Role of Matchmaking Agencies for International Marriage in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract  This paper explores the roles of matchmaking agencies (MAs) in international marriages in contemporary Japan by identifying them from such sources as Yahoo Japan’s website, telephone directory, and a website of international marriage agencies. With the selected agencies, in-depth interview surveys were conducted, and the following findings were obtained. Many MAs started matchmaking services due to their own personal experiences with international marriage. For Japanese men, the main motivation for international marriage is the difficulty of finding Japanese women to marry. Regarding the spatial distribution of Japanese clients, there is an obvious distance-decay tendency: the shorter the distance from a particular MA office, the more clients. MAs provide various kinds of advice about preparing documents to help foreign wives of Japanese clients acquire spouse visas. Although many MAs are conscientious, they are wary of unscrupulous agencies. Furthermore, based on interviews with immigration officials, at least one-third of all international marriages registered in Japan are agency-based marriages. These results suggest that the significance of MAs needs to be favorably evaluated in the context of Japan’s current population, which started to decline in 2005. Foreign brides as new residents might obtain permanent residence status in Japan and should be supported by national and local governments.

Key words  international marriage, matchmaking agency, foreign wife, interview survey, Japan

Introduction

Our contemporary world offers great diversity of transnational human mobility, but labor migration has thus far attracted the most attention (Castles and Miller 2003; OECD 2005). Despite the increasing importance of transnational migration due to marriage, however, this topic has not attracted sufficient interest in the existing literature.

Noteworthy in this situation is the rapid upsurge of concern about international marriage migration, particularly over the past decade, for governmental practitioners and academic researchers in East and Southeast Asia where the major destination countries include Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (for example, Bauzon 1999; Piper 1997, 1999, 2003; Suzuki 2000; Wang and Chang 2002; Piper and Roces 2003; Tsay 2004; Lu 2005; Davin 2007; Ochiai 2007; Lin and Ma 2008; Kamiya and Lee 2009; Yang and Lu 2010). The male populations of these countries face a so-called marriage squeeze in the context of the far-reaching influence of the Confucian sense of values and the serious demographic movement of low fertility and rapidly aging populations; international marriage is expected to resolve the issue. In relation to this, however, we should also keep in mind that the distinction between labor migration and marriage migration is often blurred, as demonstrated by, for instance, Piper and Roces (2003). We must also consider that, as far as Japan is concerned, the importance of international marriage in destination choice among Japanese prefectures is also confirmed in the context of new immigration rather than internal migration (Liaw and Ishikawa 2008; Ishikawa and Liaw 2009).

In Japan, transnational marriage migration began to attract considerable public attention in the mid-1980s, particularly in the rural parts of Yamagata Prefecture in northern Japan where the marriage squeeze for the male successors of farming households was serious. Local governments took steps to introduce foreign brides, although they soon stopped such introductions (Kuwayama 1995: 15; Ishii 1995: 84–85). Since, international marriage has continued to rapidly increase, as discussed below, and it can now be found throughout the country. Based on such an increase of international marriage, there has been a proliferation of research into this topic (Yagasaki 2010). Previous studies have expressed diverse interests including the historical background (Kamoto 2001; Yasutomi and Stout Umezu 2005), legal procedures (Enomoto 1999; Kokusai Kekkon wo Kangaeru-kai 2005), the actual situations of

Noteworthy in recent years is the rapid development of international marriage studies in Japan (Ishikawa 2003, 2007b; Ochiai et al. 2007; Liaw and Ishikawa 2008; Kamiya and Lee 2009; Yagasaki 2010; Liaw et al. 2010) and social networks among Japanese wives of international married couples (Avila Tàpies 2008) from geographical perspectives. Since the topic of marriage has been historically ignored in the discipline of geography, this remarkable new trend is expected to contribute to the complete elucidation of the situation of international marriages in Japan.

Although existing studies have explored various aspects of international marriage in contemporary Japan, they suffer from a serious drawback: insufficient research on matchmaking agencies (MAs), which play an active role in international marriage. Japan has a long custom of matchmaking or arranged marriage in which trusted figures voluntarily introduce grooms/brides to unmarried persons; until the 1960s such omiai marriages outnumbered love marriages (Takeshita 2000: 24, 112). Throughout this paper, however, MAs who operate matchmaking businesses are discussed.

This topic can be posed beyond exploring the role of MAs in the country and can contribute to progress in population geography. A crucial but often overlooked element in the global expansion of international migration, which has been especially significant in Asia, is the “immigration industry” that consists of recruiters, lawyers, agents, organizers, travel agents, and various intermediaries who often comprise complex networks. Such actors remain little studied or understood. When institutional influences on immigration have been studied, the focus has tended to fall only on the role of government agencies (Hugo 1996). Hence, MA actors for international marriages in Japan provide a typical example of Hugo’s perspective and deserve an in-depth study. The following reasons for the significance of investigating MAs for international marriage in contemporary Japan are specifically indicated.

First, as mentioned above, previous studies that focused on MAs for international marriages in Japan are scarce except for the introduction of their businesses by the MAs themselves (Ozawa and Shirakawa 2004; Itamoto 2005; Ishida 2007). Nakazawa (1996) and Nakamatsu (2003), for example, devoted some attention to MAs; unfortunately, however, their main interest lies in the actual circumstances of the Asian wives of international married couples who utilized MAs rather than the MAs themselves. In short, the specific role of MAs in international marriage remains academically unexplored. Such a problem complicates the posing of a convincing explanatory framework for this research.

Second, the existing international marriage literature in Japan under-represents marriages arranged by MA and over-represents “romantic” marriages. Although many introductions or reports exist about international married couples and their lives after marriage, most only address the “romantic” marriages (Yagasaki 2010). Interestingly, for instance, in their book Saito and Nemoto (1998) introduce 100 stories of international marriage without citing a single case of an MA-based marriage. Overall, couples of international marriage arranged by MAs are very reluctant to admit their reliance on MAs, probably due to feelings of embarrassment because they only managed to marry, not by themselves, but by the help of MAs. Except for reports written by matchmakers themselves (e.g., Itamoto 2005; Ishida 2007), the paucity of existing literature featuring couples of MA-based marriages supports this statement. Such reluctance and the generally unsavory reputation of MAs seem to be a principal cause of the dearth of international marriage studies.

Third, even though the share of MA-based marriage is estimated to occupy a considerably high percentage of all international marriages registered in Japan, it cannot be confirmed from any official statistics; no plausible share has been presented. For example, approximately 45,000 international marriages were registered in 2006; but what is the percentage of MA-based marriages? Answering this question is crucial because it could offer substantial and valuable evidence about the importance of marriages introduced by MAs within all international marriages registered in Japan. Note that, according to the Thirteenth Basic Survey of Birth Trend conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in 2005, the share of omiai marriages (or marriages arranged by trusted figures or matchmaking agencies) forms only 6.4% of all marriages in Japan (Kokuritsu Shakai-hoshou Jinkou Mondai Kenkyuu-sho 2009).1

Given this background, the purpose of this paper is to clarify the roles of MAs in contemporary Japan by revealing their activities and calculating the share of MA-based marriages among all international marriages. The following is the structure of this article. After outlining the
country’s international marriage trends, the identification of MAs is attempted. The results of in-depth interview surveys with selected MAs are discussed, and then the share of MA-based marriages is estimated. Finally, the major findings and their implications are presented in the concluding section.

International Marriage Trends in Japan

Figure 1 shows the international marriage trends since 1970 as reported in Vital Statistics of Japan. The term “international marriage” denotes marriages registered in Japan between Japanese nationals and foreigners; it includes marriages to persons of other nationalities who are already permanent residents of Japan. Until the 1970s, the annual number of international marriages ranged between 5,000 and 7,000, but it increased rapidly in close relation to a massive influx of immigrants during the 1980s when the Japanese economy was booming. This momentum continued even after the country entered a recessionary period in the early 1990s. With respect to the sudden increase in 2001 and the rapid decline in 2002, MA-6, cited below, offers the following explanation. The immigration bureau noticed that such an increase reflected a rise in fake marriages, chiefly from China, and thus more rigid immigration control was enforced, resulting in a great loss of marriage migration the next year. In 2006, the number of international marriages was 44,701. The number of couples comprised of foreign husbands and Japanese wives remain higher than the other couples in 1970, and it has only increased slowly. On the contrary, couples comprised of Japanese husbands and foreign wives have appreciably increased during the past two decades. Consequently, in 2006 the latter occupied 80% of all international marriages.

Figure 2 exhibits the temporal changes in the nationality composition of foreign spouses since 1992; from that year, we can ascertain the number of foreign spouses by the major eight nationalities. More than 75% are from Asian countries including China, the Philippines, Korea, and Thailand. Particularly, the numbers from China, which reveal an increasing tendency during this time period, have contributed greatly to the rise of Japan’s international marriages. International marriages between Japanese and Koreans have been rather stable, mainly because a great majority of the Korean population in Japan is so-called “old-comers” (i.e., pre-1945 immigrants chiefly from Korea and their descendants) whose nationality remains Korean.

Identifying Matchmaking Agencies for International Marriage

First, MAs for international marriage in Japan must be found. Unfortunately, however, the following difficulties must be surmounted.

Since permission or a license is not required for establishing a matchmaking business, there is no single, comprehensive data source. Participation and entrance into this sector is easy, so many new companies sprout up. Many foreign wives or internationally married couples have started such businesses based on their own experiences by referring to the MAs that arranged their own introductions. Fundamentally, however, a matchmaking service that connects two different people is not easy and needs careful management; a certain portion of new businesses will inevitably fail in a short period. This situation results in the rapid and inevitable movement of MAs in and out of this industry.

Due to these difficulties, the following three sources were used. The first was Yahoo Japan’s website (http://www.yahoo.co.jp/). MAs were sought by the term
“kokusai kekkon (international marriage).” The second was a telephone directory, which was also accessed at Yahoo Japan’s website. However using “kekkon chuukai (marriage matchmaking)” resulted in the retrieval of all MAs, not just international marriage agencies. So international marriage MAs were extracted by agency names that contain information associated with international marriage. The third was the website that offered links to the major international marriage agencies (Kokusai Kekkon Soudan-jo 2009). It provided insufficient but useful MA information.

Finally, a list was compiled consisting of 303 MAs as of the end of December 2007. Note that it might include many already closed agencies due to the fluid tendencies of this field.

Two attributes of these MAs are described. First, we can determine their spatial distribution by prefecture from their address information (for the names of the 47 prefectures and the eight regions, see Figure 3). This distribution shown in Figure 4 corresponds well to the one of foreign residents shown in Statistics on the Foreigners Registered in Japan (Figure 5). An important feature of Figure 4 is the concentration of MAs in central
Japan from the Kanto to Kinki regions that contain the three largest metropolitan areas. Particularly, Tokyo prefecture’s share (22.8%) is remarkable because it greatly exceeds that of the prefecture (9.8%) in terms of Japan’s population as of the 2005 census, although it does not reach that of the Tokyo metropolitan area shown in Figure 3 (27.0%). Moreover, we confirmed more MAs in prefectures located in eastern Japan but fewer in western Japan. Such a contrast may be related to the spatial patterns of the unbalanced sex ratio discussed in Ishikawa (2003), in which he demonstrated that while the ratio generally exceeds 100, namely, the unmarried male population is larger than that of females in the eastern half of the country, it is less conspicuous in the western half. However, a detailed analysis couldn’t be conducted here due to space limitations.

Second, we also learned the nationality of foreigners (mostly women) introduced by MAs to Japanese clients (mostly men) for a considerable number of MAs, because the agency names of the extracted MAs and the contents of their websites provided clues. When plural nationalities were confirmed for a particular agency, plural counting was performed. A total of 244 agencies contained such nationality information, and Figure 6 depicts the nationality composition. Note the overwhelmingly high proportion (70.5%) of MAs for arranging marriages with Chinese women. The second largest nationality is Filipino (9.8%), followed by Russian, Vietnamese, Thai, and Korean. This composition is greatly different from the one shown in Figure 2; the MA share is much larger than the international marriage share for China, but the MA share is much smaller than the international marriage share for Korea. Such a discrepancy basically stems from the different degree of dependencies on MA-based marriages; a short explanation for the three largest nationalities (Chinese, Filipino, and Korean) in Figure 2 will be discussed below, based on the typology of international marriage shown later in Table 2.

A detailed investigation of the temporal changes in the distribution and nationality composition of brides is difficult due to the problems mentioned at the beginning of this section. Nevertheless, according to Ishida (2007: 14–15) and the matchmaking agencies cited below, the main origin of brides for MA-based marriages has shifted from Taiwan and South Korea to the Philippines and China; in China, most brides previously came from large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, and then the main origin area changed to Fujian Province; currently, the main origin is the Dongbei (Northeast) District consisting of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning Provinces. Many Chinese brides have come from Fangzhen Prefecture of Heilongjiang Province; the number of people from this prefecture who live in Japan has reached 35,000 (Hao 2008). A major reason for the strong concentration from certain areas in China seems to reflect the requirement of the Japanese MAs’ partners in China that many bridal candidates be easily found in relatively small areas.
Interview Surveys of Matchmaking Agencies

Next, to scrutinize the roles of MAs, I tried to conduct interview surveys with MAs, but due to their wariness of the proprietors, which is related to the timidity discussed later, I experienced difficulties; in fact my requests were rejected many times. However, since samples need to be selected in consideration of the spatial distribution and nationality composition of the MAs shown in Figures 4 and 6, I eventually contacted 36 of the 303 MAs and successfully conducted in-depth interview surveys with 20 from September 2007 to March 2008. Note that with four of the 20 MAs, interviews were done by email due to the temporary visits of owners to key source countries for brides. Conclusions about the roles of MAs based on interviews (some of them conducted by email) should be drawn cautiously since less than 10% of the identified agencies participated. Given the dearth of existing literature and the difficulty of conducting interviews with MAs, however, this issue appears unavoidable.

The basic information culled from these twenty MAs is given in Table 1. Four of these MAs are in Tokyo, two each in Gunma, Shizuoka, Aichi, and Shiga prefectures, and one each in Iwate, Fukushima, Chiba, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Kumamoto, and Kagoshima prefectures (Figure 7); the nationality composition of the foreign women arranged for Japanese clients included eleven Chinese, four Filipinos, and one Vietnamese, Thai, Russian, and Ukrainian woman each. The nationality of the only foreign man to whom an MA introduced Japanese women was American.

The interview questions addressed many items, including establishment year, reason of starting this business, business operation, reason for international marriage, spatial extent of Japanese clients, acquisition of visa, business reputation, and so on. The major findings obtained from this interview survey are discussed in this order.

Establishment year

Out of the twenty MAs, fourteen were established after 2000, five in the 1990s, and one in the 1960s (Table 1). This result reveals the following. First, it supports the above-mentioned short-lived nature of such businesses. To survive, MAs must cope with various problems including possible lawsuits by clients. In fact, MA-6 defined a good matchmaking service as one that lasts for a long time. Second, it also reflects the recent rapid growth in the international bride business.

MA-20, established in the 1960s, is an exceptional case. This MA can be considered a pioneer agency, although it is relatively unknown. This small MA is located in a fishing town of Kagoshima Prefecture and has successfully introduced more than 40 Chinese women to Japanese men, most of whom are involved in fishing-related occupations. This MA had a Taiwanese partner and then a Chinese partner at Guilin, the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China. Recall that international marriage began to attract a great attention in the 1980s particularly in the rural parts of Yamagata Prefecture. The country’s primary industries including agriculture and fishing declined in the 1960s and the period of rapid economic growth reduced the attractiveness of such occupations in these sectors. The male workers living in rural areas of the country’s peripheral regions had difficulty finding Japanese brides, because young females tended to leave for urban areas. If the workers had to stay in their hometowns and raise families, they had few options but to marry foreign women. Such behavior was demanded more for the male successors of rural households in the regions. This example of MA-20 suggests that the marriage squeeze for Japanese men increased their decisions to marry foreign women and

Table 1. List of Selected Matchmaking Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Prefecture</th>
<th>Establishment Year</th>
<th>Major Nationality</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA-1</td>
<td>Iwate</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-2</td>
<td>Fukushima</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-3</td>
<td>Gunma</td>
<td>2004–2005</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-4</td>
<td>Gunma</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-5</td>
<td>Chiba</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-6</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-7</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-8</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-9</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-10</td>
<td>Shizuoka</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-11</td>
<td>Shizuoka</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-12</td>
<td>Aichi</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-13</td>
<td>Aichi</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-14</td>
<td>Shiga</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-15</td>
<td>Shiga</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-16</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-17</td>
<td>Osaka</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-18</td>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-19</td>
<td>Kumamoto</td>
<td>1999–2000</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-20</td>
<td>Kagoshima</td>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s survey.
might even have been serious and widespread before the 1980s, at least in localized areas of the country.

Reasons for starting their matchmaking businesses

The selected MAs provided various reasons for establishing matchmaking services. However, a chief reason is that they themselves had experienced international marriage and wanted a job that might exploit such an experience (MAs-5, -11, -14, -15, and -16). In fact, at least eleven among the 20 MAs are run by couples themselves who experienced international marriages, which resembles the findings by Nakamatsu (2003: 185–186). The second largest reason is a relationship with China or the Philippines through previous businesses (MAs-3, -6, -17, and -19); interestingly, Nakamatsu (2003: 184) also observed that many Japanese marriage agencies were or had been engaged in other businesses involving Asia. Other reasons included previous matchmaking experience between Japanese men and women (MA-12), a previous stay in the United States (MA-9), and the marriage squeeze of the agency owner’s relatives (MA-10). A few cases claimed more ambitious or idealistic reasons; for example, MA-7 said it wanted to help Japan address her low fertility.

Business operations

Most of the MAs are small with only one or two employees. Only a few MAs are in the black, suggesting that the great majority of them have other business interests in addition to matchmaking. Generally, competition is acute, and there is hostility among MAs.

If a marriage is finalized, the payment amount varies greatly based on the specific service categories and country/area of the bride’s origin. According to MA websites, the frequently observed minimum amount for a match with a Chinese woman, for example, is between 1.6 and 2.0 million Japanese yen. That amount covers the expenses of passport preparation, travel to and domestic travel within China, accommodations and the wedding. It doesn’t include such expenses as domestic travel in Japan, betrothal money, and engagement/wedding rings. Obtaining data of the net profit per marriage from an MA was very difficult, but one MA quoted a price of around 600,000 Japanese yen for a marriage between a Japanese man and a Chinese woman. MAs-6 and -11 scoffed at MAs advertising low prices because they tend to lack crucial services.

Reasons for international marriage

For Japanese men today, the main reason for marrying
foreign women is the difficulty of marrying Japanese women, who have improved their education levels and are actively participating in the labor market. This suggests lower economic dependency on husbands. Moreover, the great majority of MAs answered that it is quite difficult for Japanese males 40 or older to marry Japanese women. In fact, based on my interviews, the male clients ranged from their thirties to their early sixties, but the main age class was in their forties. It is not hard to fulfill international marriages if males over forty still hope to get married and have no objections to marrying foreign women through MA introductions, because much more foreign women seek MA-based international marriages. Consequently, from the MA side, it is not unusual that their marriage success rate, defined as the proportion of clients who marry foreign brides introduced by a particular MA to clients registered with this MA, is almost 100%. Note that since these women are on the whole much younger than the Japanese men, the age difference between the brides and the grooms of international couples tends to be large.

Nowadays, this situation is not restricted to particular occupations including male successors of farm households in rural areas, as demonstrated in previous literature (Higurashi 1989; Sato 1989; Mitsuoka 1989, 1996; Ishida 2007: 33). This is also the case for most occupations including professional and technical jobs in urban areas including the three largest metropolitan areas. For example, the main clients of MA-16 are engineers and those of MA-8 include lawyers and doctors.

Furthermore, it seems fruitful to consider the situation of Japanese women. Although males are the main gender facing the marriage squeeze in contemporary Japan, the notion is also applicable to well-educated and well-paid career women who often want to get married before reaching 35 to have children. Those who exceed this age tend to abandon marriage plans, but if they still hope to marry, one option is to utilize MAs that arrange introductions between Japanese women and foreign men, usually Americans (also see Ozawa and Shirakawa 2004: 183–185). Due to this background, several MAs for the international marriages of Japanese women exist, including MA-9. The clients of MAs are not limited to men.

Many MAs cited economic stability and the longing for a piece of Japan’s affluence to explain why foreign women desire international marriage. Most foreign brides are in their twenties and thirties, but those from rural areas tend to be younger. For example, women in their twenties is the primary age class for marriage migrants from the rural parts of China’s Dongbei District but women from the urban areas are often in their late twenties or early thirties.

**Spatial distribution of Japanese clients**

For a particular MA, its male Japanese client base is limited to an area near its office. For instance, main clients of MA-14, located in the central part of Shiga Prefecture, concentrate in the central and northern portion of the prefecture; for MA-20 located in the northwestern coast of Kagoshima Prefecture, most clients are limited to the western part of the prefecture and the southwestern part of Kumamoto Prefecture. However, after MAs establish their own websites, they tend to expand their business areas.

Such discussion concerns the spatial range of clients. However, if the number of clients is considered together, there is an obvious distance-decay tendency: the shorter the distance from a particular MA’s office, the greater the number of clients. This reflects the necessity of human movement in close relation to time-and-energy-consuming jobs peculiar to matchmaking businesses before and after marriage. For example, when trouble or dissatisfaction from the Japanese male client arises before the marriage, the agency manager often has to intervene to ensure the contract. Post-marriage service is also important. It is not unusual that newly wedded couples face various troubles including arguments that reflect their different cultural backgrounds. In this situation, the MA that arranged the marriage is often asked to intercede. Many MAs believe that such intercession is unavoidably included in their jobs, though they cannot make any financial claims. However, MAs that provide better after-services gather a good reputation and expect better marriage success. Without such after-services, MAs tend to be regarded as agencies that only think of making money, resulting in bad reputations. Note that generally, such after-services are discontinued when the first baby is born (also see Ishida 2007: 107–114).

While MAs want to use websites for expanding their businesses, they prefer smaller activity areas for offering minute services. In fact, MA-13, located in Aichi Prefecture, mentions in its website that its clients are required to live within the three prefectures of Aichi, Gifu, and Mie. The agency may decline potential clients because post-marriage services are difficult for those in distant places.

**Acquisition of a spouse visa**

To quickly attain a visa as a spouse of a Japanese national, MAs provide various kinds of advice to clients
for preparing the documents. It usually takes two months from the submission of the required documents for a spouse visa status to be issued by the immigration bureau. The length is often longer if marriage fraud is suspected.

On the contrary, for applications without problems from the couple's side, this length tends to be shorter. A good strategy is to attach a wedding photo that includes all the relatives of both families to the required documents. According to MA-17, this greatly reduces the suspicion of a fake marriage. Furthermore, MA-6 bragged that since they have established a favorable impression from the immigration bureau based on excellent business results in the past, issuing of visa status requires only one month. The length of waiting time before the visa is issued may depend on which MAs are used.

### Business reputation

Many MAs claimed that the most delightful moment of their jobs is when the Japanese client expresses gratitude after the marriage is concluded and they are invited to the wedding reception. In addition, MA-1 admitted being moved when he was asked to name the first baby of a newly-wedded couple.

Although many MAs are conscientious, even they worry about the unscrupulous MAs that have damaged the image of their whole industry. This has also led to timidity about their professions. Based on my visits to selected MAs' offices, they rarely put up loud signboards to avoid attracting attention. MAs are often not well-known locally. Their unfavorable reputation seems to stem from the following causes.

First, MAs in Japan have to count on partners in other countries when they look for brides, if such reliable persons as relatives or close friends of the agency managers are unavailable. According to MA-11, even after marriages are contracted between Japanese men and Chinese women, Chinese partners (often called brokers) do not receive cooperation fees from the Japanese MAs, because Chinese agencies are eager to become partners with Japanese MAs; instead, the partners usually demand more than one million Japanese yen from the brides. Since the Japanese husband is usually unaware of such demand, the Chinese woman has to work hard in Japan and keeps this from her husband, often causing discord and sometimes even divorce. MA-6 confessed that the covert maneuvers of such brokers are a tragedy of international marriages in Japan. Such problems do not occur if a Japanese MA has a reliable partner in China.

Second, marriages of convenience or fake marriages in which MAs are involved also help create a negative image. Regarding this topic, Ishida (2007: 53–57) describes the following three cases. The first is a marriage disguised by collaboration among the “husband,” the “wife,” and the Japanese MA. The second is a marriage in which the “wife” exploits international marriage as a loophole to work in Japan and disappears after entering the country. The “husband” (and often the Japanese MA as well) do not know her original intention. The third resembles the second, but the “wife’s” behavior is mainly led by the Chinese MA.

Third, MA-11 added that one inevitable cause of the bad reputation of MAs is the easy participation in the matchmaking business by internationally married couples or their foreign wives who are unaware of the industry's severity. Their resultant business failures or deadlocks result in unfavorable rumors.

### Estimating the Share of Marriages Arranged by Matchmaking Agencies

Next, we estimate the share of MA-based marriages within international marriages in Japan. Such questions were also asked in the interview surveys, but no satisfactory answers were obtained. A possible clue is the answer that couples under consideration must write for the question, “did you have an introducer?” on the questionnaire sheet that has to be submitted to Japan’s immigration bureau (Kokusai Kekkon wo Kangaerukai 2005: 131–134). If this answer is “yes” and a MA name is written as the introducer, it serves as direct and convincing evidence that an MA was utilized.

However, even if this couple actually used an MA, “friend” as an introducer tends to be written, because couples are often worried about relying on an MA and want to avoid the whiff of a fake marriage. Therefore, it is highly likely that specific MA names are under-represented. We cannot expect questionnaire answers to provide sufficiently reliable evidence from which to calculate this share.

To tackle this problem, I prepared a typology list that focused on Japan by keeping in mind the diversity confirmed by the interview surveys of the MAs mentioned earlier and immigration officials referred to below (Table 2). Since the couples of Japanese husbands and foreign wives are predominant (80.5% in 2006) in our country (see Figure 1), this table assumes such couples.

Although previously more than seven types were assumed that seemingly cover all possible cases, the six types shown in Table 2 were finally determined according to the advice obtained from the interview surveys. This
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Table 2. Six Types of International Marriage between Japanese Husbands and Foreign Wives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Love marriage or MA-based marriage</th>
<th>Country of usual residence before marriage</th>
<th>Status of residence</th>
<th>Data availability from official statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Husband (nationality: Japan)</td>
<td>Wife (nationality: country A)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Status of “permanent residence” (no status change)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Other statuses → “spouse of Japanese national”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>MA-based</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Acquisition of new status “spouse of Japanese national”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Country A</td>
<td>Country A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Country A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>MA-based</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Country A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s survey.

typology is based on the three major differences of the course until marriage, countries of usual residence for couples, and changes in status-of-residence. Therefore, these differences are explained.

First, with respect to the courses until marriage, international marriages are divided into marriages realized by MA arrangement and all the rest. Since most of the latter generally correspond to “romantic” marriages, such marriages are termed love marriages for convenience. Types 1, 2, 4, and 5 belong to love marriages, and Types 3 and 6 belong to MA-based marriages.

Second, the countries of residence for the husband and the wife immediately before their marriage and country A as the foreign wife’s nationality are considered in Table 2. The country of usual residence both for the husband and the wife of Types 1–3 is Japan. These types correspond to international marriages whose husbands and wives probably met in Japan. Type 4 is the case where a Japanese man and a foreign woman met and fell in love in country A, and she entered Japan as a new immigrant with spouse visa status. Type 5 assumes that the Japanese man and the foreign woman met in Japan and their love continued even after she returned to her country A. This type particularly represents Japanese grooms and Filipino brides. Until 2004, the main status-of-residence for new female immigrants from the Philippines was “entertainer.” Most worked at so-called “Philippine Pubs” (Abe 2009), where they met Japanese men and sometimes fell in love. Although the issuance of this status-of-residence became stricter in 2005, such affairs may have lasted even after the women returned to her home country. It is not unusual for a Japanese man and a Filipino woman to marry based on such a background. Type 6 is the case of international marriages arranged by MA, the main subject of this study. Note that seemingly the aforementioned case where the applicants write “friend” as introducer on the questionnaire sheet is classified into Type 5 of Table 2; but a considerably high percentage of them should actually fall into Type 6 because such couples usually get married only a few days after meeting.

Third, in terms of the legal procedure associated with international marriage, there is no change in status-of-residence for Type 1, since the foreign woman already has permanent resident status, which is preferred over a spouse visa. In the meantime, the foreign wives of Types 2 and 3 change their statuses from, for instance, college student or specialist in humanities/international services to a spouse visa. As new immigrants, the foreign wives of Types 4–6 have to acquire a spouse visa.

The different types exhibited in Table 2 can be justified by this explanation. Since MA-based marriages are Types 3 and 6, our purpose is to learn the size of the share of these two types within all Types 1–6. We cannot determine it directly from official statistics. However, a tentative answer can be found by combining the data recorded in the official statistics with the proportions provided by the officials in charge of examining the applications for new status-of-residences including...
“spouse of Japanese national.”

For this purpose, I visited the Tokyo and Osaka Regional Immigration Bureaus in March 2008 and interviewed immigration officials. At the immigration bureaus, applications for international marriage status-of-residence are examined along with those for permanent residence status. In 2006, the Tokyo and Osaka bureaus respectively examined 44.8% and 10.1% of the nation’s total of 51,650 applications, suggesting that the obtained answers will reflect national tendencies. By combining the data that appear in the official statistics and the interview results, the following discussion emerges.

According to the Vital Statistics of Japan, the total number of international marriages in 2006 was 44,701: 35,993 (80.5%) foreign brides and 8,708 (19.5%) foreign grooms (Figure 1). Thus, the former number corresponds to the sum of Types 1–6 in Table 2. Moreover, according to the Annual Report of Statistics on Legal Migrants, the total number of new immigrants with spouse visa status in 2006 was 18,441. Since a breakdown by gender is unavailable, it is assumed to be in direct proportion to the above share (80.5% vs. 19.5%) of international marriages in 2006. As a result, 14,845 foreign brides and 3,596 foreign grooms are estimated. The former number corresponds to the sum of Types 4–6 in Table 2. The replies to my questions obtained from the officials at the Tokyo and Osaka Regional Immigration Bureaus are as follows: the rate of Type 6 to the sum of Types 4–6 is 70–80% at the former bureau and 80-90% at the latter. So if 70% is used as a minimum rate here, the resultant number is 10,392 persons (14,845×0.7). Moreover, according to the officials, the rate of Types 3 to 6 is one-ninth; so, 10,392÷9=1,155 persons. Therefore, the total of Types 3 and 6 (or MA-based marriages) is 11,547 (10,392+1,155) and occupies 32.1% (11,547÷35,993) of all international marriage types. Alternately, if 80% is used as the minimum rate, the share of MA-based marriages is 36.7%.

If the number of MA-based international marriages between foreign husbands and Japanese wives is added (which is excluded from the above discussion), this share becomes even higher. But such estimation was omitted due to the small number of foreign husbands. However, the estimated share of MA-based marriages for international marriages in contemporary Japan is estimated to be at least one-third. Obviously, this is much higher than the proportion of omiai marriage (6.4%) for couples of Japanese groom and Japanese bride (Kokuritsu Shakai-hoshou Jinkou Mondai Kenkyuu-cho 2009).

Based on Table 2, we estimated the share of MA-based marriages, which is an important goal of this article. However, the table is also useful for explaining the distinctions of major countries between the 2006 composition of Figures 2 and 6 from the variation of the dependency on MAs for international marriage. Therefore, this is mentioned at the end of this section.

China’s remarkably high share (70.5%) in Figure 6 stems from the active immigration of brides supported by matchmaking businesses and the low dependence on MAs in the Philippines and Korea compared with the number of international marriages registered in Japan. The large percentage (27.6%) of the couples for the Philippines in Figure 2 but the relatively small percentage (9.8%) in Figure 6 can be explained by the importance of love marriages exemplified by Type 5, which reflects the many “entertainers” in Japan from the country until 2004, as explained earlier. Moreover, a much smaller proportion for Korea (only 2.5%) in Figure 6 in comparison with 18.7% in Figure 2 is chiefly due to the prominence of Type 1. “Old-comer” Korean residents in Japan have rich information reflecting their long periods of residence and thus do not need to rely on MAs for spouses, although the Vital Statistics of Japan does not indicate whether these international marriages are between “old-comer” Koreans and Japanese or “new-comer” Koreans and Japanese (Piper 2000).

**Conclusion**

This paper explored the actual activities of matchmaking agencies (MAs) for international marriages in Japan and estimated the share of such marriages within all international marriages. The major findings can be summarized as follows.

Many MAs started matchmaking services partly because their own marriages are international. The main reason for international marriage for Japanese men is the difficulty of finding Japanese women to marry. With regard to the spatial distribution of Japanese clients, there is an obvious distance-decay tendency: the shorter the distance from a particular MA’s office, the more clients. MAs provide various kinds of advice on preparing the documents for foreign wives of Japanese clients to acquire spouse visa status. Although many MAs are conscientious, they worry about unscrupulous MAs. Moreover, the share of MA-based marriages in all international marriages is so high (at least one-third) that it plays a crucial role in Japan’s international marriages.

Finally, two implications of these findings are mentioned. First, as mentioned above, the MAs' own...
attitudes toward their industry are timid rather than confident due to the unscrupulous MAs. However, if we consider the high percentage of international marriages through introductions by MAs and that one-third of registered international marriages could not occur without MA activities, the significance of MAs needs to be favorably evaluated in the context of Japan’s current population that started to decline in 2005 (Ishikawa 2007a: 192; Ishikawa and Liaw 2009). Previous discussion has tended to regard foreign populations in Japan as workers (particularly unskilled workers) without realizing that they can contribute to a mitigation of various population-decline-related issues.

Second, as new immigrants, foreign brides enter Japan with undue stress due to different cultural backgrounds and anxiety about their marriage lives. However, their support has been left mainly to MAs so far. Foreign brides as new residents, who might obtain permanent residence in Japan, should be supported by national and local governments, although self-help or mutual aid through social networks of foreign wives (Ishii 1995; Takahata 2003; Davin 2007) and support from new organizations including NGOs and women’s shelters (Piper 2003) also deserve consideration.

An international comparative study of the roles of MAs among East Asian countries including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, all of which have received many foreign brides through transnational migration, is a challenging theme that belongs on a future research agenda.

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Notes

1. There is no question about the nationalities of the grooms and brides in the questionnaire sheet of this survey. However, according to a staff member in charge of this survey at the institute, almost all respondents are Japanese nationals, and thus this figure is the share of omiai marriages between Japanese grooms and Japanese brides.

2. The countries of origin of the four largest groups of foreign residents in Japan are Korea, China, Brazil, and the Philippines; according to Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan, the shares of these four countries among almost 2.1 million foreigners at the end of 2006 were 28.7%, 26.9%, 15.0%, and 9.3%, respectively. Therefore, the share of international marriages including Brazilians in Figure 2 is much smaller than this nationality’s “fair” share in terms of registered population. The share of marriages to Japanese nationals in both genders among Brazilians, including many of Japanese descent, is low, but they enjoy “long-term resident” status that does not restrict them from working in Japan and enables them to bring their families from Brazil. In other words, such Brazilians do not need to rely on international marriage to work in Japan.

3. This situation under which international marriage businesses can be operated without any special licenses has both merits and demerits. It expands the marriage market and provides a marriage opportunity for men facing a “marriage squeeze”; but it also produces shady agencies and the questionable practices and reputations associated with them.

4. Although this paper examines the situation of international marriage in contemporary Japan, attention has been increasing on arranged marriages between Japanese grooms and brides as well, exemplified by the popularity of the term konkatsu (marriage activities). Such marriages are viewed more favorably than negatively in the current context of a greatly lowered birth rate (see, for example, Yamada and Shirakawa 2008). Therefore, the important role of matchmaking agencies seems common between exogamy and endogamy.

References


(J): written in Japanese

(JE): written in Japanese with English abstract