



Making Ordinary, If Not Ideal, Intimate Relationships

Japanese-Chinese Transnational Matchmaking

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“Ideally, Japanese should marry Japanese. That is the best marriage,” said Mr. Tanaka. Mr. Tanaka is a marriage broker, but contrary to the ideal he articulated, his job is not to facilitate marriages between Japanese men and women. Instead he mediates marriages between Japanese men and Chinese women. Since establishing his transnational marriage agency in 1995, as of October 2010 he had brokered 242 pairings between Japanese men and women from mainland China. Although he is very proud of what he does, he did not hesitate to claim that the ideal marriage is always between co-nationals. After saying this, he continued, “But there are some Japanese men who cannot [marry Japanese women]. So I take them to China to find a Chinese bride.” Mr. Tanaka’s opinion was not unusual. From both other transnational marriage brokers and many of their Japanese clientele I had heard the refrain that for a Japanese man, finding a Japanese bride was the natural first choice.

The transnational marriage agencies (*kokusai kekkon shōkaijō*) on which this chapter focuses—Mr. Tanaka’s is one example—offer brokerage services to facilitate marriages between Japanese men and Chinese women. Their services vary, but typically they include multi-day “matchmaking tours” (*omiai tuā*) to China. (In addition to marriage tours to China, some agencies also offer matchmaking meetings with Chinese women already residing in Japan.) During these tours, in a short space of time, Japanese men are usually introduced to several bridal candidates who have been recruited by branch offices in the area. Upon the assent of both sides, the new acquaintances become engaged, and the marriages are sealed shortly thereafter. At the time of marriage, most couples are still unable

to communicate with each other. It is only after marriage that the new Chinese brides start learning basic Japanese. Such learning takes place in special classes in China while the women are waiting to receive a spousal visa that will allow them to join their husbands in Japan. The visa process generally takes three to six months but sometimes can take longer.

How is it that heterosexual marriages—intimate relationships heavily laden with normative expectations in Japan—are being created in such a seemingly unconventional way? If even a broker of such marriages himself believes that the ideal marriage is between a Japanese man and woman, how do these seemingly extraordinary ways of establishing marital relations become acceptable to participants? Studies of marriage in Japan have shown that the ideology of marriage has shifted from centering on “arranged marriages” that value familial relations and standing to more individualistic conceptions of “love” or “compassionate” marriages, with the main turning point being in the 1970s (Hashimoto and Traphagan 2008; Ronald and Alexy 2011; West 2011). How then do participants try to make sense of intimate relationships that appear to transgress the older ideology by being both arranged and “less than ideal” because they include foreign brides? By investigating transnational and domestic matchmaking practices in Japanese society, in this chapter I examine how these transnational unions are created and, more broadly, how the rhetorics of “ordinariness” and “naturalness” are constructed to include transnationally arranged relationships.

Tomoko Nakamatsu (2013) observes that whereas marriage by introduction is a long-standing practice in Japan, introduction agencies, including those facilitating transnational marriages, appeal to notions of “love” or “romance” as one of their strategies: “One outcome of the normalization of marriage based on romantic love was that it encouraged the growth of a new type of marriage introduction business: the promotion of romantic encounters” (ibid, 475). Whereas the transnational marriage agencies I researched made some references to “love” on their websites, as Nakamatsu might lead us to expect, on the whole my interactions with marriage brokers and their clientele revealed very different narratives, dynamics, and scenarios through which such transnational matchmaking came to be portrayed as a feasible option. Many brokers, as well as clientele, were aware that “love” does not initially exist in brokered relationships, not simply because the couples barely knew one another, but also because arranged relationships entail different constructions of intimacy in marriage: not the pursuit of intimacy itself, but rather a *possibility* for intimacy. Accordingly, this chapter is not about what constitutes intimacy per se. Rather, I ask how the Japanese men involved attempted to create a conceivable site for

intimacy. Drawing upon the definition of intimacy discussed in this book's introduction and adding a consideration of future-oriented aspects, I posit that the intimate relationships here entail aspirations to marry someone in order to share a life, and therefore it is a someone that participants can imagine being close to physically and emotionally in the future. In other words, since at the time of marriage the two participants are virtual strangers, it is not intimacy itself but instead the possibility of intimacy after marriage that plays an important role. The practice of intimacy in this case—or more precisely the practice of imagining intimacy—requires an alternative way of understanding marital relationships.

To elaborate, in place of appeals to the notions of existing “love” or “romance,” the Japanese men who participated in these marriages were encouraged to engage in these intimate relationships because of the “naturalness” or “ordinariness” attributed to the relationships. Male participants themselves attempted to understand their marriages as “ordinary” by framing their relationships as “not so different” from the domestic marital unions they had originally sought. Drawing upon Goffman's theorization of stigma—“an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (2009 [1963], 5)—I argue that these Japanese men and transnational marriage brokers negotiated perceptions of the “ordinary” as a means to construct intimate relationships. As Goffman claims, stigmatized individuals attempt to present themselves as ordinary persons by managing information about their failings. In the case of transnational matchmaking practices, the Japanese men tried to manage two pieces of information: their inability to find a Japanese wife and their inability to meet their future spouse “naturally.” While they attempted to make sense of their private experiences, their negotiations also involved a public dimension, most prominently concerning how to tell others about their intimate relationships.

Love was not the foremost concern, and it was seen as something—within both domestic and transnational matchmaking practices—that would come after a marriage had already been brokered (should it come at all). The work that went into constructing these intimate relationships, as this chapter documents, involved rendering them as normal. It is important that the intimate relationships I discuss here are not created solely by two individuals but are imagined to be socially acknowledged as such. Some of the Japanese men were worried how their marriages would be seen by public eyes (*seken no me*). The key point is that it was neither love nor even passion that was seen as a prerequisite for intimacy but rather the ability of participants to view their relationships as socially acceptable, if not ordinary.

The materials referenced here were collected during ethnographic fieldwork in China and Japan from 2007 to 2010. During this period, I visited transnational marriage agencies on a regular basis and observed matchmaking processes, including Internet matchmaking meetings, matchmaking parties, and consultations between clients and brokers. I also followed matchmaking tours to northeast China and interviewed male clients, female bride candidates, and brokers in both Japan and China. As a comparison, I interviewed domestic marriage brokers. While I conducted research with and interviewed Chinese women, this chapter primarily focuses on the experiences of Japanese men.¹

TRANSNATIONAL MATCHMAKING PRACTICES

The practice of facilitating marriages between Japanese men and non-Japanese Asian women has its origins in the mid-1980s in the Japanese countryside (Kuwayama 1995; Shukuya 1988). Owing to a perceived shortage of women and women's unwillingness to marry into rural communities, many Japanese men who remained in rural areas had difficulty finding a bride. Local governments tried many different strategies, including recruiting women from elsewhere in Japan, yet none of these plans were seen as working. Importing "Asian brides" was then hit upon as a solution for Japanese men who could not find a Japanese bride. Asahi village in Yamagata Prefecture is one example of this phenomenon. In 1985, the local government organized matchmaking tours to the Philippines that resulted in an almost 100 percent success rate for the participating men to find a bride (Shukuya 1988).

Today these matchmaking practices are not limited to the rural areas of Japan. Although there are agencies introducing women from Thailand, the Philippines, and Russia, most women introduced by the matchmaking industry are Chinese, especially since the mid-1990s.² Most of the Chinese women included in my fieldwork came from northeast China.³ During my research, both professional and amateur marriage brokers were involved in commercial matchmaking practices.⁴ Some transnational marriage brokers were registered at the Nihon Nakodo Renmei (Japanese Matchmakers Association) or the Nihon Buraidaru Renmei (Bridal Information Union). Both organizations are national brokerage business networks in which the majority of agencies mediate marriages between Japanese men and women.⁵ Others conduct brokerages as a side job. The majority of men I met at transnational marriage agencies were white-collar businessmen living in urban areas.⁶ Most of the men had full-time jobs, some even at globally known companies. Whereas these characteristics contradicted the

typical image of men seeking matches because they were socially and economically “disadvantaged” (Tseng 2010; Yang and Lu 2010), for many different reasons most of these men had had a hard time finding a local wife. Age was seen as one of the reasons for such difficulties. The average age of male participants ranged between forty and fifty and included both those never married and previously divorced. Individuals in this age range were often seen as “too old” to find a suitable Japanese bride. Because many men thought that having a child or children was an essential part of marital life, Japanese women of a similar age were excluded from their conceptions of “suitable brides.” Some men confessed that if they were younger, they would never think about marrying a Chinese woman.

Most transnational marriage agencies offer similar services. They provide a Japanese male clientele with Chinese women’s profiles, either online or in print. The profiles typically include pictures, age, height, weight, hometown, family structures, hobbies, the women’s willingness to live with in-laws, and other pertinent details. After the Japanese client has selected several candidates, the brokers contact their local staff in China. The local staff members then ask the selected women if they are willing to meet the interested party by showing them that man’s profile. If they agree, the Japanese client visits China with the broker, often as part of a group. The man meets the women he has selected, talking with each for fifteen or twenty minutes with the help of translators. After having met all potential candidates, the Japanese male client, the brokers, and local staff members discuss which woman he would like to marry. Sometimes, they also decide on a second choice in case the first choice declines his proposal. The local staff members then check with the woman to see if she is also willing. Should both sides agree, the engagement is contracted, and they all move on to an engagement dinner party at the same hotel. Some couples marry the following day, and others marry in a month or so, when the Japanese man returns for a second visit to meet his betrothed in China.

The brokerage fees vary depending on the services and the marriage agencies. The fees include registration, consulting, matchmaking tours, wedding tours, paperwork assistance, language lessons for the Chinese women, and “after-care” services for newly married couples. Some agencies offer packages involving choices concerning the quality of the hotel for the wedding party or the number of wedding photos taken at a photo studio. The total cost ranges from ¥1,500,000 to ¥3,500,000 (\$15,000–\$35,000), depending on the agency and services desired.⁷ The fact that payments were involved provoked social perceptions that these pairings were the result of an unusual, even stigmatized, way of creating intimate relations. In particular, transnational matchmaking tours were often criticized and

mocked by the national media, which characterized them not only as involving “mail order brides” (Shukuya 1988), but also as entailing “instant marriage tours” (*Yomiuri*, March 23, 2010), “bride-hunting tours” (*Shukan Bunshu*, March 2, 2006), and “buying brides under the name of matchmaking” (*Shukan Post*, March 10, 2006). The relative ease of such matching was specifically used as proof that it could not be based on truly equal relations.

Notably, Japanese-Chinese marriages brokered via these matchmaking practices are premised on multiple inequities—not just global economic inequalities, but also disparities at a personal level (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Piper 2003). It is always the women who relocate to a new place, where they often face substantial linguistic and cultural barriers. Simply taking “ordinariness” at its face value, as deployed by the brokers and participants, risks obscuring uneven transactions and relationships. Nonetheless, such asymmetrical relationships were made possible not simply by global economic and gender inequalities, but also were rendered seemingly “natural” through domestic values and norms used to create intimate relationships, including normalized commercial matchmaking activities and taken-for-granted gender differences in Japanese society.

“IDEAL MARRIAGE” IN THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT

Whereas transnational matchmaking services are often stigmatized in Japanese society owing to their commercial aspects, payments for matching services, quick matchings, and unequal relations are not absent within domestic matchmaking practices. Nonetheless, perceptions of these practices are different. As stated above, “love” has become a crucial element in contemporary Japanese marital ideology. Nonetheless, of course, loveless marriages exist, and the terms “loveless” or “sexless” have come into common parlance in recent decades. Love is seen as an ideal component of marital relations but not an indispensable element (West 2011). My ethnographic data also show that when one cannot find a partner based on love, many believe that some degree of compromise is necessary.

Seeking a marriage partner through introduction services is seen as one way to negotiate the ideal form of marriage. The first marriage agencies that utilized computerized matchmaking services or psychological tests emerged in the 1970s, and now there are at least 3,700–3,900 such institutions in Japan (West 2011).⁸ Unlike online dating services, these agencies specifically target potential customers who are looking for a marriage partner. Contemporary marriage introduction agencies, both domestic

and transnational, frequently use the term *omiaiai* (arranged meetings) to describe elements of their brokerage services. Nevertheless, their use of *omiaiai* is quite dissimilar from what the term described in a traditional sense: older relatives introducing young people to others from similar backgrounds for the purpose of marriage (Nakane 1967; Hendry 2013). For instance, during an interview one domestic marriage broker told me, “Families are usually not involved in *omiaiai* today. People came to the marriage agency because they themselves thought it was already too late to find a partner. Although some people asked their mothers’ opinions, mothers rarely intervene in our matchmaking processes.” Although agencies are likely to describe their services in terms that index “traditional matchmaking,” in key ways contemporary practices are substantially different.

For those who visited domestic marriage agencies, the ideology of love in marriage occupied an ambiguous place. It was not exactly finding love that they sought but rather finding the possibility for intimacy. On the one hand, many of them still hoped to find some “love” or a “crush” or what Akiko Takeyama (2008) calls “romantic excitement” (*tokimeki*), as one broker put it. This broker told me that people cannot marry someone they do not like. On the other hand, participants are also aware that it is not only difficult to find such excitement, but also that “love” alone is not a sufficient reason to marry someone. Another domestic broker wrote that if people marry as a result of passionate love, their passion level will simply decrease after marriage, ruining their relationship. But in the case of arranged marriages, couples start with the feeling that “I can possibly marry this person”—that is, a measure that is just a passing score, 60–70 points (out of 100). Then, in the process of living together, they find the good characteristics of their new spouse (Yamada 2009). Therefore, according to the same broker, the ways in which couples try to generate “love” in an arranged marriage is a different form of “love marriage.”

Although finding love is one element of the rhetoric, many men I met were focused on the means through which they might find a partner. In particular, Japanese men defined the ideal form of marriage as one in which they met their brides “naturally” since it was through such a “natural” encounter that intimacy was seen as having the possibility to emerge. For instance, one Japanese man at a transnational marriage agency confessed, “Encountering someone [to marry] naturally [*shizen na deai*] is the best.” Similarly, as stated by another man, “If it is possible, I want to meet and marry someone naturally [*shizen ni*].” Their comments suggest that meeting someone through an agency (either domestic or transnational) was not natural and thus not an ideal way to establish marital relations.⁹

Nonetheless, within domestic matchmaking practices, such “unnatural” ways of meeting a partner were rationalized by emerging media discourses concerning “the marriage squeeze.” During my research, *konkatsu* (partner hunting) was a topic receiving prevalent coverage in the media. The term was originally created by sociologist Masahiro Yamada and journalist Tōko Shirakawa in 2007. In describing what they mean by *konkatsu* activity, Yamada and Shirakawa (2008) explain that before the 1980s it was common to find a marriage partner with support from one’s workplace or community. Thus encounters between males and females during this period were generated through social connections. However, with the emphasis on economic liberalism that became prominent in the 1980s, people became free to seek marriage partners wherever they chose. But this resulted in individuals facing an unequal playing field in their efforts to engage the opposite sex, for those who were more handsome or socially skilled would be at an advantage (Miles, this volume). In their view, people’s values and lifestyles, particularly views concerning the division of labor based on gender, have become more diverse and thus have created more obstacles to marriage. Potential partners are more likely to now have very differing opinions about marital life. As a result, finding someone to marry now requires activities (*katsudō*) involving more personal effort. The inequalities created by these liberalizing trends reward personal ability and effort, and they have made it difficult for certain individuals to find both jobs and marriage partners. According to Yamada and Shirakawa, this is the social cause of the modern “marriage squeeze.”

The concept of *konkatsu* correspondingly attracted media attention, and a number of professional and amateur brokers published how-to books and even held seminars for unmarried people. I attended one of the “*konkatsu* seminars” in the spring of 2009 in Tokyo. It was administered by an instructor who had authored a number of books on how to find a marriage partner. All together, forty people (approximately twenty men and twenty women) attended the series.¹⁰ The instructor started the seminar with the question, “Why is *konkatsu* important?” Then he continued:

We actually all want a “natural encounter” [*shizen na deai*]. I also think this is the best. But when we pass the age of thirty, we cannot have natural encounters. This is because after the age of thirty, it is difficult to create new human relationships. In the old days, more than 90 percent of people married by the age of thirty. But now, owing to the issue of late marriage, there are fewer opportunities for natural encounters. When natural encounters disappear, there is something that we have to do: that is *konkatsu*. Natural encounters also take time, and you might also fail. *Konkatsu* will give you the opportunity to meet someone one-on-one more quickly.

As part of the *konkatsu* activities, the instructor explained several different types of introduction services, including major domestic introduction companies and middle- and small-scale matchmaking services. While he claimed that it was up to the attendees as to which services they want to use, he also stated that by using these matchmaking services, “We can buy encounters [*deai wa kaeru*]! If we can buy them, then just buy them! If you cannot find an encounter by yourself, there is someone who can assist you, so then you buy it.” Finding someone through marriage agencies appeared far from a “natural encounter” and thus not ideal. Nonetheless, the understanding that participants were the victims of social forces and not simply suffering from personal failings made commercial matchmaking appear to be a more acceptable solution for creating intimate relationships. Seeking a partner through domestic matchmaking services was portrayed as unavoidable or even a natural result of social changes and the tendencies toward late marriage (*bankonka*) in Japan. In this manner, seminar participants were led to view the non-ideal—arranged meetings—as necessary and even acceptable.

How, then, did some Japanese men decide that transnational matchmaking was a viable option? In what follows, I look at how such compromised options became acceptable. My ethnographic data show that transnational matchmaking systems helped male clientele gradually shift their perspectives and definitions so that an arranged marriage in a transnational context also came to seem natural and thus not really transgressive of the norms of domestic matchmaking.

FROM DOMESTIC AND SEMI-TRANSNATIONAL TO TRANSNATIONAL MATCHMAKING

Japanese men experienced the transition from domestic to transnational matchmaking practices by gradually shifting the boundaries of their acceptable “marriage market.” Few men began their search for a marriage partner with a visit to a transnational marriage agency. Most of the Japanese men I met at the transnational marriage agencies had been enrolled at domestic marriage agencies and had already gone through the process outlined above, shifting away from placing their hopes in a “natural” encounter. As one transnational marriage broker confessed to me, “No one wants to marry a Chinese bride at first.” A Japanese man said the following:

Before I came here [a transnational marriage agency], I had a lot of arranged meetings with Japanese women. I do not know why, but nothing worked. I met around thirty or forty women. When I felt okay, the

other did not feel the same, or when a counterpart liked me, I did not have any feelings for her. Then, the domestic broker I knew introduced me to the transnational broker here. I felt that if it did not work with Japanese women, I might also turn my eyes to transnational matchmaking.

At domestic marriage agencies, some men had dated Japanese women for a short time but had not moved on to marriage. Even after becoming clients at a transnational marriage agency, some men still did not completely give up their hopes of marrying a Japanese woman, so they simultaneously continued their memberships at domestic marriage agencies. Others complained that they had not even had a chance to meet a single Japanese woman because within the matchmaking system, which requires mutual consent before a meeting is set up, the women refused to meet them based on their profiles. Some had been enrolled at domestic matchmaking agencies for more than half a year and still had not had any matchmaking meetings, although they were still being charged monthly fees to access women's profiles. If men did not get the chance to meet women in person, they felt that they were paying monthly fees for nothing.

After failing to find a suitable bride at domestic marriage agencies, some men started looking at transnational marriage websites, and others simply shifted their target based on recommendations from their domestic brokers. For instance, Mr. Iguchi had been a member of a domestic marriage agency for a number of years. He was in his late thirties and a public servant in an urban city. His income was decent and stable. His father and brother were both medical doctors. The domestic marriage broker told me that "because Mr. Iguchi could not become a medical doctor, he has an inferiority complex, which makes his personality a little difficult. He is also short. He is not a bad person, but he talks too much about nothing important." After a number of unsuccessful matchmaking meetings with Japanese women, the domestic broker did not know what to do with him. Then she found the opportunity to introduce him to a transnational marriage agency she knew. After she sent him to the transnational agency, surprisingly, Mr. Iguchi found a bride from China quite quickly. The domestic broker was also astonished by how easy it was for a man like him to find a bride. Since then, whenever she encountered someone for whom she could not find a match at her own domestic agency, she sent him to the transnational agency.

Many Japanese men struggled with the decision to shift their target from a domestic to a transnational match. Many male clients were attracted to one of the transnational marriage agencies, China Love, because it also offered matchmaking parties and meetings with Chinese women who

already resided in Japan on a trainee, student, work, or even permanent residency visa. Most of these women already spoke Japanese. For men who saw themselves involuntarily engaged in transnational matchmaking practices, such a middle ground—not totally domestic, not totally transnational—was an intermediate step when making up their minds whether they were ready to consider a Chinese wife. A Japanese man told me, “Actually going to China by crossing national borders does not give a good impression to others. If it is a matchmaking meeting with a Chinese woman already living in Japan, I can tell others that I met her somewhere in Japan.” Presenting legitimate stories about how intimate relationships had been created was part of transforming an “unnatural” encounter into a “natural” one.

Over the course of my research, I observed thirteen matchmaking parties between Japanese men and Chinese women at China Love. Parties were held at a restaurant near the agency. At each party, there were ten to thirteen men and a similar number of women, though agencies always tried to have a few more women than men. The participation fees were ¥10,000 for men but free for women.¹¹ Drinks and a light lunch were served. Using a system of so-called “speed dating,” every seven or eight minutes men moved from one table to the next, while the women always remained at the same tables. This system made it possible for everyone to meet everyone else. After that, participants submitted the names of their three favorite people. The staff members input those data into a computer program and made matches. Every party produced two to four couples. Those who became couples went out for coffee right after the party, and the other men went back to the office and further discussed other opportunities with the brokers. While sometimes disappointing, the matchmaking parties gave many male clients their first interaction with Chinese women at a personal level. On the way back from a party to the agency, one man commented, “They really looked like Japanese. I did not feel any incongruity interacting with them.” Another man said, “Yeah, but like Japanese women, they also like young handsome men. . . . Like today, the most popular man was the youngest.” The participants at the party realized that Chinese women in Japan were like Japanese women, in both positive and negative ways. In other words, they did not seem like total “foreigners,” but they could be as demanding as Japanese women. If that was the case, many men might not have a chance to find a bride for the same reasons they had difficulties at the domestic agencies. Brokers also often invited those who did not find any match for dinner and drinks afterward to cheer them up. I was also invited to such dinners a number of times. Over dinner, one broker repeatedly stressed, “Let’s go to China

to find a bride!" The broker tried to convince the men that if they went to China, they would have more opportunities to meet younger and prettier women who were not too demanding. Some men indeed decided to visit China to find a bride.

In these ways, men's acceptance of matchmaking practices gradually expanded from the domestic to the semi-transnational and eventually to the transnational. While crossing national borders to find a bride who did not speak the same language seemed unimaginable for many men in the beginning, this step-by-step process facilitated a gradual transformation that did not require them to abruptly change their outlook. The arranged marriage system was already common practice for domestic marriages; moving from domestic marriage agencies to transnational ones reflected the extent to which men were willing to compromise or, to put it more precisely, stretch their conception of "ordinary" matching.

PAYMENTS AS AN ORDINARY PART OF CONTEMPORARY MATCHMAKING PRACTICES

The payments involved in transnational matchmaking, often stigmatized in society as "buying a bride," were also given meanings that built upon existing domestic practices. As discussed above, domestic introduction services require payments. For instance, domestic marriage agencies provide numerous services, including "*omiai* parties" and individual arranged meetings. In order to participate in these events, people have to be members of an agency and pay registration fees. Some agencies charge monthly or annual membership fees but have no fees when a couple gets married, while others charge lower membership and monthly fees but extra fees at the time of marriage. However, the fees are not seen as buying "a wife" (or husband) but rather as purchasing an "opportunity," partly because in the domestic services, men and women pay the same fees and are seen as equal in the process of matching. Both sides have equal rights to reject invitations or proposals. The service provided by brokers is simply "assistance" for creating encounters.

Payments do not simply signify a commodification of social ties. Viviana A. Zelizer analyzes the production of meaning in activities that entail payments to argue that people incessantly employ different forms of payment within their intimate relations: "It is not the money involved that determined the relationship's quality, but the relationship that defined the appropriateness of one sort of payment or another" (2000, 818). Although people use various forms of payment in intimate relations, they also

regularly differentiate monetary transactions according to the definition of the relationships in which they are involved by “[adapting] symbols, rituals, practices, and physically distinguishable forms of money to mark distinct social relations (*ibid.*, 819).” Zelizer further states, “This is serious work. It is precisely because different forms of payment signify differences in the character of the social relations currently operating (*ibid.*, 826).” According to her, this differentiation can also work in the opposite direction—that is, different meanings of social ties distinguish the forms of payment accordingly.

Many men expressed their gratitude for paid services. For instance, Mr. Goto paid ¥3,500,000 (approximately \$35,000) all together when he married a Chinese bride. This was the highest price paid by any male client that I heard of during my fieldwork. He purchased all the services available, including the matchmaking tour, wedding ceremony, the after-care services, language lessons for his Chinese bride, a gift package for the bride, and extra wedding photos. Regardless of the expense, Mr. Goto was grateful for the services of the marriage broker. On the way back to Japan after the wedding ceremony in China, I shared a four-hour car ride to the airport with him. He said, “I never thought about marrying a Chinese bride, but I also never thought about marrying such a pretty and young wife in my life. I wonder what my neighbors will say about me. They will be very surprised. But I am so grateful to the agency for introducing her to me.” Mr. Goto was in his sixties. After his first wife passed away two years before, he became a client of a domestic marriage agency. He told me that he was even rejected by a woman in her forties. He did not expect this and was critical of such a woman’s attitude. He said, “I wonder what a woman in her forties is going to do going forward.”

Looking at cross-border marriage matchmaking practices in Taiwan, Lu (2005) observes that matchmaking practices take on very traditional forms (such as matchmakers, bride price, and gift money) while engaging multiple fixed financial actions. Yet she argues that these practices go beyond simply commercial transactions to also involve other types of localized social relations and reciprocal duties. My ethnographic work in Japan shows that commercial interactions were already rather an ordinary practice in domestic matchmaking. Domestic marriage services, which included fees, were rarely criticized for requiring monetary payments. In part, because being unmarried or marrying late was seen as a social problem, not finding anyone was seen as worse than investing in matchmaking services. As the payments at domestic marriage agencies were for buying “opportunities” and not for “marriage” itself, many men also saw

their payments to transnational marriage agencies as buying transnational “introductory services,” not “Chinese brides.” The meanings attached to the fees at domestic agencies thus were transposed to rationalize payments made to transnational agencies as well.

MAKING DIFFERENCES “NATURAL”: “THEY ARE JUST MEN AND WOMEN”

My final ethnographic example illustrates the ways in which multiple “differences”—linguistic, cultural, or economic (among others)—have been rendered as the natural consequences of gender dissimilarities that also exist among domestic couples. Although many Japanese men tried to view their marriages to Chinese women as no different from domestic marriages, they nonetheless encountered difficulties and disparities. Particularly in the beginning, their married life was different from that of domestic couples. Transnational agency staff members frequently spent time responding to married clientele (male and female) who sought assistance in solving their problems. When I was at China Love, for instance, staff members were often on the phone. Sometimes they would spend as much as two or three hours talking with a client. The requests they received ranged from simple translations to help in settling a quarrel or even arranging a divorce. According to the chief broker at China Love, a common source of conflict was financial issues. For instance, a couple might have different expectations and wishes concerning the size of the remittance that would go to the wife’s parents in China.¹² Another broker explained to me, “Of course women want to send remittances to their parents. However, they should not ask their husbands for ¥100,000 per month; that would be too much. They could ask for ¥20,000 or ¥30,000, but they would have to consult with their husbands. It is our job to tell wives about the reality of their husbands’ financial situation.”

One day, a China Love staff member was on the phone with a male customer whose Chinese bride had come to Japan three months before. He bought his wife cosmetics every month. His wife had started taking his gifts for granted and stopped expressing gratitude. He was dissatisfied with his wife’s attitude and called for advice. He was frustrated not only because his wife did not understand what he meant, but also because her way of talking was too direct and often sounded rude to him. After hanging up, the staff member said, “Japanese people often ask me things like, ‘Are all Chinese like this?’ or ‘Are these unique Chinese characteristics?’” Yet brokers and staff members often advised Japanese men to deemphasize nationality and national character. Moreover, when listening

to men's complaints about their difficulties in communicating, the chief broker often stated, "After all, they are just men and women." He continued, "Men and women are different creatures; they will never understand each other." According to him, it was not simply a linguistic or cultural difficulty but rather a natural outcome of gender differences. Here, intimate relationships were discursively created as relations between a man and a woman. It was thus precisely the inability of couples to understand each other that made them ordinary couples wherein heterosexual intimacy was seen as possible.

Other brokers also shared the position that the male-female relationship was the central tension in cross-border marriages. In particular, many stated that male-female relationships were "irrational." For instance, Aoki, a broker at Wedding China, told me he was concerned about the correspondence between newlywed husbands and wives without the use of a proper translator. Sometimes, couples would use a dictionary or an online translation service, both of which often produced strange translations. Aoki said, "We don't know what can happen in a relationship between men and women. Anything can happen, and a small thing might damage their relationship. They might even break up before their marital life in Japan." A possible breakup before a woman arrived in Japan might occur, according to him, not because they did not speak the same language or did not know each other well enough, but because they were "men and women." In these ways, substantial differences shaped by culture, class, and language were minimized and naturalized as the inevitable tensions between all men and women.

The sources of conflict were thus rendered as "natural" outcomes of male-female relationships. Each couple's miscommunications and differences were portrayed as gender differences or as due to sex-based divisions of labor. Feminist scholars have questioned seemingly natural distinctions between males and females and argued that distinctions, such as public/private, production/reproduction, or political/domestic, are the products of ideology (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Martin 1991; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995). However, these differentiated categories are still widely employed and treated as natural in society. These seemingly natural differences are employed not only to separate the sexes, but also to ease communication between them and, perhaps, sell services that aid that process (such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*; Gray 1992).¹³ These "differences" were deployed and even rationalized in order to make sense of or conceal any difficulties the participants faced.

The broker Tanaka also used this gender-dichotomous image in order to explain household finances. Some men were concerned that they might

have made the wrong decision by marrying a person who had high financial demands. Nonetheless, the broker's strategy was to show that Chinese women's financial demands were not the undesired consequence of their having married someone from a developing country or that their marital relationships were based on financial ties. Rather, he sought to reframe financial demands as the product of natural gender differences. According to him, in any marriage, the role of the man is to provide, while women are to accept what they are told. His favorite sexual joke was also to connect this dichotomous image with the idea that men penetrate (*ireru*) while women accept (*ukeru*); he said this meant that men "naturally" should initiate their desires and women should never reject. This discourse was employed to console or persuade male clients, justifying and explaining conflicts between Japanese husbands and their Chinese wives. Part of the marketing strategy of Mr. Tanaka's agency was to avoid divorces as much as possible. The broker and the other staff members at the agency often claimed that very few of their brokered marriages ended in divorce, in contrast to other agencies that introduced women who then became "run-away brides."

Acknowledging the conflicts in these marriages as something other than the result of gender differences would further stigmatize the married couples and provide evidence that the marriages were brokered based on convenience. The last thing participants wanted was to have their marriages perceived as involving two strangers who sought an easy way to achieve their goals through an unnatural arranged international pairing. In order to avoid such an image, conflicts needed to be rendered as part of the ordinary struggles that any couple must face.

Japanese-Chinese matchmaking processes negotiate the limits of doxa while still relying on it. Natural or conventional social facts, or "doxa," according to Bourdieu (1977), are always negotiated by different members of society. Although Bourdieu discusses challenging doxa in terms of the relationship between the dominator and the dominated, at the transnational marriage agencies, those producing the discourses and consulting with frustrated clients wished to reaffirm taken-for-granted assumptions about marriage. By rendering a brokered Japanese-Chinese marital relationship as simply one between a man and a woman, participants could avoid the perception that they were transgressing social norms. Such masking emphasized the relationship across sexual and gender boundaries while downplaying other borders and differences. By doing so, marriage became a place where the only acceptable differences and inequities were those believed to be between the genders.

ORDINARY OR EXTRAORDINARY?

This chapter has demonstrated that in order to establish a basis for intimate transnational relationships, the work focused on framing seemingly extraordinary ways of meeting a partner as “ordinary.” Domestic commercial matchmaking services have already become acceptable, if not ideal, methods of making intimate relationships through a public discourse that portrays such practices as the inevitable results of social change in Japanese society. Participants in transnational marriages have sought to appropriate meanings attached to the domestic use of matchmaking services to render acceptable transnational matchmaking practices. As outlined above, in three different contexts, Japanese men attempted to destigmatize their intimate relationships, making them out to be as natural and ordinary as those of domestic arrangements for couples. They achieved this not by rejecting but by stretching already existing meanings, practices, and discourses within Japanese society.

These efforts demonstrate how intimate relationships can be created in transnational Japan. The ability to view one’s relationship as ordinary has played a more important role than love or passion in matchmaking practices. While not everyone can create an “ideal intimate relationship”—that is, meet someone naturally and decide to marry based on love, often with the support of family and friends—the production of intimate relationships remains negotiable based on available discourses concerning what is normal. In the negotiations of these discourses outlined above, the boundaries between national and transnational, and ordinary and extraordinary, become blurred. That blurring has rendered transnational matches, linking spouses who do not share a language or culture, seem like just a slight extension of marriage patterns in contemporary Japanese society and thus a permissible basis for an intimate relationship.

NOTES

1. I do not mean to undervalue women’s experiences; however, as Suzuki (2003) observes, compared with women’s experiences, men’s experiences seldom appear publicly or academically. I have written elsewhere my analysis of women’s positions and experiences (Yamaura 2015b).

2. Marriages with Filipina women occur not only via marriage agencies, but also in local clubs or bars. In these relationships, Japanese men meet and marry Filipina women who originally came to Japan on entertainment visas (Faier 2009; Suzuki 2005).

3. The two major bride-sending communities where I conducted fieldwork were located in territory that constituted part of Manchukuo, the former puppet state of imperial Japan. I have argued elsewhere that contemporary transnational brokerage linkages were made possible based on colonial legacies in this area. In particular, terms such as “familiarity”

(*shinkinkan/qinqie*) and “blood ties” (*xueyuan guanxi*)—terms that were linked to the colonial past and subsequent repatriation—were used to legitimate cross-border marriages between Japan and northeast China (Yamaura 2015a, 2015b).

4. In order to become a transnational marriage broker, no qualification was required. However, although it is not too difficult to start a brokerage business, it is difficult to maintain it. I witnessed many brokers quit owing to a lack of success.

5. Approximately 850–1,300 marriage agencies are registered in these networks. The brokers also exchange the profiles of their clientele so that they can set up their clients with each other.

6. According to the demographic survey I conducted at a transnational marriage agency, the clients were mostly white-collar businessmen (53 percent), followed by self-employed men (14.3 percent), public servants (10 percent), corporate executives (6.8 percent), specialists (5.3 percent), schoolteachers (3.7 percent), and retired men (1 percent), with 4.5 percent of respondents choosing “other.” This survey was conducted with 149 Japanese men at the transnational marriage agency.

7. Chinese women also pay brokerage fees to Chinese brokers, ranging from 20,000 RMB to 130,000 RMB. This means that female clients pay between \$3,200 and \$21,000.

8. These institutions include so-called go-between services (86.7 percent), in which matchmakers personally mediate meetings based on each side’s requests; data-matching services (8.4 percent), in which individuals input their information and requests for the computer to find suitable matches (often with the “assistance” of an agency’s staff members); and Internet matching services (3.1 percent), in which no matchmakers are involved (West 2011).

9. Chizuko Ueno (1995) observes that, whereas “love marriages” (*ren'ai kekkon*) might appear to value love and discard other socioeconomic criteria, these marriages actually are based more on class and educational endogamy.

10. Although I did not do a demographic survey on the attendees, the majority of them looked to be in their mid-thirties to mid-forties.

11. Japanese men were the main targets of the brokerage business in Japan. Hence, while women attend parties for free, the parties were designed for the Japanese men to have more opportunities to meet women.

12. Chinese women’s remittance to their families in China varied, yet many women shared the wish to help their parents in some way. Some women just brought nice gifts when they visited their families; others tried to help buy a house. It is important that such wishes to help were not limited to transnational marriages. Even if they married in China, children’s filial piety was seen as important (see for example, Fong 2004).

13. John Gray argues that men and women speak different languages: “When misunderstandings arise, remember that we speak different languages; take the time necessary to translate what your partner really means or wants to say” (1993, 97).

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