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## **Learning in Transitions: Migrant Women Reflecting on Life Trajectories and Constructing Self-identity**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine how foreign wives in Korea present themselves in relation to the dominant discourse surrounding them through stories of migration and marriage experiences.

*Keywords:* transnational migration, migrant women, biographical learning, identity

### **Introduction and Research Purpose**

Historically considered a culturally and ethnically homogenous society, South Korea is recently emerging as a migration-receiving country. Marriage migration, prevalently joined by females from neighboring countries, is a major drive that contributes to the country's demographic change. In response, the Korean government strategically adopted multiculturalism (*damunhwa*) in 2006 and launched a series of social integration policies for multicultural families. Foreign wives are at the center of the Korean multicultural discourse because they form families with Koreans and live as permanent residents.

Societal stereotypes about foreign wives cast them as passive, poor, and undereducated who choose international marriage to 'marry up' in the absence of love (Kawaguchi & Lee, 2017). Such perception is associated with how marriage migration is often facilitated, involving a quick marriage tour arranged by commercial marriage agencies (Kawaguchi & Lee, 2017). In the Korean context, the terms foreign wife and *damunhwa*, the latter referring to multicultural family, are tied with a negative image of low social class and status and those who need welfare benefits (H. Kim, 2010). Such representations are reinforced and reproduced by the media (A. Kim, 2014).

Existing literature on foreign wives provides us with insights into the general challenges related to their social adjustment. Still, voices of the women are barely heard, especially regarding their identity shifts and negotiations in the migration context. Uncovering how foreign wives are located within the surrounding discourse and how they respond is crucial because it shapes their integration processes into Korean society (Grzymala-Kazlowski, 2016). In this context, through foreign wives' selective stories around their transnational migration and marriage experiences, this study examines how the women construct self-identity in relation to their popular narrative.

### **Biographical Learning in Context of Migration**

This study adopts the biographical learning approach. In adult education, it was introduced in the early 1990s, recognizing biography as a 'field of learning' (Alheit, 1994). In today's society, where traditional life course designs are less valid and "biographies are becoming more complicated, more individual, less 'normal'" (Alheit, 1994, p. 285), people are more responsible for coping with frequent and unexpected life changes. When people face life changes or disruptions, they do not just pass or endure them. They engage and reflect on their experiences (often without realizing it) and seek to change the situation. Therefore, the concept focuses on people's ability to deal with life.

Struggling with and reworking identities is at the center of biographical learning in the migration context (Hallqvist, 2014; Thunborg & Bron, 2019). Migration is a significant transitional experience in one's life, and the transition process is often not smooth. Facing different cultural, social, and political norms and values, migrants feel dislocated (Bron, 2002). Migrants are also put into questions about belonging and self, particularly concerning how others see them (Bron, 2000). To redefine the self and find their place in a new social context, they rework their sense of self and negotiate with the changes they are undergoing.

Migrants rebuild their identities by telling and reflecting on their life stories (Hallqvist, Ellström, & Hydén., 2012). Recalling the significant life events and experiences from the past to the present, drawing connections between them, and interpreting them in relation to where they are now is a learning process and effort to construct self-identity (Bron, 2002). The biographical learning approach in this study helps investigate foreign wives' marriage and migration trajectories as learning trajectories. It enables us to explore how foreign wives interpret and give meanings to their significant transitional moments and experiences in their life-course to make sense of themselves and their lives in new circumstances.

## Method

The study draws on narratives obtained from a larger qualitative research project examining how foreign wives construct their self-identities and work-identities following life transitions incurred by transnational migration and marriage. In total, 15 women of various backgrounds (e.g., nationality, age, education, marriage years, years of living in Korea) participated in the study. Data sources for this study include in-depth interviews and personal conversations. The interviews centered on the participants' significant life events and experiences that initiated changes and disruptions in their lives (e.g., marriage, migration, people, professional work). For this study, I focus on the data that are directly related to: What are the key events and experiences that define their life? How did they affect them? How do they describe themselves and their life situation in relation to the dominant discourse? I used thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), mainly following an inductive approach, to generate initial codes, identify patterns, and refine the themes.

## Findings

I first describe how my participants became those who are commonly addressed as foreign wives based on their transnational movement stories. Next, I describe how the women construct self-identity in response.

### *Various Departures in the Women's Transnational Journeys*

The mainstream discourse on foreign wives represents them as those who marry for economic reasons without love (M. Kim, 2018). They are assumed to directly come from their country of origin, primarily Southeast Asia, without barely knowing their husbands and Korean society. In contrast to such representations of foreign wives in the discourse, out of 15 participants, only five women initially entered Korea as *marriage migrants*. Only two among them, Stella and Miyoung, each coming from the Philippines and Vietnam, fit the image of foreign wives in the discourse. Each woman chose marriage migration motivated by religious faith and economic hardship. The other three women (Yoko, Nana, Suhyun) came to Korea immediately following their marriages, but their marriages were not arranged but were built on romance. They met their husbands via personal networks and gradually developed relationships, resulting in marriage migration.

Two women (Dolgormaa, Mei) came to Korea as *labor migrants* and later became foreign wives. Once married before their current marriage, both women initially came to Korea to seek a better future and restore self-confidence while earning money. Three women (Khutulun, Zolzaya, and Irena) came to Korea in their late 10s and early 20s as *international students*, and later met their husbands. Because their primary motivation was to study and prepare for career opportunities, marriage was not a part of their initial plan. The last five women (Yanyu, Jun, Joanna, Jian, Karina) accompanied their husbands as *dependents*. If marriage migrants immediately came to Korea following their marriage, they formed families in their country of origin and later decided to migrate to Korea. Their primary motivation was to sustain their family, particularly concerning their children. They reported not expecting to migrate to Korea upon their marriage. They negotiated personal preferences in respect of their husbands' careers.

In contrast to dominant discourse, most women gradually developed their relationships with their husbands before marriage, which many reported as unexpected or unplanned events that changed their lives. Whereas foreign wives are described as victims of commercial marriage who do not have the freedom to choose their marriage (M. Kim, 2018), the women's stories indicated they were actors in their marriage and migration projects. Not only the women married out of love, but also their desires to get out of traditional style of living, pursuit of adventure, and illusions about Korea also contributed to their decision makings to migrate to Korea and/or to marry their husbands. Although each woman had different departure and reasons for their marriage and migration, within the discourse, they are reduced to 'foreign wives,' which presume their unified collectivities and emphasize their social positions as dependents of Korean male spouses.

### ***The Women's Different Self-identifications***

After living in Korea from shortly three years to even more than 20 years, the women were aware of how the terms foreign wives and *damunhwa* are negatively perceived in Korean society. This section presents how they respond to the surrounding discourse and construct own identities. I organized them under the following categories: conceding, mixed, distancing, and denying.

**Conceding: "I admit I am a foreign wife."** Throughout our interactions and the interviews, six women (Stella, Suhyun, Miyoung, Mei, Jun, Dolgormaa) identified themselves as foreign wives and *damunhwa*, but for different reasons. The women were aware of how the terms serve as identity labels that distinguish them from mainstream Korean society. However, their perception of *damunhwa* as a useful beneficiary tool led them to accept such group construction positively. For instance, Jun, originally from China, came to Korea following her husband's persuasion. She learned about a local multicultural family support center (MFSC) through her husband. She is currently taking its vocational education program to get into a more stable job than her current Chinese language tutoring work, which she gained the information through the MFSC. Jun commented,

It's amazing that Korea provides free education to foreign wives. Institutions like MFSC are hard to imagine in China. Why should I complain? They [MFSC] help us in many ways to adjust well. I have taken several courses already. I regret that I didn't know the center earlier.

Drawing comparisons to services available for foreign wives in China, Jun highly valued access to free resources and opportunities because she is a foreign wife. Other women who perceived

themselves as foreign wives also actively used their local MFSCs, from daycare services and job counseling to various educational programs in computer skills, parenting, and cooking.

Sometimes, the direction of social mobility influenced their self-identification as a foreign wife. For instance, Dolgormaa, from Mongolia, positively perceived herself as a foreign wife because it provides a safety net that protects her legally. Before her marriage to her current husband, Dolgormaa used to work as an undocumented migrant. Dolgormaa compared her status before and after marriage:

You know, I was *bul-chae* [undocumented migrant] a long time ago. There was always a threat of being caught, although I was never caught. We [other migrants] used to inform each other which regions are being investigated like ‘rush to home, hide and don’t come out for days.’... Compared to when I was *bul-chae*, now I have a visa. You don’t know how much it is relieving. It’s like having a qualification in some way. I don’t have to hide anymore, and I can get a salary.

For Dolgormaa, being a foreign wife lifted her status and sense of security. Also emphasized in her words, “I can get a salary,” is that she is now fairly paid at work because her legal status protects her compared to the old days when she had to endure poor work conditions.

**Mixed: “I am, but I don’t want to be confined.”** Four women (Zolzaya, Khutulun, Karina, Jian) generally conceived themselves as foreign wives but indicated in their narratives that they do not want to be confined by “the identification tag,” as Khutulun pointed out. All of them except Jian studied in Korea as international students before marriage, and they similarly shared the accounts of shifting social identity after marriage. For instance, Zolzaya, originally from Mongolia, contrasted how Koreans differently treated her after her marriage:

When I first came as an international student, people were curious about me. It was nothing discriminatory. As I said, international students are considered to come to Korea to learn the language and culture. So, people tried to help me and show me how nice Korea was. You must remember this. When I was treated as an international student, people wanted to *introduce* Korea to me, but as a foreign wife, people wanted to *teach* me. Do you get what I mean? Whether I graduated college or not, my overall life is not important anymore. I should be taught because I come from a poorer country and married a Korean guy. I am fundamentally treated differently.

Zolzaya’s positionality shifted dramatically after her marriage. It was a shift from an educated and welcomed guest to an ignorant and poor being who should ultimately be helped assimilate into Korean society. She embraced her multiple identities as she said, “I am a migrant. I am a foreigner. I am a foreign wife. I am *damunhwa*. I am everything.” However, expressed in her above narrative is not only unequal treatment facing foreign wives but also her frustration with feeling stuck with her identity as a foreign wife among her other identities and qualities.

**Distancing: “I am, but I prefer to be called a Chinese.”** Sometimes the women (Yoko, Nana, Yanyu) indirectly refuse to be defined as foreign wives. For instance, Yanyu, from China, is familiar with Koreans addressing her as a foreign wife and attends a vocational education program at a local MFSC, but she avoids describing herself as a foreign wife. Instead, she represents her as a “foreigner” or “Chinese.” Her distancing from foreign wives or *damunhwa* can be noted from her narrative:

I am concerned about *damunhwa*. I feel very sorry. I am sorry that many *damunhwa* families have financial problems. We are fine. Also, I heard that some *damunhwa* children are not good at speaking Korean and have learning difficulties at school, but

their moms cannot help them because they are not good at Korean. Luckily it is not our [her family] case.

Yanyu's putting distance from foreign wives is through internalizing the dominant discourse, which describes foreign wives as poor (H. Kim, 2010) and multicultural children as having difficulty with school life (Park, 2009). She also stressed how her marriage is built on love for each other and is different from "the women whose marriages are fake or paid." She also emphasized her university education and previous work experience as a teacher before migration, which is perceived as a socially respected job in both Korea and China. She distinguished herself from the discourse by comparing her life situations, from past to present, from foreign wives depicted in the discourse.

**Denying: "I don't want to be called so."** Two women (Irena, Joanna) bluntly rejected being grouped with foreign wives. This was to my surprise because I met them at the anti-discrimination event for damunwha families, where each woman represented the Lithuanian and Rumanian communities. Also, I invited them to the research project as foreign wives. Joanna, for instance, admits that she can be considered a foreign wife and damunhwa according to the legal definition, but she firmly indicated she does not want to be perceived so. Instead, Joanna defines herself more as a European:

We are continuously considering moving to another country like Canada or somewhere in Europe. For now, because my husband is Korean, it's easier for him to live [here]. Things like housing and maintenance fees are easier for my husband to handle here as a Korean. But when we move to Europe, because I am a European, I know administrative things better... Korea was a good starting point for us in our current situation.

Joanna not only positions herself as a European instead of a foreign wife, but she also emphasizes that she and her husband are not planning to live in Korea for good, although they are uncertain how their future will unfold. By constructing herself as a transnational being who is not bounded by geography or nationality but is on the move, she resists the imposed image of foreign wives as depicted by the dominant discourse. Also, her Western appearance and English proficiency, both serving as cultural capital, contributed to her resisting the discourse.

## Conclusion

This paper called into question the assumptions underlying the mainstream discourse on foreign wives and attempted to explain how they self-identify themselves. Whether self-initiated or not, transnational marriage and migration were critical life events that marked the life trajectories of all participants. Their marriage and migration trajectories were more complicated than what is presented in the discourse. Although none of my participants were fresh newcomers but had lived in Korea for many years, their everyday experiences in the migration context continuously put them into questions about who they are. They explored and reflected on the ways Korean society represents them, and they sought to make sense of who they are.

The participants drew on their biographical knowledge (e.g., a complex combination of migratory and marriage motivations, racial and ethnic background, education, and work experiences) to connect their past to present experiences and rework their identities in relation to the surrounding discourse. Their different self-identification can be read as their subjective actions or coping strategies to establish a sense of self in the migration context. It should be noted that their self-identifications are not a fixed nor finished product but are changeable as they are put into different social situations and as their experiences accumulate (Bron, 2002).

The study expands applying the concept of biographical learning to explore migrants' learning experiences, as suggested in previous research (e.g., Bron, 2000; Hallqvist, 2014). For adult educators to design programs that can meaningfully help foreign wives exercise more control over their lives and integrate into their new social context, understanding who they are from their perspectives should be preceded. In this sense, this study shows how adult education research can further use biographical learning to investigate people's learning in daily lives as it "takes people's life experiences as a point of departure" (Hallqvist, 2014, p. 497).

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