegal matchmakers as there were thousands of Vietnamese women marrying Taiwanese men with the help of brokerages during this period. The Decree further mentioned that the Ministry of Justice of Vietnam directed the Departments of Justice in each province and city to require parties involving marriage to directly submit dossiers. Submission by a third person was not accepted, while interviews with the concerned parties were compulsory (Hoang, 2013b). Additionally, in the field of supporting marriage involving foreign elements, the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Women's Union was appointed as the organization to coordinate and monitor international marriages. According to Decree No. 68/2002/NĐ-CP, fifteen centers were founded to minimize negative risks for marriages between Vietnamese women and foreign men (Hoang, 2013a).

Furthermore, in 2005, Decree 150/2005/NĐ-CP on Penalties for Administrative Violations in the field of Security and Social Order and Safety stated the penalty for illegal matchmaking, which ranged from 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 Vietnam dong (VND) (approximately 40–80 USD). However, this penalty was indeed small compared to the profit that an agency could make from a successful marriage back in that time. In 2000, the cost for a marriage between a Vietnamese woman and a Korean man ranged from 7,000 to 15,000 USD, and one-third of this belonged to the agencies (Kamiya and Lee, 2009). In 2009, the government strengthened the penalty for illegal marriage matchmaking activities in Decree 60/2009/NĐ-CP, which stated that any profit-earning activities on international marriage matchmaking will be penalized from 10,000,000 to 20,000,000 Vietnam dong (approximately 400–800 USD). This time, the penalty was ten times higher. Nonetheless, the number of Vietnamese marriage migrant women in Korea in 2010 was recorded at 9,623, which was the second highest number in history (see Figure 1).

Stepping into the new decade of the 2010s, there have been changes in the way each state approached and managed the marriage migration issue. In Vietnam, marriage procedures have become simpler than hitherto (Hoang, 2013a). In contemporary society, along with economic, cultural, and social aspects that have been interchanged, marriages between Vietnamese citizens and citizens from other countries have become common. It seems that the Vietnamese government aims to reduce and simplify many administrative procedures, meanwhile moving towards providing more support for international marriages. At the beginning of 2013, Decree No. 24/2013/NĐ-CP on Marriage and Family Involving Foreign Elements was enacted. The new regulation only required either the wife or the husband to be present while submitting the marriage registration dossier, and the time for resolving and verifying documents was also considerably reduced compared to Decree 68/2002/NĐ-CP (Hoang, 2013a). Decree No. 24/2013/

NĐ-CP further announced that fees for marriage registration involving foreign elements in bordering areas were exempted. Local women support centers, for the first time, were allowed to introduce people to international marriages as Section 33/1/g stated that “if a Vietnamese citizen or a foreigner wants to marry a foreigner or a Vietnamese citizen, the local women support center is allowed to do the matchmaking work.”

Contrariwise, the Korean government has tightened the requirements for marriage migrant visa applications from Vietnam. Accordingly, the purpose of the government was to protect the human rights of the marriage parties as well as to create the stable settlement of multicultural families. Since 2010, the Embassy of Korea in Vietnam has asked marriage migrant candidates the completion of “Local Pre-Education for Marriage Migrants” which provided information about Korea. Since April 2014, Article 9-5 of the Immigration Control Act (Standards for issuance of visas for the purpose of marriage and cohabitation, etc.) required those who apply for a marriage migrant visa to meet either one of the following conditions: 1) Passing level I of the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) or 2) Completing required education hours at a designated center and required examination at the Korean embassy in Vietnam. Additionally, since March 2011, Article 9-4 of the Enforcement Regulations of the Immigration Control Act (Procedures for inviting foreigners for the purpose of marriage and cohabitation, etc.) required Korean grooms to complete a program called the “International Marriage Information Program” to learn about the culture and politics in the country of the foreign wife, as well as basic laws and regulations on international marriage. Noteworthy, this required education for Korean husbands takes only three hours meanwhile the required education at a designated center for marriage migrant candidates usually takes three to four months to complete. Korean grooms further needed to meet basic income requirements while sponsoring their foreign wives according to Article 9-4

**Table 2** Basic income requirement for Korean grooms between 2015 and 2021.

Family type	2 members	3 members	4 members	5 members	6 members
In 2015 (won)	15,135,091	19,579,507	24,023,937	28,468,368	32,912,784
In 2019 (won)	17,439,168	22,560,192	27,681,240	32,802,240	37,923,264
In 2021 (won)	18,528,474	23,903,700	29,257,740	34,544,238	39,771,618

Source: Ministry of Justice, 2021

of the Immigration Control Act. Since 2015, the basic income requirement has been continuously adjusted every other year as shown in Table 2.

Throughout the last two decades, the governments of Korea and Vietnam have continuously issued and adjusted their policies and regulations on international marriages. In the 2000s, while the Korean government actively issued policies regarding support for foreign brides in the country and Korean marriage matchmakers could work freely; in Vietnam, the government focused on managing illegal brokerage activities related to transnational marriages. Inversely, in the 2010s, the Korean government began to tighten requirements on spouse visas; meanwhile, Vietnam simplified international marriage procedures, as well as paid more attention to the matchmaking and counseling activities of local women support centers. The next section will further present how these changes in governmental policies and regulations guide the activities of marriage matchmakers and how marriage migrants have been disadvantaged from this throughout the last two decades.

## 2. The Intermediate Mechanism: Marriage Matchmaker

Until the mid-2000s, marriage agencies in Korea could work freely without a license. Accordingly, this business used to operate in the form of reporting instead of subscribing. However, since December 2007, the National Assembly of South Korea issued Law No.8688 titled “Law on Marriage



Source: Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2018

**Figure 2** Registered marriage agencies in Korea from 2008–2018

Matchmaking Business” to manage the marriage matchmaking business. Despite marriage brokerage businesses having provided opportunities for marriage to adult men and women who have limited opportunities to meet in modern society, according to Law No.8688, there have been many social problems occurring along with the increasing number of international marriages. Thus, the new law is to contribute to the formation of a healthy marriage culture. Accordingly, all marriage matchmaking businesses must register with the local government for permission to operate. This system asked marriage agencies to keep track of information related to Korean men who seek foreign wives.

From 2008 to 2017, the law on matchmaking activities was reviewed eleven times, and the government focused on the ability of the company to provide accurate information for participants as well as their responsibilities for any risk (see Appendix 1). After every adjustment, marriage agencies had

to meet more requirements in the capital, and they were regularly checked by the authorities. The new regulations had an immediate impact as the number of marriage matchmaking businesses decreased gradually annually, and until May 2018, there were only 366 left.

However, registered Korean marriage matchmakers rarely work individually, especially since all profit-earning marriage matchmaking activities are forbidden in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese matchmakers are individuals or small groups, who can communicate in Korean and partner with Korean agencies. They search and collect a list of Vietnamese women to gather for meetings when a Korean groom and a Korean matchmaker arrive.

The process is that, first, in Korea, Korean men who wish to marry foreign wives find marriage matchmakers. Some men ask for information about brokerages from relatives or friends whose wives are also from Vietnam. However, billboard advertisements and fliers for marriages with foreigners have long been easy to find anywhere in Korea (Onishi, 2007). The Korean matchmaker then provides a marriage package that includes round-trip airfares, accommodations, a group meeting with several women, marriage registration in Vietnam, a wedding ceremony, a honeymoon, gifts to the in-laws in Vietnam, and translation throughout the trip. After the marriage tour, the Korean husband leaves first, while Vietnamese brides prepare for marriage migrant visas to fly to Korea. Since the beginning of the 2010s, there has been a difference in the process after the marriage tour of Korean husbands due to the new regulations on marriage migrant visas that ask marriage migrant candidates to complete and pass Korean education. Accordingly, from two to three months of visa application prior to the language requirement applied, it could take six months or even a year for marriage migrant candidates to go to Korea. Notwithstanding the changing regulations, the role of matchmakers remains significant. The details could be seen in the following stories.



It was hard at first, as I had to do everything by myself, while other women got married through agencies and took care of everything. [...] Ultimately, I decided to ask for help, and everything was solved (Interviewee 5).

In 2006, when Interviewee 5 got married to her Korean husband, there were no requirements for Vietnamese brides regarding Korean language ability. The interviewee had tried by herself to complete the marriage registrations at the local authority, but she was not successful. Until she asked for help from an agency, the procedure was quick. Despite the Vietnam law forbidding the activities of profit-earning marriage matchmaking, since the onset, the role of brokers has been significant. This could be related to what Bélanger et al. (2011) referred to as “under-the-table payment,” which was familiar in the case of international migration, especially marriage migration.

Furthermore, in the early 2000s, when the demand for foreign brides was high and supported by the government of Korea, marriage matchmakers used to visit houses in poor rural areas and disbursed gifts and money to persuade families and young women to avail themselves of international marriage. However, as the Korean government has tightened requirements on spouse visas recently, many women nowadays have to pay matchmakers a certain amount of money to go to meetings with Korean men.

It is akin to going to sell vegetables at the market (Interviewee 13).

An interviewee whom the author met at the dormitory of the Korean class shared that she felt so pitiful for herself and other women who went through these kinds of meetings with Korean men. It is not only that you have to pay prior to going to the meeting but also the fact of what happens there. The meeting is usually between one Korean man and several Vietnamese women. After a short meeting with the help of a translator,

the men decide with whom he wants to marry. A wedding, followed by a honeymoon, occurs several days after the meeting; all these are provided within the package by the marriage matchmakers. However, the work of the matchmaker is not done with the meeting only.

As marriage migrant candidates have to meet several requirements for spouse visas and the communication with their husbands and in-laws is limited due to language barriers, the marriage package provided by marriage agencies includes visa-related document work.

This market is more evil than anyone could contemplate. You may be fortunate to meet an agency who understands your situation and truly wants to help you to change your life. However, you can also meet an unpleasant one who wants to take advantage of you, not only financially but also physically (Interview 13).

The interviewee emphasizes how matchmakers are important not only in matchmaking couples but also in maintaining the relationship between the Vietnamese brides and the Korean in-laws until the departure date. After several days of residing in Vietnam and completing the marriage document procedure, the Korean men leave for Korea, while the women are sent to the language center by the matchmakers. As language ability is required in new regulations for spouse visas, many marriage migrant candidates have to spend months at centers to study, take the exam, apply for visas, wait for interviews, and so forth. Throughout the months of language education and waiting for visa application, the matchmaker manages the situation. By that time when the author was conducting interviews at the center, a broker came into the office to collect graduation certificates of the marriage migrant candidates that he managed. Next to the author, Interviewee 16 further explained that the brokers kept the documents, and they could ask

for further fees claimed as needed for those to be done. In other cases, as Interviewee 13 mentioned above, they ask for inappropriate offers from the brides. Interviewee 16 added:

Matchmakers could take advantage of the brides because of their limited communication in Korean. Sometimes, they ask for inappropriate offers from brides (Interviewee 16).

Despite profit-earning marriage matchmaking businesses being illegal in Vietnam, the power of matchmakers remains consolidated. Here, the pertinent question involves the agency of female marriage migrants in the domination of matchmakers. The next section will investigate the decision-making of women who undergo marriage migration over the last two decades.

### 3. The Agency of Marriage Migrants

Many scholars have long agreed on how economic motivation affects the decision of women regarding marriage migration (Lee et al., 2016; Hoang, 2013b). In many rural areas, as the labor of young men is less dispensable on the farm, women are usually sent to cities or overseas. This is detailed in the case study of Hoang's research (2013b) in the explanation of the huge number of women from certain villages in Hai Phong city, Vietnam that engages in international marriage. Accordingly, as the main economic activity in these areas is fishing, men become the breadwinner of the family, and women, who are less involved in economic activities, obey less power. In many cases, migration decisions are influenced by elders (especially men), and women are expected to obey patriarchal authority.

However, economic motivations and Confucian filial piety have not

been the only factor that encouraged women to migrate. Many women have decided to emigrate for marriage based on their own understanding of Korea. The change in marriage migration-related decision-making can be observed in the case presented below. Interviewee 9 shares about her marriage decision along with the story of her older sister, who is also a marriage migrant to Korea.

My sister got married fourteen or fifteen years ago. This was because the financial situation of our family back then was not good. For me, I was turning 27 years old and single. My sister found someone [my husband] she thought would be nice to me (Interviewee 9).

The interviewee further added.

Before coming to Korea, I had been told about support programs from the Korean government for multicultural families, such as school fee exemptions for children. This helped me to feel much more confident (Interviewee 9).

The story of Interviewee 9 showed that for her sister, who migrated to Korea during the early 2000s, the main reason was the financial difficulty of her family. However, for Interviewee 9, she made her decision based on her understanding of how the Korean government supports multicultural families.

In other cases, many young women choose international marriage based on their own evaluations of Korea and marriage with Korean men, which are sometimes formed through Korean soap operas. Korean dramas, which portray romantic stories and gentle Korean male actors, accounted for up to 40% of soap operas on Vietnamese television (Hyun, 2007). These dramas make Vietnamese women form a positive impression of Korean men and affect their decisions on marriage migration (Vu and Lee, 2013). Onishi (2007)

detailed the stories of two women who got married to Korean men in 2007, only knowing about the country and its people through television and Korean dramas. However, it is noteworthy that in addition to Korean soap operas and television shows, news regarding marriage migrant women being mistreated by their Korean husbands is also presented in Vietnamese news. Nowadays, many women, for example, Interviewee 13, know better about Korea before deciding on marriage migration. She further mentioned that if the relationship between her and her husband turns out terrible, she still has another choice—running away and remaining undocumented to make money.

However, to gain such agency in the decision of marriage migrants, such as Interviewee 13, this study further emphasizes the role of ethnic networks, both indirectly and directly. Ethnic networks, in this article, refer to a set of relationships between Vietnamese marriage migrant women and their Vietnamese relatives and friends. Their ethnic networks also include those who are originally from Vietnam but currently living in Korea. First, the role of ethnic networks highlights the values of “cultural remittance,” which refers to the social values and practices that marriage migrants export to their natal families and hometowns through temporary visits, phone calls, or social media (Levitt, 1998). The successful and beautiful appearance of many marriage migrants inspires other relatives, friends, and young girls in their hometowns to dream of marrying Korean men (Hoang, 2013b). Accordingly, many women follow the marriage migration path of their relatives and friends in Korea.

In other cases, many women are confident in their decisions as they are directly introduced to their Korean husbands through a relative or a friend, or at least, as they know someone who is in Korea. Interviewee 9 is the case wherein she was directly introduced to her Korean husband through her sister, who is also a marriage migrant woman in Korea. Furthermore,

this type of connection was also found not only in the case of Interviewee 9 but also in other cases of our interviewees.

Another case is Interviewee 6, who was encouraged to come to Korea by a friend during the time her family was facing financial difficulty.

I was working in a factory in the south [of Vietnam], but my family had a big debt, and my salary could not help that much. My friend recommended I marry a Korean man and come to Korea to work. I did think about a fake marriage at first (Interviewee 6).

Although Interviewee 6, later came to Korea and engaged in a true marriage to her Korean husband, her statement showed that even though it was in 2006, prior to her decision, she had known someone who was already in Korea. Interviewee 13, whose story has been mentioned above, also revealed that she was informed about the marriage tour of her husband by a hometown friend living near her husband in Korea. She later encountered the matchmaker as her husband had already been registered in that marriage package. Despite the short meeting with her husband when she barely knew the Korean language, Interviewee 13 still decided to marry mainly because of the encouragement of her hometown friend. At least, she knows, if things do not turn out as her plan, she has a friend to guide her on what to do next.

## V. Discussion

Based on the analysis of the relations between governments, match-makers, and marriage migrants, this article illuminates two stages of the marriage migration regime under which different rules guide the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to Korea. First, the marriage migration

regime of Vietnamese women to Korea was formed during the mid-2000s dominated by the active role of the Korean government and the power of marriage matchmakers. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the government focused on tightening the regulations toward managing the activities of illegal matchmakers but failed due to its minimal penalty and “under-the-table payment” (Bélanger et al., 2011). Many young women and their families were persuaded to engage in marriage migration through economic benefits during this time.

Conversely, since the 2010s, there has been a twist in the marriage migration regime as the Korean government has tightened immigration regulations while the Vietnamese government started to open international marriages. Accordingly, the Vietnamese government has made special efforts to support international marriages through regulations on marriage registration procedures, the capability of local women centers to counsel and introduce international couples, and so forth. Hence, the marriage process with foreigners has become much easier (Hoang, 2013a). However, there was a mismatch, as the Korean government has tightened immigration policies, especially regarding stricter language ability requirements for Vietnamese women. While marriage migrant candidates must attend Korean classes and pass the exam, Korean men must prove that they have enough financial and physical ability to sponsor marriage migrant visas. Many marriage matchmakers then take advantage of marriage migrants due to the tightening of immigration policies. All marriage processes are now under the supervision of these marriage matchmakers.

Notwithstanding that the two stages of the marriage migration regime guide different rules in the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to Korea, this study highlights the role of ethnic networks in the gaining agency of many women. The enthusiastic governments and powerful matchmakers could guide the way marriage migration occurs, but the

ethnic network of each woman remains an important role in their decision to migrate. Many women decided to migrate following their relatives and friends in Korea, whether directly or indirectly. While some women are indirectly inspired by other economic and social values that marriage migrant women brought back, others have been directly matched to their Korean husbands through relatives or friends. In this study, ethnic networks have been found since the early cases of international marriage between Vietnamese women and Korean men; however, it has been neglected in previous studies focusing on economic and historical-structural approaches.

In conclusion, this study found that governmental policies and regulations not only guide the movement of people and the work of marriage matchmakers but also the way brokerages treat marriage migrant women. Furthermore, the author argues that while the active guidance of governments helps many women in their decision-making and settlement in Korea, the lack of cooperation between Vietnam and Korea leads to the domination and demonization of matchmakers. Thus, these findings emphasize the importance of transnational cooperation in supporting women on the move.

## VI. Conclusion

The scholarship on marriage migration has long considered the historical-structural context as well as the economic approach in analyzing the motivations of female migrants. The findings presented herein show how agencies are intertwined with the structural context, as the study discusses how the intermediate mechanism—marriage matchmakers—participates in the marriage migration regime and how marriage migrants make their decisions in such a challenging context.



The present study employs the concept of regime, which results from the relations between various actors and presents the condition that governs behaviors and decision-making, to articulate the marriage migration of Vietnamese women to Korea. By doing so, the contribution of this article is fourfold: (i) The concept of regime enables the analysis of the dynamics of actors in the complicated migration picture, thus, bridging the politics of migration and the practices of those on the move. (ii) While bridging the discourses and practices, the importance of the intermediate mechanism—marriage matchmakers—as well as the interplay of government and non-governmental actors in framing migration policies have been considered in this research. (iii) In line with calls regarding the avoidance of victimizing women in marriage migration, this study has shown how marriage migrant women made their decisions based on their ethnic networks despite the challenging context for international marriage between Vietnamese women and Korean men. (iv) Finally, the findings of this study have important policy implications. The author would suggest that greater cooperation at the government level is crucial to support marriage migrant women who undergo marriage migration with the help of matchmakers. Regardless of its illegal characteristic in Vietnam, it is undeniable that marriage matchmakers have dominated the market. Meanwhile, as long as matchmakers are legal in Korea and the entry of Vietnamese marriage migrant women into the country seems unabated, further cooperation between the two countries is vital.

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## Appendix 1. Table of the Law on Marriage Matchmakers from 2007 to 2017

No. of enacted laws	Content
No.8688 (2007.12.14 revised, 2008.06.15 implemented)	As international marriage is rapidly growing and causing social issues, legal regulations on marriage matchmaking business are established in order to contribute to the formation of a healthy marriage culture.
No.10301 (2010.05.17 revised, 2010.11.18 implemented)	Marriage businesses are required to provide information of two marriage candidates to each other, as well as the translation service; abolishing the deposit system and unifying the reporting and registering processes at the city—district—county level.
No. 11283 (2012.02.01 revised, 2012.08.02 implemented)	Only those who are 18 years old and above can participate in international marriage via matchmaking businesses. Any activities such as group meetings are prohibited. A person who has a mental illness or has been arrested for prostitution or other crimes in the last 10 years is asked to provide notarized related documents for the pre-marriage personal information collection. The company is required to be capitalized at 100 million won at least in the beginning and manage their titles and advertisements to avoid human rights violations.
No.11672 (2013.03.22 revised, 2013.09.23 implemented)	In the past, if any marriage matchmaker violated the local laws of a foreign country, there were no sanctions for them. However, since the new regulation was implemented, those who violated the foreign local law will not be able to operate the marriage matchmaking business again and they will be reported to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade for their violations.
No. 12078 (2013.08.13 revised, 2014.02.14 implemented)	In order to prevent the harm that international marriage matchmaking may cause to the participant, as well as to establish a strong legal regulation toward a healthy marriage culture via matchmakers, a survey on international marriages will be conducted every 3 years. A promotional video will be designed in order to enhance public awareness about international marriage.
No. 13177 (2015.02.03 revised, 2015.08.04 implemented)	The Ministry of Gender Equality and Families revises and issues the standard contract which will be used by marriage matchmaking businesses. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Families collaborates with the mayors/head chiefs of cities/boroughs in designing educational programs for marriage matchmaking businesses in order to reduce potential harm for participants.

No. of enacted laws	Content
No.14060 (2016.03.02 revised, 2016.03.02 implemented)	The legislative purpose of this law is clearly to manage marriage matchmaking businesses as well as to protect the participants' rights and foster a healthy marriage business culture. Additionally, the law specifies the role of the mayors/head chiefs of cities/boroughs in supervising the activities of marriage matchmaking businesses, including examining the personal information provision, etc. Another purpose of the law on marriage matchmaking businesses is to guarantee compensation in case there is any loss to the participant. Since the international marriage participants are those who usually occupy the low economic/social position in the society, they face the difficulty in checking the marriage matchmaker's liability for losses. In case any risk happens, as long as the participant proves that he/she has not done anything wrong, compensation is guaranteed.
No. 14441 (2016.12.20 revised, 2016.12.20 implemented)	To make it easier for the general public's understanding, the Japanese style Chinese character "dang-he" is replaced by the Korean style Chinese character "he-dang."
No. 14405 (2016.12.20 revised, 2017.3.21 implemented)	Changing the word "from the consulate" to "from the notarization specialized consul" in Article 10 Section 2-1 of the Act on Notarial Acts Done at Overseas Diplomatic and Consular Missions. Introducing the educational system about the notarization of specialized consul, as well as prescribing the regulations for examining the official documents of the country of residence.
No. 14700 (2017.3.21 revised, 2017.9.22 implemented)	As proposed by the Anti-Corruption & Civil Rights Commission and the regulation of the Secretariat of the National Assembly, the legal penalty deviation is revised from the standard of one-year imprisonment and 10 million won.
No. 15203 (2017.12.12 revised, 2017.12.12 implemented)	Currently, the status of international marriage matchmaking businesses as well as the cases of victims of these practices are surveyed every 3 years; henceforth, the activity of domestic marriage matchmaking businesses will be also included in the survey in order to provide the whole matchmaking business picture in the country.