Does Spousal Dissimilarity Matter?
An Analysis of Marital Dissolution among
Transnational Couples in South Korea, 2004-2014*

Kim, Doo-Sub** · Ryu, Jungkyun***

This study explores the effects of spousal dissimilarity on marital dissolution among transnational couples in South Korea. Greater incidences of spousal dissimilarity in age and education are observed among transnational couples. Utilizing marriage and divorce registration data for the period 2004 - 2014, this paper examines whether age and educational dissimilarity between spouses helps explain variations in duration of marriage and the risk of divorce. Attention is also focused on incorporating the direction of spousal difference in age and education into the analysis. To better understand the mechanisms of marital dissolution, indicators of marital duration and probability of divorce are adopted, and the results of regression and logistic analyses are compared with each other. The hypothesis that the direction of spousal dissimilarity as well as spousal dissimilarity itself exerts a significant influence on duration of marriage and the risk of divorce is supported. It is also found that differentials in duration of marriage according to the country of origin of the foreign wife are reduced significantly when the effects of spousal dissimilarity are controlled for.

Key Words: Transnational Couples, Spousal Dissimilarity, Marital Dissolution, Marital Duration, Risk of Divorce

I. Introduction

There is a large literature on the relationship between socio-demographic traits

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** Department of Sociology, Hanyang University (Corresponding Author) | duskim@hanyang.ac.kr

*** The Commission for SSK Multi-cultural Research, Hanyang University | jungkyunryu@gmail.com
of couples and marital stability. Selecting a marital partner is more or less subject to restrictions or preferences, so there is a strong tendency toward positive assortative marriage, marrying a partner with the same or similar socio-demographic traits (Oppenheimer, 1988; Smits, Ultee and Lammers, 2000; Birkeland and Heldal, 2003; Smits, 2008; Çelikaksoy, Nielson and Verner, 2006; Bruze, 2010). Despite some degree of contextual variation, most studies have pointed to strong stability of marital homogamy. It has been found that the greater the socio-demographic similarity between marital partners, the lower the risk of marital dissolution (Udry, 1966; Cutright, 1971; Bumpass and Sweet, 1972; Rockwell, 1976; Blau and Schwartz, 1984; Atkinson and Glass, 1985; Mare, 1991; Smits et al., 1998; Schwartz and Mare, 2005).

During the past several decades, South Korea (hereafter Korea) has experienced a dramatic increase in marriage immigrant women from China, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. Marriage migration across borders is also pervasive in Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong (Piper, 1999; Wang and Chang, 2002; Piper and Roces, 2003; Tsay, 2004; Constable, 2005; Hugo, 2005; Chen, 2008; Jones and Shen, 2008; Kim, 2008, 2012b; Tu, 2008; Yang and Lu, 2010; The Economist, 2011; Jones, 2012). One key difference from other parts of the world is that East Asian marriage migration does not involve large diaspora (e.g., Indians in the UK or Turks in Germany and Austria) with a strong incentive to seek spouses from the home country (Jones, 2012). Rather, in Korea, it was triggered by a gender imbalance in the local marriage market. High sex ratio at birth and urban-ward migration of young women have intensified the marriage squeeze particularly in rural areas (Yang and Liu, 2005; Kim, 2006, 2010, 2015). Those disadvantaged in their socioeconomic and demographic traits have been less likely to find spouses in domestic marriage markets, and have therefore searched for foreign wives.

The increasing pace of divorce has been remarkable for transnational couples in Korea during the past two decades (Kim, 2010, 2015). Another prominent phenomenon in the demographic profile of transnational couples is profound spousal difference in age and educational level. Late age at
marriage of Korean husbands and unconventional age and educational differences between spouses have been widely observed. Heterogeneous composition of transnational couples provides an interesting setting to examine their marital dissolution. Age and/or educational heterogamy and their effects on marital quality as well as stability have been well examined in Western or developed countries (Vera, Berardo and Berardo, 1985; Bitter, 1986; Rogler and Procidano, 1989; Qian, 1999; Raymo and Xie, 2000; Poppel, Liefbroer, Vermunt and Smeenk, 2001; Clarkwest, 2007; Esteve, Cortina and Cabré, 2009; de Putte, Poppel, Vanassche, Sanchez, Jidkova, Beckhaut, Oris and Matthys, 2009; Raymo, Fukuda and Iwasawa, 2013). Therefore, questions can be raised whether general theories of marriage fit the marriage migration context in Korea. Only a few studies have applied the homogamy/heterogamy hypothesis to transnational or interracial couples (Qian, Blair and Ruf, 2001; Kim and Lee, 2008; Zhang and van Hook, 2009; Kim, 2012a; Choi, Kim and Ryu, 20161). In the presence of a strong tendency for spousal dissimilarity, it is not clear whether the heterogamy hypothesis and its negative effect on marital stability can be applied to couples of different ethnic origins or transnational couples. Nor is it clear how the distinct mechanisms of marital dissolution operate in the context of transnational marriage.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the effect of age and educational dissimilarity between spouses on marital stability among transnational couples in Korea. Attention is focused on incorporating the following methodological considerations. First, this study presents the actual probability of divorce as well as duration of marriage in the study of marital dissolution of transnational couples for the first time. Utilizing a matched micro-dataset between the marriage and divorce registration records from 2004-2014, this study has a great strength in that it covers all cases of marriage and divorce during the past eleven years, so it is free from

1) Analyzing the cumulative probabilities of divorce based on a matched micro-dataset between the marriage and divorce registration records, we conducted a study on the risk of marital dissolution among transnational couples in Korea (Choi et al., 2016). Mainly due to data limitations, however, the study population was restricted to the 2010 marriage cohort, and we were able to follow only 48 months of marriage for the previous study.
sampling bias as well as measurement problems. It should be noted that most survey data on marriage immigrants in Korea do not include a sufficient number of divorced foreign spouses as most of them return to their country of origin after getting divorced.

Secondly, this paper incorporates the direction of spousal difference in age and education into the analysis. There is a great deal of diversity in a couple’s combination of socio-demographic traits according to the country of origin of the foreign wife. For example, marriages of Korean men to foreign women from developing countries do not necessarily mean marrying down in terms of education. In fact, foreign women from the Philippines, Mongolia and Uzbekistan tend to be younger but more educated than their husbands (Kim, 2006, 2015). Therefore, attention is focused on the direction of spousal dissimilarity and its effects on marital duration and risk of divorce.

Thirdly, one of the questions raised in this study is whether the effects of spousal dissimilarity differ depending on which indicator of duration of marriage or probability of divorce is analyzed. These two indicators are likely to be negatively associated with each other. We believe, however, that these two indicators capture different aspects of marital dissolution, and that the inconsistent findings may provide clues for further discussion leading to more insights into the mechanisms of marital dissolution.

II. The Korean Context

The entry into the new millennium marked an important turning point in the history of Korean nuptiality. The frequencies of transnational marriage and of divorce maintained a low level until the late 1990s. During the past two decades, however, Korean society has also witnessed a rapid increase in the number of divorces of transnational couples. The country of origin of divorced wives has spread widely into Vietnam, the Philippines, other Southeast Asian countries and Japan while the overwhelming majority of divorced wives were from China (Jones, 2012; Kim, 2012b, 2015). From 2000 – 2015, a total of 75,607 Korean men registered their divorces from foreign
wives. Incidences of divorce from foreign wives have increased 19.9 times from 2000-2015, and 9.9 times since the year 2003. This increasing trend reversed after reaching a peak of 8,349 transnational divorces in 2011. Chinese divorcées, numbering 43,847, accounted for 58.0% of total foreign divorcées from 2000-2015. Other nationalities of origin of foreign divorcées are as follows: Vietnamese 15,185, Filipina 3,572, Japanese 2,914, Mongolian 1,602 and Uzbeki 1,592 (Statistics Korea, 2017).

A notable aspect of marital dissolution that should be emphasized is that marriages of Korean men to women from developing countries including China, Vietnam, Mongolia and Uzbekistan have been less secure and of short duration. Average duration of marriage for divorced transnational couples was estimated at 28.0 months in 2005 and increased to 56.8 months in 2014.2) The counterpart figure for native Korean couples was estimated at 144.0 and 171.6 months in 2005 and 2014, respectively (CSMR, 2016; Statistics Korea, 2016).

Transnational couples are diverse in their socio-demographic traits. When the study population is divided according to the country of origin of the foreign wife, Chinese wives tend to be relatively older, married at an older age, or more likely to have had previous marital experience than other foreign wives, while Vietnamese wives tend to show the opposite attributes on the continuum. Vietnamese wives tend to be less educated, while foreign wives from the Philippines and Mongolia tend to be more educated than their husbands (Kim, 2008, 2012a).

As far as transnational marriage is concerned, the concept of assortative marriage between those with a similar level of status is not supported by empirical data. Socio-demographic barriers to the process of spouse selection are considered to be less serious for those searching for a foreign wife. Facing a shortage of ‘marriageable’ women, one possible response to difficulty in finding a spouse is to lower the compatibility threshold (Kim, 2012a, 2012b). Thus, spousal dissimilarity in age and educational level may become profound. For example, the average age difference between Korean husbands

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2) However, it should be noted that average duration of marriage is calculated based on the divorce registration data, and thus only refers to marital duration that ends in divorce. Those whose marriages continue are not considered in the calculation of average duration of marriage.
and Vietnamese wives is calculated to be as large as 17.0 years. On the other hand, the average age difference of Korean-Chinese couples is relatively smaller. In the case of Vietnamese wives, marrying up seems to be clear, given their young age and low educational level. They have the overriding motive of acquiring higher income and helping the family back home economically. In contrast, Filipinas tend to be better educated than their Korean husbands. Mongolian and Uzbeki wives also tend to be better educated than their Korean husbands (Kim, 2008, 2010, 2012a; Jones, 2012).

III. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Homogamy models of assortative marriage rest on the premise that people in the marriage market tend to marry partners with similar socio-demographic traits. Due to the contextual environment of marriage squeeze, however, the transnational openness hypothesis posits that the level of age- and/or education-heterogamous marriages tends to be higher among transnational couples in comparison with native Korean couples (Kim, 2012a, 2012b).

Most research on marital stability is based on the hypothesis of socio-cultural and demographic homogamy. The basic argument is that between-spouse differences in socio-cultural and demographic traits influence the level of marital satisfaction, and thus spousal dissimilarity tends to shorten marital duration and increase the risk of marital dissolution (Kalmijn, 1998; Kalmijn, de Graaf and Janssen, 2005; Milewski and Kulu, 2014). This paper attempts to analyze spousal dissimilarity and explore whether the hypothesis of a positive relationship between spousal dissimilarity of socio-demographic traits and marital instability fits transnational couples. More specifically, the purpose is to answer the following questions:

1) Does spousal difference in age and education among transnational couples tend to shorten duration of marriage and/or increase the risk of marital dissolution?

2) Does the direction of spousal difference in age and educational
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attainment help explain variations in marital duration or probability of getting divorced?

3) Are there any intervening factors that interact with spousal dissimilarity in the context of transnational marriage and operate in the mechanisms of divorce?

4) Are the causal mechanisms of divorce operating for transnational couples significantly different from those for native Korean couples?

The conceptual framework adopted in this study is the selectivity perspective where high risk of marital dissolution among transnational couples can be attributed to a couple’s compositional traits rather than the characteristics of transnational marriage itself (Milewski and Kulu, 2014). It is emphasized that the socioeconomic and demographic traits of transnational couples may differ from those of native Korean couples. For example, many foreign wives are likely to get married at a relatively young age, be less educated or have vulnerable economic conditions, all of which heighten the risk of divorce. Different socio-demographic traits help explain variations in the level of marital dissolution according to the country of origin of the foreign wives.

A key argument to be examined is whether the different composition of socio-demographic traits between spouses is a significant factor that potentially increases the risk of divorce (Kalmijn, 1998; Kalmijn et al., 2005; Kim, 2008, 2010). If the partner selection process of transnational marriages involves additional spousal dissimilarities, it could increase the marital instability of transnational couples. The selectivity perspective posits that if the effects of socio-demographic traits are controlled for, the high risk of divorce among transnational couples may be significantly reduced or even disappear (Choi et al., 2016).

Another conceptual framework adopted in this study is the cost of divorce. The general theory of marriage scholarship implies a positive association between socioeconomic status and divorce (Choi et al., 2016). When the cost of divorce is high, those who have the socioeconomic resources to manage the high costs are more likely to divorce. However, such a prevailing theory is not supported in Korea, Japan or Taiwan. Although the cost of divorce is
very high, less educated people are found to have a higher risk of divorce in these regions (Hong, Ha and Kim, 2012; Park and Raymo, 2013; Raymo et al., 2013; Kim, 2015; Cheng, 2016).

Therefore, the question can be raised whether transnational couples living in Korea follow the overall pattern of a negative association. Foreign wives also consider the costs and benefits of marital dissolution and calculate the net gains of the possible options. If the net gains from a marital union decrease in the presence of tension and conflict from married life, they may be more inclined to consider marital dissolution as an option (Becker, Landes and Michael, 1977; Becker, 1991; Blossfeld and Müller, 2002). It should be noted, however, that most foreign divorcées must return to their home country after getting divorced unless they hold Korean citizenship. Thus, the cost of divorce for foreign wives without Korean citizenship is likely to be substantially higher than those who hold Korean citizenship. The cost of divorce perspective leads to a conjecture that the effect of holding Korean citizenship on the risk of divorce is positive. This would be particularly true for those involved in a sham marriage. If sham marriages were prevalent above a certain level, citizenship status would reveal a positive relationship with divorce (Choi et al., 2016).

It should be noted, however, that the legal process for obtaining Korean citizenship requires a strong relationship with the Korean husband, maintaining a good quality of married life, and a certain level of adaptation to Korean society. According to the selectivity perspective, foreign wives with Korean citizenship are expected to have a lower risk of divorce compared to their non-citizen counterparts. Despite some occurrences of sham marriage, we expect the overall pattern to support the selectivity perspective.

IV. Data, Variables and Methods

Utilizing a matched micro-dataset from the marriage and divorce registration records for the period 2004 - 2014,3) this paper attempts to apply the conceptual schemes above to couples of a Korean husband and a foreign
wife living in Korea. The dataset contains information on 266,354 marriages of Korean men to foreign women and 65,250 divorces of Korean husbands from foreign wives.

The major independent variables of this paper are two different measures of spousal dissimilarity, that is, differences in age and educational attainment. Spousal difference in age is calculated by subtracting the wife's age from the husband's age. This variable ranges between 20 and -10. For some graphs, tables, and regression and logistic analyses, this variable is sorted into four categories (H 10+ older than W, H 5-9 older than W, H 0-4 older than W, and W older than H). Information on the educational attainment of a couple is available on a five point scale (primary or less, junior high, high, college, and graduate school) in the marriage and divorce registration data. Thus, the range of spousal difference in educational attainment varies between 4 and -4 after subtracting the wife's education from the husband's education. This variable is recoded into three categories (H higher than W, same level, and W higher than H) in some graphs, tables, and regression and logistic analyses.

Two indicators of marital instability are adopted as dependent variables in this study. The first indicator is calculated as duration (in months) between marriage and divorce. It should be noted, however, that the variable of marital duration can only be calculated for divorced couples. Questions can be raised as to the validity of findings on the relationship between spousal dissimilarity and marital instability if the couples who maintain their marriage are excluded from the analysis. To strengthen the arguments of this study, we also calculate the marital duration-specific risk of divorce for the 2004 marriage cohort and present the cumulative probability of divorce according to marital duration as the second indicator of marital dissolution. For a series of logistic analyses, the probability of divorce within the first 132 months of marriage is also calculated for the 2004-2014 marriage cohorts.4) Various

3) In the first stage of this study, we conducted an analysis utilizing the marriage and divorce registration data for the period 1990-2014. It was found, however, that the number of divorces of transnational couples was not sufficient to be analyzed until the early 2000s. It was also found that complete information on the country of origin of the foreign wife became available only from 2004.
socio-demographic traits such as wife’s country of origin, educational attainment of the couple, wife’s age at marriage, year of marriage, and wife’s citizenship status) are introduced into the analysis as other explaining variables or control variables. As for wife’s country of origin, the major five categories are China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and other.

In addition to discussions based on descriptive statistics and graphs, a series of stepwise regression and logistic analyses are conducted in this study to explore the causal relationship between spousal dissimilarity on marital instability after controlling for the effects of a couple’s socio-demographic traits. The main focus is to examine whether and to what extent marital duration and risk of divorce change according to spousal difference in age and educational attainment. Attention is also focused on the direction of spousal difference in age and educational attainment and its effects on marital instability.

It is assumed in this study that the results from the regression analyses of duration of marriage and logistic analyses of the risk of divorce may not coincide with each other, as they depend upon each indicator capturing different aspects of marital dissolution. Although available information is very limited, this study attempt to provide plausible explanations on the inconsistent findings of the regression and logistic analyses.

4) Calculation of the probability of divorce requires very complicated processes of matching between marriage and divorce records, and imputation and estimation based on certain assumptions. As individual IDs are not included in the marriage and divorce registration records, it is not possible to match the same individual between the two registration records. To identify the number of divorces (numerator) according to marital duration as well as the number of marriages (denominator) to calculate the marital duration-specific probabilities of divorce for all the specific groups of individuals, information on the year and month of marriage, age, sex, country of origin of the foreign wife, and education of the couple, available from both registration records, was utilized. For the matching process between the two registration records, more than 6,000 types of transnational couples were constructed based on combination of these information, and the probability of divorce was calculated for each type. For more details on the calculation process, refer to Choi et al. (2016) and Park and Raymo (2013).

5) It should be noted that wife’s citizenship status is not included in the regression and logistic models of this study. Information on naturalized foreign residents only began to be included in the marriage and divorce registration from 2010. For marriages and divorces occurring before 2010, foreign residents with Korean citizenship were registered as Koreans nationals, which leads to the problems of a mismatch between the marriage and divorce records and underestimation of the risk of divorce for transnational marriages (Choi et al., 2016). To avoid these problems, foreign wives with Korean citizenship who reported themselves as Korean nationals in the marriage and divorce registration are considered as foreign wives in this study.
V. Results

1. Duration of Marriage

One of the main purposes of this study is to analyze variations in duration of marriage according to the socio-demographic traits of couples based on the entire set of divorce registration data. As shown in Table 1, the average duration of marriage for divorced couples of Korean husbands and foreign wives is estimated at 36.5 months for the period 2004-2014. A prominent factor to be emphasized as an exogenous variable is the country of origin of the foreign wife. The average marital duration of Chinese and Japanese wives is estimated at 41.5 and 35.0 months, respectively. In contrast, Vietnamese and Filipina wives show a relatively shorter duration, revealing a marital duration of 30.8 and 24.5 months, respectively.

The patterns of terminated marital duration revealed in Table 1 imply that, with the minor exceptions of Vietnamese and Filipina wives due to the small number of cases, transnational marriages with a smaller spousal difference in age tend to last longer. Marriages in which the husband is 10 or more years older than the wife show markedly shorter marital duration. About 93 and 84 percent of Vietnamese and Filipina wives fall into this category, respectively. Marital duration tends to be longer for Filipina and Chinese wives who are older than their husbands. It also appears that, among marriages ending in divorce, couples with more educated wives than their husbands show longer marital duration regardless of the country of origin of the foreign wife. Only Japanese wives reveal a minor deviation from the pattern.

It has been found that better education functions as a stabilizer of marriage among native Korean couples (Hong et al., 2012; Park and Raymo, 2013; Kim, 2015). A general pattern of a positive relationship between education of the foreign wife and duration of marriage is also observed. However, the least educated Vietnamese wives reveal longer marital duration than their more educated counterparts. It is interesting to note in Table 1 that education of the Korean husband does not appear to be a stabilizer of transnational marriage. College educated Korean husbands show the shortest marital duration with the exception of those married to Japanese wives.
### Table 1: Average Duration of Marriage by Major Socio-demographic Variables and Country of Origin of the Foreign Wife, 2004-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin of the foreign wife</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spousal difference in age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H 10+ older than W</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H 5 - 9 older than W</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H 0 - 4 older than W</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W older than H</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spousal difference in education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H higher than W</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same level</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W higher than H</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wife’s education**

| Primary or less | 40.5  | 34.1  | 23.1  | -     | 25.0  | 36.9  |
| Junior high     | 40.0  | 31.3  | 22.6  | 32.5  | 24.2  | 36.1  |
| High            | 43.2  | 30.1  | 23.0  | 33.4  | 25.3  | 37.2  |
| College         | 42.0  | 32.7  | 29.1  | 37.9  | 30.5  | 36.4  |

**Husband’s education**

| Primary or less | 45.6  | 31.7  | 27.8  | 31.0  | 26.1  | 41.1  |
| Junior high     | 44.4  | 34.3  | 24.8  | 31.7  | 27.4  | 40.4  |
| High            | 40.1  | 30.5  | 24.5  | 32.9  | 26.3  | 35.3  |
| College         | 36.5  | 26.9  | 22.8  | 37.0  | 25.6  | 31.6  |

**Wife’s age at marriage**

| 15 - 19 | 28.7  | 33.5  | 24.9  | -     | 24.2  | 31.6  |
| 20 - 24 | 34.2  | 30.7  | 23.6  | 39.9  | 24.4  | 30.3  |
| 25 - 34 | 37.8  | 25.5  | 25.7  | 36.8  | 27.7  | 34.1  |
| 35 - 44 | 45.8  | 27.1  | 26.6  | 31.2  | 32.9  | 44.4  |
| 45+     | 46.1  | 13.6  | -     | 31.8  | 33.6  | 45.0  |

**Year of marriage**

| 2004 - 2005 | 54.6  | 51.7  | 42.3  | 47.2  | 40.9  | 52.9  |
| 2006 - 2007 | 41.0  | 39.8  | 29.7  | 39.1  | 30.7  | 39.0  |
| 2008 - 2009 | 29.5  | 26.8  | 23.7  | 30.8  | 24.6  | 27.9  |
| 2010 - 2011 | 21.4  | 17.2  | 16.4  | 22.6  | 16.4  | 18.8  |
| 2012 - 2014 | 11.6  | 9.7   | 11.4  | 12.4  | 9.4   | 10.5  |

**Wife’s citizenship status**

| Citizen | 73.6  | 78.7  | 75.6  | -     | 72.0  | 74.7  |
| Non-citizen | 35.2  | 23.6  | 19.8  | 34.8  | 24.1  | 30.4  |

*Note: Average duration of marriage is not calculated for cells with less than 30 cases.*


Getting married at a young age does not seem to lead to a longer duration of marriage for foreign wives. However, the younger the age at marriage, the
longer the marital duration is a noticeable pattern among Vietnamese divorcées. This study restricts its analysis to the transnational marriages that occurred in 2004 or after, so it is not surprising to observe a strong negative relationship between year of marriage and duration of marriage.

As expected, average duration of marriage for foreign wives who hold Korean citizenship tends to be markedly longer than the counterpart figure for non-citizen wives. However, it is found that the number of Japanese wives who obtained Korean citizenship after getting married to Korean men is too small to calculate the average duration of marriage.

One of the arguments of this study is that the direction of spousal difference in age and education helps explain variation in duration of marriage. It is clear in Figure 1(a) that spousal difference in age and duration of marriage shows different patterns according to the type of marriage. A reversed J-shaped relationship is found for couples consisting of a Korean husband and a foreign wife. Although native Korean couples show a curvilinear relationship, variation in duration of marriage is not substantial. Couples of a foreign husband and a Korean wife reveal a slightly negative relationship between the two variables.

Most previous studies in Korea have argued that marital stability is weaker among transnational couples compared to native Korean couples (Kim, 2006, 2010; Hong et al., 2012; Kim, 2014; Choi et al., 2016). For the study population of this analysis, average duration of marriage is estimated at 40.5 months for native Korean couples, 36.5 months for couples consisting of a Korean husband and a foreign wife, and 39.9 months for couples of a foreign husband and Korean wife. However, as shown in Figure 1(a), both types of transnational couples are found to have a longer duration of marriage compared to native Korean couples for certain ranges of spousal age difference.

Among couples of a Korean husband and a foreign wife, as shown in Figure 1(a), duration of marriage appears to be the longest when the foreign wife is 3 to 4 years older than the Korean husband. Couples with less than a 3 year difference in age also reveal relatively longer marital duration. The wider the age gap between an older husband and a younger wife, the
[Figure 1] Average Duration of Marriage according to Spousal Difference in Age, Type of Marriage and Education of the Foreign Wife, 2004-2014

(a) Difference in age and type of marriage  
(b) Difference in age and wife’s education


greater the decrease in duration of marriage. This finding is particularly true for Filipina and Chinese wives. When the age gap is wider than 7 years among wife-older couples, duration of marriage also drops drastically. It is clear in Figure 1 (b) that the reversed J-shaped pattern holds consistent regardless of the educational level of the foreign wife.

An interesting phenomenon in this data is that educational difference between spouses shows a different pattern of relationship with duration of marriage. In Figure 2(a), the relationship between the two variables appears to be linear and negative among couples of a Korean husband and a foreign wife. This negative relationship remains consistent in Figure 2(b) regardless of the educational level of the foreign wife. In contrast, as shown in Figure 2(a), the variation in marital duration is relatively smaller for native Korean couples, while a positive relationship with a minor exception is found for couples of a foreign husband and a Korean wife.

Figure 3 presents the results when both indicators of spousal difference in age and education are employed at the same time. It is confirmed in Figure 3(a) that spousal dissimilarity does not significantly influence marital duration among native Korean couples. However, for couples of a Korean husband and a foreign wife, as shown in Figure 3(b), the patterns of variation in marital
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[Figure 2] Average Duration of Marriage according to Spousal Difference in Education, Type of Marriage and Education of the Foreign Wife, 2004-2014

(a) Difference in education & type of marriage (b) Difference in education & wife's education


[Figure 3] Average Duration of Marriage according to Spousal Difference in Age and Education and Type of Marriage, 2004-2014

(a) Korean husband & Korean wife (b) Korean husband & foreign wife


duration according to spousal difference in age and education remain consistent with those observed in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2.
2. Probability of Divorce

In an effort to capture the effects of age and educational dissimilarity between spouses more effectively, marriage duration-specific risk of divorce for the 2004 marriage cohort is calculated. As an alternative measure of marital instability, the cumulative probability of divorce within the first 132 months of marriage is presented in Figures 4, 5 and 6.

Figure 4(a) shows that 14.4 percent of marriages between Korean nationals ended within 132 months. However, transnational marriage reveals a remarkably higher risk of divorce. About 36.6 percent of marriages between a Korean husband and a foreign wife were resolved within 132 months. This finding is in line with previous studies that have pointed to the foreign women’s vulnerable situation in the union and the lower quality of married life (Kim, 2006; Chung and Lim, 2011; Kim, 2012a; Kim and Lee, 2013; Lee and Jun, 2014; Kim, 2014).

Figure 4(b) presents the cumulative probability of divorce within 132 months according to the country of origin of the foreign wife. It is found that Korean-Chinese couples had the highest risk of divorce after four years of marriage, while Korean-Japanese couples had the lowest risk. About 40.2 percent of Chinese wives got divorced within 132 months of their marriage. In contrast, the risk of divorce for Japanese wives was estimated at 15.0 percent.

The analysis of the cumulative probability of divorce according to the educational level of the foreign wife confirms that a couple’s education is negatively associated with the risk of divorce (Figure not shown). Foreign wives with the lowest level of education witnessed an extremely high level of divorce. Around 64.4 percent of foreign wives with primary education or less ended their marriage within 132 months.

This study also examines the educational gradient in divorce by country of origin of the foreign wife. It is confirmed that education has become a stabilizer of transnational marriage regardless of the country of origin of the foreign wife. The relationship between education and risk of divorce is found to be negative for all countries. About 59.5 percent of Chinese wives with
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[Figure 4] Cumulative Probability of Divorce according to Type of Marriage and Country of Origin of the Foreign Wife, 2004-2014

![Cumulative Probability of Divorce](image)

(a) Type of marriage

(b) Country of origin of wife


primary education or less divorced within 132 months, and almost all the Vietnamese wives in the same category experienced divorce (Figures not shown).

The patterns of the cumulative probability of divorce seem to support the differential patterns of marital duration discussed above. Marriages in which the Korean husband is 10 or more years older than the foreign wife are found to be associated with shorter marital duration (Table 1 and Figure 1). For the 2004 marriage cohort, Figure 5(a) shows a pattern of corresponding variations in the risk of divorce according to the categories of spousal difference in age.

As far as spousal difference in education is concerned, however, the probability pattern of divorce is not in accordance with the pattern of marital duration. Marriages where the foreign wife is more educated wives than her Korean husband tend to last longer (Table 1 and Figure 3). However, it appears clear in Figure 5(b) that marriages with a more educated wives show the highest probability of divorce, while marriages with a more educated husband present the lowest probability. This rather inconsistent finding is mainly due to Chinese wives having a very different pattern of
[Figure 5] Cumulative Probability of Divorce according to Spousal Difference in Age and Education, 2004-2014

- Probability of divorce compared to other foreign wives, as shown in Figure 6(a). It turns out that Chinese wives constitute 59.3 percent of the study population and are responsible for the unexpected pattern of the probability of divorce presented in Figure 5(b). For Vietnamese, Filipina and Japanese wives, differential patterns of the probability of divorce in Figure 6 are in accordance with the patterns of marital duration presented in Table 1.

The main reasons why Korean-Chinese couples show an opposite pattern of divorce probability according to spousal difference in education is puzzling. It remains unaccounted for by the factors available and examined in this paper. Chinese wives with more education than their husbands tend to be relatively older, married at an older age, and more likely to have previous marital experience than other foreign wives. It is also worth noting that around three quarters of Chinese wives are ethnic Koreans who speak the Korean language fluently with a higher level of assimilation into Korean society.

Unlike other foreign wives, ethnic Korean women with Chinese nationality do not have to return to China when their marriage to a Korean man ends in divorce. Therefore, the cost of divorce, for ethnic Koreans above a certain level of education in particular, is likely to be lower compared to other foreign wives. Among the 2010-2014 marriage cohort, Chinese wives
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[Figure 6] Cumulative Probability of Divorce according to Spousal Difference in Education and Country of Origin of the Foreign Wife, 2004-2014

(a) Chinese wife

(b) Vietnamese wife

(c) Filipina wife

(d) Japanese wife


who are older as well as more educated than their Korean husbands are found to have a substantially higher probability of obtaining Korean citizenship. Another question can be raised whether sham marriages constitute a significant portion of marriages between Korean men and Chinese women (DongA Il Bo, 1996). However, partly due to the lack of appropriate information in our matched micro-dataset between the marriage and divorce records, it remains puzzling how the distinct causal mechanisms of divorce operate in the context of transnational marriage between Korean men and Chinese women.
3. Regression and Logistic Analyses

It should be noted that the results above are based on bivariate or trivariate relationships. The differentials in duration of marriage and risk of divorce observed above could be weakened or even disappear when the effects of the socio-demographic traits of the couple are controlled for. To strengthen the arguments of this study, a series of regression and logistic analyses are conducted.6) Dummy variables that stand for the country of origin of the foreign wife, the couple’s education and year of marriage are employed as control or exogenous variables in both the regression and logistic models.7)

Table 2 confirms that Chinese wives tend to have a substantially longer duration of marriage but also a higher probability of divorce. Chinese wives have a 23 percent higher probability of divorce than 'other' foreign wives of the reference group after controlling for the effects of all the variables included in Model 4. The marriages of Vietnamese women are also likely to last longer than those of foreign wives from other countries. Although Filipina wives appear to have a shorter marital duration, it turns out to last longer than other foreign wives after controlling for the effects of spousal difference in age and education. Japanese wives are characterized by having a longer marital duration. In Model 4, the probability of divorce for Vietnamese is estimated to be the lowest, which is followed by that for Japanese and Filipina wives.

The results of the regression and logistic analyses support foreign wife’s education as being positively associated with duration of marriage and tends to lower the risk of divorce substantially. Foreign wives with college

6) The event history analysis could be a better option. However, it requires the complete matching of the same individual between marriage and divorce records, and cannot be conducted in this study.
7) Utilizing information on the acquisition of Korean citizenship available in the divorce registration data from 2010, a series of separate regression analyses were conducted for those married from 2010 - 2014, and the results were compared to those based on the entire population of transnational couples married from 2004 - 2014. Some of the discussions and explanations on the mechanisms of marital dissolution provided in this paper are based on the results of these analyses. However, we did not find any significant differences in the patterns of the relationships from the comparison and therefore decided not to present the results of the analysis for the marriage cohorts from 2010 - 2014.
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### Table 2
Regression Analysis of Factors Related to the Duration of Marriage and Logistic Analysis of Factors Related to the Probability of Divorce, 2004-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Regression analysis</th>
<th>Logistic analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duration of marriage</td>
<td>Probability of divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Model 1)</td>
<td>(Model 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Odds ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of origin (ref: other)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese wife</td>
<td>12.49</td>
<td>6.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese wife</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>7.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipina wife</td>
<td>-1.50</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese wife</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wife’s education (ref: primary or less)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior high</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wife’s age at marriage (ref: 45+)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 19</td>
<td>-6.75</td>
<td>-4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 24</td>
<td>-9.90</td>
<td>-6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 34</td>
<td>-8.74</td>
<td>-6.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 - 44</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spousal diff. in age (ref: H 0 – 4 older than W)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H 10+ older than W</td>
<td>-2.76</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H 5 – 9 older than W</td>
<td>-1.54</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W older than H</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spousal diff. in education (ref: same level)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H higher than W</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W higher than H</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year of marriage (ref: 2004 - 2005)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 - 2007</td>
<td>-12.12</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 - 2008</td>
<td>-23.02</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 - 2011</td>
<td>-31.94</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012 - 2014</td>
<td>-39.82</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Constant)</strong></td>
<td>32.53</td>
<td>50.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of cases</strong></td>
<td>58,972</td>
<td>58,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²/Pseudo R²</strong></td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F ratio/ LR χ²</strong></td>
<td>349.15</td>
<td>923.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** This analysis is of the entire population, and thus standard errors and statistical significance are not reported in this table.

**Source:** Marriage and divorce registration data, 2004 - 2014.

Education are estimated to have 73 percent lower probability of divorce compared to those in the lowest category of education.

As far as wife’s age at marriage is concerned, foreign wives married at ages over 45 show the longest duration of marriage, while those married at
ages 20-24, the shortest marital duration. Differentials in the probability of divorce according to the wife’s age at marriage are reduced substantially, and this variable appears to be relatively less influential after controlling for the effects of the socio-demographic variables included in Model 4.

It is clear in Table 2 that spousal difference in age and education exert a significant influence on duration of marriage and probability of divorce. When the Korean husband is older than his foreign wife and the age gap is wider, marital duration tends to be shorter. When the Korean husband is older than his foreign wife by 10 years or more, the couple’s risk of divorce increases to 49 percent higher than that of the reference group in which the husband is 0-4 years older than his wife. Holding the advantage of superiority of age, Korean husbands may hold a less egalitarian view of married life and prefer to control over their foreign wives. In this case, it is more likely that this type of couple will become more vulnerable to the tensions and conflicts of married life, which in turn, increases the risk of marital dissolution. As mentioned above, when the foreign wife is more educated than her Korean husband, their marriage tends to last longer but also has a higher risk of divorce. It should also be noted that longer marital duration for Chinese wives is reduced substantially when the effects of spousal difference in age and education are controlled for.

Finally, the study population is composed of those whose marriages and divorces occurred in 2004 or after. To reduce other compositional effects according to the timing of marriage, year of marriage is employed in the regression and logistic models. It is therefore understandable that, year of marriage ceteris paribus is negatively associated with duration of marriage and probability of divorce.

VI. Discussion

The next decade is expected to continue witnessing a rapid increase in the level of marital dissolution, and this will present new demographic, socioeconomic and cultural challenges for Korean society. Having a relatively
short history of transnational marriage, comprehensive and reliable data on foreign wives and their married life are not widely available in Korea. Given the growing concern regarding the marital instability of transnational couples and the data limitation, this study attempts to explore the pattern of spousal dissimilarity and its effect on marital dissolution based on marriage and divorce registration data. Utilizing a matched micro-dataset between the marriage and divorce registration records for the period 1990-2014, various measures of spousal dissimilarity, duration of marriage and cumulative probability of divorce are calculated for the entire population of transnational couples for the first time.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the links between spousal dissimilarity, and its effect on marital dissolution. Special attention is paid to the direction of spousal dissimilarity in terms of age and education and its effects on marital dissolution. In order to reveal the different aspects of marital dissolution, this study employs two indicators of marital dissolution, duration of marriage and probability of divorce. The results from analyses of divorced transnational couples can be summarized as follows.

Transnational marriages between a Korean husband and a foreign wife show a substantially shorter duration of marriage and a higher risk of divorce compared to native Korean couples. Chinese wives reveal the longest duration of marriage and the highest risk of divorce at the same time. Japanese wives show a markedly longer marital duration and substantially lower risk of divorce. It is clear that wife’s education is a stabilizer of transnational marriage. A general pattern of a positive relationship with duration of marriage is observed. Foreign wives with more education have a significantly lower probability of divorce. Another prominent phenomenon is that average duration of marriage for foreign wives who hold Korean citizenship tends to be markedly longer than the counterpart figure for non-citizen wives.

In connecting the issue of spousal dissimilarity to the mechanisms of marital dissolution, the empirical results from our analysis clearly suggest that spousal difference in age and education have a significant influence on marital duration and the risk of divorce. One of the key hypotheses of this study, that the direction of spousal dissimilarity helps explain variations in
duration of marriage, is also proven. A reversed J-shaped relationship between spousal difference in age and duration of marriage is found. In contrast, the relationship between educational difference and marital duration appears to be linear and negative. Spousal difference in age and education also exert a significant influence on marital dissolution. The wider the age gap between spouses, the shorter marital duration and the greater the risk of divorce. When the foreign wife is more educated than her Korean husband, their marriage tends to last longer and reveals a higher risk of divorce at the same time.

The selectivity perspective posits that the high risk of divorce in heterogamous marriages is basically due to compositional effects rather than the characteristics of a heterogamous marriage itself. In accordance with this hypothesis, longer marital duration for Chinese wives is reduced substantially when the effects of spousal dissimilarity are controlled for. It is also found that the cost of divorce perspective helps explain the differentials in marital duration and the probability of divorce according to the country of origin of the foreign wife, the level of education and the citizenship status.

A notable aspect to be emphasized is that the observed patterns of marital dissolution among transnational couples in Korea do not fully support the prevailing theory of homogamy and heterogamy. For example, having a relatively low degree of socio-cultural difference, marriages to Chinese women are confirmed to last longer. It is interesting to find, however, that these marriages have the highest risk of divorce, which is contrary to our expectation.

In the face of inconsistent findings from the regression and logistic analyses regarding the links between spousal dissimilarity and marital instability, we believe that quantification of transnational marriage with more comprehensive data may allow us to have greater insights into the mechanisms. This is because marital dissolution is likely to be constrained by a variety of factors. Most transnational couples have to overcome profound differences in religion and cultural background as well as socio-demographic traits in the process of adaptation to the host society. In particular, when a couple's economic status and living standard are relatively low, the likelihood of overcoming friction
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from spousal differences in age, education, and other characteristics is likely to be seriously hampered. Therefore, future research should be directed to test more nuanced hypotheses about when, why, and how spousal dissimilarity operates as a stabilizer or destabilizer of transnational marriage in the context of Korean society. Another promising direction of future research is to apply the conceptual framework set out in this study to other Asian countries that have experienced a large influx of marriage immigrant wives. These expansions may provide further insights into the causal mechanisms of marital dissolution among transnational couples.

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국제결혼 부부의 상이성과 결혼 해체의 분석, 2004-2014

김 두섭·유정균

이 연구의 주된 목적은 한국에 거주하는 국제결혼 부부의 상이성이 결혼 해체에 미치는 영향을 파악하는 것이다. 국제결혼 부부의 연령과 교육수준 격차는 현저하게 크게 나타나는 것으로 확인되었다. 이 논문의 분석을 위해 통계청에서 제공하는 2004-2014년의 혼인통계와 이혼통계 전수 자료를 통합하였다. 이 통합자료를 활용하여 국제결혼 부부의 연령 및 교육의 격차가 결혼자속기간과 이혼확률에 미치는 영향을 확인하고자 하였다. 아울러 부부 연령 및 교육 격차의 방향성이 결혼 해체에 미치는 영향력의 차이를 살펴보는 것에도 초점이 맞추어져 있다. 국제 결혼 부부의 결혼 해체와 관련된 이의의 폭을 넓히기 위해 결혼자속기간과 이혼확률을 동시에 살펴보았으며, 회귀분석과 로지스틱분석을 실시하여 그 결과를 비교하였다. 분석결과, 부부의 상이성뿐만 아니라 차이의 방향성이 결혼자속기간과 이혼확률에 의미 있는 영향을 미칠 것이라고는 가설은 지지되었다. 그리고 부부의 상이성이 미치는 영향력을 통제하면, 혼인 이후의 성의 출산적에 따른 결혼자속기간의 차이는 줄어드는 것으로 확인되었다.

핵심단어: 국제결혼, 부부 상이성, 결혼해체, 결혼자속기간, 이혼확률