IN THE BUSINESS OF CULTURAL REPRODUCTION: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MAIL-ORDER BRIDE PHENOMENON

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Synopsis — This article attempts to draw out the theoretical implications of the Mail-Order Brides phenomenon at the levels of state, family, and civil society, and thus provides an analytical framework for understanding the crossnational transfer of Mail-Order Brides (MOBs) as reproductive workers. It will first provide some theoretical explanations for understanding gender relations in connection with the MOB system. The article will then discuss the unique aspect of MOBs as one diversified form of today’s international female migration in the context of reproductive labor. Finally, the implications of new political possibilities that women’s social agency including MOBs as actors may evoke in order to restructure the patriarchal order will be addressed. The case of Japan will be employed to highlight the main issues and problems concerned. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The emergence of the Mail-Order Bride (MOB) phenomenon has been recognized as a new social phenomenon, albeit one that is a “modern form” of the mediated marriage arrangements practiced since early times in many societies. In various societies, customary matchmaking is generally conducted for compatriots or two individuals of the same nationality. It has been practiced either informally through friends, family, and distant relatives, or formally with the intervention of paid professional matchmakers.

From the 1960s onwards, the matchmaking industry (i.e., commercialized marriage mediation) has increased in size and spread more widely both within and across borders. The growth of the worldscale matchmaking industry was achieved through computerization and the advancement of communication systems, and has been associated with the individual experiences of transiency, isolation, and loneliness and with the interactive effects of intensified industrialization and accelerated urbanization as well as improved international mobility (del Rosario, 1994, p. 123).

Commercialized marriage mediation in the form of the MOB system is growing fast in many industrialized countries (Truong & del Rosario, 1985). In the late 1970s, the demand–supply patterns in the MOB system were primarily between men from industrialized countries in Western Europe and Australia on the demand side and women from South East Asia on the supply side (Stoop, 1994). In the 1980s and 1990s, demand–supply patterns diversified, bringing additional flows such as those between Western and Eastern Europe and between Japan and other East and South East Asian countries.

As far as Japan is concerned, women who migrate to Japan under the MOB system have diverse motivations. A survey done by the Commission for Overseas Filipinos in 1983 revealed that 65% were college graduates employed in relatively wealthy positions such as government officials and secretarial work, and only 24% were leaving the Philippines to improve their economic conditions (Maglipon, 1985, p. 33). Women left to fulfill a desire to

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live in a foreign country (16%), to petition (or support) other members of their families (12%), and to support their relatives financially (9%). Some women (6%) left their country to be free from hard work and family pressure (Sato, 1989, p. 125–126; Maglipon, 1985, p. 33). Women thus see the matchmaking system as a chance to cope with difficult situations by finding (financially) appropriate companions.

Another reason often given by MOBs reflects the idea that marriage is seen as a central feature of a woman’s life. For example, an increasing number of Korean women are motivated to become MOBs in order to escape from the social stigma attached to single women in Korean society. Becoming a MOB appears to be a coping strategy for single Korean women who have passed “marriageable age” (maximum 25 years old) and are believed to be constantly under pressure to get married. It is also said that in Japan there is a greater demand for Korean MOBs than for other nationalities because of their similar physical characteristics and the common cultural heritage shared by the two countries (Sasakawa, 1989, pp. 40, 42).

The latest trend in Japan is to source brides from the former Soviet Union. One major matchmaking agency has widened its supply of MOBs to add women from the former Soviet Union to the conventional pool of women available from the catchment areas of Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippines. It claims that the cost of a single matchmaking process is approximately ¥3,000,000 (US$30,000) (Asano, 1995, pp. 20–28).

As a crosscultural phenomenon, the MOB system may be considered a subsystem within the patriarchal order that provides substitutes to maintain the sexual division of labor. As such, the MOB system reflects a deeper structure of patriarchy in which a certain conception of femininity cannot be challenged. Whereas women in industrialized countries may have been able to challenge the system at an individual level, and to delay or resist marriage or to impose more stringent conditions upon it, they have not substantially changed the conception of femininity as mother and homemaker, nor can they change the sexual division of labor as a social structure. Nevertheless, their resistance leaves a gap in the domain of reproduction as motherhood and homemaking, a gap then filled by women from other countries.

The following discussion will further analyze several aspects of this issue. It will first provide an analytical framework for understanding gender relations at the levels of family, state, and civil society, as well as the connection between the MOB system. Here, my argument is not confined to one particular culture or society, but attempts rather to explore the issue in a wider view. The article will then discuss the crossnational transfer of MOBs as economic migrants, highlighting their role as reproductive workers. Finally, it will address future perspectives on the phenomenon, taking into account the implications of the new political possibilities that women’s social agency may evoke to restructure the patriarchal order. Here, the case of Japan will be employed to crystallize the problem area and the limits it confronts.

**GENDER RELATIONS AND THE MOB SYSTEM: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

As a social phenomenon that has emerged in industrial societies but involves a crossnational exchange relation, MOB must be placed in the specific trajectory of changing gender relations in industrialized society. The prevalence of MOBs as a system, and MOBs as substitutes and actors in multicultural marriages signify both a response of the patriarchal order to women’s resistance against marriage and domesticity and the relative strength of this order. The flexibility or rigidity of MOB system is manifested in the cultural space that is or is not available for MOBs to negotiate their individual identities.

In contemporary feminist thought, patriarchy means “... the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination” (Stacey, 1993, p. 53). But the advent of international capitalism invites an appreciation of interconnections between it and patriarchy. Thus, Mies writes:

... (C)apitalism cannot function without patriarchy, that the goal of this system, namely the never-ending process of capital accumulation, cannot be achieved unless patriarchal man–woman relations are maintained or newly created ... . Patriarchy thus consti-
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tutes the mostly invisible underground of the visible capitalist system. (Mies, 1986, p. 38)

Capitalist patriarchy is an intrinsically interconnected system. The key characteristic of capitalism is the social and sexual division of labor (Mies, 1986, p. 104). This “. . . division of labour along lines of gender” (Mackintosh, 1981, p. 2) involves two main dimensions—within paid work and between paid and unpaid work—and operates to value men’s work more highly than women’s work. The sexual division of labor is embedded in the hierarchical order of work organizations, and tolerates specific relations of wage distribution that tend to create disadvantages for women to achieve economic independence.

Here, I refer to unpaid work or women’s work as “reproductive work,” the work essential to maintain and produce human resources that also entails the reproduction of the whole social structure per se, including the reproduction of political ideologies (Mackintosh, 1981, p. 9). This reproductive work frequently takes place within the institution of marriage.

Unpaid work for human and social reproduction is usually categorized as domestic work, allocated mainly to women, and “. . . is commonly viewed to be done for love . . . (which is seen) as a basis of expectations from the wife/mother identity” (del Rosario, 1994, p. 226). It subscribes to a belief that women’s biological function is child-bearing, and is fortified by the “conjugal contract”:

. . . (I)t is the exchange made necessary by the family wage earned by the husband in the labour market, and the performance of unpaid domestic labour by the wife. (Whitehead, 1981, p. 103)

The division of labor between the sexes is further fortified via the activities of the state, which are intended to maintain a particular type of household. The idea of a heterosexual, male-headed family is easily located in state policies and their fiscal and social security system. Similarly, the state exercises great control over the formulation of the family through family law, industrial legislation, the provision of childcare facilities, and ideas about standards of living as well as the concept of motherhood (Burton, 1985, pp. 112, 114).

The “housewife” as a social agent has emerged in the process of the centralization of the economy, which implies that the state has interfered increasingly in every part of life by destroying the traditional family structure. It alters the nature of work in the home, and the ideas of “home” have shifted from sanctuary to family, to a social resource and to complimentary to society. Here, family as an institution is fortified, introducing a new concept of society as one large family (Turnaturi, 1987, pp. 261–263). Social interpretation of the work done by women under housewifization thus becomes problematic. Women’s devotion to domestic work is seen as “natural,” and attributed simply to biology, thus degrading women’s position within the wage labor market (Mackintosh, 1981, p. 11). As a result, a clear sexual division of labor within the household is envisioned, one that captures women and confines them to the household as housewives under the institution of marriage for domestic work so that the state or capitalism can externalize costs that they would otherwise have to cover (Mies, 1986, p. 110). The housewifization of women thus occurs concurrent with the proletariazation of men (Mies, 1986, p. 69). Despite the divide between home and society, this mobilization of people seems to indicate that these two processes interact deeply, and that the public and private realms have become increasingly interdependent.

As stated by Mies and others, the argument that sees structures as determinants of social agency has met its own limits. In short, the Marxist feminist school of thought believes in a “material” explanation for changing forms and systems of gender structures (Scott, 1988, p. 35). Nevertheless, this could only explain the emergence of the MOB system but without necessarily touching on agency, motivation of the MOBs themselves, their husbands, and the response of civil groups.

Connell and Scott offer useful propositions on agency. The recent work on feminists theories the state challenges the conventional notion of “the state as an entity and as being coherent” (del Rosario, 1994, p. 102). Instead, it demonstrates the state as a process, articulating the difference among men, women, and state practices, and negating perspectives that assert state structures as given (del Rosario, 1994, p. 102). In his analysis of process and structure, Connell provides a similar perspective by focusing on the dynamic process where
gender inequality is constructed and institutionalized in state practices and policies. Connell further argues that the state is not only a regulatory entity but profoundly involved in creating and determining new categories and new historical possibilities for the basic components of the gender order. Given its power to regulate and create, the state becomes a major influence on the political dynamics of gender relations, and its position remains unfixed. The state thus allows for new political possibilities to arise that may change structures (Connell, 1990, pp. 519–533).

Moreover, in her theory of gender and power, Scott wages that the dynamics of agency will be determined in political processes. “The nature of that process, of the actors and their actions, can only be determined specifically, in the context of time and place” (Scott, 1988, p. 49). Scott also points out the different possibilities and meanings that “new kinds of cultural symbols” may bring to gender structure.

As Connell claims, “gender relations are present in all types of institutions,” and they construct a major structure of most (Connell, 1987, p. 120). Here, clarification of the definition of “gender” per se may be crucial. Scott provides such a definition of gender as “... a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes, and... a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott, 1988, p. 42).

To comprehend gender relations in a society, it is first necessary to clarify how they are structured. For this purpose, Connell initiates his analysis by breaking down the concept of a single gender structure into components such as the sexual division of labor, power, and cathexis that are major structural elements in any gender regime (Connell, 1987, pp. 91, 99) and the patriarchal social order.

Here, the sexual division of labor is regarded as the part of a gendered system of production, consumption, and distribution. To put it more concretely, the organization of housework and childcare, the divisions between paid work and between wage and domestic work, discrimination in training and promotion, unequal wages and unequal exchanges in society all occur in the realm of the gendered division of labour (Connell, 1987, p. 96, cited in Maharaj, 1995, p. 60). Gender operates here at the institutional level where it gets profoundly interwoven in relations between the family, the state, and systems of production.

The structure of authority or control over gender relations is another crucial element, and is reflected in those hierarchies of the state, business, and family that exclude, regulate, or violate women institutionally and interpersonally (Connell, 1987, p. 96, cited in Maharaj, 1995, p. 60). As it is at the core complex of patriarchy, this specific structure of authority also becomes apparent in state control over gender ideology at the normative level. This is exemplified by the regulation of marriage and motherhood through implementation of certain state policies and by taxation and legal actions that create gendered social categories such as “husband” and “wife” (Connell, 1987, p. 130).

Such gendered role definitions support the element of cathexis. Socially constructed gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity play a significant role in defining work and roles in the family and in society. The formulation of such rigid sexual ideas are, as Connell writes, “... the fusion of emotional relations, power and the division of labour” (Connell, 1987, p. 125), and justifies the creation of a gender hierarchy that constitutes and tolerates the overall subordination of women while shaping women’s subjective identity.

Gender relations and hierarchies have varied characteristics in different societies depending on how the elements or components identified above are combined. The most extreme form is the male-centered structure known as patriarchy. “Gender-based” hierarchies are reproduced and maintained within social institutions such as the family, the workplace, schools, the market, and the state (Connell, 1987, pp. 119, 141).

Scott’s work identifies four dimensions in which the concept of gender may take form, i.e., symbolic, normative, institutional, and subjective. However, the significance in her work is that she highlights the role of the symbolic order. By making connections with the normative aspect of gender, and the way in which “... normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meaning of symbols that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities” (Scott, 1988, p. 43). These concepts are expressed within various doctrines and disciplines, and emerge as dominant, fixed binary oppositions, and categories that assert a
specific meaning of masculine and feminine. By definition, normative concepts of gender become “naturalized,” reproduced, and ingrained in a culture during the historical process. Scott further points out how hierarchical structures depend on generalized understandings of the “natural” male–female relationship. With regard to political power, the specific meaning of the male/female opposition becomes perhaps the most powerful primary reference. As this dichotomy needs to be fixed and dominant, its naturalness and divinity are upgraded and fortified by locating it outside human construction. Both the specifically contextualized gender subjectivity and the process of gender relationships then become part of the significant power (Scott, 1988, pp. 43, 48–49).

Here, it is clear how the symbolic order plays a role in shaping gender identity, and this is where the interpretation of agency becomes significant. Women’s agency, or more concretely, the foreign women who replace those Japanese women resisting patriarchy, and the women in civic groups who provide support services in the context of this study, is an outcome of the interactions of gender principles in all the four dimensions mentioned by Scott (1988). The four aspects are key elements of understanding the transformation of gender relations, and the nature of resistance formulated by women.

Through the fragmentation of reproductive services, work such as child-care and care of the elderly and sick are no longer allocated exclusively to women but are allowed to be shared with other state or commercial institutions. Concurrently, the size of the family has shrunk from the traditional extended family to a smaller, nuclear family unit, a change attributed to developments in the economy and in ideology, law, and technology. As a result, women gained control over their own fertility and both sexes have gained greater freedom in making decisions concerning childbirth (del Rosario, 1994, p. 188). This has been accompanied by an increase in female labor participation in paid employment, and has facilitated growing numbers of women profiting from the welfare system, the automation of housework, rising feminist consciousness, and easier access to divorce.

Technological innovations have indeed eased the burden of working women’s double shift, yet for ideological reasons, women are still regarded as holding primary responsibility for housework. As feminist consciousness has become more widespread, women are more commonly articulating their dual productive and reproductive responsibilities as grounds for redistribution of economic resources in marriages. However, the majority of marriage partners rather interpret women’s negotiations for economic equality as a threat to lose their conventional access to reproductive services that have previously been offered for free. The separation of marriage and motherhood was achieved through the discovery of birth control, and substantial earning power has enabled women to escape unhappy marriages (del Rosario, 1994, pp. 191–192). Simultaneously, women’s prospects and expectations for marriage have changed and diverged from those of men.

In the case of Japan, the emergence of newly created agency of the professional housewife and its social significance must be seen as the major and unique cause of MOB phenomenon. The process of housewifization was required to maintain Japanese corporate society and its dependence on a subtle combination of patriarchy and an extreme emphasis on motherhood. The system has ensured the maintenance of reproductive work while greatly contributing to the country’s capital accumulation because housewives provide cheap labor for the market (Takahashi, 1994). The rigid sexual division of labor within the household has been confirmed as part of economic restructuring, and this reshaping and redefining of sexual ideology, as well as the social value of the family and the housewife, has been tolerated at the state’s convenience. Notwithstanding the relatively high social status attached to the housewife, many married women suffer serious self-identity crises caused from the extreme social isolation (Handa, 1983; Kanamori & Kitamura, 1986). Women’s resulting covert denial of their oppressive marriage roles such as mother and wife has started threatening the basic premises of the Japanese social structure. Faced with this problem, Japan has followed other industrialized countries in seeking to introduce MOBs as a solution.

Given this background, the emergence of the MOB system may be seen as a modification of women’s resistance to being house-
wives under unfavorable conditions. The MOB system is considered an instrument for finding substitute labor for reproduction and wage work. In this view, MOBs fulfill marriage expectations that promise the traditional roles and values that satisfy male demands in the marriage and the patriarchal structure.

**MOBs AS REPRODUCTIVE MIGRANT WORKERS**

The MOB system is a coping strategy that has developed in response to women’s resistance. MOBs are substitutes for women in industrialized countries who resist conventional forms of marriage based on the ideology of oppressive domesticity. They are pulled in from outside of the country to fill a gap created between women and men. It appears that MOBs constitute one diversified form of today’s international female migration in the context of reproductive labor. It is thus possible to categorize them as “female migrant reproductive workers” (Truong, 1996, p. 37), marked by a high degree of international mobility.

The emergence of an international division of labor in the realm of reproductive work is recognized as a striking feature in current trends of international female migration. This division of labor is ruled by a crosscultural homogeneous yardstick that determines the domain of social reproduction, i.e., sex-affective services, caretaking, and the social maintenance of labor, as a realm exclusive to women (Truong, 1996, p. 29). Culturally and socially different societies organize and share common tactics to maintain the conventional models of social reproduction by transferring reproductive labor across national boundaries. The implications of such a transfer, which affects states, capital, communities, families, and migrant women or MOBs themselves, need to be carefully examined as well (Truong, 1996, pp. 29–30).

Further exploration of two major aspects of reproductive labor explains why shifts in the organization of reproduction may be sensitive to changes in economic climates, and take a certain direction from those changes. First, ideological and cultural bindings and character define reproduction as women’s responsibility, thus making reproduction unrecognized, devalued, and unpaid or underpaid. Moreover, the cultural and human dimension of reproductive labor requires interceding and nurturing skills that cannot be easily technologized or replaced by men without resocialization to create a more equalized division of labor between sexes (Truong, 1996, pp. 33–34).

Reproduction is also affected by a number of other factors external to the gendered work organization in the homes. These are: changes in working patterns and living arrangements; in patterns of production and consumption; and in state policy concerning the social sector and social services. Increased female participation in waged work without sufficient state support for providing care services for children and older dependents creates labor shortages with gender-specific characteristics. These shortages are then exacerbated by the rigid sexual division of labor in the home. Women’s burdens have intensified, leading women to develop coping strategies that include reallocation of their work onto female relatives and hired labor in the form of maids and housekeepers (Truong, 1996, p. 34).

Along similar lines, del Rosario’s findings (1994) on the MOB system point to an expansion and diversification in the lower range of the service sector that reflects an acute demand for consumption and personalized services. This demand is in response to shifts in the patterns of middle-class women’s employment and to their changing attitudes towards domestic work in many industrialized countries both in Western Europe and Asia. Given this background, rising demands for fragmented reproductive work in the form of domestic services and the MOB system has been achieved through wages or a marriage contract (Truong, 1996, p. 35).

The increase in the transnational flow of female reproductive workers from low-income regions to high-income indicates that there are significant gaps that cannot be met by indigenous labor. Migrants’ remittances to their home country also create substantial foreign exchange. For MOBs, however, the invisibility resulting from the idea that the institution of marriage is a “private domain” hides the concrete figure of remittances made by MOBs in official statistics. Nevertheless, it is possible to assume that MOBs’ home countries benefit substantially from this source (del Rosario, 1994, p. 252; Diaz Ojeda, 1995). The state is not the sole beneficiary. As del Rosario asserts, the MOB system, with its promise of marriage to a foreigner and the possibility of migration guaranteeing a
high potentiality of remittance, is the most acceptable and viable option open for women in the case of the Philippines. Participation in the MOB system may be socially recognized as a coping strategy for survival or ensuring the upward mobility of MOBs’ original families. It is often performed as an obligation towards family members within a specific cultural context (del Rosario, 1994, pp. 204–205).

The MOB system is thus an instrument of economic activity, and MOBs’ remittances are regarded as a new form of capital accumulation. The exploitative dimension of waged and unwaged work performed by MOBs is another element of this new economic formation, one supported by Shukuya’s (1988) and del Rosario’s (1994) findings. Rather than assuming a clear division between production–reproduction in MOBs’ work, they argue that women’s labor is not limited exclusively to household management, caring for and nurturing families, but that labor intended for household consumption often turns out to channel directly to the market economy. Furthermore, MOBs often find themselves situated in subordinated conditions or secondary positions to their local counterparts in the labour market of their host country. This is ascribed to their multiple identities across gender, race, and nationality, and involves a substantial degree of exploitation and subordination of MOBs’ labor. This process is, however, perceived as a form of adaptive response, and thus tolerated.

Unlike other female migrant workers whose appeal is mainly as economic instruments, MOBs are also seen as reproducers of culture through the institution of “marriage” by family, community, and society of their new country of domicile. As such, the MOBs’ particular placement within networks of marriage, family, and labor leads them to manifest more sharply those sociocultural and political aspects common to female migrant work in general. The sensitive situation of each individual MOB makes it complex and difficult for MOBs to become one united agency, bonded by common interests to claim a stake in their receiving countries.

**WOMEN’S AGENCY AND THE NEW POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES FOR THE STRUCTURAL TRANSITION**

The major question here is to what extent the social agency can change the structure of patriarchy. More accurately, to what degree and to what point can such women’s agency as MOBs themselves, feminists, and a handful of grass-root support groups challenge and transform the cause of women’s subordination and oppression, in other words, the structures of patriarchy. Given the complexity and the uniqueness of the MOB phenomenon, these questions are especially important. Furthermore, what conditions and strategies would such a process of social change involve, and what consequences and implications would such a transformation have for states, communities, families, and MOBs themselves.

Connell’s argument (1990) that social agency can transform the structure of hegemonic masculinity, or patriarchy, is indeed very powerful. However, the questions posed here are rather what can be transformed, and to what extent social agency can change male-centered structures. This article will use the case of Japan to examine these questions further.

One reason for the MOB phenomenon in Japan is a labor shortage in both productive and reproductive realms. Against this background, four options for the future are envisioned for the maintenance of its economic growth: (1) initiate gender-specific reforms to ensure a more equitable structure of production and distribution in agriculture and industry; (2) robotize further; (3) tap the female and the elderly labor force for its industry; and (4) rely on foreign labor (Truong, 1996, p. 40).

The introduction of the MOB system by authorities is obviously a stop-gap measure, and has produced its own contradictions as time has passed. These include racial discrimination against children born to MOBs and their Japanese spouses, and state and communal practices that work to integrate MOBs and thereby erode their ethnic identity and increase their vulnerability as women and foreigners.

The legal and social condition of MOBs in Japan is in need of much improvement. In many cases, MOBs are deprived of legal rights and treatment, and are often placed in more difficult and exploitative conditions than are Japanese married women. In particular, three major issues specific to MOBs may be identified: (1) MOBs’ vulnerable legal status as both aliens and as women; (2) economic matters referring to house management and remittances; and (3) psychological conditions that make
MOBs prisoners of a particular mental framework and prejudices in the name of “empowerment” at the expense of their ethnic identity and dignity (Kojima, 1995, pp. 51–55).

In response, considerable but as yet unsatisfactory actions have been initiated by the different levels of society. In addition to actions taken by policy makers, relevant women’s agencies including MOBs themselves, committed feminists and grass-root support groups in the MOBs’ new country of domicile have initiated support programs. Moreover, conventional supports may be categorized into two major groups: (1) programs and courses created to assist MOBs adjustment to a Japanese way of life, or to reeducate them to be “good” Japanese wives and mothers; and (2) shelters providing support to women filing divorces and attempting to resolve domestic violence issues.

Often, the former has turned out to be controversial, as it is very hard to define what is best for MOBs. The majority of such programs targeted at MOBs stem from good intentions, and are aimed at promoting better understanding of Japanese society and people. For instance since 1988, the Ministry of Education has been making efforts to promote international exchange activities such as introducing the basic Japanese language, custom, and cooking by utilizing Japanese women with overseas living experiences as volunteers (Prime Minister’s Office, 1990, p. 43). Japanese language classes and culture courses are quite common both in rural and urban areas, yet many projects are of short duration and concentrated in the specific districts in remote areas, and do not fully satisfy the needs of MOBs and their families. Other support projects initiated by Public Health Centres seem more promising. In Yamagata, MOBs have been provided health support programs specifically designed for bearing and rearing babies, mostly home visits by public health nurses (PHN). Counselling services are also available both from PHN and through language-assisted telephone line services (interview with Yamagata Prefectural Office, July 1995). Similar actions have increased gradually in urban areas such as Kawasaki city (“oenshimasu ikokude,” 1990). Classes and counselling are believed to help MOBs manage the problems they may face, and to promote their integration into society. Very few of such classes, however, assign value to MOBs’ indigenous wisdom or to the cultural assets of their home cultures.

On the other hand, MOBs have organized to teach local people English language and ethnic cooking, and mobilized to engage in cultural exhibitions on a number of occasions in several villages. Such activities could create an outlet for easing stress generated in the everyday life of MOBs, and also give them an opportunity to sustain their self-esteem and ethnic identity. Under the grandiose title of “Positive Social Participation,” however, these activities may occasionally turn out to bring new interests to the community rather than to benefit MOBs themselves.10

Regarding the other axis of support, shelters, it has been estimated that only four relevant shelters exist at present. Most shelters do not exclusively serve MOBs but also deal with “Japayukisan” (Japan-bound Asian migrant women) as well as Japanese women in the same situations. Wives of Japanese men rank the second largest group of all (29.4%), and when combined with “Japayukisan” visitors they comprise 80% of all visitors (HELP, 1993, p. 5). Reasons for seeking asylum varies, however, one organization’s records from March 1993, reveal that as many as 57% of visitors (HELP, 1993, p. 7) suffer from domestic violence or heavy discord and isolation within the family caused by language barriers and cultural difference. It may be possible to illustrate how serious and complex the issue is through an example: ideas of ethnic hierarchy degrade Japanese men married to Asian brides, this disdain is then blamed on and transferred to wives and, by extension to children’s feelings towards their mothers (Iyori et al., 1988, pp. 232–245, and a personal interview in June 1995). Some 30% of MOBs are also in need of economic assistance, reflecting women’s vulnerable situation of total economic dependence on their husbands (HELP, 1993, p. 7).

The burning question here is what MOBs themselves feel they need most. It is indispensable for MOBs to be exposed to the Japanese social order that defines lives, customs, and values in order to survive in Japanese society. This does not, however, mean it is necessary to degrade and erase MOBs cultural identities. By looking closely at each program and reexamining its underlying assumptions, it has become clear that MOBs are expected to accept
and follow the Japanese way in all parts of life. MOBs’ indigenous wisdom, learned experience and value-system, imprinted onto their body and soul, are either denied or regarded as “not appropriate” simply because they have not been generated from the soil of Japanese culture. At first, it is softly “suggested” that MOBs learn how to cook Japanese food and how to socialize with people along Japanese rules of conduct so as to make their lives in Japan easier. However, it does not take much time before they realize that in fact, they have little choice in the matter.

In consequence, existing programs on both the macro- and micro-levels designed to “empower” MOBs acceptance of, or survival in, the society ultimately increase their vulnerability as foreigners, women, and wives or mothers. The Japanization of MOBs ensures and thus reproduces a traditional model of motherhood and wifehood that Japanese women themselves contest due to its oppressive nature. In other words, such supports are carefully organized around the core idea of specific gender relations and thus reinforce existing structures of authority, labor, and cathexis.

The number of MOBs and their children are rapidly growing, and this phenomenon is creating a stir within Japanese society. In some areas, children of MOBs compose the majority of the total enrolment in elementary schools (“Hanano Kokorowa,” 1994; Kuwayama, 1993). Here, the conventional notion that reduces ethnicity to biology should be also challenged. The argument proposed that the maintenance of the symbolic idea of “pure Japanese” through the interaction of two different ethnic groups has been secured only by the biological reduction of MOBs.

For sustainability, Japanese society may thus need to change in two directions: (1) to stop pulling-in “substitutes” as the first step to change and reconstruct gender relations; and, (2) alter notions of ethnicity or otherness that stress “ethnic purity” based on the distinctive racial hierarchy to justify the Japanization of MOBs and other foreign residents (Agatsuma & Yoneyama, 1977).

In recent years, foreign brides have begun to make public appeals. This development clarifies the differences in vision between support providers and support seekers. Support groups initiated by MOBs themselves may show little difference in the types of activities and services provided, yet their existence signifies and represents a change in the power dynamics between the two groups involved. Because MOB themselves in the role of support providers share similar experiences and backgrounds with the brides who seek support, the process of assistance may involve less tensions or gaps of understanding between people involved. Furthermore, such support services may not curtail MOBs’ ethnic identity, but rather, it has the potential to reinforce their bond as foreign brides. Such support may also enhance self-esteem and autonomy by emphasizing identities and social roles of MOBs other than mother/wife or housewife. In other words, activities by specific women’s agency may challenge conventional structures of labor and cathexis, opening space for negotiations to breach or change a certain level of the patriarchal order.

One such group is the Filipina Circle of Advancement and Progress (FICAP). It is one of the few civil groups that tackles the stereotypes and stigma attached to Filipina/Japanese marriages. FICAP aims to facilitate enhancing opportunities for fellow women to upgrade their life choices by widespread networking through the country. The group offers computer/language courses for vocational training, and provides cultural/language education for Japanese–Filipino children both in Japan and in the Philippines. Similar classes are also available for Japanese husbands for the better understanding of their spouses (Hui, 1996).

Further efforts to change the “real” structure of male power by women’s collective action have begun to be realized through revisions to the immigration, custody, and children’s rights legislation, and through changes in controls over women’s mobility, etc. One promising change in policy on a nationwide scale was the notice sent to regional immigration bureaus and overseas diplomatic establishments on July 30, 1996. This notice, which was drafted along with the principles of “the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” and is a de facto policy, allows foreign single mothers supporting children whose fathers are confirmed to be Japanese to receive special permission to stay beyond their visa status. Permission is valid for 1 year, but can be renewed annually. Prior to this notice,
cases had been handled case by case, a policy that had resulted in a mushroom increase of deported children with Japanese nationality from 164 in 1990 to 1,085 in 1995 (Kitamura, 1996). The new ministry policy is also applicable for foreign mothers who have already been deported but wish to return to Japan to raise their children in the country. Such a perspective reflects the authority’s prime concern with children’s rights, where attention had been formerly allocated to parents’ unlawfulness as aliens (Kitamura, 1996).

The MOB issue illustrates one form of the patriarchal bargaining involved in changing or challenging a structure. As many feminist studies have shown, women strategically engage in roughly three groups of resistance categorized as overt, covert, and negotiation to maximize security, stability, and dignity within the constraints created by patriarchal societies. Although overt resistance is organized collectively, covert strategies are hidden and invisible, and based on individual action. Negotiated resistance uses both collective and individual strategies (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kojima, 1995). In this context, MOBs are barely institutionalized and yet their individual resistance has created social pressure and resulted in a substantial challenge to patriarchal authority, as stated above. Bargaining with power has had obvious effects related to labor and cathexis at different levels, and may inspire and encourage other waves of challenges by women’s agency.

In summary, a network of women’s organizations initiated by MOBs is critical. Internal pressure stemming from “outsiders” in a society appears to hold promise for different levels of transformation in the patriarchal order. Changes in gender relations are indispensable, but the voice of MOBs should get public attention and be allied with the actions by other women’s advocates to: (1) raise public awareness and to campaign for the improvement of MOBs’ legal and social status; (2) in corporate MOBs into more public realms to upgrade their social image; and (3) create opportunities for development education aimed at providing better understanding of other racial and ethnic groups. These actions need to occur on national/international and government/civil society platforms. Greater awareness will lead to more constructive gender relations, and thus, will contribute to the development of fairly gender-balanced society. This process may be also assisted by interactions with the numerous social actors internationally.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the MOB phenomenon reflects the social implications of reproductive work and its attached value that are subject to socially constructed masculinism. This is assured, and fortified through interactions of social agency and institutions under hegemonic patriarchy that appears to be non-negotiable. As explored, marriage signifies more than two strangers getting together. It signifies a combination of interests far beyond the boundary of the couple, which relate to the sustainability of the patriarchal structure. The crossnational transfer of MOBs may be seen as a flow of “reproductive migrant workers” under the conjugal contract. Yet, because of the “private” nature ascribed to the realm of reproduction, MOBs and their work have been disguised, leaving them vulnerable, undervalued, and on occasions exploited. The MOB system is a new form of capital accumulation, and functions also as a means to reproduce culture.

The MOB system is a stop-gap measure that embodies a number of contradictions that have only started to be exposed. Drawing on Connell’s and Scott’s propositions, this article has also discussed political possibilities by which the social agency may hypothetically possess power to change the structure of the patriarchy. The case of Japan has been illustrated to elaborate how and to what extent relevant women’s agency can change real and symbolic structures centred around the male-value and the notion of ethnic purity.

As demonstrated in the case of Japan, the MOB phenomenon is the outcome of complicity of the state and civil society. The state however, must be seen as a dynamic process rather than as a fixed and unchanging entity. It is time for the dynamic voices and silent screams of the diverse group of women who are MOBs and their families to resound in both state and civil society.

ENDNOTES

1. del Rosario defines the term Mail-Order Brides (MOB) as following: “(it) refers to any women . . . who
utilizes the system of introduction provided by commercial institutions for the prime purpose of marriage with a foreign national” (del Rosario, 1994, p. 2).

2. Examples include some European societies (Irish peasants: Connell, 1968 cited in del Rosario, 1994, p. 120), as well as immigrant minorities living in Europe and the United States such as Polish, Irish, Italian Jewish, German, Chinese, and others. (del Rosario, 1994, pp. 120–122). Arranged marriages are also common in many Asian countries, for examples as “omiai” in Japan.

3. In recent years, the increase of incidents of trafficked women sold as brides to single men in rural, economically underdeveloped areas has been serious in China. According to one official study, 88,759 women and girls were kidnapped or trafficked by false job promises between 1991 and 1996. This organized crime has expanded its territory to the neighboring countries, involving numbers of victims from Vietnam (Ishikawa, 1997; Shimizu, 1996).

4. Different sources show different profiles of MOBs. For example, a study by the Filipina Circle of Advancement and Progress (FICAP) in Tokyo revealed that only 7% of Filipinas have university degrees, while many were without high school diplomas (Hui, 1996). This may reflect the diversified and complex profiles of MOBs.

5. A survey conducted by the Commission for Overseas Filipinos (Maglupon) targeted some 35 fiancée visa holders, a large number of whom were assumed to be MOB. The nationality of their companions was not specified, which implies the survey may have been implemented across borders. Nevertheless, a significant similarity is recognised between cases in Europe/Australia and cases in Japan.

6. This is ascribed to aging Japanese farming communities facing a serious labor shortage. The influence of industrialization and urbanization, cultural restrictions on women’s inheritance rights and other oppressive factors in women’s lives in rural areas have caused women to migrate to urban areas (del Rosario, 1994, p. 190). The MOB system was consequently introduced to a number of villages by municipal authorities to resolve the serious bride shortage.

7. Daughters in traditional families in the Philippines are believed to maintain closer ties with their families of origin even after marriage, as they hold primary responsibility to their family members. Sons, on the other hand, are given more freedom and are expected to be more independent and responsible to their own families (Lauby & Stark, 1988, pp. 485–486, in Ojeda, 1995, p. 37).

8. Findings of Ojeda on remittances show that many Filipina migrants (many of whom are MOBs) in The Netherlands engage in service sector, jobs shunned by the local labor force for their unfavorable working and wage conditions. Paid domestic service, both in the regular and black market accessed through their own informal network, is the most common work available for Filipina migrants (Diaz Ojeda, 1995, pp. 31, 36).

9. According to research conducted in the Mogami district of Yamagata, Japan 1995, with a population of culturally diverse MOB residents from China, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, etc., 70% of MOBs have married into farming households as cohabitants with their parents-in-law. Women represent a significant portion of farm labor. They are often underpaid as supplementary agricultural work force outside the household due to gender differentiated wage agreements. Another study revealed that while a half of Korean MOBs and 30% of MOBs of other nationalities were exclusively housewives; the rest had been urged by their families to take outside jobs at neighboring factories for the prime purpose of familiarizing themselves with people and community. Again, these tasks tend to be low paid and require little skill (Nakazawa, 1995, cited in Nakamura, 1995, p. 39; Shukuya, 1988, pp. 225–227, 290).

10. T village is recognized for accepting numbers of Korean MOB. The Traditional Korean pickles known as kimchi have become a best-selling village product and make a significant contribution to the local economy. Additionally, Little Korea will be constructed within the village as a part of the tourism promotion plan.

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