Mate Selection in Korea and Japan:
Facts and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract: Mate selection behavior has long been studied from the standpoint of the family formation. In what pace and how the shift from arranged marriage to love marriage has proceeded has been the main question. In this paper, we are trying to set an alternate research agenda for the study of mate selection in East Asian countries. Mate selection can and should be analyzed in relation to the wider society: educational system, labor market, gender segregation structure, the welfare policy of the government, and so on. Using EASS2006 data, we show the current trends of mate selection in Korea and Japan. General trend of data indicates that mate selection has become the more personalized matter, rather than the family matter, with less and less parental control. Then, the implication of this personalization of mate selection is discussed from the viewpoint of the welfare regime perspective.

Keywords: mate selection, arranged marriage, East Asian countries

1 Introduction

Marriage draws the attention of many family sociologists. In East Asian countries, research has been concerned with the rise of the age at first marriage, which leads to declining birth rates in the region (Raymo, 1998; Iwasawa, 2002). Japan experienced serious economic depression in the 1990s, and its economic growth has been slow and erratic over the past decades. The drifting economy has suppressed the income of young male workers. On the other hand, there remain expectations among Japanese women that men should be the primary breadwinner. The slow economic growth has meant that the number of men who are able to fulfill such expectations has been declined. In Korea, economic difficulties due to the 1997 currency crisis is said to be one of the causes of delay in the timing of first marriage and extremely low birthrates (Eun, 2003).

Those shifts in marriage and child-bearing provoked considerable debate since the 1990s. Traditionally, family sociologists working on East Asian societies studied the structures of the family support system, or more specifically, intergenerational support relations. Thus, most mate selection studies[1] have focused on intergenerational relations. Compared with the West, in general, parents have considerable say in mate selection. In the literature, parental

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influence on mate selection has been a central issue. The issue of mate selection has been studied intensively in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s by social scientists in the United States and Europe as well. In particular, social psychologists examined the relation between person's personality and mate selection behavior (for instance, they tested hypotheses such as, "Do people choose mates who are similar to themselves in character?") (Strauss, 1946; Udry, 1963). In addition, much mate selection research has been done in the field of ethnic studies, where interracial marriage is a phenomenon of interest.

As East Asian countries experienced rapid modernization, arranged marriages were replaced by love marriages. As we will see, the shift from traditional marriage to a modernized one can be confirmed. This seems to mean that the studies on mate selection will shift its focus from its relation with family strategy to more personalized questions. However, as we will see, things are more complicated. Mate selection is related to various sectors of the society in variant ways. Before we push the mate selection studies to the psychological area, a lot of work should be done from the sociological perspective.

Fortunately, sociologists today can receive the benefit of rich reliable data. EASS (East Asian Social Surveys) done in 2006 collected the response about marriage and mate selection as well as other basic facts about respondents from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan[2]. We use this data to do a comparative analysis on marriage and mate selection. We show several basic facts that have been almost impossible because of the limitations of data. In the final part, we show the possible future research agenda on mate selection. Even though the overall shift of mate selection is toward personalization of it, there are plenty of things that should be done from a sociological point of view.

2 Mate selection and marriage: facts and research

In this section, we present basic facts about mate selection and marriage in Korea and Japan.

2.1 Which country is more traditional in terms of mate selection, Korea or Japan?

There is a popular dichotomy in terms of mate selection: arranged marriage vs. love marriage. The mate selection process, however, includes several stages, and we will show that the dichotomous concept is not sufficient to grasp the reality. The first stage in the mate selection process is the mate search. After the mate search, one may go through a background check of the candidate or compatibility test through dating. Regardless of what comes after the search stage, the final stage should be decision making as to whether to marry the candidate.

Thus, we can make several categories according to the variation in these processes. In the case of a typical arranged marriage, the mate is searched and introduced by parents or elderly neighbors and the power to decide whether to marry him or her belongs to the parents. But there might be the case in which the searching agency and the decision-making subject are different. For instance, most of the recent arranged marriages in Japan adopt the

Figure 1: Mate search channel and parental influence on marriage by birth cohorts
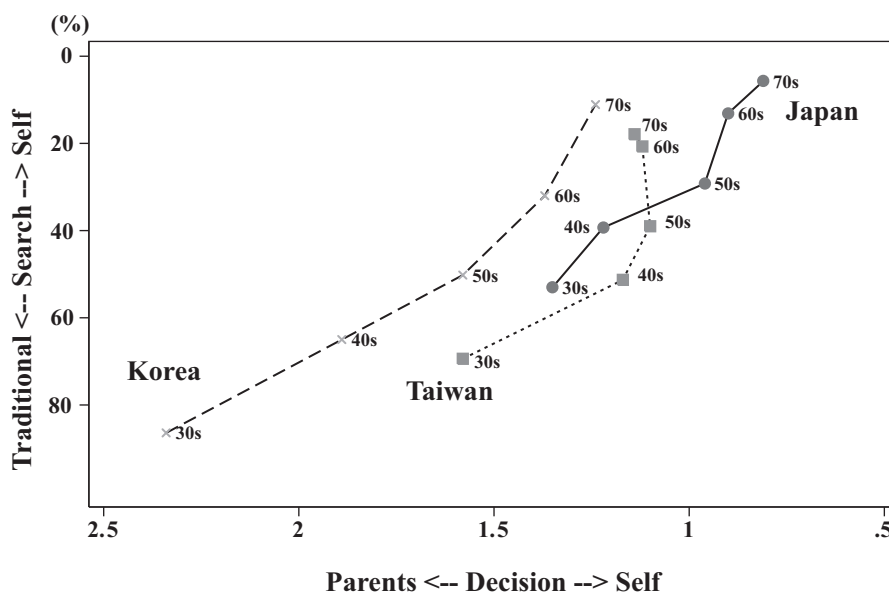
Data: EASS2006.

procedure in which parents introduce the possible mate candidate and set up the meeting, but the final decision is granted to the child.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of arranged marriages in the Y axis and the strength of parental influence in the X axis, by nation and birth cohort[3]. The data come from the EASS2006 which are comparative surveys collected in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, conducted during similar time periods using a common questionnaire.

For the older cohort, the percentage of arranged marriages is much higher in Korea than in other East Asian countries, perhaps because of the strong Confucian tradition. However, the rate of love marriages in Korea has been catching up to others, eventually surpassing that of Taiwan.

Even though the prevalence of arranged marriages in Korea and Japan has dramatically declined, parental influence still remains to a substantial degree, especially in Korea. The proportion of those who received parental influence "much" or "fairly much" in their marriage decisions are 55% for the 1950s birth cohort, 46% for the 1960s, and 37% for the 1970s in Korea. The percentage of those who received no parental influence at all is only 25% even for the 1970s birth cohort.
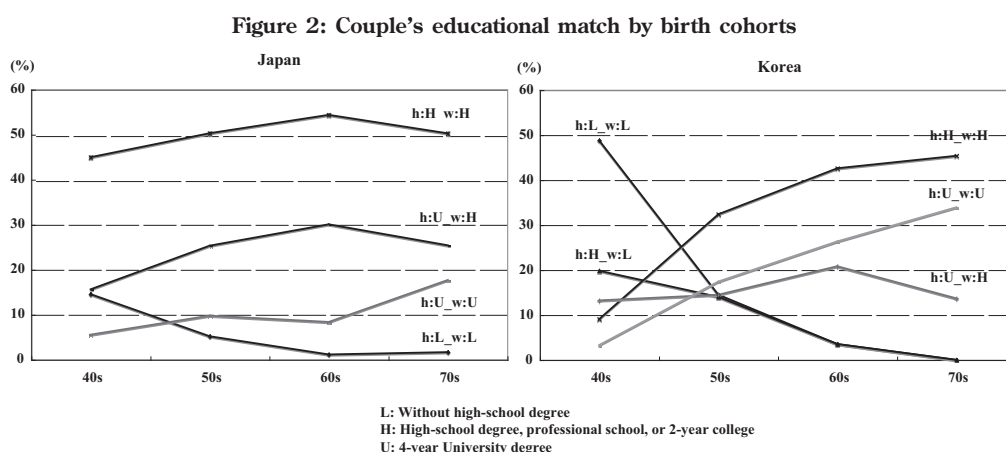
These analyses suggest that mate selection is more traditional in Korea than in Japan especially in terms of parental power on children's marriage, though overall parental intervention has been declining in both countries. Children are provided more initiatives in the mate search process in Korea as well as in Japan, but the gap between "who initiates the search" and "who decides eventually" is still wide in Korea.

2.2 What is the most popular combination in terms of couple's educational background?

Another possible indication of traditionalism in marriage is the proportion of homogamy. Figure 2 shows the combination of educational background of the couples in Korea and Japan[4]. First we notice that the shift of combinations in Korea has been much more dramatic than in Japan. In Japan, the shifts in combinations have been relatively stable.

Markedly different between the two countries is the proportion of couples with university degrees. The main reason for this prevalence of mating between the highly educated among Koreans seems to be the higher proportion of people, especially among women, with university degrees (20% for Japanese and 43% for Koreans in 1970s birth cohort females).

In fact, net of these population factors, the preference of Korean males with university degree for homogamy is no higher than that of Japanese with university degrees. Table 1

Figure 2: Couple's educational match by birth cohorts

L: Without high-school degree
H: High-school degree, professional school, or 2-year college
U: 4-year University degree

Data: EASS2006.

Table 1: Wife educational background for the male with university degree (1970s birth cohort)

Male	Female Education	Market	Observed	Expected	Ratio
	Japan				
64	Higher secondary	69	5	17	0.30
	Above higher secondary	50	14	12	1.14
	University degree	32	18	8	2.30
	Total	151	37	0.25	
	Korea				
69	Higher secondary	72	2	14	0.15
	Above higher secondary	46	10	9	1.15
	University degree	89	27	17	1.61
	Total	207	39	0.19	

Data: EASS2006.

Expected fugures are rounded.

shows to whom the male with a university degree married among the 1970s birth cohort. In Japan, there were 64 male respondents with a university degree, and there were 69 females with higher secondary (namely high-school) degrees in the same birth cohort, 50 females with educational backgrounds above higher secondary (namely 2-year college or professional school), and 32 females with university degrees. There were 37 males who were married, therefore the overall proportions of those who were married was 0.25. If the wife's education makes no difference, the expected frequency of the couple with university degrees is 8 (=32*0.25), but 18 couples were observed. The ratio of observed couples and expected ones is 2.30 in Japan, while it is 1.61 in Korea. This suggests that the tendency for homogamy among those with university degrees in younger cohorts is lower in Korea compared to Japan.

2.3 Mate selection strategy: its relation to marriage timing

It is fair to say that arranged marriages have been declining in number. But if we look at the data carefully, another story can be found.

Mate selection has two important aspects. It can be a part of family strategy where parents might exercise their influence to improve their interests. The other aspect is the method of finding mates. We can suppose that in modernized mate selection, one would find their mate by an arranged marriage or through an introduction when one cannot find his or her by oneself. In the less modernized society, a typical characteristic of arranged marriages is that parents treat mate selection as a family matter and take active intervention, rather than merely expressing their "concern" about the marriage of their child.

Figure 3 shows mate selection patterns by birth cohorts and the age at marriage. (Those who are currently divorced or widowed are excluded.) The figures are cumulative – that is, those who were married by age 24 are included in the upper white part of each bar.

We can see that the ratios of mate selection type by arrangement, introduction, and self are different by age at marriage. For instance, among the 1950s birth cohort who married in their late 20s in Japan, 63 had found their mates by themselves, 20 via introduction, and 43 by arrangement. Among those who married after age 30, the ratio of those who experienced arranged marriage is much higher (22 experience arranged marriage, while 23 found mates by themselves). This tendency of arranged marriages for those who marry at a later age is still found for the 1960s birth cohort, though in a somewhat weak pattern.

In Korea, the overall proportion of arranged marriages is much higher than in Japan. The only group where marriage by self dominates over arranged marriage is the one who married before age 30 among the 1960s birth cohort.

From these observations, we speculate that the function of arranged marriages has changed from that of the exertion of parental power to one of an alternate channel through which those who cannot successfully find their mate by themselves meet one. The function of marriage via introduction may be somewhat similar to that of arranged marriage.

2.4 Mate selection strategy: Becker vs. Oppenheimer

The economic model of marriage first presented by G. Becker predicts that highly

Figure 3: Mate selection by birth cohorts and the age at marriage

Japan   **Korea**
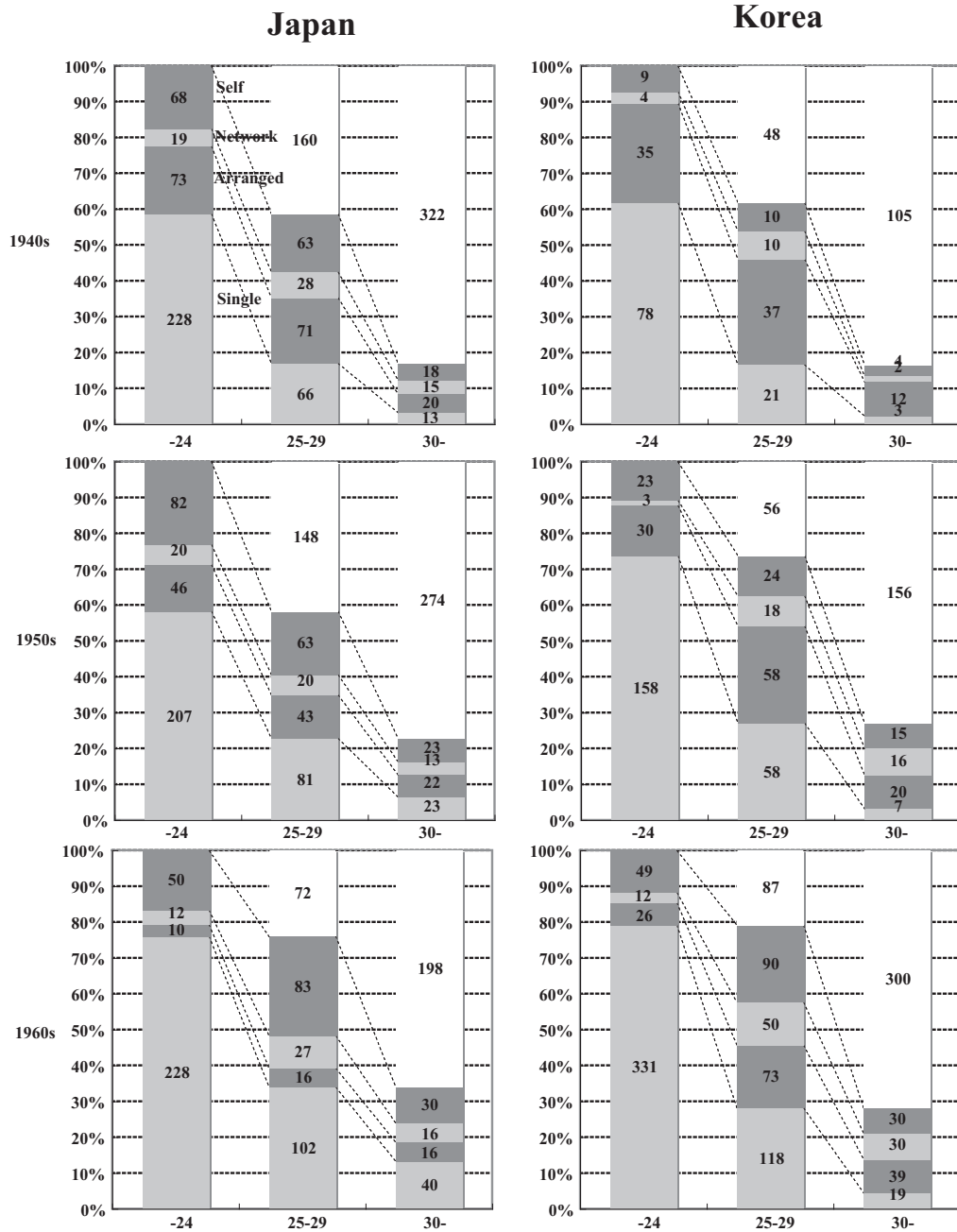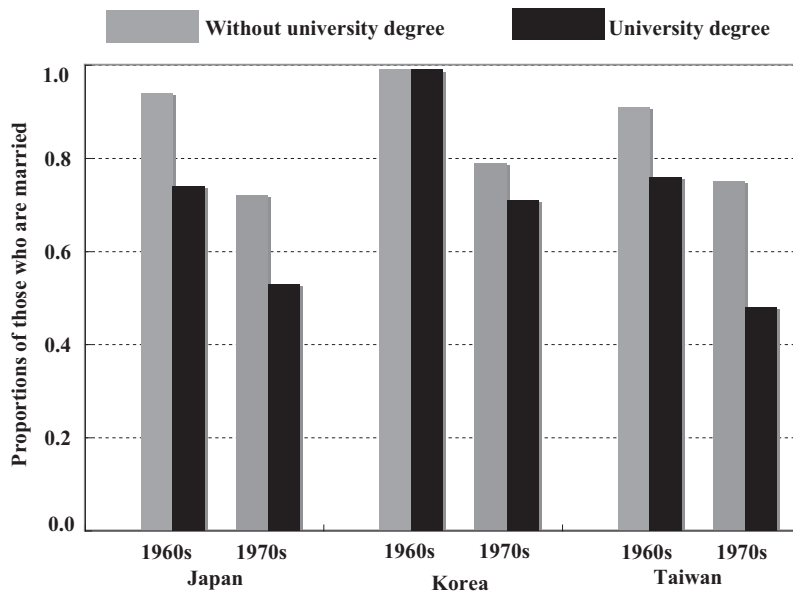

Data: EASS2006.

educated females have difficulty finding their mates, for the merit of marriage comes from specialized roles, namely the sexual division of labor. Men do not have to marry highly educated women, so the educational background of women is irrelevant in terms of the probability of marriage (Becker, 1991). But women's educational background is irrelevant only from the standpoint of the male. Usually, for highly educated women, early marriage generates the opportunity cost, thus they tend to marry late in Becker's world[5].

On the contrary, according to Oppenheimer, women's education does matter (Oppenheimer, 1988). In a society where job opportunity is uncertain, high education becomes an important sign of a person's merit. That has been always true for males. But if the economy is unstable and men's income is not enough to secure the household, it might also apply to women to gain a stable income for the household.

In the U.S. recently, it has been confirmed that the Oppenheimer's model has more explanatory power than Becker's for higher educated women are more likely to marry (Oppenheimer and Lew, 1995). How about in Korea and Japan?

Figure 4 shows the proportion of married women by education, birth cohort, and nation. Except for the 1960s birth cohort in Korea, higher-educated women show a lower tendency for marriage. Thus in general, Korea and Japan seem to fit in Becker's model, in which women with higher education are less likely to marry. There are, however, variations among countries. In Korea, the education of women is relatively independent of marriage compared to the other two nations, and the overall marriage rate is higher. One possible reason is the social attitude towards marriage in Korea, which is more positive (we will see this later in section 2.8). The other possible reason might be that the economic situation of Korea is more

Fugure 4: Percentage of ever-married female by education, birth cohort and nation

Data: EASS2006.

unstable and that gives Oppenheimer's model an edge. In short, when Korean men choose their mates, her education becomes at least part of the criteria. Indirect support for this explanation is provided later in section 2.7.

Overall, marriage rates have been declining in all three countries. We might attribute this shift to young men's unstable economic status. In Japan, it is said that there are less and less men who earn enough to match the needs of women. Strong attitudes towards sexual division of labor hold back the dual career model which Oppenheimer's model predicts to be pervasive in the economically unstable society.

2.5 Family strategy: is there a relation between mate selection and three-generation households?

There are usually many occasions in which parents influence children's lives. It starts from discipline, whether to go to university, and sometimes whom to marry. Children's mate selection is one of these and possibly the last event where parents might have interest. Parents may intervene into their children's mate selection to improve their future lives. From this we can propose the hypothesis that those who find mates by arranged marriages actually live with their parents.

The results from the data (not shown in this paper) is that there is no clear evidence that arranged marriages lead to three-generation households neither in Korea nor in Japan. In the first place, there are a few who live with their parents in Korea.

How about the attitude? EASS2006 asked the respondents about their attitudes toward the idea of three-generation households. The attitudes of children can be different from that of their parents, but it might be possible that the positive attitude toward living together with parents after marriage can make children respect the opinions of parents on mate selection. Data shows there is no evidence that those who chose arranged marriages have positive attitudes toward the idea of three-generation households in Korea and Japan, either. Estimation results of the ordered logistic regression, which regresses opinions about three-generation households on influence of parents on mate selection, sex, birth year and nation, supports no significant effect of the influence of parents. Regression taking search channels as the target variable does not give a significant effect, either.

There are still remaining traditional patterns of mate selection, but it is not related to, or at least does not lead to, the parents' strategy of three-generation households.

2.6 What leads to happiness: arranged marriage or love marriage?

One of the most enduring research questions about mate selection is its relationship with marital happiness. Blood (1967) did a survey in Tokyo in the 1960s and tested the popular idea of "arranged marriages start out cold and grow hot, while love matches start out hot and grow cold". The results did not support the hypothesis. It turned out that both mate selection types "started out hot and grew cold". Xiaohe (1990) replicated this survey in China and found no support for the hypothesis[6].

EASS2006 have a question of marital happiness, so here we replicate the analysis. As

Figure 5: Marital satisfaction by sex, marital duration, and mate seclection type
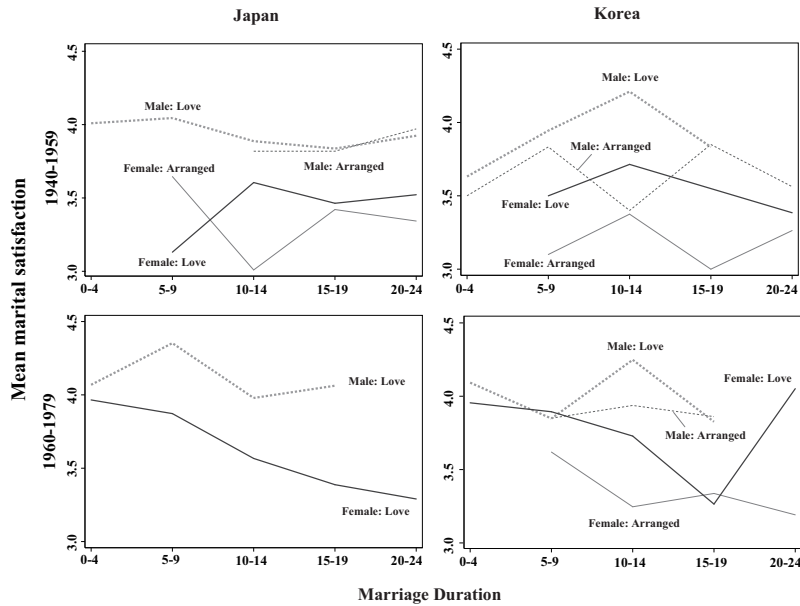
Data: EASS2006.

noted earlier, the mate selection process can be broken into two distinct features: the search channel and the decision-making. We test whether these two features of mate selection make a difference in marital happiness.

Figure 5 plots the mean marital satisfaction by sex, birth cohorts (those born between 1940 to and 1959, and between 1960 to and 1979), duration of marital years, and mate selection (arranged marriage or love marriage). The shift of the satisfaction level cannot be understood as a move within a person, since EASS2006 is not the longitudinal data.

It is difficult to see a simple coherent pattern, but men's satisfaction is higher in most groups. The Japanese barely show a difference in terms of the mate selection pattern. In Korea, love marriage groups indicate somewhat higher satisfaction.

Table 2 is the result of the model estimation using OLS regression. It gives the significant effect of search channel for Korean respondents, net of sex and birth year effects. Koreans live happier marital lives if they found mates on their own. Parental influence does not give a significant effect for Korean respondents. For Japanese respondents, parental influence shows significant results but search channel has no significant effect, contrary to the Korean respondents. In Japan, marital satisfaction depends on the value of marital duration and its squared value (result not shown in the table). This suggests that we can find the U-shaped effect of marriage duration, net of other variables, which supports the preceding research on marital satisfaction in Japan.

2.7 What do people think is important in marital life? Comparison among 5 countries

The meaning of marriage might vary according to the society. What people think is

Table 2: OLS Estimation result of the marital satisfaction by nation

	Japan		Korea	
Male	0.46	***	0.38	***
Birth cohort				
1940s	reference		reference	
1950s	0.01	—	−0.05	—
1960s	0.09	—	−0.05	—
1970s	0.33	†	0.16	—
Love marriage	0.05	—	0.24	***
Parental Influence	−0.06	*	0.04	—
Marital duration	−0.04	***	−0.01	—
Marital duration (squared)	0.00	***	0.00	—
constant	3.71	***	3.44	***
N	1055		899	
F	15.4(8,1046)	***	9.48(8,890)	***
Adjusted R^2	0.10		0.07	

Data: EASS2006.

† $p<.1$; * $p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$ (Two-tailed test)

important in marital life should be different among societies. The Japanese Ministry of the Cabinet Office conducted a comparative survey on marriage and family in 2005 in five different countries: U.S., France, Sweden, Japan, and Korea ("Comparative Survey on the Attitude toward Societies of Low Birthrate"[7]). In this survey, respondents (aged 20 to 49) were asked, "What do you think is important in ensuring a happy marital life?". They were supposed to choose 3 out of 13 items[8]. We picked 11 items which collected at least 10% of the respondents' choices. The following is the list of these 11 items.

- honesty: to be honest with each other
- background: to share similar backgrounds
- common interests: to share a common hobby or interest
- religion: to have the same religious background
- attraction: to be sexually attracted to each other
- income: to have enough income to live a stable life
- dual earner: both husband and wife have jobs
- housework: to share household tasks
- live separately: to live separately from parents
- children: to have kids
- raise kids well: to raise kids healthily

Figure 6 is the radar chart indicating the proportion of the choices for each item. "Honesty" drew the highest responses in all countries. Japanese and Koreans were peculiar in that those who chose the items "to have kids" and "raise kids well" were much higher than in the other societies.

The proportion of those who chose "income" was particularly high in Korea (66%).

Figure 6: Important thing in marital life
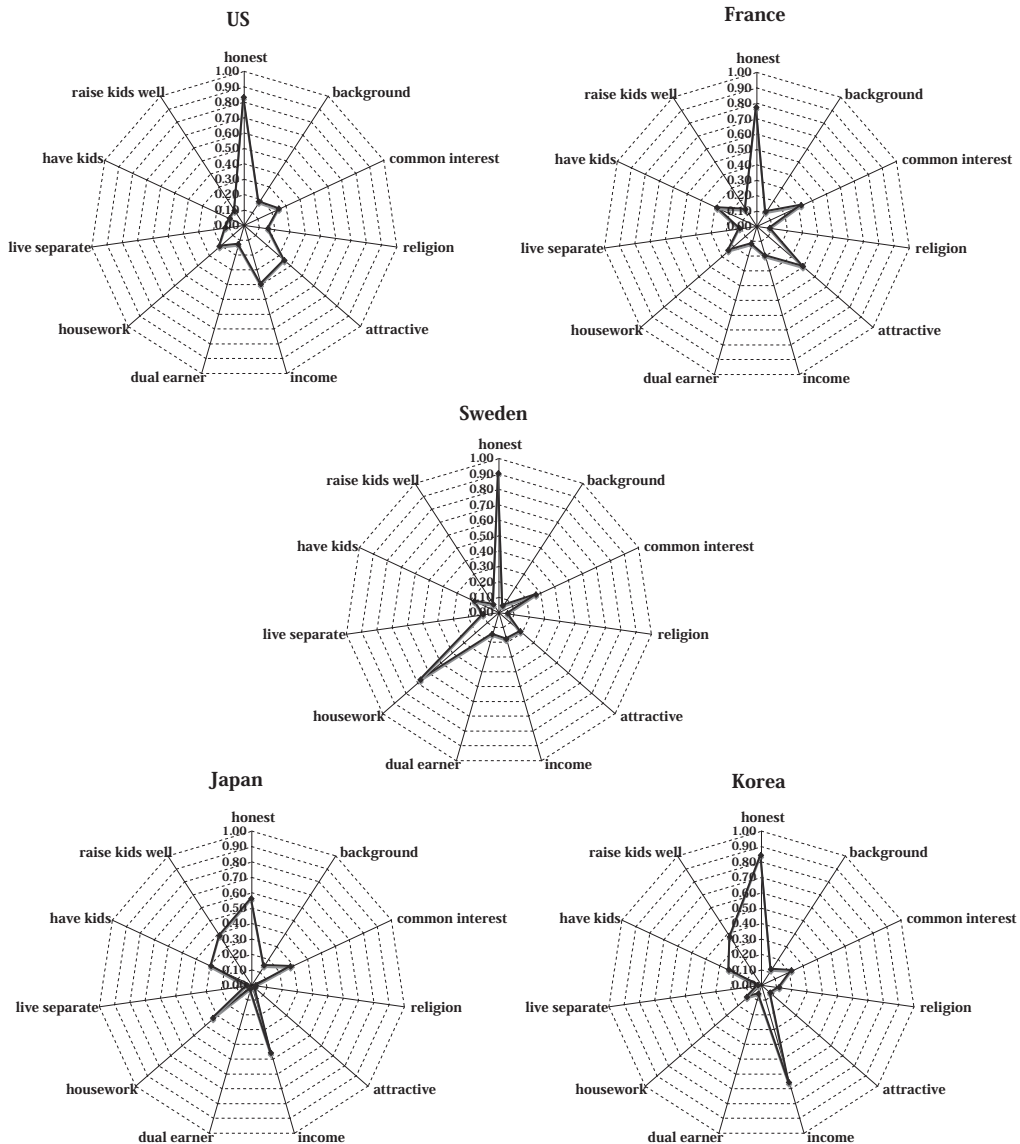
Data: Comparative Survey on the Attitude toward Societies of Low Birthrate, Japanese Ministry of the Cabinet Office.

Estimation results of the logistic regression taking "income" item as the target variable indicates that in Korea whether a respondent chooses this item does not depend on sex, marital status, income, or age. It might be the result of the economic stagnation lasting from the 1997 currency crisis, not the national or cultural characteristics of Korean people. It may nevertheless be an important reason for delaying marriage among younger generation Koreans in recent years.

## 2.8 Do people think married folks are happier? Comparison among 5 countries

The same survey conducted by the Cabinet Office contains the question, "Do you agree with the idea that married people are happier than single people?" Answers to this question might depend on respondents' marital status, so we need to analyze it separately according to marital status. Figure 7 shows the results. Among single people, Koreans are most enthusiastic about marriage. Among married people, Americans are most positive about marital happiness, followed by Koreans.

In Korea and Japan, the youth are facing difficulties getting married mostly because of economic hardships. Proportions of people who are married are still high in these countries, but taking cohabitation into consideration, the rate of those who have partnership by either marriage or cohabitation is the lowest in Korea, followed by Japan (figure 8).

In Japan, the problem finds itself in that the impact of economic stagnation is not equally distributed. In short, the young and women are the victims of economic depression in agist and sexist societies like Japan. It can be assumed that Korea is in a similarly unfair situation.

In the previous section we introduced Oppenheimer's model which implies that during weak economic growth and unstable job opportunities, women with higher educational careers can find mates easier, for higher education indicates stable future gaining. However, what is taking place in Japan is that the vested group (namely, elderly men) protects its jobs and incomes by excluding the young and women from the game. People of marriageable age are avoiding marriage because of this hardship.

Figure 7: Do you think married people are happier?
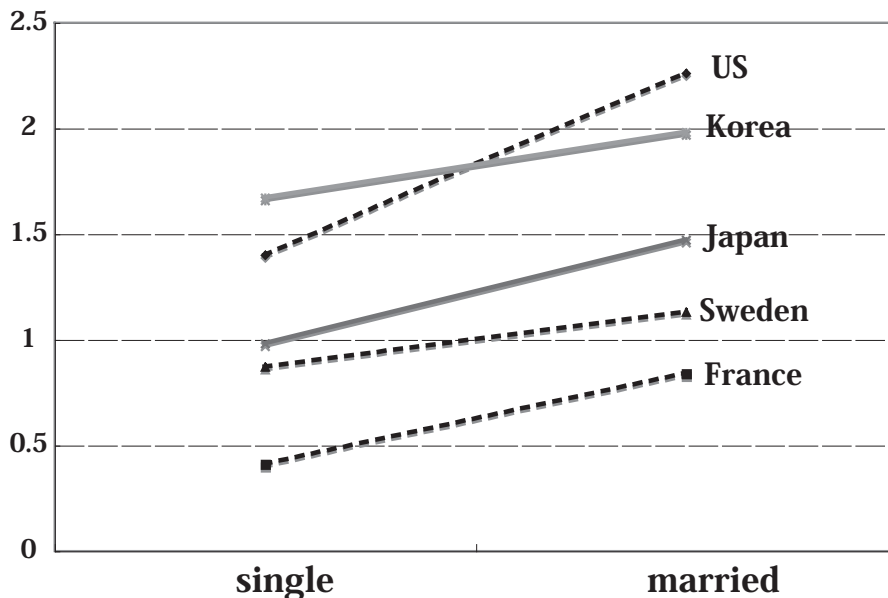
Data: Comparative Survey on the Attitude toward Societies of Low Birthrate, Japanese Ministry of the Cabinet Office.

Figure 8: Partnership status by age and nation
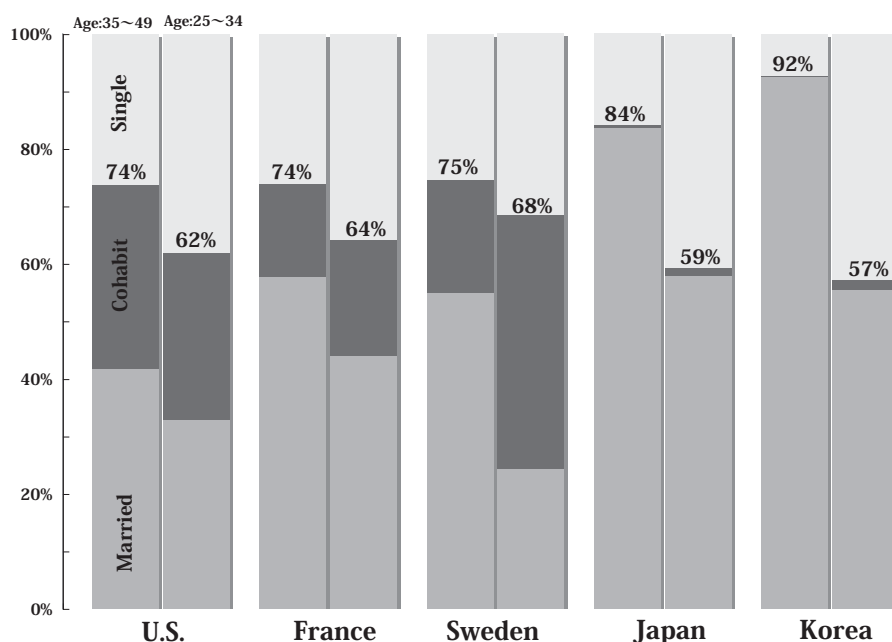
Data: Comparative Survey on the Attitude toward Societies of Low Birthrate, Japanese Ministry of the Cabinet Office.

3 Future research agenda

3.1 Marriage and mate selection from the perspective of social welfare

Even though mate selection has highly informal characteristics, marriage is related in various ways to other parts of the society. In modern societies, the major sectors from which a person receives necessary resources are the family, social networks, the market, and the government. Society varies in the form of the mix of these four sectors. Northern European nations have developed the welfare states or "social democratic" regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), where governmental aids are generous. There are many arguments concerning the categorization of East Asian countries such as Korea and Japan. Some argue that they are parts of the "conservative" regime as in the Esping-Andersen's model, while others (including Esping-Andersen himself) insist that there should be another regime category for East Asian societies. Regardless of the theoretical position, most scholars share the idea that East Asian countries depend largely on the family for the welfare of their members.

In recent years, both Japan and Korea have been facing the problems of low economic growth and sharply plunging birthrates, which western societies had faced long before. Some scholars of social policy argue that Japan and Korea are on the way to becoming mature welfare systems. This is perhaps true. Nevertheless, the future of welfare regime is still uncertain in East Asian countries. We need to observe family and marriage from this perspective of the welfare mix, where the relation of the family and other parts of the society

is important to people's welfare.

In terms of mate selection studies, the shifts from family matter to personal matter is partly dependent on the moves of the welfare system of the society. As we saw in section 2.1, mate selection has become less traditional both in Japan and Korea. Nevertheless, if the welfare system of the East Asian countries are adopting the policy which leaves much responsibility to the family sector, mate selection might become the parental concern again, as parents will eventually turn to their children for support in old age. Parents might intervene in children's mating in order for children to marry those who could care more for parents-in-law.

Despite some cross-national variations, it seems to be the case that mate selection has become a more personal matter rather than a family matter in both Korea and Japan. However, that does not change the fact that marriage is a social institution. Largely left in the informal section, mate selection suffers from inefficiency and unfairness in the societal level. Whether to be able to meet the "proper" mate heavily depends on external factors beyond the personal level, such as birthplace or workplace. Even worse, it is virtually impossible to "judge" if the current mate is the right person, since it is unrealistic to compare him or her with many possible mates in the market. In other words, the marriage market is quite imperfect. Usually, governments intervene in the market if it is imperfect, but in the case of the marriage market, almost no interventions are made in most of the countries. We should keep an eye on the consequences of the "personalization" of the mate selection.

3.2 Future research design

Let us think of the proper research design for mate selection that takes welfare perspectives into consideration in East Asian countries. In most marriage and family research, there has been a predominant focus on the gender perspective. For instance, the division of housework has been treated primarily as the couple's problem if not a cultural legacy. Thinking from the perspective of the social system, division of housework is highly linked with the workings of other sections of the society such as the market, the government, availability of care facilities for children and the aged, and so on. Likewise, mate selection has been largely treated as a personal or a family problem, with much focus on the issues of human capital or cultural values. As we have discussed earlier, however, mate selection has much to do with non-personal matters, particularly with the experiences of work in the cases of Japan and Korea. Future survey research on mate selection in East Asia should be designed so as to enable investigations on the interrelationship between the characteristics of the informal and formal sectors.

The second suggestion concerns the survey design itself. Since the life course of the people in East Asian countries is expected to have more variety in the years ahead, we might face the limitation of one-shot cross section survey. To be sure, cross section surveys can dig into the past experiences of the respondents through retrospective questions, but their reliability is dubious because of the uncertain memory, not to mention that too many retrospective questions can place too much of a burden on the respondents. Thus, with cross

section data we have no other way of estimating the shift of marital satisfaction within a marriage. Further, we cannot know whether the marital satisfaction level of a person at a given point in time is due to some persistent personality or to a particular life event. With panel analysis, we can avoid the problems of uncertain retrospective answers and at the same time control the effects of individual dispositions.

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Notes

1　Mate selection refers here to the selection of "whom" as a mate. It can be separated from the question of timing – that is, when to marry.

2　EASS2006 is a joint research project among four countries, the Japanese team of which is JGSS. The Japanese General Social Surveys (JGSS) are designed and carried out at the Institute of Regional Studies at Osaka University of Commerce in collaboration with the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo under the direction of Ichiro TANIOKA, Michio NITTA, Noriko IWAI and Tokio YASUDA. The project is financially assisted by Gakujutsu Frontier Grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science

and Technology for 1999-2008 academic years, and the datasets are compiled and distributed by SSJ Data Archive, Information Center for Social Science Research on Japan, Institute of Social Science, the University of Tokyo.

3　Here, those who found mates by arrangement or introduction by family members, neighbors, matchmakers, or matching organizations are categorized into the "arranged marriage" group. Those who found mates by arrangement or introduction by friends or colleagues, and those who found mates by themselves are categorized as the "love marriage" group. The question about parental influence is, "Was there any influence of parents when you decided to marry current partner?" and respondents are provided with four choices: 3 "much", 2 "fairly much", 1 "not too much" and 0 "not at all".

4　The combinations that have never reached 10% are omitted from the graph.

5　If a woman acts rationally in Becker's model, she would not invest too much on education. In reality, women have overinvested on their education. Educational equality for men and women has been an exogenous factor that has been independent from job opportunity or availability of the family support system.

6　Those testings should be understood with qualification. Samples of the survey done by Blood were not representative. Xiaohe used probability samples, but the survey was done in one city in China (Chengdu in Sichuan).

7　The data are used with the permission of the Ministry of the Cabinet Office of Japan. I am thankful to Osamu Tamaki (the Cabinet Office) and Miho Iwasawa (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research) for the data permission procedure.

8　Actually they had 16 choices. The other three included "Other", "None of the above" and "Don't know".

韓国と日本における配偶者選択
現状とこれからの研究アジェンダ

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　配偶者選択行動は，長い間家族形成の文脈において研究されてきた。そこでは見合い婚から恋愛婚への変化がどのように進んできたのか，ということが主要な関心であった。本論文では，東アジアの配偶者選択の研究において，従来とは異なった研究アジェンダの提言を行う。配偶者選択は，教育，労働市場，性別分業，福祉政策といったより広い社会との関わりにおいて分析される必要がある。最初に EASS2006 のデータを用いて韓国と日本における配偶者選択の動向を分析する。データから読み取れる一般的な傾向は，配偶者選択行動が家族の意思決定から，両親の干渉を排した個人の意思決定へと移行してきたということである。これを受けて，配偶者選択の「個人化」の帰結が，福祉レジームの観点から検討される。

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