

The Bride(s) From Hanoi: South Korean Popular Culture, Vietnam and "Asia" in the New Millennium

STEPHEN EPSTEIN
Victoria University of Wellington

ABSTRACT

In recent years South Korea has witnessed an efflorescence of cultural productions that highlight the nation's increasing encounters with the foreign generally and Asia more specifically. Growing travel for Koreans within the larger region, a popular discourse that celebrates the success of the Korean Wave across the continent, a dramatic increase in labor migration and, perhaps most significantly, a meteoric rise in international marriages are all reconfiguring Korea's understanding of its relationship with its neighbors. Inevitably, this recalibrated understanding is also being reflected--and refracted--in popular media.

*This paper is part of a broader project examining the spate of recent Korean television dramas and reality-cum-talk shows that draw attention to Korea's relationship with Asia. In this paper I will discuss popular understandings of Korea's contemporary encounter with Vietnam with a particular focus on a series of Korean television productions, such as the reality show *Sadon cheoeum boepgesseumnida* (Meet the In-laws), that draw attention to the relationship. In particular, I will be considering the extent to which these shows are: a) inculcating a hierarchical sense of Korea's relationship with an Asian hinterland; and b) promoting a radical shift in Korea's gendering of the "foreign" from male to female.*

In recent years South Korea has witnessed an efflorescence of cultural productions that highlight the nation's increasing encounters with the foreign generally and Asia more specifically. Growing travel for Koreans within the larger region, a popular discourse that celebrates the success of the Korean Wave across the continent, a dramatic increase in labor migration and, perhaps most significantly, a meteoric rise in international marriages are all reconfiguring Korea's understanding of its relationship with its neighbors. Inevitably, this recalibrated understanding is also being reflected--and refracted--in popular media.

This paper is part of a broader project examining the spate of recent Korean television dramas and reality-cum-talk shows that draw attention to Korea's relationship with a larger Asia. In particular, I argue that these shows are inculcating a hierarchical sense of South Korea's relationship with an Asian hinterland, and simultaneously promoting a radical shift in Korea's gendering of the "foreign" from male to female. I want here to restrict my discussion to a small subset of such programs that focus on encounters between South Korea and Vietnam. Although the South Korea-Vietnam relationship has unique features that have created an ambivalent, fraught history, these ambiguities also allow Vietnam to serve as a particularly fruitful site for exploring Korea's evolving relationship with its continental neighbors, and perhaps, despite its unique features, even to stand as a metonym for developing "Asia" in South Korean popular culture.

To be sure, in the last three years, a striking number of productions have appeared that suggest a special place for Vietnam currently in the South Korean imagination. Most

notably, a disproportionate number of dramas that treat international marriage have singled out relationships between Korean men and Vietnamese women, including *Hanoi Shinbu* (The Bride from Hanoi; SBS, 2005), *Hwanggeumui sinbu* (Golden Bride; SBS, 2007), *Kkocheul chajeureo wattdanda* (Flowers for My Life; KBS, 2007), *Sannomeo namchoneneun* (In the Southern Village over the Mountains; KBS, 2007), and *Barami bunda* (The Wind Blows; KBS, 2008), the last three of which feature Vietnamese-born actress Ha Hoang Haiyen (Ha Ji-eun) who has become a South Korean citizen. Likewise, over this period, reality/talk shows such as SBS' *Sadon cheoeum boepgesseumnida* (Meet the In-laws) and *Reobeu in Asia* (Love in Asia)¹, and *Minyeodeurui suda* (Beauties' Chatter) on KBS have featured numerous Vietnamese women among their guests. Recently the two genres merged in *Eoneu beteam sinbuui majimak pyeonji* (A Vietnamese Bride's Last Letter), a June 2008 MBC production that discussed, and partially dramatized, examples of international marriages gone tragically wrong.

Of course, the extraordinary rise in the number of Vietnamese in South Korea plays a key role in spawning increased attention to the Korea-Vietnam relationship. As a *Maeil gyeongje* (Maeil Business) article notes, only one Vietnamese national resided in Korea in 1990. By 2000, however, this figure had risen to 19,000, and by the end of 2005, there were 39,410.² The numbers are continuing to grow rapidly, especially through international marriage: according to the Korean Statistics Office, the total number of Vietnamese brides married to Korean men nearly doubled to 10,131 in 2006 from 5,822 in 2005.³

Nonetheless, given the spike in marriage partners from multiple countries,⁴ other factors must account for the disproportionate prevalence of Vietnam in dramatizations of international relationships. Some of these factors likely reflect practical matters: access to Korean-speaking actresses such as Haiyen to play Vietnamese brides may foster Vietnam's prevalence in dramas, as will the potential for Korean actresses to pass more plausibly as half, or even fully, Vietnamese than as natives of several other countries. Dramas, however, will also find it a profitable strategy to treat issues that resonate at a deep level, and the South Korea-Vietnam relationship has features that encourage repeated appearance:⁵ certainly, a shared past as peripheral nations within the Confucian Sinosphere offers a mutual sense of cultural and historical proximity, as does the experience of post-colonial civil wars between divided northern and southern halves. That both wars notoriously involved an ideological clash between communism and capitalism and drew in large external powers, most notably the United States, further draws the nations together.

¹ See e.g. episodes 7, 36, 47, 59, 106, 132.

² See <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=009&aid=0000561251>

³ The situation is even more striking in Taiwan where, according to Taiwan's Central Research Institute, Vietnamese brides account for 35% of 338,000 foreign brides in Taiwan. For more on the situation in Taiwan specifically, see Wang Hong-Zen and Shu-ming Chang, "The Commodification of International Marriages: Cross-border Marriage Business in Taiwan and Viet Nam" *International Migration* 40:6 (2002): 93-116.

⁴ Between 2001 and 2005, the rate of international marriage as a percentage of all marriages increased almost threefold from 4.8% to 13.6% of the population. See Gavin Jones and Hsiu-hua Shen, "International marriage in East and Southeast Asia: trends and research emphases," *Citizenship Studies* 12:1 (2008): 9-25.

⁵ Ethnic Koreans, such as the *joseonjok* and, to a lesser extent, the *goryeo saram*, also seem to show up disproportionately in films and television dramas as well, for they provide a rich palette of issues to draw upon.

Moreover, South Korea's own participation in the Vietnam War has left an emotional legacy that underpins a variety of encounters in popular culture, as when noted travel writer Han Biya (1998: 68) finds that she must address the war and Korea's role within it in the first few pages of her account of her trip to Vietnam.⁶ Han's need arises because Korea's legacy in Vietnam encompasses feelings of guilt, especially in a very concrete manifestation: thousands of children of mixed Korean-Vietnamese descent, the *Lai Dai Han*, a significant proportion of whom were abandoned by their fathers. Notably, both *The Golden Bride* and *The Bride from Hanoi* include characters of mixed heritage and depict Korean men as both desirable partners and subject to moral failing.⁷

What I wish to focus on today, however, is not these fictive depictions, but the discourse propagated in representations of international marriage in the Korean media more broadly and their intersection with this new surge in reality shows. A majority of marriages between Korean men and Vietnamese women have occurred through brokers,⁸ a tendency that has become increasingly prominent since requirements for setting up matchmaking agencies were liberalized in 1999. The role of brokers has aroused controversy, especially as a result of occasionally disturbing advertising campaigns such as a poster, which apparently even caught the attention of the 2006 US State Department report on human trafficking, proclaiming as a virtue of Vietnamese brides that "they never run away."⁹ Others ads have treated Vietnamese women in objectifying terms that suggest marketing a commodity. One particularly egregious example lists such traits as "Pretty features, and the finest bodies in the world"; "A thoroughgoing spirit of chastity--divorce completely impossible"; "Unlike Chinese and Filipina women, they have excellent cooking skills".¹⁰

Only marginally less offensive have been media portrayals like the 2006 *Chosun Ilbo* article entitled *Beteunam cheonyeodeul, huimangui ttang, koriaro* ("Vietnamese maidens coming to the land of hope, Korea"). This piece drew criticism for its demeaning portrayal of women seeking foreign husbands and its fulsome self-congratulation. In particular, protesters denounced the article's blithe attachment of a photo in which the faces of the prospective Vietnamese brides were clearly visible, while the Korean men involved remained discreetly turned away from the camera. The caption below the photo

⁶ Consider, e.g., the recent film *Nimeun meongose* (Sunny), Hwang Sok-yon's novel *Mugui ui geuneul* (The Shadow of Arms) and Ahn Jung-Ho's *Hayan jeonjaeng* (White Badge). For articles on the relationship in English, see Theodore Hughes' piece in *Japan Focus*, "Korean Memories of the Korean and Vietnam Wars: A Counter-History" <<http://japanfocus.org/products/details/2406>> and Charles Armstrong, "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam," *Critical Asian Studies* 33:4 (2001), 527-539.

⁷ The young mixed-race child in *The Bride from Hanoi* is not the child of soldier but apparently a Korean businessman from the more recent wave of contact. An earlier film *Laittaihan*, which appeared in 1994, dealt with the topic head on.

⁸ The medium of introduction appears to differ somewhat depending on the national provenance of the bride. According to research done by the Ministry of Health and Warfare, matchmaking agencies are of particular importance in the case of Vietnamese, Mongolian and Russian women, in contrast to, e.g., Chinese-Koreans (networks of acquaintances), ethnic Chinese (direct meetings), and Filipinas (religious organizations). See Hye-Kyung Lee's "International Marriage and the State" paper from the 2006 International Conference of International Marriage, available at <http://www.cct.go.kr/data/acf2006/multi/multi_0303_Hye%20Kyung%20Lee.pdf>.

⁹ Thus writes Kang Do-tae, the South Korean chief for Population and Women Policies in an article entitled "New Law to clean up Int'l Matchmaking, available at <http://www.korea.net/News/News/newsprint.asp?serial_no=20080103013>.

¹⁰ This poster may be seen at <<http://i-guacu.com/191>>.

read “Korean princes, please take me home.”¹¹ Although the *Chosun Ilbo* removed the photo from the Korean version of the story after protest from local NGOs,¹² the English language online version continues to run the picture, albeit editing out for international circulation the opening paragraphs that suggest the arrival of Korean men rescuing maidens in distress and offering a significantly different editorial slant in its title “Finding Love Overseas the Perfunctory Way.”¹³

Such articles have more optimistic and compassionate television sequels in the SBS shows *Love in Asia* and *Meet The In-Laws*, which showcase couples living in successful international marriages in Korea.¹⁴ The shows are clearly a well-intentioned attempt to humanize the numerous foreign brides from elsewhere in Asia who have taken up residence in Korea and to promote intercultural understanding generally. While *Love in Asia* focuses on the couple itself, *Meet the In-Laws*, which debuted in 2007 as a segment on the show *Iryoil jota* (Happy Sunday), derives its particular piquance from bringing the couple’s in-laws together for the first time and flying members of the bride’s family to Korea. As journalist Kim Tae-eun writes, “The greatest virtue of *Meet the In-Laws* is that it causes us to meditate on the homogeneity (*dongjilseong*) of the peoples of Asia.”¹⁵ The show thus fosters a growing regional identity.

Nonetheless, whether intentionally or not, the show also establishes socioeconomic hierarchies within this homogeneity that encourage a view of Korea’s locally privileged position. By its very premise, *Meet the In-Laws* tends to preclude couples from wealthier backgrounds who have married on more equal terms, whose relationships have evolved more organically, and whose parents may have already met. Because of its desire to tug at the heartstrings, the show almost unavoidably depicts a higher standard of living for Korea. Furthermore, although marriages do, of course, occur between Korean women and migrant laborers from Asian countries, as far as I am aware *Meet the In-Laws* has never used a couple in which the wife is Korean and the husband a foreigner. In other words, *Meet the In-Laws* both mirrors, and further encourages, Korean attitudes of superiority to an Asian hinterland, which are then coded in gendered terms.

The format of the show generally falls into two halves. In the first, the viewer is invited to visit the bride’s new home, to see how she has been welcomed into the community and how she now lives happily with her Korean husband and in-laws. The second half of the show returns to the woman’s home village overseas and films the way of life there, before showing “video letters” (*yeongsang pyeonji*) of the bride and parents speaking to one another while still separated. As the show’s climax, the parents are revealed in the Korean studio to be reunited with their daughter and to receive the traditional first ceremonial bow from the couple to the bride’s parents. For the rest of

¹¹ <http://www.chosun.com/national/news/200604/200604210037.html>

¹² <http://www.thanhniennnews.com/overseas/?catid=12&newsid=14873>

¹³ <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200604/200604200010.html>;

¹⁴ We might reasonably hypothesize that shows such as *Love in Asia* and *Meet the In-laws* that are designed to promote intercultural understanding wish to both convey a sense of Korea’s growing multicultural diversity and excite viewer interest with novelty by introducing couples from a wide swath of the international community, and may not have great concern with featuring nationalities in accurate proportion to the actual number of marriages that occur. International marriages of Koreans with Chinese nationals, both Han Chinese and ethnic Koreans, with whom cultural proximity is most apparent, are even more noticeably underrepresented on these shows.

¹⁵ See Kim Tae-eun, *Sadon cheoeum boepgesseumnida: imi uriga doen woegugin myeoneurideul*, 25/12/07, <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LS2D&mid=sec&sid1=106&sid2=224&oid=108&aid=0000086859&iid=>

today's talk, I want to focus on excerpts from one 2007 episode, which I have chosen both because of their current ready availability on YouTube, and because they typify the relatively circumscribed patterns of representation to be found.¹⁶ In the climactic section, we witness the presentation of the video letters that go back and forth between two Vietnamese brides in Korea, cousins to one another, and their families back home. The transition to the letters from the more lighthearted material that has preceded is marked by a shift in the background music to an instrumental piano and string composition that signals an emotionally heightened, melancholy tone.

A threefold split screen technique simultaneously presents the video letter that the bride has sent back to Vietnam, the reaction of the family as they view her letter, and the reaction of the bride in the studio in Korea as she in turn watches her family react to her letter. The multiple screens allow for an easy juxtaposition of (and inevitable comparisons between) Korea and Vietnam. Some contrasts, such as differences in clothing that suggest Korea's cold winter weather in distinction to Vietnam's more subtropical climate, while underscoring difference, are relatively neutral. Others, however, evoke a significant economic disparity: we observe, for example, the arrival and installation of a television and VCR within the bride's former home, as members of a large extended family come together to watch. The numbers that gather imply that a special event is in store, that television is a rarity, and that the level of development is low. While juxtaposed village scenes often place together rural Vietnam and rural Korea on the show, differences regularly obtrude: scenes in Korea underscore the nation's aging, late-capitalist countryside in contrast to the more even age distribution of the bride's homes, where one seems to encounter a thriving, even teeming, if poor, environment. One should also remember that the majority of SBS' intended viewing audience is the mainstream, urban Korean public. For such viewers the presentation evokes a sense of nostalgia in suggesting the communitarian bonds and extended families that are dissolving in the move to high-tech, city-dwelling, low-fertility nuclear family units. And while the twofold evocation of nostalgia creates an affective connection to both rural Korea and Vietnam, it also fosters the sense that Vietnam exists within a vastly different developmental space.

Members of the brides' families take turns speaking in response to the messages from the two young women located in Korea. Both, typically for the show, send reassurances to their families not to worry as they are being well taken care of. By having the brides comfort their families, the show also reassures its audience of Korea's moral goodness and the survival of a cherished defining characteristic of Korean identity, *jeong* (perhaps best rendered here as "affection"). The Vietnam-based parents and families in turn offer multiple requests to their daughters/ sisters to be dutiful daughters-in-law/wives. This injunction, frequently expressed on the show, subsumes Vietnam within a traditional Confucian patrilocal framework and acknowledges a position within that hierarchy that reinforces the gendering of Korea as male and leader.

The dominant emotion evoked by the segment, however, is longing for absent loved ones, and this is reinforced in several aspects that seem determined to elicit tears from the viewer. Another aspect of split screens is their ability to allow continual reaction shots, often of weeping subjects, which urge viewer empathy with these transplanted brides. It is difficult indeed to view these shows and not feel an upsurge of emotion because of their concerted attempts, manipulative but undeniably skillful in their genuine

¹⁶ See the two clips available via <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9X4DsQwZfl>> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_aZ-ULsF5Q>.

raw reality, to touch on powerful, universal human sentiments.¹⁷ The show brings its audience into a heightened emotional realm with frequent reference to peak life markers such as childbirth, weddings, and death that bind the two countries together in reminders of common humanity. Typical examples found within just a five-minute sequence in this episode include an image of the loving Korean husband with his hand on his pregnant wife's tummy; multiple references to the poor health of the bride's father; an older sister in Vietnam reminding her younger sibling that she has promised to have a baby and to come to visit, the sister's further remark that she cries at times because she misses her so much, and the bride's frail grandmother stating "I want to see you one more time before I die."

Korea, it hardly need be said, is a land whose inhabitants know well the pain of divided families. The show offers emotional catharsis through its reunions but displaces Korea's lingering grief over separation onto others. One unnoticed function of these shows, I would argue, is that they take the place of *Geu sarami bogo sipda* [The Person I Miss], which quietly disappeared from Korean television in 2007, after its long successful run in helping to reunite families that had suffered agonizing separations, often as a result of straitened economic circumstances. The emotions evoked by that show, with its frequently intense reality theatre, have been transferred from a purely domestic audience to create a sense of shared experience with others in the larger Asian region. An implicit message, however, is that South Korea, and South Korean television, has now graduated, or outgrown, the need for such shows to suit an entirely domestic setting.

I use the metaphors of maturation here very deliberately, for *Meet the In-Laws* promotes not only a gendered relationship between Korea and Asia, but one in which Korea takes on the role of elder guide to Asia as a younger partner. Both are reflected in reality, when Korean husbands take much younger wives from elsewhere in Asia, as is evident in this episode, but this discursive tendency appears in more subtle ways as well. The climactic revelation of the bride's parents from backstage occurs at a moving moment. The bride, who at this point is weeping upon hearing her grandmother's emotional plea, is asked by the show's host, Nam Hui-seok, a surprising question: does she remember the lullaby that her grandmother sang her when she was a child? Yes, she does. As she sings this tune, so evocative of childhood, while choking back tears, her parents appear from behind.

Even more strikingly, as the show approaches its conclusion shortly after the tearful reunion, Nam, seen virtually towering over the other Vietnamese women who have accompanied the featured guest, asks one if she misses her mother as well, in tones clearly reminiscent of an adult addressing a child. When the woman answers *eung* ("yeah"), she generates laughter among the audience. An awkward moment of cultural misunderstanding follows, as the woman, flustered, issues a challenging *waeyo* ("Why?"). It is, however, the host's turn to be taken aback when she responds to his inquiry about how she feels upon seeing her friend reunited with her parents. She feels both bad and good: happy for her friend, but sad not to see her own mother. Nam then speaks in a condescending tone, again, as if to a child, telling her that she too should work hard so she can go see her own mother once more. Stifling her own tears, she moves off-camera. A subtitle that coincidentally appears at this point just before the credit roll makes evident

¹⁷ If only to judge by the occasions I've viewed this with others in Korea, I feel confident in saying that there is rarely a dry eye when the shows have finished (including my own). It is not uncommon to see the hosts themselves of such shows wiping genuine tears away when families are reunited.

the desire to stage-manage these encounters: “We are accepting applications from foreign daughters-in-law who are caring for their in-laws and managing happy (*dallan*) families.” In other words, troubled brides need not apply, and the appearance of harmony between Korea and its newly arrived brides will be maintained, recreated and propagated. Nonetheless, the encounter just witnessed highlights that even so, jarring moments can intrude.

Some final observations and questions by way of conclusion. What are the larger implications of the arrival of shows such as *Meet The In-Laws*? Certainly to an extent they simply reflect public recognition of a noteworthy demographic trend. At the same time, these shows’ modes of representing Vietnam and Asia in the popular imaginary and their intertwining with gender issues deserve careful attention. If Korea’s popular culture images of its connections to Japan, for example, fraught as they may be, suggest Korea at its most modern and sophisticated, connections to a larger Asia replay Korea’s most cherished sense of itself as a nation that retains a sense of “soul” (without the ‘e’), that is, as an agrarian society where *jeong* still reigns supreme. Since the turn of the millennium one finds increasing evidence of a radical shift in Korea’s gendering of its encounters with the foreign away from the aggressive male intruder, whose presence in Korea has often been symbolized in tropes of rape and violation, as in *gijichon* (camptown) fiction, to the foreign as the female to be dominated and domesticated within the national fabric.

Indeed, where are Vietnamese men in Korea’s popular representations of its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbor? Other than reminders of the fathers and brothers of brides, left back in the home country, they have until now been conspicuously absent. But perhaps further change is afoot: the 2007 independent film *Cheoeum mannan saramdeul* (Hello, Stranger) centers upon the friendship between a North Korean refugee in the south and a male Vietnamese migrant laborer while this year’s *The Wind Blows* has its male Korean protagonist find that his love interest continues her relationship with a Vietnamese boyfriend. As a new generation of mixed Korean-Vietnamese children is born on the Korean peninsula itself, and *pho* restaurants proliferate on the streets of Korean cities, interest in the country is continuing to grow. How the representation of Vietnam evolves is unpredictable but will undoubtedly be fascinating.

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Contact address:

Dr Stephen J Epstein, Director, Asian Studies Programme, Victoria University of
Wellington, NEW ZEALAND email: Stephen.Epstein@vuw.ac.nz