“Salvation” Through Marriage:
Gendered Desire, Heteronormativity, and Religious Identities in the Transnational Context

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A 2007 New York Times article, “Korean Men Use Brokers to Find Brides in Vietnam” (Onishi 2007), shows the journey of two Korean men crossing borders in search for their life partner and finding one in a matter of few days from Vietnamese women who they cannot speak to without a help of translator. This story shows a tip of the iceberg that is the large-scale international marriage migration in Asia. This movement from Southeast Asian countries to East Asian countries, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, has engendered not only demographic changes but also social, cultural, and political changes in the receiving countries, galvanizing the attention of politicians, activists, and scholars (Burgess 2004; Constable 2003b; 2005; Kojima 2001; Lee 2008; Piper and Roces 2003). This attention to commercial matchmaking agencies, which recalls the sensationalized “mail-order brides” phenomenon, however, overshadows a transnational religious organization which is inconspicuously contributing to the mass movement. The organization is called the Unification Church, which has long promoted international marriages since the 1960s. This paper examines the roles of the Unification Church in promoting international marriage migration with particular focus on gendered desire and heteronormativity.

Much scholarly work on international marriage migration investigates what urges men and women to find spouses from other countries and what can be done after women migrate to their husband’s country, community and family (Burgess 2004; Freeman 2005; Nakamatsu 2003). This literature examines women marriage migrants’ and their husbands’ gender expectations – both parties look for a partner that can enable them to realize an ideal heterosexual marriage with a male head of household and a female housewife (Constable 2003a). Here it is assumed that these expectations are from their preconceived ideas on gender roles. What is often overlooked is how their gendered desires are created and reinforced by intermediary agents.
It is widely acknowledged that transnational matchmaking agencies play a role in the expansion of international marriage migration (Wang and Chang 2002) and their operation is often criticized for “marketing women” to men who are in need of wives or “commodifying arranged marriage” (Wang 2007). However, few studies are done on these agencies beyond their matchmaking role. This paper reveals that in this process, intermediary agencies not only promote conventional gender ideologies but also normalizes and regulate heterosexuality as well.

Migration scholars have critically analyzed the complex relationships of gender, race and ethnicity in migrants’ experiences in the contexts of migration and incorporation into the host societies (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Parreñas 2001), whereas sexuality has been often overlooked. Sexuality has been a topic in the field of international migration but it was limited to the context of sex trafficking or experiences of gay immigrants with HIV/AIDS (Altman 2002; Herdt 1997; Manderson and Jolly 1997). Heterosexuality remained “the unmarked premise,” that is “the perceived norm” with an exception of Gloria González-López’s Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives (2005), which studies sexual experiences of heterosexual Mexican immigrants.

With the case of Filipinas who are matched with South Korean farmers through the Unification Church and subsequently migrate to their husband’s country, I attempt to show how gender and sexuality is constitutive of migration and vice versa. Here I aim to demonstrate that gender and heterosexuality is socially constructed and normalized. By paying a particular attention to the roles of the Unification Church, this study shows how cultural logics of desire is constructed by the religious organization as well and how they are gendered; and it explicitly demonstrates the institutional regulation of sexuality and normalization of heterosexuality. In addition, I will show how the UC’s religious identity becomes diluted through this enterprise.
NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS OF
FILIPINA MARRIAGE MIGRANTS TO SOUTH KOREA

Global political and economic changes in the 1980s and the 1990s have diversified the modes of international marriage migration: many Eastern European women began to cross borders for marriage and the Newly Industrialized Countries in East Asia, Taiwan and South Korea as well as Japan emerged as new host countries for international marriage migrants, escalating intra-regional marriage migration.

As of 2005, 13.6% of all marriages in South Korea are between Koreans and foreign-born spouses and 9.9% of all marriages and 72% of all international marriages are between Korean men and foreign-born women (Korean National Statistical Office 2007). That is, 1 out of 10 marriages in Korea is between Korean man and foreign-born woman. While the increase of male foreign spouses is explained by the unions between male migrant workers and Korean women (Lee 2003), the number of foreign woman-Korean man marriage has steadily increased since the early 1990s initially due to the issue of “farm bachelors.”

Since the 1970s, the South Korean government’s promotion of export-oriented industrialization and urbanization overrode the possibility of systematic agricultural development, leaving rural areas without good economic prospects. While strong rural patriarchal characteristics and growing employment opportunities in urban manufacturing industries drove women out of rural areas, patrilineal and patrilocal traditions made a farmer’s son stay in his hometown and look for a wife who would live with his family, which made farmers the last candidate women would choose to marry. Male farmers’ difficulties in finding wives became a
national issue in the 1980s with media reports of farmers committing suicide out of the frustration of not providing offspring, which is an important duty of filial piety.

The national campaign to find brides for these farm bachelors began in the early 1990s (Shim 1993). After a disappointing response within the country, they first turned to “joseonjok” (Korean descendents) communities in northeastern China, Yeon-Byeon province. Unfortunately, by the mid-1990s, “joseonjok” women appeared in media representations as “runaway brides” who abandoned their husbands and even their children to look for jobs in cities (Freeman 2005). This is when Korean farmers began to look for wives in other countries with guidance of local Unification churches and support from government offices, and international migration for inter-ethnic marriage began in South Korea starting in the mid-1990s.

Filipino international migrants have received serious scholarly attention in many aspects due to their numerical magnitude. The number of Filipino contract workers was 643,304 in the year 2000 (NSCB 2004) and they were going to 170 countries around the world. Workers, both legal and illegal, annually send $7 billion to the Philippines (Sassen 2003). While some Filipinas are migrating to destination countries to work for wages, other Filipinas and women in developing countries chose marriage as a path of migration. In addition to the conventional destinations in North America, Australia, and Europe, Japan and other Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs), such as Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea, have become new destination countries for Filipina migrant workers (Chow 2002), and with the labor migration flow, Filipinas also entered Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea through marriage since the late 1970s, the mid-1980s, and the early 1990s, respectively. According to the report on marriage patterns by the Korean National Statistical Office, 41.0% of Korean farmers married foreign-born women in 2006.
Farm bachelors marrying international marriage migrants, especially Filipinas, have been a starting point of intra-regional marriage migration in both Japan and Taiwan, followed by South Korea. Recently in the 2000s, South Korean men have been marrying women not only from the Philippines but also from Vietnam, Russia, and Pakistan; and, middle-aged divorcees, widowers, and people with disability in urban areas are targeted as “clients” of commercial introduction agencies. Particularly, like in Taiwan (Wang and Chang 2002), Vietnamese women has drastically increased in Korea powered by rigorous commercial wedding agencies (see Onishi 2007 for the Vietnam process), which has outnumbered their Filipina counterparts since 2005.

While the Vietnamese are seen as attractive for their physiological similarities with Koreans, Filipina wives are newcomers to South Korean society who come to the country without any previous roots in Korea, whom Koreans perceive as different in terms of physical appearance, language, and custom. Yet, the steady number of Filipinas are matched with Korean farmers through the Unification Church, and the percentage of Filipina marriage migrants living in rural areas is higher than that of Filipinas in cities. This study examines what drives Filipinas and Korean men to participate in international marriage.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study contributes to the literature of gender, sexuality and international migration. Especially it highlights how gender and sexuality are dimensions of power relations that shape and organize migration (Cantú, Naples, and Vidal-Ortiz 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). By paying attention to the transnational religious organization, it also stresses the social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality that is constitutive of migration.
The Logics of Gendered Desire

Previous studies of international marriage migration have adscribed to a singular global economy framework. It is generally understood to involve women from a lower-standing country moving to a higher-standing country in the global hierarchy. However, the dominant explanatory focus on potential economic and geographical upward mobility is limited as it effaces women’s agency in making a decision to participate in marriage migration. This dominant discourse maintains a stereotypical image of “mail-order brides” who are “sold” to men, predisposing women’s victimhood.

Recent scholars turn to examine the cultural logics to which traditional gender ideology is integral. That is, instead of viewing all international marriage migration as “marriage for migration,” one needs to examine the implications of “migration for marriage.” In heteronormative society, men and women obtain intangible yet significant benefits when they realize “respectable” marital status (Constable 2003a; Constable 2003b; Kojima 2001; Nakamatsu 2003). The definition of “a better life” for marriage migrants includes positive images of marriage that encompass various elements – a caring, middle-class husband, children, affection, love, financial security, and personal career advancement. What is noteworthy here is the conflation of economic and cultural logics.

Socialist feminists offer the idea of “capitalist patriarchy” that the development of industrialization and capitalism helped establish the notion of the (bourgeois) nuclear family and create the patriarchal ordering with “the man as ‘head’ of the household and ‘breadwinner’ for the “non-earning” wife and their children” (Mies 1998). This sexual division of labor in the private sphere – housewifization (Mies 1998) – not only prioritizes women’s unpaid reproductive
labor but also circumscribes gender equality in the public sphere, justifying women’s low wages. This nuclear family form has a distinct class connotation, as it views women who deviated from domestic roles – such as single, divorced, or working-class women – as a threat to social morality. Even though more contemporary women enter the public sphere, this family form persistently remains as the norm in most societies and the basis with which the state family policies are structured, continuously adding double burdens on women with paid jobs.

In this context, women take diverse approaches to dealing with capitalist patriarchal systems and international marriage migration can be considered as a way of “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988) to maximize power and options within a patriarchal structure (Kibria 1990). In other words, the marriage contract itself is a form of patriarchal bargain for women; it not only establishes women’s social status as married woman, wife, and mother, but also secures her a “breadwinner.” A dearth of local marriageable men and women, who conform to the ideal gender role, can influence Filipinas and Korean men to look for their marriage partner “on a global stage” (Constable 2003b). In their search for an “ideal partner,” women and men utilize knowledge and imagination informed by transnational images and the global hierarchies among the states that are reconstructed by available transnational networks and connections.

This gendered politics is closely linked to cultural logics of love and desire. (Constable 2003b) argues that practical and material desires are not exclusive of emotional ones; but rather the former can be constitutive of the latter. The western notion of marriage based on romantic love, which posits arranged marriage as its antithesis, and thus love-less and demoralizing, continues to be disseminated and reinforced by global media and literature. While this upholds continual suspicion about international correspondence or arranged marriages, local men and women who are not immune to the ideology of romantic love participate in the matchmaking
process with a hope to find someone they can love as a life partner as well. Here the conventional gender relationship is constitutive of women’s and men’s desire and love.

Marriage is a site of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Marriage is not a static state but a process involving actions and changes – from the contraction of marriage, reproduction, and sometimes the dissolution of marriage, in which women and men do gender. Especially mating practices among heterosexual couples also involve doing gender. Men tend to look for partners whose feminine quality allows them to achieve their masculinity, and vice versa. This “marriage gradient (or mating gradient)” pattern, in which men tend to marry women who are younger and less educated and make less money (Thai 2005; Veevers 1988), reinforces the hierarchical order of masculinity and femininity. That is, when men do masculinity in heterosexual pairing, they do not merely create or maintain differences from women but they try to affirm their dominant position in relation to their woman partner.

Examining the roles of the UC in international marriage in South Korea, this paper argues that the gendered desire is re/constructed by an intermediary agency for international marriage. The gendered logics are also intersected with class and nationality, heightening women’s and men’s desire for and facilitating international marriage migration from a developing country to a developed country. Therefore, the religious organization maintains patriarchal ideology – marriage gradients- and practices – patrilocality.

**Heteronormativity in Immigration and Religion**

In his book, *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant men*, Lionel Cantú (2009) argues that heterosexuality is the unmarked, taken-for-granted premise of much research on international migration and critiques that due to the heteronormativity of
mainstream literature, migration studies scholars have ignored scholarship on sexuality and
gender, and therefore failed to recognize sexuality as an important dimension of analysis. He
uses “a queer theoretical paradigm” that attempts to destabilize models based on heterosexuality
and to make “regimes of normalization” visible, particularly as they related to relations among
sex, gender, and sexual desire. It is particularly effective to examine international marriage
migration in order to discuss heteronormativity in the context of migration because most countries
do not acknowledge same sex marriage. Moreover, bringing foreign spouse to one’s country is a
privilege that is not granted to same-sex civil unions.

In his discussions on the social construction of sexuality, Michel Foucault (1990 [1978])
challenges theories of social inequality that focus on the policing functions of the state through
laws and censorship and asserts that sexual normalization occurs in the multiple sites through
discourse and knowledge production. Here I pay attention to one of those sites – an organized
religion. Sexuality is an intimate part of religion as many sexuality issues, such as teen
pregnancy, abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriages, and youth abstinence movement, are
contented in the religious context. Most organized religions around the world takes a patriarchal
structure, and its regulation of sexuality is oftentimes directly related to the control of women’s
body and sexuality. Similarly, many religious organizations take a homophobic stance, arguing
that homosexuality is “unnatural” since homosexual intercourse cannot result in procreation. The
UC is also aligned with this position in their promotion and normalization of “heterosexuality for
procreation.” In fact, the formation of a family with heterosexual partnership and the procreation
are fundamental in the UC’s religious purpose, making the regulations of sexuality – both
abstinence and consummation of marriage) part of their religious rituals.
As this paper contends “migration for marriage,” it illustrates how hetero/sexuality shapes and organizes processes of migration and modes of incorporation to the host country, in this case, South Korea.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on a larger project about international marriage migrants’ migration and settlement processes. Using multiple methods, I conducted one year of ethnographic fieldwork from July 2005 to June 2006 in two South Korean rural communities with large numbers of Filipina marriage migrants. I call them Hyowon County and Seojin County.

While volunteering as an instructor at the Korean class for Filipinas provided by a local Catholic church in Hyowon County, I conducted participant observation at informal co-ethnic social gatherings, town festivals, and other events provided by local governments and community organizations for families with migrant wives in both counties. I also visited people’s homes, observing family interactions. Also, I conducted in-depth interviews with 35 Filipinas and 25 Korean men who married Filipinas. The interviews with Filipina wives were conducted both in English (one of the two official language in the Philippines) and Korean both of which I can speak fluently, while the interviews with Korean men were in Korean. Interviews centered on basic demographic information, women’s and men’s lives before marriage (e.g. for women, any paid work experiences), the process of finding a spouse, married life, family relations (including relationships with in-laws), community lives, and their perceptions of international marriage migration. I also met with members of the community, government, and religious
organizations. Lastly, I obtained various publications, reports, documents, newspaper reports, and television programs pertaining to marriage migrants.

In the beginning of the fieldwork, I occasionally found myself in situations where interviewees seemed reluctant to reveal the hardships they experienced at home with their Korean husbands and their families because I was Korean. However, during the duration of 12 months, I was able to establish congenial rapport with them. Also, interviews were complemented with participant observation and informal discussions with Filipinas, Korean husbands, and other local residents, which revealed patterns in Filipina wives’ perceptions. This long stay also allowed me to observe how particular circumstances influenced their perceptions over time.

Filipina participants’ ages at the time of interview ranged from 25 to 44 with the average of 34, and their ages at the time of marriage varied between 21 and 36 with the average of 28. The length of time for which they have lived in South Korea at the time of interview ranged from one year to 11 years. Eleven women graduated from high school; seven women had some college education (from less than one semester to 2 years without diploma); six women graduated from 2-year college and nine women had bachelor’s degree. The average age of Korean men who participated in the study was about 41, their ages ranging from 34 to 56 and their education attainment was in general lower than women’s with one associate bachelor’s degree, 9 high school graduates, 8 having middle school graduates, 1 with 6-year education and one less than 6 year education. All names are pseudonyms.

THE UNIFICATION CHURCH:
INTERMARRIAGE OF PATRIARCHY AND HETEROSEXUALITY

The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (HAS-UWC), or the so-called Unification Church (UC), was founded by a Korean religious leader, Reverend Sun Myung Moon in 1954. Initially, Moon gathered his followers mainly in Korea and Japan, but soon his activities were broadened to the West, giving speeches in the United States and Europe. To escape from the Korean government’s spiritual and political oppression (which was partially a response to questionable UC activities), Moon emigrated to the United States in 1971 and built up the Church’s western membership. Soon after, the UC obtained its reputation as one of the most controversial religious organizations in the world. In the 1970s, the U.S. and British media reported on the brainwashing of young students by “Moonies” and aggressive deprogramming was carried out to counter the Unification Movement (Barker 1984). For decades, Moon was accused of tax evasion, infidelity and a sex scandal; and, even today the UC is still seen as a cult organization by the general public not only in the United States and South Korea but also in many countries around the world. Examining whether the UC is a cult or not is beyond the scope of this paper. What is noteworthy is that the organization still functions as a route of international marriage migration for women in different countries, including Filipinas to South Korea. Also, by analyzing the UC doctrines, this paper highlights heteronormativity in the context of transnational marriage migration.

Salvation through Heterosexual Marriage

The UC originated in Christianity and sees itself as a movement to unite all Christians. UC members believe that Moon is the second Messiah (after Christ). The Divine Principles (DP), which contain Moon’s theological doctrines, teach that an original human couple, Adam and Eve,
suffered the Fall from grace which consists of two sexual failures – a spiritual fall caused by a sexual relationship between Archangel Lucifer (the serpent) and Eve, and a physical fall through the sexual relationship between Eve and Adam (Barker 1984). People must restore the original position endowed at the creation through indemnity (Grace 1985).

Family based on heterosexual coupling and reproduction is an integral concept in the DP as well as for the UC structures and practices. The Ideal Four Position Foundation is based on husband and wife in a give-and-take relationship with God above them and children below them. Moon and his wife Hak Ja Han, who are called “True Parents,” can free people from the power of original sin through the Blessing ceremony where Unification members create True Family. Therefore, the wedding ceremony “occupies a central place in the Movement’s ideology and stands out as its most important ritual.” (Grace 1985, 163) The whole Blessing ceremony consists of five steps: (1) The Chastening Ceremony to end sin and prepare the couple for a new beginning; (2) The Holy Wine Ceremony to share a cup of Holy Wine (or grape juice); (3) The Holy Blessing Ceremony to exchange vows; (4) The Separation Period when the couple exercise abstinence; and (5) The Three Day Ceremony to consummate the couple’s marriage over three days.

In the early days, the Blessing committee collected personal information on members, including pictures, and presented them to Moon who personally matched couples and officiated at the Blessing ceremony. Thus, being selected for the Blessing ceremony was considered as honor. At the same time, following the choice of the Church is considered a sacrifice of “one’s self for the higher purpose of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth” (Grace 1984, 165). As a result of Reverend Moon’s efforts to achieve world unity through the unions of racially and culturally different people in marriage, a large number of international matches between
Americans and foreign nationals were arranged. As the scale of matching grew, the ceremonies became mass weddings and the rules became relaxed over time. Then, in the 1990s, non-Unificationists were allowed to be matched with UC members. Ceremonies proceeded without the actual presence of Moon and matching was done by church leaders instead of Moon himself. In the 1997, the name of the organization was changed to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, actively promoting the True Family Movement. In South Korea, the UC has played a significant role in Japanese women’s marriage migration since the 1980s. This expansion of the True Family Movement to include non-members and the relaxation of ceremonial processes has contributed to the increasing number of Filipina and Thai women marriage migrants to South Korea (Y. Kim et al. 2006).

**Finding Spouses Through the UC**

Among the respondents for this study, 19 Korean men (76%) and 28 Filipinas (80%) met their spouses through the UC. South Korean respondents who found their spouses through the UC said that they were first approached by family members, neighbors, friends, acquaintances, and people from the UC, except for four men who voluntarily went to the UC to be matched. The UC determines who should be matched with Korean men, and men follow the choice of the Church. When asked why they married Filipinas, not women of another nationality, some South Korean men responded “because of the Unification Church.” In other words, the Unification Church directed men to marry Filipinas and men followed their decision.

Like South Korean men, the Filipinas who met their husbands through the UC said that they were initially “witnessed” by family relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, or strangers they met on streets, in department stores, or government offices. “Witnessing” is one of the external
missions UC members should carry out in order to achieve the ultimate goals of the UC. It means to “spread the truth” (Barker 1984, 25) which is purported to recruit new members.

In Manila, Filipinas recruited from all over the Philippines are matched with Korean men who have just flown in from South Korea. Korean men’s trip usually lasts about four to five days. After their arrival, they are introduced to their partner who is pre-determined by “picture matching.” In most cases, men meet one Filipina at a time, and a general rule is that they can reject their match once. After the initial meeting where they are matched, they have a second meeting on the same day or the next day to have the Blessing ceremony in the form of small-scale mass wedding. One 1996 news report describes a mass wedding with 983 couples in Manila with Moon on a satellite screen (Y. Kim et al. 2006, 11n8), but nowadays the Blessing ceremony occurs on a smaller scale, more frequently and in a more relaxed way. The respondents said that they had the ceremony with one Philippine leader and one Korean leader and only with the picture of Rev. Moon and Mrs. Han. At the third meeting, the couples, who are now husbands and wives, go on a Manila tour arranged by the Church.

After the matching, followed by the Blessing and one-day tour, husbands go back to South Korea and wait for their wives to come “home,” while Filipinas go back to their Philippine home to begin the Separation Period. After returning to their hometown, Filipinas stay at or regularly attend a local Unification Church (or “Unification Center” in the Philippines) for one to six months depending on the general practices of the local UC and the length of immigration process. As UC members, Filipinas study UC doctrines and they are prepared for their lives in Korea, learning about South Korean society and traditional cultures.

Within one month or up to a year after the Blessing, women travel from the Philippines to South Korea and are placed at a local UC in a town where their husbands live, often via a larger
UC near Seoul. After the proper Separation Period, Filipinas are allowed to move into their husbands’ house and the Three-Day Ceremony is carried out. According to the UC calendar, the couples have another mass wedding, which takes place in Seoul or cities near Seoul, officiated by Reverend Moon. When the husbands’ families can afford to and/or are willing, they have a private wedding with their family members, relatives, and friends.

The Construction of Gender Desire

The construction of gendered desire begins from the moment when Filipinas have a contact with the UC recruiters. It was not the UC doctrines but something else that usually attracted the Filipinas to the UC.

This woman who was my neighbor asked me if I wanted to meet an ideal husband. I had a boyfriend and I was not thinking about getting married at that time so I asked “why would I want to meet someone from another country?” She kept saying that I could meet an ideal husband. So one Saturday, I left work early to go to a seminar. … And, at the seminar, they said that we could have a free ticket to go to Manila [to be matched with a man]. Really, free ticket? [laughs] I had never been to Manila before so I thought this free ticket was good. But, I asked “what if I don’t like a man?” They said it would be OK. I didn’t think of meeting a man at that time. It was to see Manila. (Ailyn Loanzon)

Many respondents reported how a “recruiter” talked about men with financial stability and the potential benefits from marrying “an ideal husband,” and usually they emphasized that husbands could support the woman and her family in the Philippines. Even though some Filipinas had boyfriends when they were “witnessed,” Korean men sounded more attractive than
their Filipino boyfriends who they described as “playboy” or did not hold reliable jobs. Some women decided to go to the UC seminar primarily with this expectation to meet a Korean man, while others went to the initial seminar or “orientation” because of their recruiters’ persistent touting of the advantages.

This suggestion of “an ideal husband” continues as the UC becomes a messenger for the couple who barely know each other and cannot communicate one another. After the matching, women’s association with the local UC is maintained because women’s communications with their husbands in Korea occur through the Unification center. Except for Korean men who, despite their modest command of English, are willing to communicate with their wives on their own, many women receive letters and phone calls from their husbands at the Unification center where an interpreter is readily available. Therefore, the Filipina-South Korean couples’ long-distance courtship is carefully guided under the supervision of the UC which serves as a bridge between Filipinas and South Korean men. While Filipinas and Korean men rely on during the matching and the Separation Period, the UC not only translate the contents of communications but also may add extras.

Celia Sering had been a 22-year-old midwife in Manila when she was invited to the Unification Church by one of her relatives. After a one-week seminar, she was matched with 32-year-old Jae-yeong Ahn.

It was, what do you say? Love at first sight! [laughs] It was so weird, seonsaengnim [teacher]. I cannot explain it but I knew he was the one. I was so excited. I went home and told my parents that I wanted to marry him. But, my parents said no. Especially my mother did not like it.

Minjeong: Why?
You see, we heard about Filipina wives who were beaten up by their Korean husbands. My parents did not want me to marry him because he was Korean. We had a huge fight. I cried. I cried so hard. [laughs] Next morning, my mother was still against it but I packed my bag and went to the Unification Church for the Blessing.

[Korean in italics]

Her road to married life continued to be bumpy. After the Blessing, she participated in the series of Unification workshops starting with the full 21-day seminar, followed by the four-month stay in the Unification Center, during which she participated in fundraising, foodraising and witnessing. Then, she moved to Korea and stayed at the Unification Church, where she continued to observe the Separation Period. But, even after four months, she was still at the Church. There was a dispute between the Church and Jae-yeong regarding “donations” to cover her living expenses, so the couple suspected that the reverend was stalling her to extort more money, rather than that it was the standard Unification practice in which the younger a wife is, the longer the Separation Period. When they went to Seoul to have a mass wedding, Jae-yeong took Celia to his aunt’s place and Celia started her life with Jae-yeong.

It is very difficult to refute the love between Celia and Jae-yeong. After 7 years, Celia who still had a very difficult relationship with her domineering father-in-law, was one of the most devoted and hard-working farmer’s wives. However, it was not something that she had initially learned about Jae-yeong.

When I learned a little bit of Korean, I told my husband, “you are a liar.”

Minjeong: Why?
When I first came here, I wondered “why we ride a bus when he had a car?” I thought he had a car and a house. But he didn’t have a car and he just had a room in his parents’ house! When I was able to say it in Korean, I told him that. [laughs]

Minjeong: What did he say?

He just laughed. [laughs] Then, he said “I didn’t say that.” [chuckles] He blamed the translator. My husband said things as they were but the translator exaggerated things.

[seriously] At that time, we could not know because we didn’t know Korean.

Celia knew her husband’s true condition the day she arrived in Korea, but she still wanted to live with her husband because she loved him, she said. What is important here is how the Unification Church facilitates the gendered desire by feeding the images of an “ideal partner.”

A more serious problem rises in what the UC tells the husband. Stella Santiago was one of the earliest Filipinas who arrived in the area and it took her 8 months to come to Korea. Like many Filipinas, she was pressed by the Unification people to be matched and she went to the Matching in January 1996 for fun, “like a blind date.” She did not think she would be married to a man she had never met. Stella said that because she was short, she longed to find a tall man, but her matched partner was 5’ 4”’. She told the Unification leader and her husband that she was thinking about getting married in the next year or the year after, so if he could not wait for her, he should marry someone else. Her sassy remark froze her husband, and this somehow touched her. She agreed to be matched with her husband but she did not want to rush into her move to Korea. When he went back to Korea, her husband called her every day and sent her the pictures and gifts. She thought that this might be her destiny, but she was offended whenever her husband asked her if she needed any money.
Of course it is nice to have money, but I was not married to him because of money. What if he disrespects me when I go to Korea. I was working at that time and I could work hard and made an honest earning. It made me really uncomfortable. … But later I found that the Unification Reverend told him to say that. [My husband was told that] I was not making my decision fast and if he offered money then I would come to Korea sooner. I already knew that I was going to marry [and eventually join] him, but I did not want to go to Korea like that.

At the end of June 1996, she met her husband’s friend who was visiting Manila. Stella’s husband sent her gifts, money, and a letter through his friend, and the friend persuaded her husband that Stella really liked the gifts and needed a little more nudge from her husband. In July 1996, after two weeks, Stella’s husband made a second trip to the Philippines. Stella, with laughter, said “I guess he wanted to get married no matter how busy he was.”

Even Filipinas, who said that they married for the sake of their family, wished that their marriage would be amiable. Although their marriage did not start with love, they hoped that love would eventually come later. It is often intermediary agencies that reduce their marriage to a form of exchange and reinforce the image of international marriage migrants as opportunists who would do anything for economic gain. The Unification Reverend convinced Stella’s husband that a promise of economic support or direct supply of money would be a persuasive means to bring her to Korea sooner. However, Filipinas stress that their marriage is not for migration but that their migration is for marriage. Even though this form of arranged marriage is a deviation from the western idea that privileges romantic love prior to the contracting of marriage, international couples wish for the same things that other people expect to obtain from marriage – familial/spousal affection and a future life with stability. This echoes Giddens’s notion of
romantic love, which is culturally specific and separate from passionate love. He suggests that romantic love “is a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life, it is said, ‘complete’” (Giddens 1992, 40). In order to make sure of having an enduring and loving relationship, it is important for Filipinas to find a husband with whom they can build their life. This desire, enmeshed with pragmatism, may form the basis upon which meaningful and enduring relationships are imagined and/or realized (Constable 2003b).

Regulating Hetero/sexuality and Diluted Religious Identity

The sexual Fall of Adam and Even foregrounds the Separation Period for the couples matched by the UC and the detailed instructions for the Three-Day Ceremony (the consummation of marriage) signify the importance of the couple’s union and the beginning of the family involving procreation. These UC practices explicitly normalize heterosexuality through the regulations of sexual behaviors of UC members.

However, both of these rituals significant to the core idea of the UC doctrines often cause Filipinas and Korean men’s departure from the UC. Only 5 out of 25 Filipinas in Hyowon County maintained their UC membership, but even the existing members did not demonstrate their steady commitment, often missing Sunday sermons.

Many Filipinas lose their trust in the UC soon after discovering that their new Korean life is very different from what they were promised in the Philippines. The frequently-used phrase when recruiting women, “big house and rich husband,” is rarely materialized in rural areas. Except for a couple of Filipina respondents who were UC “converts,” most Filipinas endured their membership from about 6 months to a year in order not to miss this opportunity of marrying a Korean man and moving to Korea without paying their way or hassling with legal paperwork.
Also, the UC doctrines fail to convince Filipinas who were initially lured into the organization in search of “an ideal man.” Women’s decision to be parted from the UC is supported by Korean husbands who, from the beginning, considered the UC as “a religious organization that provides matching services” (Seong-jin Lee). In exchange, Korean men make “donations” by stages – initially for the introduction ($3,000 per matching), processing of immigration paperwork ($100-200), travel expenses for wives to come to Korea (flight fare) and living expenses when wives stay at the local UC in Korea (about US $200 per month). Sometimes Korean families experience conflicts with the Unification Church when they have to re-negotiate the terms. Jae-yeong Ahn, Hong-shin Han, and Cheol-won Kim were at odds with the Church “during the Separation Period” when they and their wives wanted to make a home early, but their requests were denied for the purpose of observation by the church order. For Korean men who neither know nor care about the meaning of the Separation Period, the church’s insistence appears absurd. Cheol-won who married in 1999 still gets irate when discussing the UC affairs:

The Church does not let you share the bed with your wife for more than three months. While keeping the wife, they extort money from you with some sorry excuse of educating them. Until recently, the Church even demanded a written promise that you should not miss Sunday sermons. And now they added another condition: You have to pay your donation when you come to Sunday sermons. If you don’t bring your donation, then they at once tell you not to come. Just like that! That’s what I saw and heard about the Church. It makes me mad just thinking about it!

As illustrated above with Jae-yeong and Celia’s case, the cat-and-mouse game is often played by Filipina-Korean couples who are eager to live as husband and wife. Especially likely is that the abstinence prior to the Three-Day Ceremony is often broken, even under the watchful eyes of the
reverend. After the long wait following the Blessing, these newly weds, who are not committed UC members, did not feel obligated to adhere to the UC rules.

According to the original UC practice, the Separation Period lasts for at least 40 days and up to several years. One of the variation factors is the age of the wife – when the wife is close to 30 years old, the Separation Period becomes shorter so that the couple can have children sooner (Grace 1985). Celia Sereng, was 21 years old when she and Jae-yeong had the Blessing. Because she was particularly young, her Separation Period was longer than others, lasting almost 6 months in the Philippines and 4 months in South Korea. Barbara Maraña’s Separation Period in South Korea was only one month because she was 30 years old. This variation suggests how heterosexuality is regulated in connection with procreation.

While the Separation Period causes conflicts between some Filipina-Korean couples and the UC, it provides a “dating” period for other Filipinas and Korean men. During the prolonged Separation Period in the Philippines and in Korea, Filipinas and South Korean husbands develop affection and commitment to each other. The women expressed how they were touched by the men’s devotion – daily international phone calls, occasionally with the expensive interpreter service provided by a phone company, as well as gifts including money – in this period, and indicated that their affection towards their partners grew through this period. Cynthia Gonzales recalled the time when she received 22 roses, the same number as her age, from her husband, and how she was envied by other Filipinas who were staying at the Unification Church with her. This period helps them learn about each other better and ponder their decision on their partner or marriage. In his research on Unification couples in the United States, James H. Grace (1985) found that many couples compared the Separation Period to the engagement period in traditional American society, although it is not the purpose of the Separation Period that church leaders
advocates. Nonetheless, the UC oral tradition suggests that “couples who take a god-centered role in relating to one another during [the Separation Period] inevitably will ‘fall in love.’” (Grace 1985, 173). Therefore, the Separation Period reinforces and normalizes the traditional heterosexual practices.

Moreover, the Three-Day Ceremony explicitly regulates sexuality of the UC couples. It entails very specific instructions on how to consummate marriage. While it was rarely observed and often considered to be ludicrous by Filipinas without proper understanding of the meanings or prevailing faith, the ceremony valorizes heterosexuality and its implications.

CONCLUSION

Wang and Chang (2002) argued that it is important to acknowledge the role of commercial agencies in the exploding number of Vietnamese marriage migrants. Compared to the number of Vietnamese migrant women, the number of Filipinas increased modestly and even decreased from 2005 to 2006. This can be partially explained by the fact that, compared to commercial agencies, the marriage migration process is drawn out and guided by the UC doctrines and practices, as well as the tension resulting from the misunderstandings among the Church and Filipinas and South Koreans. The leaders attempt to maintain the global standing of the ill-reputed organization by expanding the UC practice of the Blessing Ceremony, which coincidentally fits the existing needs of Korean men and Filipinas. However, in the course of its expansion, the church leaders relaxed their principles and slowly lost the meanings of the ritual. Korean men see the UC like an insurance agency that will match them to wives who will not run away, but also as a religious cult that they want to circumvent. The UC presents a way for Filipinas to marry a man in a more advanced country, but it also serves as an invisible bond for
some Filipinas, with the undeniable elements of human trafficking in some cases. With the emergence of commercial agencies that aggressively approach their potential clients with such tactics as a “bride guarantee” – if a bride runs away, the agency will introduce you to another (Lee 2008) – the Church is losing its favor among South Korean men who do not want to feel burdened by the Church’s demand of “spiritual” (and financial) commitment even after marriage is contracted. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Unification Church has played a crucial role in facilitating Filipinas’ (and Japanese and Thai women’s) marriage migration to South Korea. Their local presence allows South Koreans to consider an option of having a Filipina wife or, in some cases, it determines South Korean men’s partner by directing them to Filipinas instead of Japanese women. In the Philippines, “witnessing” made Filipinas participate in recruiting other Filipinas, sustaining the web of international marriage migration. Without the Unification Church, Filipina international marriage migration to South Korea would not have reached the scale it has achieved.

What is more significant is that the UC fosters the desire for international marriage both directly by approaching Korean men and indirectly with Filipinas’ through “witnessing.” They plant the goal of an ideal husband and a comfortable life in Filipinas and the dream of finding a faithful wife in Korean men. This gendered desire is not a new invention by the UC but instead mirror a patriarchal family form which is still considered to be the “norm” in many societies. Thus, Filipinas and Korean men enter cross-border marriages, coordinated by the UC, with the anticipation of attaining something close to this normative family form, which they imagine will enable them to achieve proper femininity and masculinity as well.

Furthermore, this paper reveals the unaddressed aspect of the UC – how it regulates sexuality and normalizes heterosexuality in accordance with the UC doctrines. This picture
supports the idea that sexuality is socially constructed; the social construction of sexuality and sexuality in turn challenges the idea of biological essentialism, suggesting a possibility of subversion.

REFERENCES

Kim, Yi-sun, Min-jun Kim, and Han, Geon-su. 2006. “Female Marriage Migrants’ Experiences of the Cultural Conflicts and the Policy Measures for Inter-cultural Communications.” Korean Women’s Development Institutes. [in Korean]
They still attended the Catholic Church when there were the events for Filipinas or important dates. Isabella was a committed UC member who joined the Unification Church through CARP.
when she was in college. She had been with the UC for 12 years before she was matched with a Korean man. However, she still attended the masses or retreats organized at the Catholic Church, and she explained that she was now a UC member but this did not mean that she abandoned the Catholic belief.

ii In the orthodox UC tradition, one cannot refuse a matched partner unless they leave the religion altogether and “divorce in request” was not permitted, while when a spouse commits adultery, divorce and re-matching was allowed.

iii The Three-Day Ceremony tells couples how to have their first sexual intercourse. Couples should have water and candle nearby and be dressed in white clothes. Wife should be on top of husband on the first and second day and on the third day, husband goes on top of wife.