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# “International Marriage” as a Symbolic Exchange of Capitals: When women from the former Soviet Union marry Japanese men

Viktoriya KIM

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## “International Marriage” as a Symbolic Exchange of Capitals: When women from the former Soviet Union marry Japanese men

Viktoriya KIM

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of so-called “international marriages”<sup>1)</sup> between Japanese nationals and foreigners has been continuously increasing. According to the latest Statistical Database of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2009), the number of Japanese-foreigner couples has increased from 4,156 in 1965 to 34,393 in 2009, as shown in Figure 1. The number of couples with a Japanese husband and a foreign wife in particular increased, soaring from 1,067 to 26,747. Of these, the top ranking are Chinese women (12,733 couples), Filipino women (5,755 couples), South/North Korean women (4,113 couples).

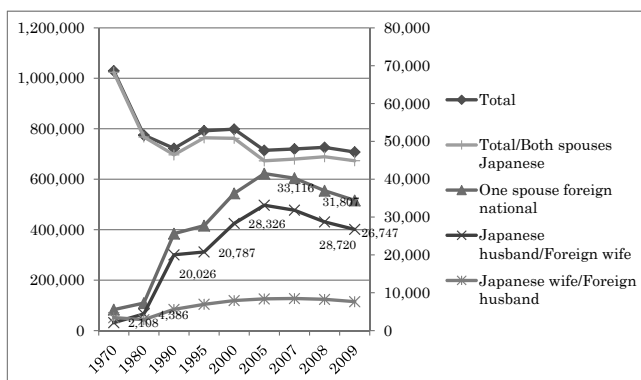
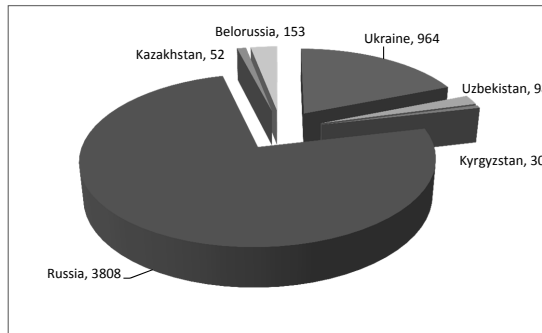


Figure 1. Annual transition in number of marriages by nationality of spouse

Also, the nationality of these foreign spouses began to diversify since the late 1980s, with an increase seen in marriages between women from the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics<sup>2)</sup> (FSU) and Japanese men. Such marriages have increased in number, from 198 couples in 1995 to 576 couples in 2000 (Population Census 1995, 2000), according to the population census data of Japan on the number of international marriages/foreign spouses by nationality<sup>3)</sup>. Also, according to the Statistical Table on Registered Aliens compiled by the Ministry of Justice, the number of citizens of former Soviet countries<sup>4)</sup> (most of which are women) married to Japanese (Spouses of Japanese nationals etc.<sup>5)</sup>) was 2,185 in 2010, and the number of permanent residents was 2,920 (Ministry of Justice 2010). As shown in Figure 2 below, the number of couples comprising Japanese and nationals of former Soviet countries increased to about 5,000 as of 2010.



**Figure 2. Total number of permanent residents and spouses of Japanese nationals from FSU countries in 2010**

Even though the number of women from the FSU has clearly increased in Japan, there are no studies focusing on these women to date. This paper first aims to make up for such lack. Secondly, it seeks to enable these women and men to articulate their personal experiences and expectations of their counterparts. In particular, it will analyze micro factors influencing women and men in choosing a foreign spouse and focus on how symbolic capitals such as gender, age, social status, and financial stability; as well as spouses' views of each other's countries; and spouses' ethnicity/race impact their choices. While most of these capitals are imagined, they play an important role in women's and men's positioning in the field of marriage and in choosing a marriage partner.

This paper presents the results of research on the lives of women married to Japanese men conducted by the author between 2006 and 2011 in the metropolitan areas of Japan, targeting forty-five women from the FSU that are or were married to Japanese men, as well as twenty Japanese men married or planning to get married to women from the FSU. Data obtained from questionnaire surveys, participant observation of women's gatherings, interviews and longitudinal interviews, were used for analysis. The study shows that Japan's higher position in the world compared to FSU countries does not necessarily explain women's willingness to marry Japanese men. Moreover, it is not only women that benefit economically and socially from marriage, as men are also active decision-makers. "International marriage" gives them an opportunity for upward social mobility and, at the same time, be able to build a "modern traditional" family.

## 2. Literature Review

There are numerous studies on "international marriage" in Japan. The main ones are Takeshita's "Sociology of International Marriage" (2001), Kamoto's "International Marriage Theory!? Modern Edition" (2008), "Intimate Encounters: Filipina Women and the Remaking of Rural Japan" of Faier (2009), "Intermarriage in the Global Immigration Era: Chinese Wives Settling in Rural Japan" by Saihanjuna (2011), and Suzuki's "Battlefields of Affection: Gender, Global Desires, and the Politics

of Intimacy in Filipina-Japanese Transnational Marriages” (2003). These studies have the following tendencies and features.

First, in some of these studies, such as those conducted by Takeshita (2001) and Kamoto (2008), there is an attempt to theorize “international marriage” through various perspectives. These include a demographic imbalance between male and female’s population in sending and receiving countries, women’s willingness for upward mobility (hypergamy), attraction for different race/ethnicity, etc. While these factors are important in explaining the general dynamics of migration, those do not explain the personal reasons these men and women have for finding a foreign partner and getting married to her or him. Overall, these studies lack the voices of couples and tend to overlook internal dynamics within them.

Second, according to Yamamoto (2010), there is also a noticeable tendency in the literature to examine only the motivations of women who enter “international marriages,” with Asian brides particularly likely to be represented as “marriage migrants,” often carrying negative connotations of economic motivations (Constable 2005: 2-4; Nakamatsu 2003: 191; Piper and Roces 2003: 4).

However, some studies attempt to take a closer look at couples’ relationships and their reasons to get married. Suzuki (2003) and Faier (2009) discuss marriages between women from the Philippines and Japanese men, and Saihanjuna (2011) looks at Chinese rural brides in Japan. These authors discuss push and pull factors, such as gender relations in the sending country, marginalization of women in the home country, access to labor/marriage migration to Japan, and networks that force/enable women to seek employment and marriage opportunities overseas. Therefore, these studies present “international marriage” as a process of women’s negotiation of their position on a global scale and on the local, family level. Overall, these authors utilize a micro perspective in discussing how individuals are constrained by structure and how they exercise agency to overcome those constraints.

This paper is also an attempt to take a close look at the individuals’ perceptions of “international marriage” and to contribute to the studies of “international marriage” in Japan by giving a new perspective of symbolic exchange of capitals and taking a look at non-Asian women from the so-called “Third World” countries, examining the differences and similarities of experiences among couples. In addition, as Yamamoto (2010) points out, studies to date have tended to focus on the motivations of the women who enter “international marriages,” whether Japanese or foreign, with far less research being focusing on the husbands. Therefore, this paper attempts to address this lack and also discuss men’s ideas about marrying foreign women.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

Previous studies on the issue of “international marriage” mostly raise the problems of policy, economic disparities, or cultural differences in intermarriages. Those studies emphasize poverty, social norms and constraints in the sending and receiving countries that lead men and women to

search for a partner outside of their countries (e.g., Thai 2002; Takeshita 2001; Kamoto 2008; Visson 2001; Makhovskaya 2005). Studies that do pay attention to the spouses' lives in the "international marriage" tend to emphasize interactions between the foreign bride and her social environment, such as interactions with her husband, his family or neighbors; the communication problems or the difficulties she experiences in accepting her new host culture (e.g., Visson 2001; Faier 2009; Satake et.al 2006; Da-anoy 2006 etc.). Thus, most of the studies that consider power relations between the foreign bride and her host society tend to ignore how such relations were perceived, negotiated or resisted by women and men.

In order to analyze couples' perceptions of marrying each other, the author will attempt to implement a framework of symbolic exchange of capitals, using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "field" or social space, and "capital." According to Bourdieu, in order to understand interactions between people or to explain an event or social phenomenon, it is insufficient to look at what was said, or what happened. It is necessary to examine the social space in which interactions, transactions and events occurred (Bourdieu 2005:148 cited in Thomson 2008: 67).

The first concept is social space or the "field," as Bourdieu named it. Since there are various analogies used for this term, this study will discuss field as similar to one where a game of football is played: there are set positions of players with internal divisions and an external boundary; the game has its specific rules, which new players must learn, and each player can move according to the position that he has in the field. According to Bourdieu, the game that occurs in social spaces or fields is competitive, with various social agents using differing strategies to maintain or improve their position. At stake in the field is the accumulation of capitals: they are both the process within, and the product of, a field (Thompson 2008: 69).

The next concept is "capital." According to Moore (2008), the term "capital" is usually associated with the economic sphere and monetary exchange. However, Bourdieu uses the term in a broader sense. He argued:

it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory. Economic theory has allowed to be foisted upon it a definition of the economy of practices which is the historical invention of capitalism; and by reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange, which is objectively and subjectively oriented toward the maximization of profit, i.e., (economically) self-interested, it has implicitly defined the other forms of exchanges as – noneconomic, and therefore disinterested (Bourdieu 1986: 15-16).

For Bourdieu (1986), capital is not limited to merely economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights. His use of the term also includes other forms, such as: cultural capital, which is convertible under certain conditions into economic capital, and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications (e.g., skills, titles); social capital, made up of social obligations ("connections"); and, symbolic capital, which, as Wacquant mentions, designates the effects of any form of capital when people do

not perceive them as such (Wacquant 2008: 268), and is convertible, under certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title or nobility. By looking not only at economic power or economic capital, but also at the other types of capital which women and men possess, spouses’ ideas about “international marriage” can be better explained.

Overall, society consists of multiple fields interconnected with each other in different ways. One person belongs to several various fields simultaneously and has different positions in each field depending on the capitals one possesses, while membership in one or several fields can also influence his/her position in other fields. Marriage can be represented as one of the fields and every actor enters it possessing various capitals. By marrying each other, people aim to obtain a position in the society by entering into the marriage field (e.g. acquiring a status of being married), by producing a marriage field itself (e.g. having wife/husband), and by getting all benefits and accumulating capitals that are provided by a counterpart (e.g. economic and symbolic capitals). Thus, both man and woman seek opportunities to get into fields with better conditions, which provide the necessary means for the life they are looking for. Since different types of capital are able to exist in objectified and embodied form (Moor 2008: 104), they might be converted, and, according to Mahar et.al. (1990), capital can be exchanged. Therefore, various types of capital can be exchanged for other capitals.

#### **4. Research Process**

The data used for this study was collected during the author’s research study for PhD dissertation in 2006-2011 on rethinking the concept of “international marriage” in Japan. The study involved interviews with forty-five women from the FSU currently or formerly married to Japanese men and twenty Japanese men married or planning to get married to women from the FSU. Some interviews were conducted twice, with an interval of at least one year. Most of the women were contacted through a Russian-language Internet network<sup>6)</sup> of women from the FSU living in Japan that was established in February 2005. Currently, this network consists of more than 750 members. Most of the participants in the study are women that actively participate or used to participate in multiple discussions on this online “Forum” and live in the urban areas of Japan (mostly around Tokyo metropolitan area and Osaka prefecture), as well as their husbands (15 persons), and other men that were found by the author through different Internet communication sites and through personal networks.

The fieldwork involved in-depth interviews via e-mail, telephone or Skype, as well as personal interviews. The author also collected data through participant observation of women’s communication on “Forum,” women’s gatherings, and at their homes. The interviews were semi-structured and covered the following topics: a) personal and family backgrounds; b) motives for marrying; c) ways to find a foreign partner; d) problems couples meet in everyday life; e) conflicts and ways of solving them; f) changes that happened in the couple’s life between the 1st and the 2nd interview.



## 5. General Assumptions about “International Marriages”

As previously mentioned, many of the studies on international couples attempted to discuss the reasons these women and men have in marrying each other. Satake et.al. (2006), in their study of marriage between Japanese men and Filipina women, give the following three reasons for men to marry foreign women. Firstly, there is an economic factor to the decision to get into an “international marriage.” With the fast growth of Japanese economy, the flow of foreign labor, including female labor migrants, to Japan increased drastically, hence Japanese have more chances to meet and communicate with foreigners. In the light of Japan’s economic power, men that cannot marry women from their home country, but have some economic means, started to look for women from less economically developed countries. The second reason refers to a socio-economic factor. Social reforms in Japanese society led to the late marriages of Japanese women, and with the influence of women’s emancipation, more women started to concentrate on their career. Therefore, more men suffering from difficulties of finding a marriage partner, found their way by approaching female labor migrants. And thirdly, there is a cultural factor that is the traditional image of the subservient Asian women. For instance, men regain their power in the Philippine pubs, where young foreign women pour them beer and light their cigarettes; compared to the “strong” Japanese women, Filipina women have an image of being obedient and submissive.

On the other hand, there are also various reasons mentioned in terms of women’s desires for “international marriage.” The first refers to economic factors, when women moving from the “Third World” country to the “First World” country get access to the welfare of the receiving country. This is a general assumption discussed by many authors (e.g. Constable 2005; Faier 2009; Suzuki 2003). The second involves the cultural factor of liberation from the oppression experiences in a patriarchal system in the woman’s own country (Suzuki 2003; Saihanjuna 2011).

Additionally, as in the case of women from the FSU, studies on the migration of Russian women reveal social, demographic, psychological and cultural reasons for marriage migration (Anashkina et.al. 2003; Barsukova 1998; Makhovskaya 2005; Sarsenov 2004). Anashkina et.al. (2003) points out that social factors play an important role. By marrying a man with a higher or the same social status, women expect to lead safe, stable lives with all the privileges of the husband’s high status. Secondly, demographic factors indicate a mismatch of the female and male populations in FSU countries. In recent years, the average lifespan of Russian men has dropped to 59 years; and at age 65, for every 100 women there are only 46 men (Druckerman 2008). Another factor is psychological, which refers to women’s unwillingness to be on a double shift (to work outside of the house and to be a housewife), and take care not only of children, but also of her infantile husband (Barsukova 1998). Finally, there is a cultural factor. Since Russian women were not influenced by the ideas of feminism

(Anashkina et.al. 2003), there is still a demand for them. In other words, foreign men look for family-oriented women that are ready to become housewives.

The abovementioned factors reflect general stereotypes about men and women in “international marriage.” However, in reality, there are many couples that do not fit into these conditions. Especially, with the increase of marriage migrants from the FSU, stereotypes generally applied to Asian women were also reflected on Slav women. Moreover, there are usually two persons (man and woman) that decide to get married and the reasons of marrying each other are more complicated than just economic, social or cultural disparity.

### 6. “International Marriage” as an Exchange of Capitals

In her work, Massey (1994) argues that relationships between people in the era of globalization are not limited to the problem of distribution of inequality, but also of mobility, where some people move more and have more power than others. She insists that movement and power of one group make other people weaker. Robinson (2007) too points out that since globalization shrinks time and space, the movement of one group of people leads to the weakening of power of another. For example, by marrying Filipina women with English language skills, Japanese men are placed in a weaker position, since the language abilities of their wives bring an imagined “America” in their houses. Consequently, this leads to a distortion in the general image that supposes gender and national hierarchy in such marriages. Therefore, based on the abovementioned arguments, this study will take a close look at the reasons men and women have in entering “international marriage” and analyse their marriage as symbolic exchange of capitals that motivate them and preset their position in the family.

Based on the author’s research, there are several forms of capitals that influence people’s expectations towards “international marriage.” As shown in Table 1, the most important ones are gender, age, ethnicity/race, economic stability, nationality, and language skills.

**Table 1. Different types of capitals possessed by women and men**

<b>Women’s capitals</b>	<b>Men’s capitals</b>
Gender/gendered features	Gender/gendered features
Age (youth)	Age (marriageable age)
Ethnicity/race (“white,” Russian, Asian)	Ethnicity/race (Asian)
Nationality	Nationality
Language abilities	Social status
Exotic features	Economic stability

In order to enter the marriage field and to get a position in the family field, women and men use capitals that they have from birth or acquired in their life course (education, work experience, home environment, etc.). Therefore, mutual reasons of women and men might be understood by considering their images and expectations of an “international marriage,” as well as their vision of gender features, ethnicity/race, and hierarchy by nationality.

### 6.1 Gender and Age

There is a variety of capitals that women and men can exchange in the field of marriage, but in case of women from the FSU and Japanese men, the central and one of the most important ones are that of gender and age. Since Russian women experience difficulties in finding an appropriate marriage partner in their home country, foreign men become their target. As Maiya (late 30s) puts it during her interview: “The number of men in the world is far greater than that in Russia, so it's better to look for one in the world.”

Moreover, FSU women agree that Japanese men are more attractive as a marriage partner than their counterparts in the home country, and express discontent towards these men in their interviews. For example, Polina (early 20s) says,

I wouldn't say everybody, but of those I've seen, there were no Russian men that were very suitable [for a husband<sup>9</sup>]. Most were alcohol or drugs addicts, and didn't work. If they worked, they didn't give what they earned to their wives [didn't support the family], and didn't help with the housework. They were always hanging out with friends, or drinking beer. They said they loved their children, but didn't take care of them. They didn't look good either; drinking too much beer has turned them blue around the eyes, and their faces are pale with blue-white shade... I don't want to offend anyone, but I didn't like them.

On the other hand, Japanese men are usually depicted as “serious, responsible, reliable, and good as a husband and as a father.” This kind of gender features attributed to Japanese men, indicate that a mismatch of female and male population in the FSU led not only to problems in finding a partner, but also to a distortion of men's attitudes towards marriage that decreased their capital as marriage partners in women's eyes, and, on the opposite, Japanese men were attributed many qualities that women seek in the marriage partner. According to Lyubov (late 30s), when she was in her home country, she got marriage proposals from some good men, including foreign men, but decided to marry her husband because of the attention he gave her. As she recalls: “If I felt bad, he would take a taxi, without thinking that it might cause a traffic jam, and go to the drugstore to buy medicines. When the heel of my shoes was broken, he told me, ‘Sit here and wait!’ and went to buy me new shoes. He was like this.”

The same may be said about age. More than half of the women who participated in the study are married to men about ten or more years their senior, the largest age difference being 34 years. There are stereotypes formed for those involved in such marriages. For these Japanese husbands, they are

deemed as unable to find a marriage partner at a marriageable age, and because of this, they turn to foreign women. However, as it is clear from interviews, for women from the FSU, older men are attractive because they seem to be more interested in family and children, and in contrast, “Russian men are infantile, and are not ready to take responsibility for a family.”

## 6.2 Ethnicity and Race

Another important kind of capital is ethnicity or race. Takeshita explains it as follows:

...[I]nterest to the different race, in the narrow sense can be explained as an attractiveness to exotic, or psychological and physiological attractiveness to such features as skin/hair color and appearances that are different from oneself, and in a broader sense, those are temper/character, linguistic, social and cultural features of the partner (Takeshita 2001: 100).

Also, as Nakamatsu (2005) points out in her study of marriage brokers, religious, language and racial differences are usually not emphasized when representing Asian women, while in the description of Russian or European women, “whiteness,” “beauty” and “sexual satisfaction” were considered as appealing characteristics. Thus, in the representation of these women, the most important one is their “whiteness,” and, in addition, their “domesticity” and “loyalty” to their husbands. “Whiteness” for men is a symbol of social status and marriage to a white woman represents their economic success (Nakamatsu 2005). According to Makhovskaya (2005) the brand of beautiful, “white” Russian women was promoted through international beauty contests. In the case of the United States of America, compared to exotic Filipina or Chinese women, Russian women are closer to the Anglo-Saxon type, which opens up a different niche for them in terms of attractiveness to American men. The same might be said in case of marriages with Japanese men, where, compared to the widespread marriages with Filipina, Chinese, Korean and other Asian women, Russian women have one large difference being ethnically and racially different.

According to the research participants, race and ethnicity also become some kind of symbolic capital in choosing a marriage partner. Women and men who participated in the interviews commented on racial and ethnic differences in many ways. The one who articulated racial differences the most was Anna’s husband Jun (late 40s). As Anna (early 30s) said in her interview: “[he] told me he always liked *gaijin* [foreigners] and he thought he was a foreigner in his previous life [laughs]. He loves Americans... and he loves blonds.” Also, according to Jun, before meeting Anna, he used to visit Filipina pubs, and Anna was the first “white” woman he ever met. On the question how Filipina women are different from Russian women, Jun explained: “Since we couldn’t talk to each other, I don’t know what they have deeply inside. But as Japanese, after all, to be with a blond woman with blue eyes or with a Filipina woman, after all, this one feels different.”

According to Yaroslavna’s husband Masayuki (early 30s), the reason he married his wife was: “I thought she was clever, beautiful and kind,” and in addition: “what was a benefit... is that everybody notices you [laughs].” As he explained, when he walks with his wife, he notices that people around

look at them. Moreover, these women are aware that they are considered attractive by being Russian or “white,” and they use their ethnicity as an advantage or capital in searching for a marriage partner, especially in the case of marriage with Japanese men. For example, Elena (late 20s) explains it this way: “It is easier to date foreign men. I mean, if there are ten Russian men, only three of them would like to date me, but in the case of Japanese men, it would be six.”

Some Japanese men are also attracted to Soviet or Russian culture. Elena’s partner loves Russia and blond women. According to Elena, “He loves Lenin, Russian history, culture and so on.” And regarding the question on why he loves Russian women, she explained: “they [Russian women], except me, are hard-workers, and compared to Japanese women, they say they want to work. And Japanese women, and me also, only think of spending money.” Therefore, because of women’s belonging to the FSU, men tend to endow these women with the image, or imagined capital, that they acquired through their knowledge of Russian or Soviet culture.

For some women, men’s ethnicity also becomes a kind of capital. They mentioned it as one of the main reasons to get married to Japanese men. For instance, Marina (late 20s) talked about her preferences: “I always liked Asian men: black hair, black eyes, dark-complexioned skin that European men don’t have, and not too tall are my favorite type.” Also, abovementioned Elena: “I like their [Japanese] appearance more. But at the core, everybody [Russian men and Japanese men] are pretty much the same.”

On the contrary, some men choose women from the FSU of Asian origin. For example, Takeshi (late 40s) worked in Moscow for two years where he met his wife Irina (late 20s). According to Takeshi, he does not like women with blond hair, and he could not feel relaxed when he was in the office with all blond women surrounding him. That is why, when he saw Irina, who is ethnic Korean, he was attracted to her.

Consequently, in “international marriage,” race and ethnicity play an important role and become an important capital for both men and women. Women’s “whiteness” and their “membership to Russian culture,” lead men to the symbolic field of “whiteness” and “Russian culture,” and, on the other hand, being Asian for some women and men also becomes an important capital for marriage field.

### **6.3 Economic Stability and Social Status**

Among the reasons FSU women give for deciding to marry Japanese men, there is one that is consistently mentioned. Here is how one of these women, Polina, explains her motivation for marrying a Japanese man: “I had self-interest, but it wasn’t about money. I thought that this man would be appropriate to build a family with and become a father to children.” As most women explained, the verb “to marry” for women (it is a gendered verb) in the Russian language translates as “to be behind the husband,” pointing to the stability and support that women supposedly get from a man after marrying him. Several participants pointed out: “before marrying him, I knew that with this man I

would feel stable and supported,” “he was good to me, serious, and responsible. He was good as a man. I thought I could rely on this man and he would build a good family for me and my son.”

Besides welfare reasons, there were some women who talked about economic benefits. In Karina’s (early 30s) case, she wanted to get married to her husband in order to have a wealthy life. She used to date boyfriends of the same age in her home country, but they did not have money and could go only to students’ cafeteria for dates. However, with her husband, she could go to luxury restaurants and receive presents, and this was appealing for her. In addition, since her husband was twenty five years older than her, he was good talker and it was interesting to talk to him.

Thus, while these women had a chance to get married to men from their own country or other countries, they chose Japanese men. The reason to do so was not only to achieve economic power. Their demonstration of care, responsibility and masculinity were attractive to women from the FSU.

#### 6.4 Different Culture and Language

As mentioned in the case of Elena’s partner, there are some men who are attracted to foreign women because they are from a different (Russian) culture and know a different language. Larisa’s (early 30s) husband Takehiro (early 40s) explained his reason to marry a Russian woman in the following manner.

When I was 33, I was once married to a Japanese woman. Well, we didn’t have children, and were married about three years; well, it wasn’t really an interesting experience. Not interesting experience, or it would be better to say that our *feeling*<sup>8)</sup> didn’t match. Both of us were very busy, and both were something like *separate*, like *DINKS*<sup>9)</sup>, and we lived this way for three years... Also, we didn’t talk straightly about our feelings, and didn’t understand each other. Because I had that [experience], I felt a bit that the character of Japanese women didn’t fit me; when I talked to foreigners in the company (foreign company) [where he worked] at that moment, I felt, well, relaxed, or it seemed that they match me, and I thought, if I had a chance, I’d get married to a foreigner.

Thus, some men who experienced dating or living with Japanese women chose to find a foreign partner because of their differences in character and style of communication. Moreover, Takehiro explained:

Americans are straightforward, but they are not *traditional*, it seems that they are always delighted, like *everyday happy* style, but Russians, of course they like to have fun, but it can be said that they are *fifty/fifty*, or have a balance, they are quite traditional, and, *intelligent*. Americans do not have a good balance. Most of them, like my boss, my friends, I mean, hmmm, there are either people that do only job, only working, or those who are slackers; I thought that I didn’t like Americans, and at that time Russian style seemed to be better.

From Takehiro’s interview, it is clear that men expect women to be modern and traditional at the same time: while they build a “modern family” with a partner from a different ethnic and cultural background, they expect them to be traditional in the Japanese way. And for some men, Russian women do have this kind of quality.

Also, about benefits of being married to a foreign woman, Masayuki states: “I can eat Russian

cuisines, and it seems it would be easier to travel abroad. And also, in the future, if we have a child, ...we can send him or her to study abroad, it would be easier to do so...” While Hideo (late 20s) is not married yet, he shared his experience of dating Russian woman. He has experienced dating a 21 year old Russian student, and what he noticed was that he could talk to her about literature, art and so on. He could not do the same with Japanese girls, and with them it was more like “useless talks (*kudaranai hanashi*).” Therefore, for this and other reasons, he is looking for another woman from the FSU as his partner.

Thus, as mentioned above, before meeting each other, women and men already have an image of the partner they would choose. It is clear that they choose a partner that suits their conditions or decide to get married in the process of interaction. Marriage for them becomes a field where they jointly (symbolically) possess mutual capitals. As shown in Figure 3, in the process of choosing a partner, women and men (symbolically) exchange the capitals each of them possess for another capital that is brought in the field by their counterpart, and try to build a field that suits their images and expectations.

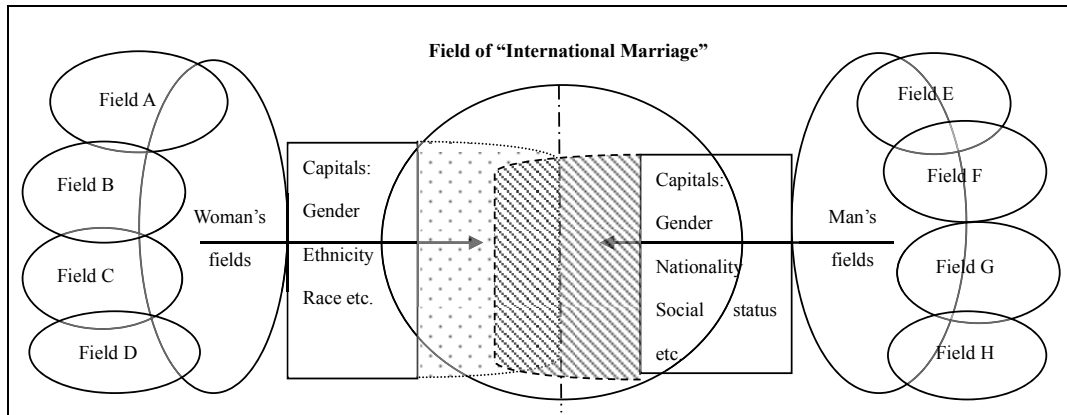


Figure 3. Symbolic exchange of capitals possessed by women and men

### 7. Conclusion

While this study has detailed the image of “international marriage” between women from the FSU and Japanese men as they imagined it before marriage, these factors do not necessarily impact their lives after marriage due to various changes in the attitudes of the spouses towards each other, different problems and so on<sup>10</sup>, this paper argues that the reasons Japanese men and FSU women get married to each other are more complicated than just the upward marriage mobility of women from the “Third World” countries to the “First World” countries.

Firstly, it is clear that women and men do not consider only the positions of their countries on a global scale in choosing a marriage partner. Personal experience and visions of the future marriage

partner are often crucial, though their views of each other are usually shaped and constrained by the society they were born into and lived in, and the images they have about spouse’s country. While FSU women are influenced by gender relationships in their home country and forced to look for a partner outside of it, Japanese men are looking for upward mobility in their own society by marrying “white” woman and/or to build “modern traditional” family, which is different from the families with Japanese women. Secondly, men and women are active decision-makers in the process of choosing a partner: while they might be constrained in terms of the scope and number of choices, they still pursue their vision of a desirable partner. As it became clear from interviews, both women and men were not constrained in choices, and usually had an alternative to the partner. And thirdly, marriage does not occur by decision of only one partner. Both partners have expectations towards each other and marriage becomes as symbolic agreement of both partners that bring the capitals they possess into the field of marriage. Overall, this study is an attempt to provide a new perspective to the “international marriage” theory that suggests “international marriage” to be a benefit for men and women in the search for upward mobility in the society or lifestyle.

#### Notes

- 1) While there are a lot of arguments in the naming of international marriages (*kokusai kekkon*) or cross-border marriages in Japan, in this paper the term “international marriage” will be utilized.
- 2) Hereinafter – FSU (former Soviet Union countries), that includes such countries as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, Belarus, etc. However, this paper mainly refers to women from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.
- 3) However, this number does not include marriages with women from Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, etc., so the actual number is difficult to grasp.
- 4) Especially, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Russia.
- 5) According to Takeshita (2001), status of residence for “spouse or child of Japanese national” is what is called “Status of Residence 4-1-16-1” pursuant to Article 4 Paragraph 1 Item 16 of the former Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, applicable for spouses of Japanese nationals, those born as the children of Japanese nationals or children adopted by Japanese nationals pursuant to the provisions of Article 817-2 of the Civil Code (Act No. 89 of 1896) (Entry and Status Division, Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice “Kokusai Kekkon no Shuhen” “Kokusai Jinrya” No. 102, Japan Immigration Association, 1995, p.32).
- 6) Hereinafter – “Forum.”
- 7) Hereinafter – comments and translation of author.
- 8) Hereinafter – in Italics the words of participants said in English language.
- 9) DINKS – double income no kids.
- 10) These topics are discussed in the author’s PhD thesis “Rethinking the Concept of International



Marriage: The case of women from the Former Soviet Union and Japanese men.”

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## **“International Marriage” as a Symbolic Exchange of Capitals: When women from the former Soviet Union marry Japanese men**

Viktoriya KIM

Studies of “international marriage” in Japan have become popular over the last three decades. Such studies investigate changes in the domestic marriage market and Japan’s changing position in the world in terms of migration by analyzing who marries foreigners in Japan and why, and taking a close look at the couples’ lives. Over the years, several attempts have been made to theorize the concept of “international marriage” in Japan, and common results from these studies suggest that macro level factors, such as politics, economics, and social class, influence people’s decision to get married and their relationships in marriage. Overall, these studies tend to examine the macro level factors in couples’ relationships. However, the purpose of this paper is to analyze micro factors influencing women and men who choose a foreign spouse, based on the case of women from former Soviet Union (FSU) countries who have married Japanese men. It seeks to give a voice to women and men to articulate their personal experiences and expectations of their counterparts, using the concept of field and the symbolic exchange of capitals. The paper mainly focuses on how such capitals, as gender, age, social status, and financial stability; spouses’ views of each other’s countries; and spouses’ ethnicity or race affect both women’s and men’s choices. While most of the symbolic capitals are imagined, they play an important role in women’s and men’s positioning in the field of marriage and in choosing a marriage partner.

This paper is based on questionnaires, interviews and participant observation data collected by the author as a part of a Ph.D. dissertation project from 2006 to 2011 in urban areas of Japan. The participants of the study were forty-five women from former Soviet Union countries and twenty Japanese men. The paper shows that Japan’s higher position in the world compared to FSU countries does not necessarily explain women’s willingness to marry Japanese men. Moreover, it is not only women that benefit economically and socially from marriage; men are also active decision-makers, and “international marriage” gives them an opportunity for upward social mobility while at the same time they build a “modern traditional” family.