



**Caren Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea***

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READING anthropologist Caren Freeman's vivid and astute ethnography, *Making and Faking Kinship*, I was reminded of a story I heard in 1995 when I was an English teacher in Yanji City, the capital city of Yeonbyeon, the Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province, northeastern China. Mrs. Lee, a cheerful and energetic middle-aged secretary at the institute where I was teaching, suddenly disappeared one day, and rumor had it that she had left her husband behind in Yanji to emigrate to South Korea. Just as suddenly, she was back, and whispered stories in the hallways revealed that when immigration officials at the airport in Seoul questioned the authenticity of her documents, she pulled out a knife in a desperate attempt to force her way into the country. Needless to say, she was sent back to China. Mrs. Lee had spent all of her family's savings and placed all her bets on being able to earn money in South Korea. Yet, despite the embarrassment of her dramatic failure, she was now even more determined to make her way back to South Korea. I never knew whether she was ultimately successful, but the story suggests something of the powerful pull of the "Korean Wind," which, between 1990 and the early 2000s, motivated tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans from China (Chosŏnjok/Chaoxianzu) to seek entry into South Korea, their purported "homeland."

Between 1998 and 2000, Caren Freeman spent nineteen months in South Korea and China, following South Korean government-supported marriage tours and matchmaking firms, and traveling to rural areas where Chosŏnjok women had migrated as brides, as well as to Heilongjiang in northeastern China, which had lost fourteen percent of its Chosŏnjok population to the Korean Wind. The book opens in the mid-1990s, the moment at which the South Korean state began legally and politically framing ethnic Koreans in China as "long-lost kin," ideal solutions to bride shortages in rural areas, as well as labor shortages in the so-called "3-D" job sector (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning). From sites in South Korea and in China, she chronicles the first wave of ethnic Korean migrant brides from China, paying close attention to the "linkages between the processes of nation making and kin making" (13) especially in the South Korean context, where "notions of Korean-ness are constructed through metaphors of kinship or blood ties" (13). Chosŏnjok "relatives" were enthusiastically welcomed to solve the problem of rural bachelorhood, yet as actual ties were forged across boundaries of difference and similarity, the myth of ethnic homogeneity was predictably complicated and unsettled. In the interests of promoting ethnic homogeneity, the state recognized certain categories as legitimate in their "open-door kin policies"—brides to South Korean men, par-

ents of those brides, and relatives of South Korean citizens. These restrictive entry policies generated a vibrant market in fraudulent documents, and “faking” kinship became a widespread strategy for circumventing what many Chosŏnjok believed to be unfair immigration policies that belied the state’s rhetoric of ethno-national relatedness and inclusion.

In Part I, we learn how the South Korean state created favorable conditions for Chosŏnjok women to marry into rural families, premised on the idea that they would help to reproduce “Koreans” in South Korea and “restore ethnic homogeneity” to the nation, especially in depopulated rural areas, and also serve a pacifying function to placate farmers’ demands for political recognition of their economic rights. The lives of these women, depicted in ethnographic close-up, reveal that their fantasies of “marrying up” were often disillusioned upon confronting the harshness of life as a rural farm wife and, moreover, by the more restrictive forms of patriarchy and gender inequality in South Korea compared to China. Yet, lest we view these women as unwitting pawns in the South Korean state’s development agenda, Freeman underscores the ways in which their mobility and agency exceed state designs, even while being constrained by hierarchies of class, gender, and nation, thus rendering their productive and reproductive positions “unavoidably ambivalent and complicated” (68).

As more stories of “runaway brides” appeared in the South Korean media, men on the market for a bride became increasingly wary of the intentions of their potential mates. Moreover, determining whether a marriage was “fake” or “real,” that is, whether the intentions of the bride were sincere and not opportunistic, and whether the woman had a husband and family back in China, became a major issue for South Korean men, who increasingly came to see themselves as the victims in this risky game of transnational kinship. Yet from the perspective of many Chosŏnjok women for whom gaining access to the South Korean labor market is highly circumscribed, marriage, whether legal or sham, is their only vehicle. “Given the conflict between their moral and legal claims to belonging, it hardly seems surprising that Chosŏnjok women would feel justified in implementing extralegal measures to circumvent the laws that stand in the way of their achieving the belonging that South Korean ethno-nationalist ideology dangles before them” (92–93). South Korean media and government policies became more negative and punitive as the romance of ethnic homogeneity gave way to xenophobic reactions to and harsh crackdowns on “illegal migrants” and “runaway brides.” With increasing government restrictions in the late 1990s, the strategies of Chosŏnjok women in China became more elaborate.

Part II moves the setting to northeastern China, where we meet City Imo and Country Ajumma, two women who are a study in contrasts, yet who, like Mrs. Lee, share a determination to make it to South Korea by any means necessary. In Country Ajumma’s village, “every Chosŏnjok household had an average of at least one member who had worked or was presently working in South Korea” (157). These women mobilized social connections, accumulated debts, forged documents, bribed officials, and took multiple risks on behalf of themselves and their families to ride the Korean Wind. City Imo sought to use real family connections in South

Korea but had to travel under a fake identity in order to circumvent a rule prohibiting more than two family invitations within five years. Country Ajumma sought to become a “paper mother” to a Chosŏnjok bride, who would invite her for the wedding in South Korea and provide the initial point of entry for her to work illegally in South Korea. As Freeman’s gripping account reveals, for these women, the unfair and capricious rules of the South Korean state, which recognizes some Chosŏnjok as “kin,” and restrict others as “fakes,” justified their illegal practices, especially when “fake” kinship relationships were accepted as “real,” and authentic relationships were rejected as fraudulent. If South Koreans considered the “faking of kinship” to be a betrayal of ethno-nationalist sentiment, for Chosŏnjok aspiring to migrate and participate in the promises of global capitalism, kinship categories reflected state power, not sentimental connection. Freeman deftly reveals how “through acts of faking kinship, Chosŏnjok migrants bypassed the nation’s borders and turned the South Korean state’s own rhetoric of blood and genealogy on its head, exposing the limits of both the territorial and the discursive boundaries of the South Korean nation-state” (239).

The gendered nature of the labor market has structured particular patterns in the formations of transnational families, created when women and men migrate, leaving spouses and children behind. These migrations also “engender moral ambiguities and cultural conundrums regarding proper gender roles and responsibilities within the family” (194). Women who leave their children in China are viewed as exceptional mothers, to the extent that some children “have come to expect, even insist, that their parents migrate on their behalf” (222). Yet even as migration could be seen as strengthening familial bonds, extramarital affairs and the potential of “paper marriages” to “pollute” marital relations in China were all too real. Freeman identifies a “new morality” of gains and losses—a middle-aged woman’s sexuality was no longer tied to patriarchy or notions of feminine purity; a new climate of instability and uncertainty pervaded, revealing not only the flexibility of transnational kinship relations but also their fragility (226).

Freeman’s book closes with a look to the present and future. As economic and political circumstances have changed, so the velocity of the Korean Wind has died down in China, and its direction has shifted, with more migrant brides and “runaway brides” arriving from Southeast Asia. With China’s millennial economic rise, Chosŏnjok migrants have been returning to face alienating and disorientingly new social and economic contexts. In the meantime, “new Chosŏnjok,” referring to South Korean migrants seeking their fortunes in China, are arriving in increasing numbers. In these changed circumstances, the Chosŏnjok who never left “may in fact have been the true winners in this game of transnational gambling” (240).

Freeman’s book is an exemplary ethnography that combines rich descriptive writing that brings to life the hopes, dreams, and disappointments of her interlocutors, with a theoretical lucidity that pays close analytic attention to the complex dynamics of gender, agency, and kinship relations that these transnational migrations entail. Freeman captures in vivid detail the ways that individual lives are caught up in larger global economic forces, and how “kinship” becomes currency in the context of state globalization projects and individual aspirations for upward mobility. As

such, it is a versatile text that could be taught effectively for undergraduate courses in anthropology, sociology, migration, Korean and Asian studies, and gender studies, as well as in graduate courses in anthropology and sociology, as an example of fine ethnographic writing and effective multi-sited methodology.

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