



Imported brides popular as money mixes Asian marriages

Activists say that because of false advertising some women end up with spouses who have few assets or who are ill, alcoholic or of difficult character

BY LAWRENCE BARTLETT
AFP, HONG KONG

Asian men from rich countries such as Japan and South Korea are increasingly seeking brides from poorer ones like Vietnam and the Philippines, as economically liberated local women get picky.

Marriages between Japanese men and foreign women shot up 73 percent between 1995 and 2006, to 35,993, according to the latest government survey. Most of the women were Filipinas, followed by Chinese.

"Asian brides — notably Chinese and Filipina — remain popular in the countryside, where it's quite hard to find young women," said Toshio Esaka, president of dating agency Royal in Osaka, western Japan.

"But nowadays, it's getting harder even downtown as a lot of young Japanese women are economically independent and prefer to remain single," Esaka said.

In South Korea, more than 35 percent of fishermen and farmers who married in the 12 months to May last year took foreign brides, mainly from China and Vietnam, government statistics show.

Both examples point to the role of cash and lifestyle in Cupid's quiver — it is mainly the less marketable men in the richer countries who look abroad for a wife when they can't find one at home.

The story is repeated in Singapore — Southeast Asia's wealthiest society — Hong Kong and Taiwan, and often involves marriage brokers.

An online matchmaking site in Singapore, where lower-income men often fear rejection by better-educated local women, offers low-cost tours to Vietnam on which men can meet "medically examined and certified virgins."

On the other side of the transaction, the women are usually so impoverished that even poorer men from rich countries offer hope of a better life.

"Due to poverty in their families and because they want to help improve the situation, Cambodian women decide to marry foreigners," said Ya Navuth, director of a Cambodian group that fights human trafficking.

"Some women meet good spouses, but some have been cheated and sold from one 'owner' to another," he said.

This sense of ownership often leads to abuse of foreign brides, rights activists say.

"Many of the cases we are dealing with involve Asian women being abused by their husbands," says Fermi Wong (王惠芬), founder of Hong Kong Unison (香港融樂會), which helps ethnic minorities in the city.

"They feel helpless because many of them do not have any relatives in Hong Kong and speak little English or Chinese."

China, Vietnam and the Philippines provide most of the foreign brides for Hong Kong men.

The potential for exploitation of helpless girls from impoverished families has led some countries — both importers and exporters of brides — to put restrictions in place. Mail-order brides from the Philippines were once a common phenomenon,



Above: Mr Cupid International Matchmakers agency operates in Singapore and matches Asian women with prospective partners in the city-state. Right: A man browses a matchmaker agency Web site to find an Asian partner.



but tales of the women being abused by their foreign husbands abroad prompted the government to outlaw the practice.

Despite this, various "marriage broker" agencies get around the law by bringing in foreign men to select their prospective brides before flying off with them.

While it was once mainly Western men who sought Filipina brides, in recent years Japanese and South Korean men have also turned to the archipelago in search of partners.

Indonesia is considering a proposal that a US\$55,000 "security guarantee" should be lodged by foreign men who marry Indonesian women.

If the couple divorces, the wife will be entitled to take the money. If they stick together for at least 10 years, they can claim it as "shared property."

But couples would be able to get around the requirement by marrying abroad.

Cambodia in March suspended marriages between South Koreans and its citizens for several weeks and introduced new requirements for the process over concerns about human trafficking.

Among "importing" countries, South Korea itself launched a crackdown two years ago on matchmaking agencies that use racial stereotypes or distorted information to help Koreans find foreign brides.

Activists say that because of false advertising some women end up with spouses who have few assets or who are ill, alcoholic or of difficult character.

Taiwan also took action, banning commercial international matchmaking services last year after a series of high-profile criminal cases, including one in

which a man was jailed for enslaving and torturing his Vietnamese wife.

More than 434,000 Taiwanese are married to foreigners, usually from China and Southeast Asia, according to the immigration bureau.

While China is mainly an exporter of brides, import demand is expected to soar because of the one-child policy, which has contributed to sex-specific abortions and a shortage of girls.

A study by the government-backed Chinese Academy of Social Sciences this year concluded that more than 24 million Chinese men of marrying age could find themselves without women to marry by 2020.

Already, young female refugees from North Korea are increasingly becoming a commodity in China, where they are sold to farmers for up to US\$1,500 a head, according to a Seoul campaigner.

The human trafficking is not new but has become more prevalent as prices soar amid a shortage of Chinese women in the countryside, said Reverend Chun Ki-won, head of the Durihana Association, which offers aid to refugees.

[HEALTH]

Dogs join owners in battle against the bulge

Lack of exercise and poor eating habits are behind rising obesity rates among pets in the US

BY ROB LEVER
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA, AFP

On a humid Sunday morning, Tammy runs briskly, panting, tongue dangling, on a 5km course, before rolling onto the cool grass.

The English Shepherd's owner Marika Krausova said the dog was "a little chubby" at around 23kg but has shed 1.4kg since an starting exercise program, which included a "pack" of half a dozen dogs and their owners.

"We've been running so she has been slowly losing weight," Krausova said after she and other dog owners sweated out the course through a local park.

These canines and their owners are on the front lines in the battle for improved dog fitness in the face of what some experts see as a growing problem of pet obesity and related problems.

Dog races, boot camps, fitness session and other programs are springing up across the US to help prevent and fight the epidemic, attributed to the same problems of weight control in humans — a sedentary lifestyle and poor diet.

"It upsets me when people have overweight dogs," said Jeff Lutton, owner of a pet store in Alexandria, Virginia, who runs the weekend program for dogs and their owners that includes runs of various distances.

A Centers for Disease Control study in

2006 concluded that between 23 and 41 percent of American dogs were overweight, but some who work with dogs contend the figure may be higher.

Dog fitness programs and "boot camps" try to combat this by allowing canines and their owners to be their own workout partners.

Nina, a bulldog-pit bull mix on the Sunday run, "is one of the laziest dogs on Earth, but being with other dogs motivates her," says owner J.P. Dhillon. "Running and long walks help keep her trim."

Riley's, a border collie-Labrador mix, has been running in the program to help cope with hip dysplasia, and in the process has pushed owner Shaunda Adams to become a better runner.

"It took us two months to complete the 3 miles [4.8km], but how he has inspired me," she said. "Now I'm signed up to my first marathon."

Jill Bowers, founder of the Thank Dog Boot Camp in Los Angeles, which gets dogs and their owners to work out together, said the animals need exercise every day and that exercising together helps both the canines and their two-legged friends.

"If the dog gets on an exercise regime they have to stick with it too. It doesn't

seem as much of a chore."

Many pet owners who are forced to leave their dogs at home during the day deprive the animals of needed exercise. But the owners are often tired after work, and will give the pets treats out of guilt.

"When I see an owner who is overweight you can guess the dog is overweight," said Carol Brooks, co-owner of DogOnFitness, which offers exercise programs for dogs.

"People are working longer hours, they are away from home and they are feeling guilty," she said.

Ernie Ward, a North Carolina veterinarian and personal trainer who wrote a book on dog obesity and founded the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, said the problem requires an effort on several fronts.

"Pet obesity is now the biggest health threat to pets in the US," Ward says.

Pet exercise is important but cannot solve the problem alone without diet changes, he said.

"The key really is diet. We are now feeding our dogs a diet similar to that we are feeding ourselves," he said.

"The milk bones and dog bones people give their dogs are not the same as they were years ago. The manufacturers are loading up these treats with fat and

sugar. Dogs like the same things we do, so they are changing the brain chemistry of the dogs."

Ward, who speaks on the subject around the world, said the problem is not confined to the US, with weight problems growing in Asia, Europe and Canada.

"Even in Paris and Nice you are starting to see heavier dogs and cats," he said. "If you look at who makes the dog foods and treats, the US is exporting our obesity problem."

Ward, who cites data showing 51.5 percent of US dogs and cats are overweight and 15 percent obese, said momentum to solve the problem must come from pet owners demanding healthier foods and working out more with their pets.

He says overweight and obese pets have a higher risk of developing other health problems including osteoarthritis, diabetes, heart disease and many forms of cancer.

"We think food is love, so we give the dogs treats," he said. "But the last few years of the dog's life is miserable. It's needless and it's avoidable."

Bounty, left, and Charlotte, right, tuck in to some pet food. The junk food and poor eating habits affecting humans are also killing their four-legged pals, say veterinary surgeons and experts.

