The flight from marriage

SEUL AND TAIPEI

Asians are marrying later, and less, than in the past. This has profound implications for the nuclear family life and Asian politics.

With her filmy polka-dot dress, huge sunglasses and career as a psychologist, Yi Zoe Hou of Taiwan might seem likely to be besieged by suitors. Yet, at 35, she is well past Taiwan’s unspoken marriage deadline. “It’s a global village,” she shrugs. “If I can’t find a Taiwanese guy that accepts my age, I can find another man somewhere else.” Maybe—but since she still wants children. Ms Hou is also wondering whether to use a sperm bank or ask a male friend to be a sperm donor. She represents a new world of family life for Asians.

Conservatives in the West are fond of saying that the traditional family is the bedrock of society. That view is held even more widely in Asia. The family is the focus of Confucian ethics, which holds that a basic moral principle, xiuhe (self-improvement), can be pursued only within the confines of the family. In an interview in 1994 Lee Kuan Yew, a former prime minister of Singapore, argued that after thousands of years of dynastic upheaval, the family is the only institution left to sustain Chinese culture. It embodies a set of virtues—learning and scholarship and hard work and thrift and deferment of present enjoyment for future gain—which, he said, underpin Asia’s economic success. He feared that the collapse of the family, if it ever happened, would be the main threat to Singapore’s success.

His Malaysian contemporary, Mahathir Mohamad, went further. In a book written in 1995 with a Japanese politician, Shintaro Ishihara, Dr Mahathir contrasted Asians’ respect for marriage with “the breakdown of established institutions and diminished respect for marriage, family values, elders, and important customs” in the West. “Western societies”, Dr Mahathir claimed, “are riddled with single-parent families... with homosexuality, with cohabitation.”

He might well have concluded that the absence of traditional family virtues from the streets of London recently showed the continued superiority of Asia.

Asians, in fact, have several distinct family systems. To simplify: in South Asia it is traditional to have arranged, early marriages, in which men are dominant and the extended family is important. East Asia also has a male-dominated system, but one that stresses the nuclear family more; nowadays it has abandoned arranged marriages. In South-East Asia, women have somewhat more autonomy. But all three systems have escaped many of the social changes that have buffeted family life in the West since the 1960s.

In South Asia and China marriage remains near-universal, with 98% of men and women tying the knot. In contrast, in some Western countries, a quarter of people in their 30s are cohabiting or have never been married, while half of new marriages end in divorce. Marriage continues to be the almost universal setting for child-bearing in Asia: only about 2% of births took place outside wedlock in Japan in 2007. Contrast that with Europe: in Sweden in 2008 55% of births were to unmarried women, while in Iceland the share was 66%.

Most East and South-East Asian countries report little or no cohabitation. The exception is Japan where, among women born in the 1970s, about 20% say they have cohabited with a sexual partner. For Japan, that is a big change. In surveys between 1987 and 2002, just 1.7% of single women said they had lived with a partner. But it is not much compared with America where, according to a 2002 Gallup poll, over half of married Americans between the ages of 18 and 49 lived together before their wedding day. In many Western societies, more cohabitation has offset a trend towards later marriage or higher rates of divorce. That
37% of all women in Taiwan aged 30-34 were single, as were 21% of 35-39 year olds. This, too, is more than in Britain and America, where only 13-15% of those in their late 30s are single. If women are unmarried entering their 40s, they will almost certainly neither marry nor have a child.

The Asian avoidance of marriage is new, and striking. Only 30 years ago, just 2% of women were single in most Asian countries. The share of unmarried women in their 30s in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong has risen 20 points or more (see chart 2), "a very sharp change in a relatively short period", says Gavin Jones of the National University of Singapore. In Thailand, the number of women entering their 40s without being married increased from 7% in 1980 to 13% in 2000. In some cities, rates of non-marriage are higher: 20% among women aged 40-44 in Bangkok; 27% among 30-34 year olds in Hong Kong. In South Korea, young men complain that women are on "marriage strike".

What is remarkable about the Asian experience is not that women are unmarried in their 30s—that happens in the West, too—but that they have never been married and have rarely cohabited. In Sweden, the proportion of women in their late 30s who are single is higher than in Asia, at 41%. But that is because marriage is disappearing as a norm. Swedish women are still setting up homes and having children, just outside wedlock. Not in Asia. Avoiding both illegitimacy and cohabitation, Asian women appear to be living a more celibate life than their Western sisters (admittedly, they could also be under-reporting rates of cohabitation and pre-marital sex). The conclusion is that East Asia's growing cohorts of unmarried women reflect less the breakdown of marriage than the fact that they are avoiding it.

But marriages are breaking down, too. In Hong Kong and Japan, the general divorce rate—the number of divorces per 1,000 people aged 15 or more—was about 2.5 in the mid-1980s, according to Mr Jones's calculations. In Asia as a whole, the rate is about 2 per 1,000. That compares with 3.7 in America, 3.4 in Britain, 3.1 in France and 2.8 in Germany. Only in one or two Asian countries is divorce as widespread as in the West. The South Korean rate, for example, is 3.5. Because divorce has been common in the West for decades, more couples there have split up. The rise in Asia has been recent: China's divorce rate took off in the early 2000s. In the 1980s the Asian rate was 1 per 1,000 people; now it is 2. If that rise continues, Asian divorce could one day be as common as in Europe.

An educated choice
The main function of marriage in most traditional societies is to bring up children (romantic love rarely has much to do with it). Not surprisingly, changes in child-bearing have gone along with changes in marriage. The number of children the average East Asian woman can expect to have during her lifetime—the fertility rate—has fallen from 5.3 in the late 1960s to below 1.6 now, an enormous drop. But old-fashioned attitudes persist, and these require couples to start having children soon after marriage. In these circumstances, women choose to reduce child-bearing by delaying it—and that means delaying marriage, too.

Changing marriage patterns are also the result of improvements in women's education and income, and the failure of women's status to keep pace. The salient characteristic of many traditional marriage systems is that women—especially young women—have little independence. In South Asia, brides are taken into the groom's family almost as soon as they move into puberty. They are tied to their husband's family. Sometimes women may not inherit property or perform funeral rites (this is especially important in China). In parts of South Asia, wives may not even take their children to hospital without getting their husband's permission.

Two forces are giving women more autonomy: education and jobs. Women's education in East Asia has improved dramatically over the past 30 years, and has almost erased the literacy gap with men. Girls stay at school for as many years as...
...have lost the ability to keep promises (like marriage).” If some Asian women do indeed have an unusually negative view of marriage, it might make them more likely to choose a job over a husband, or to put off marriage while they pursue a career.

Moreover, public attitudes and expectations are lagging behind changes in women’s lives in Asia, making it even harder to strike a balance between life and work. Despite higher incomes and education, “women have lower socioeconomic status than men,” says Hee Ran Chun, a South Korean sociologist. “Their lives are markedly restricted by the cultural values associated with Confucianism.” They are expected to give up work—sometimes on marriage, often after childbirth—and many do not return to the job market until their children are grown. This forces women on an unwelcome choice between career and family. It may also help to explain the unusually low marriage rates among the best-educated and best-paid women, for whom the opportunity cost of giving up a career to have children is greatest.

As in most traditional societies, women in Asia have long been the sole caregivers for children, elderly parents or parents-in-law. People generally assume they will continue to be so, even though many women have paid jobs outside the home. The result is that expectations placed on wives have become unusually onerous. Surveys in Japan have suggested that women who work full-time then go home and spend another 30 hours a week doing the housework. Their husbands contribute an unprincely three hours of effort. In America and Europe the disparity is less extreme, and has narrowed considerably since the 1960s.

On top of this, many Asian couples face enormous pressure to ensure their children succeed in schools with cut-throat competition for places—pressure that falls mostly on the mother. Private child care is exorbitantly expensive. There are few state-subsidised crèches (324,000 children are on waiting lists in Seoul alone). And setting up a home is expensive because of high house prices. All this means it is harder to strike a satisfying balance between job and family in Asia than in the West.

The lost brides

Not every Asian country is affected by these trends equally. South Korea, for example, has lower rates of non-marriage, and a lower age of marriage, than its neighbours. But the big exceptions are Asia’s giants. At the moment, marriage is still the norm in China and arranged marriage the norm in India. As long as that continues to be true, a majority of Asians will live in traditional families. But how long will it continue? Signs of change are everywhere.

The mean age of marriage is rising in both countries. Divorce is increasing, esp-

A family matter?
Who should choose a woman's husband? % of respondents

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Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project
cially among younger people. In India, traditional arranged marriages are being challenged by online dating (shaadi.com claims to be the world's largest matrimonial service) and by "self-arranged marriages", hybrids in which the couple meet, fall in love and agree to marry—but then let the two families fix everything up, as in traditional arranged marriages.

In China, the migration of millions of young men and women from the countryside to cities is changing family life profoundly. It has pushed up the divorce rate because migrant workers return home to find that they and their partners have grown apart. When the husband and wife go to the city together, either they choose not to bring their children with them (since both work full time) or they may not do so, the household-registration system prevents dependants from joining them. According to a survey in 2008 by the All-China Women's Federation, 56% of migrant workers were being brought up hundreds of miles away, in their parents' village, usually by grandparents. The immediate family is no longer the universal setting for child-rearing in China.

More important, the marriage systems of both giants risk being torn apart in future by their practice of sex-selective abortion. Tens of millions of female fetuses have been aborted over the past generation, as parents use pre-natal screening to identify the sex of the fetus and then rid themselves of daughters. In China in 2010 more than 118 boys were born for every 100 girls. In India the ratio was 109 to 100. By 2030, according to Avraham Ebenstein of Harvard University and Ethan Sharygin of the University of Pennsylvania, about 8% of Chinese men aged 25 and older will be unable to marry because of the country's distorted sex ratio. By 2050 the unmarried share will be 30-35%. In 2030, in the two giants, there will be 660m men between the ages of 20 and 50, but only 597m women. Over 660m men therefore face the prospect of not finding a bride. That is almost as many men of 20-59 as will be living in America in that year. This alone will wreck Asia's tradition of universal marriage.

Parasites and bare branches
The big question remains: how much is this a problem? And if it is, why? Arguably, the most important thing is that women who do not want to marry are no longer being forced to. And that must be a benefit to them, to men spared an unhappy marriage; perhaps to society as a whole.

Against that, there are several reasons for worry, some of them extremely disturbing. Social attitudes in Asia change slowly, and many people think it wrong to remain unmarried. "Parasite singles" is the unflattering term in Japan. The reluctance to marry seems to have unleashed spiteful hostility, an attitude that makes the decision not to wed a tough one.

Contraception is a particular problem. Several Asian countries restrict state-provided family planning to married couples. A few even demand to see the wedding certificate before dispensing condoms (that has happened in Europe, too). This is not a sensible policy when so many men and women will remain unmarried throughout their 20s and 30s.

Then there are the educational and social aspects of changing marriage patterns. Because women tend to marry up—that is, marry men in an income or educational group above them—any problems of non-marriage are not dispersed throughout society but concentrated in two groups with dim wedding prospects: men with no education and women with a lot.

Almost every East Asian country is worried about the decline of marriage among its best-educated daughters. In Singapore the government even set up an online-dating service, lovebyte.org.sg, to boost marriage rates among graduates. The problem is no less acute among poor or ill-educated men. South Korean women seem to be no longer interested in marrying peasant farmers, for instance.

China has coined new terms to describe the two groups: sheng-nu (left-over women) and guang gun (bare branches, or men who will not add to the family tree). "Bare branches" is most commonly used in China to refer to men who will be unable to marry because of sex-selective abortion. And that encapsulates the biggest worry about Asia's flight from marriage. If (when?) it spreads to China and India, it will combine with the surplus of bachelors to cause unheard-of strains. Prostitution could rise; brides could be traded like commodities, or women forced to "marry" several men; wives could be kept in purdah by jealous, fearful husbands.

This may sound alarmist. But the reluctance of women to marry, together with men's continuing desire for a wife, is already producing a surge of cross-border brides. According to "Asian Cross Border Marriage Migration", a book edited by Melody Lu and Wen-Shan Yang (Amsterdam University Press), 27% of Taiwanese marriages in 2002 involved foreign women; one in eight births that year was to a "mixed" family. Many girls are illiterate teenagers sold (in practice) by their families to older, richer foreigners. Back in their home villages, therefore, young men's marriage chances are lower. Arranged marriages with foreigners fell in Taiwan after the government cracked down on them, but they continue to rise elsewhere. In South Korea, one-seventh of marriages in 2005 were to "Kosians" (Korean-Asians).

In rural areas, the share is higher: 44% of farmers in South Jeolla province who married in 2009 took a foreign bride. If China or India were ever to import brides on this scale, it would spread sexual catastrophe throughout Asia. As it is, that catastrophe may be hard to avoid.

There is an historical precedent for falling and low marriage rates. It happened in Ireland in the late 19th century and in America and much of Europe in the 1930s. American and European marriage rates bounced back between 1945 and 1970. But Europe and America were different: marriage rates fell during an economic crisis and recovered as the economy did. The Asian peculiarity is that marriage rates have been eroding during a long boom. And as Asia gets richer, traditional marriage patterns are only likely to unravel further.