



How Culture-Specific Practices and Values May Influence International (Romanian–South Korean) Marriages

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Motto:

Marrying a foreigner is often a failed project
(Mohamed Elaskary, personal communication)

Abstract. The aim of my research study is to identify the barriers that cross-cultural and interracial couples are confronted with and the ways they try to overcome these potential obstacles in order for their marriage to work, with a focus on Romanian–Korean couples (Romanian wives and Korean husbands). At stake are many aspects pertaining to culture such as religious or ideological beliefs (Christianity vs. Confucianism), individualism vs. collectivism, egalitarian vs. non-egalitarian treatment of women, the language adopted by the spouses, family expectations, as well as the discrimination of bi-racial children.

The hypothesis underlying the study is that no matter how much the spouses love each other, any difference in values, practices, and behaviours can create problems. Derived from this hypothesis, the following research questions will be addressed in the study: (a) Which particular cultural issues may cause (more) frictions in international, interracial marriages? (b) What steps are taken and by which partner in order to solve the possible culturally triggered problems that appear in their relationship? (c) Are there any advantages to international, interracial marriages?

To provide answers to these questions, 7 Romanian–Korean couples have been subjected to a semi-structured interview. The information provided by the respondents has been analysed within the framework of “thematic analysis”, defined by Berelson (1952: 18) as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.

Keywords: international/interracial marriages, Romanian–Korean couples, Confucianism, cultural practices, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the Korean peninsula was isolated from the rest of the world and very homogeneous in terms of race. But as a consequence of South Korea's economic development on the one hand and of the modern era of globalization on the other, this situation has started to change: more and more foreigners are moving to South Korea to work, to study at prestigious universities, or to stay there for good. At the same time, due to factors such as a greater mobility of people in general, the South Koreans' desire to study abroad, the frequent business travels, as well as the development of the Internet, which enables people to join various dating sites, international marriages between South Koreans and foreigners are a growing phenomenon.

Many people who marry in the same culture and the same race must make adjustments as they learn to live with each other from year to year. But when two persons belonging to different cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, or social backgrounds decide to tie the knot, then they need to make additional adjustments in customs, lifestyle, religion, and attitudes in order to strengthen their relationship. This is a complicated matter, especially in those unions in which the husband is South Korean and the wife a Westerner. The problems may appear basically because the Korean society is a patriarchal one, very much influenced by Confucianism, which preaches submissiveness of women to men and to elderly persons. A woman's place in the Korean male-dominated society was in the home, her family being the primary focus. As a wife, she was supposed to obey her husband, to work hard to please her in-laws, and to bear a son. As a mother, a woman was burdened with all responsibilities for rearing children. So, a woman's life was totally governed by the family system. The roles of wives and husbands were clearly delimited. Despite some progress made by South Korea, in the sense that more and more women work outside their homes, combining their professional and family lives, a certain conservative attitude regarding women and marriage is still felt among the South Korean men (Hoare 2012).

In contrast to the South Korean culture, the Romanian one encourages gender equality and equity. Thus, married men and women could trade the roles they play in their families – it may happen that the wife is the breadwinner and the husband the babysitter –, and they are supposed to respect both pairs of in-laws equally, who, in their turn, will try to help the couple as much as they can. Moreover, from my personal experience, I could say that Romanian married women enjoy more liberty than their Korean peers. Consequently, when Romanian women marry South Korean men, a first cultural barrier they need to overcome is that of total submissiveness to their husbands.

Marrying a person of a different nationality sometimes means making “sacrifices”, adapting to a different culture, and negotiating different cultural

traditions like “the special occasions the family will celebrate, the religious upbringing of children, and the values the family will adopt” (Prentice 2020: 3). When two persons belonging to different cultures decide to form a family, they bring with them different types of “software of the mind” (Hofstede et al. 2010), which may at times be in contradiction. In order for the marriage to be successful, the spouses need to understand and respect each other, as well as to make compromises. Despite the obstacles they will encounter along their married life, the experience will teach them a lot, and they will get a lot in return. In my opinion, learning from each other’s culture makes life richer and fuller.

While intermarriages are more common today, this was not always the case. In fact, for a long time, interracial marriages were unacceptable in many parts of the world, including South Korea. It was only recently that South Korean people started choosing their marriage partner, and one of a different race for that matter, on their own, despite frequent manifestations of disapproval on behalf of the conservative society. From among the mixed marriages that took place in South Korea in the time span of 2018–2021, the majority were between South Korean men and foreign women, the latter coming mainly from other Asian countries like China, Thailand, Japan, Philippines, but also from the USA and Russia (Korean Statistical Information Service – kosis.kr, 2021). A very small percentage is represented by Romanian women married to South Korean men, some of these couples being the subjects of the present small-scale study. The general purpose of my research is to identify the problems (if any) these mixed-race couples have been confronted with, to what extent they are of a cultural nature, and what ways to overcome them the spouses have found.

The structure of the paper is as follows: section 2 offers a glimpse into *thematic analysis*, the theoretical framework within which the data collected from the Romanian–Korean¹ couples were analysed. Section 3 presents the research methodology, i.e. the interview as a data collection method, the research hypothesis, and the research questions. The recurring patterns encountered in the transcripts of the interviews are analysed along the themes established in terms of thematic content analysis in section 4. The last part of the paper comprises the conclusions and the answers to the research questions.

2. Thematic analysis

The approach I considered suitable for this study is *thematic analysis*, “a descriptive qualitative approach to data analysis” (Vaismoradi et al. 2013: 399), defined as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke 2006: 79). The aim of thematic analysis is “to

1 For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term “Korean” to refer to South Korean people.

examine narrative materials of life stories by breaking the text into relatively small units of content and submitting them to descriptive treatment” (Sparkes 2005 – quoted in Vaismoradi et al. 2013: 400). Unlike *content analysis*, to which it is very similar and which relies more on the interpretation of data, thematic analysis is more descriptive in nature. Qualitative description is valuable not only for the knowledge it imparts but also because it is a means of establishing meaning and of producing solid findings (Sandelowski 2010).

According to Vaismoradi et al. (2013: 399), the main characteristic features of thematic analysis are as follows:

Table 1. *The main characteristic features of thematic analysis according to Vaismoradi et al. (2013)*

Aims and concentrations	Analysing narrative materials of life stories
Philosophical background	Realist/essentialist and constructionist, factist perspective
Analysis process	Description and interpretation, both inductive and deductive, emphasizing context, integration of manifest and latent contents, drawing thematic map, non-linear analysis process, no peer checking

As De Santis and Noel Ugarizza (2000) contend, thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads in recorded communication, which extend across an entire interview or sets of interviews.

The data used by researchers in thematic analysis could be in the form of interviews or focus groups. For the current study, I have chosen to analyse recordings of in-depth interviews (or “content”) with mixed-race couples, which are representative for the investigated topic and which have “a clear historical time frame” (Baker 1994: 106), namely the 21st century. These transcribed recordings (or “texts”) are actually “written communicative materials which are intended to be read and understood by people other than the analysts (Krippendorff, 2004 – quoted in Cohen et al. 2018: 674).

The theoretical framework and research methodology (to be presented in the next section) were meant to enable me to offer an encompassing picture of the Romanian–Korean marriages, namely of the barriers they need to overcome and of the cultural differences they need to negotiate for the marriage to last.

3. Research methodology

In collecting the data for the study, I opted for the semi-structured interviews defined by McDonough & McDonough (1997: 183) as “interviews (...) that have a structured overall framework but allow for greater flexibility within that, for example in changing the order of the questions and for more extensive follow-up of the responses”. One of the greatest strengths of this research methodology is “the ability to ask questions that are meaningful to participants and to likewise receive responses in participants’ own words and native cognitive constructs. Of additional benefit (...) is the use of inductive probing (...) which allows the researcher to clarify expressions or meanings and further permits participants to tell their stories” (Guest et al. 2012: 12).

There were altogether 32 questions that the interviewees were kindly asked to provide answers to. The interview questions were, in general, the same for both the wives and the husbands, but there were also some gender-specific ones. Additionally, for the couples who had children, there were some questions related to mixed-race offspring. Out of the common questions, some were aimed at gaining socio-cultural information about the interviewees, while others focused on the cultural barriers my mixed-marriage couples could have been confronted with in their married life, being aware of the fact that each member may have had certain expectations, which differ significantly across cultures.

In all the international couples I interviewed, the wife was Romanian and the husband South Korean. Six of the couples were acquaintances of mine, an additional one being recommended to me by someone who knew about my small-scale study. Because of the pandemic, the interviews were conducted online, via the e-learning platform of Transilvania University of Braşov, my home university, in the time-span of December 2021 – January 2022. With some couples, the wives and husbands were interviewed separately; two couples (C2 and C4²) expressed their wish to be both present and to provide the answers in turn. The female subjects were interviewed in Romanian, whereas their Korean spouses were interviewed in English (H3, H5, H6, and H7), in Romanian (H2 and H4), and one in Korean (H1), with the help of his Korean-speaking wife. The duration of the interviews varied depending on the number of follow-up questions and also on the respondents’ desire to share as many details as possible. Thus, the shortest session was 45 minutes long (Couple 3), whereas the longest lasted 126 minutes (Couple 7). The next step was the transcription of the recordings. This was followed by breaking down the interview transcripts into smaller units of analysis, i.e. fragments/paragraphs, and ascribing them a name/theme. This is what Cohen et al. (2018) and Baker (1994) call *coding*, i.e. “the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected” (Cohen et al. 2018: 668).

2 C stands for *couple*, H for *husband*, and W for *wife*.

According to Saldaña (2009) (quoted in Guest et al. 2012: 59), a theme is “a phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is *about* and/or what it *means*” (emphasis in original). Some of the themes to be analysed in section 4 of the paper were pre-determined by the analytical objectives of the study. Thus, the theme tagged *acceptance/rejection by in-laws* was based on the answers provided by the spouses to questions such as: “Q5: *When did you meet your in-laws, before or after the wedding? Please tell me how you met them, what impression they made on you?* Q6: *How did your in-laws / your spouse’s relatives treat you? Please tell me what actions/behaviours impressed you.* Q7: *Do you think that your in-laws’ attitude towards you has changed after some years since you got married? If so, in what way has it changed?*” Other themes emerged while re-reading the interview transcripts, when I came across words/phrases that occurred frequently both throughout and across them. Thus, no mention of adopting the Korean husband’s surname was made in the interview, but five of the female respondents in the study mentioned it, so I considered it a theme worth investigating.

All in all, the categories/themes I have obtained are: *acceptance/rejection by in-laws, dealing with prejudice, attitudes to bi-racial children, dealing with conflict, and making adjustments*. Within the latter category, further subcategories/themes were identified, “thereby creating a hierarchy of subordination and superordination, in effect creating a tree diagram of codes” (Cohen et al. 2018: 669). Thus, the subordinate themes of the aforementioned category would be: sharing activities, adopting the spouse’s religion, adopting the husband’s surname, and learning each other’s language. The final step in using *thematic analysis* as a research method is the analysis of the identified themes.

In any research study based on interviews, a key aspect is to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. As Cohen et al. (2018: 129) explain, “[t]he essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity.” All the respondents in the interviews were promised complete anonymity. Thus, instead of using their real names, I employed codes for identifying them (“to keep the information on individuals separate from access to them” – Cohen et al. 2018: 130). Along this idea, each couple that contributed with information related to their marriage was coded as C1, C2..... C7 (C stands for “couple”, while the number accompanying it indicates the order in which the couples were interviewed). In each couple, I have employed W for the wife and H for the husband, each initial being accompanied by the number corresponding to their order of interviewing (W1...W7, H1....H7). Apart from that, other aspects of their socio-demographic background, which I considered relevant for the analysis, were simplified so that the identity of the informants should not be revealed: instead of using the exact birth date, I opted for their age. Moreover, when considering their professions, I made use of a general term rather than a very specific syntagm (e.g. *teacher* rather than

language/geography teacher), while when it came to their place of residence, only the name of the country was mentioned, but not the city. This means that even if I can identify the respondents from the information given, I “will in no way make the connection known publicly; the boundaries surrounding the shared secret will be protected” (Cohen et al. 2018: 130). *Table 2* below contains detailed information about my informants.

Table 2. *Socio-demographic data concerning the informants*

Couple indicator	Place of residence	Length of marriage	Ages		Professions
C1	South Korea & Romania	25 yrs	W1 H1	53 65	Multiple jobs Engineer
C2	Romania	10 yrs	W2 H2	46 46	Bank clerk Professor
C3	Canada	5 yrs	W3 H4	30 30	IT specialist IT specialist
C4	Romania	2 yrs	W4 H4	29 30	Physician Salesman
C5	South Korea	3 yrs	W5 H5	30 30	Teacher Musician
C6	Romania	7 yrs	W6 H6	32 39	Social assistant YouTube
C7	South Korea	6 yrs	W7 H7	51 48	Teacher Teacher

The working hypothesis is that even in marriages between people from the same culture, race, and religion problems may appear; but when it comes to mixed-race/international marriages, the cultural differences may add to the problems and may lead to marriage failure. Derived from that, the following research questions have been formulated:

(a) Which particular cultural issues may cause (more) frictions in international, interracial marriages?

(b) What steps are taken and by which partner in order to solve the possible culturally triggered problems that appear in their relationship?

(c) Which are the advantages and disadvantages of interracial marriages?

4. Data analysis

The themes identified in the interview transcripts will be analysed in turn in what follows.

4.1. Acceptance/rejection by the in-laws

One problem any couple, irrespective of whether it is international or not, may face is that of getting their families' consent to marry. According to some scholars (Clark 2000, Tudor 2015, de Mente 2017), in current South Korea, plenty of marriages are arranged or semi-arranged³ by the parents, as the Koreans consider that marriage is not just the union between a man and a woman, it is the union of two families. Consequently, the Korean parents' disapproval of marriage may be a barrier, especially when it comes to interracial or multi-ethnic couples, most of these parents not fancying the idea of having a foreigner as a daughter-/son-in law.

As it emerged from the interviews, some of the Korean men introduced their would-be-brides to their parents via *Skype* or *WhatsApp* way before taking them in person to Korea because they needed to make sure that their parents would like them / approve of them. Koreans would never bring a non-suitor to the family. The future relationship between the Romanian brides and their Korean in-laws depended to a great extent on their first encounter.

From among the 7 interviewed couples, two of them did not care about asking for the approval of their families to get married; it is the case of Couple 1, because H1 had already been married before and was raising two daughters on his own, and Couple 7, who got married quite late in their lives. H7 acknowledged with laughter that when he brought his then-fiancée to meet his immediate family members,

(1) they were just so happy to see her because I was already like 40-something years old and they almost gave up. Well, I almost gave up, too. She brought a lot of happiness to our family. [H7]

W2 confessed that before visiting her future in-laws in South Korea, she communicated with them via *Skype*. Her husband confessed that his parents fell in love with her at first sight. This encouraged him to take his fiancée to South Korea:

(2) I met them at the airport; they were all smiling happily. They triggered in me a state of well-being, which I cannot describe in words. I realized that despite the fact that I didn't know them, they were close to me, close to my soul. [W2]

It is also true that before getting married, H2 told his wife that his "parents may not agree with the marriage, and then we will have problems; we cannot marry, and neither can we continue our relationship".

3 "The semi-arranged marriage usually involves parental permission for an 'introduction' by a matchmaker, who carefully appraises the backgrounds of the prospective bride and bridegroom, leading to a so-called 'love' period before marriage" (Shin 1987: 261).

A similar positive experience was recounted by W3, whose in-laws had welcomed her in their family before she married her Korean husband. On the other hand, W4, who had also met her in-laws before marriage, acknowledged the fact that initially they were not very happy with the idea of having a foreign daughter-in-law, “maybe out of fear of not knowing much about the culture” she came from. She mentioned that when she first visited South Korea, it was not her parents-in-law who waited for her and her fiancé at the airport but the latter’s grandmother. This may have caused a bit of disappointment in her heart, but it was quickly dissipated by the big hug she received from the elderly lady, given the fact that Koreans are non-haptic persons. Thus, by using a more Western gesture to welcome her grandson’s fiancée, the Korean grandmother acknowledged her acceptance of the relationship. The fact that W4 could speak a bit of Korean and fluent English helped her communicate with her fiancé’s parents, brother, and other relatives, making them change their reticent attitude so much so that on the couple’s departure to Romania, even W4’s future father-in-law hugged her.

From among the Romanian wives, the only one who confessed having felt unwelcomed by her in-laws was W1. She is also the one who has been married the longest (25 years). She met her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law only when she accompanied her husband to South Korea after their marriage in Romania. Her husband somewhat misled her by saying that his country could offer her “civilization and modernity” but failed to tell her anything about family relationships and the wife’s submissiveness to the husband and to his family members. From the very start of her stay with her in-laws (as it was customary in South Korea), she felt rejected by them. Not only did her Korean family members treat her like a servant, but they also made her life a hell by instigating both W1’s husband and her stepdaughters to ignore her. And rather than trying to teach W1 some of their traditions, they would find fault with her for everything, as the fragment below illustrates:

(3) One day I ate alone some kimchi⁴ soup in-between the meals because I was hungry. On seeing me, my sister-in-law started shouting like crazy that there won’t be any food left, and how do I dare to eat alone, without asking for permission. After some time, I understood that men eat the best food, women the leftovers and only after the men have filled their stomach. Apparently this is the old-age tradition. (...) They also taught the girls to ignore me, not to talk to me. The youngest daughter would cover her eyes every time I wanted to talk to her. [W1]

For all the couples in the study, it seems that the Romanian parents of the brides did not express any opposition to the mixed marriage, even if they could not freely

4 Kimchi is a traditional Korean dish made of spicy pickled cabbage.

and easily communicate with the Korean young men. H7 both recounts his first encounter with his in-laws and describes his relationship with them at present:

(4) Our marriage was in November, and in summer, in August the same year, we went together to Romania. So that was the plan. I stayed with her family and that was the time when I met my in-laws for the first time. Well, they were happy people. (...) They welcomed me, obviously, but the problem was, without my wife, I couldn't connect, I couldn't talk to anybody, because they didn't speak English, I didn't speak Romanian. (...) And before our departure, back to Korea, I talked to her father, I want to marry your daughter, and he said <yes, yes, yes>. (...) Every time [I go to Romania] they are very nice, and they always try to make me feel comfortable, and they make sure that I am well fed. I would say that the relationship I have with my in-laws is very, very good. [H7]

H3 also has good memories related to his first encounter with his wife's parents, which, he says, was very interesting and beautiful, as he could not expect her parents to be open to him, a foreigner and, moreover, an Asian. He also mentions that after they got married, his in-laws made him feel like a family member and offered him their hospitality.

But as the marriage progressed, some frictions appeared between some of the Romanian parents and their sons-in-law, which were mainly caused by cultural differences. Thus, H6 originally had a good relationship with his Romanian in-laws until his family moved from South Korea to Romania, where they live at the moment with his mother-in-law. He is not at all happy with this cohabitation, especially because his wife comes from a large family. And, as it is customary in Romania, on various occasions, such as someone's birthday or religious holidays, all members of the family come to celebrate the event at their mother's place, which puts some pressure on W6, as she has to help her mother with the preparations for the event. H6 is also dissatisfied because he thinks that his wife dedicates too much of her time to her parents and her siblings rather than to her nuclear family.

H2 also experienced some initial disagreements with his mother-in-law, which he accounted for in terms of cultural differences:

(5) In the beginning, there was a kind of conflict, a cultural conflict between my mother-in-law and me. In Korea, as you know, the relationship between the son-in-law and the mother-in-law is not as good as it is in Romania, it is a very cold one. Because of this, I had some arguments with my mother-in-law, although I shouldn't have argued with her, but at present we have a good relationship. She takes good care of me all the time. But now I got a

grasp of the Romanian culture. There are no more problems. I understand her, and she understands me. [H2]

H1, who met his wife while he was working as a young engineer in Romania, mentioned the warm reception he had received from W1's parents before he got married. They accommodated, fed, and clothed him when he was broke because the company he was working for had not paid his salary and daily allowance. He also stated that W1's parents accepted him as their son-in-law without any kind of racial discrimination. His father-in-law would often invite him to drink beer together downtown. But on his sporadic visits to Romania after the marriage, H1 started being criticized by his father-in-law. "He said I didn't do anything in the house, but I would retort that I brought the money, which I assumed was enough. But in Romania things are different: men work both at home and in their work places." What H1's confession highlights is that in South Korea men are the breadwinners, and they do not care much about doing anything apart from earning the money for the family. In Romania, many husbands help their wives with the house chores and with the raising of the children, especially because most of the Romanian wives, unlike their Korean peers, have jobs, and it is very natural for couples to share some of the domestic activities like raising children, doing house chores, and cooking. According to the statistics provided by Eurostat in 2017, 55% of the Romanian male population is involved in raising children and 41% in cooking and house chores (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/womenmen_2017/ro_ro/images/pdf/WomenMenEurope-DigitalPublication-2017_ro.pdf?lang=ro).

4.2. Dealing with prejudice

Mixed-race couples, more than same-race international couples, stand out due to the different physical features. In more conservative cultures, such as the Korean and the Romanian ones, this could lead to various forms of discrimination. Most of the couples I have interviewed confessed having experienced some sort of negative behaviour both on the part of their co-nationals and from the people of their spouses' culture. The most traumatic experience was that of Couple 3 in Romania, which determined them to leave the country and move to a place where multiculturalism has had a longer history. Both H3 and W3 recounted an event that left them with a bitter taste:

(6) Overall, there were more bad experiences than good ones. To start with the bad experience, we went to S [name of a place in Romania] on a trip and we got a taxi from the train station and the taxi driver started making mean jokes; he asked her why does she meet Asian guys and why foreigners steal

our girls. (...) I could feel a lot of negativity whenever I was in the street with her. When I was alone, I didn't care much because they were just laughing at me... But when I was with her, some gypsies were poking my body or, in the elevator, making fun of my language. (...) In Korea, it was kind of opposite: when she was with me, people would not show any negativity, but I heard that when she went out alone, it was a bit rough. Some people tried to pick her up or get her (phone) number, grabbing her wrist. [H3]

(7) In the most fortunate cases, they would simply pass by and turn their heads, to have a better look at us, but there were also situations in which they shouted at us *chinchong*, *chinchin*, things like this. We had a worse incident: there was a group of teenagers who started making all kinds of inappropriate comments, and I replied to them, not nicely, but I replied. This led to physical conflict, and we had to call the police. Actually, this happening made us leave Romania. [W3]

Another respondent (W1), who lived most of her married life in South Korea, recounted how at the beginning of their marriage, while she was walking one day arm-in-arm with her husband, a Korean man separated them saying that “the husband should walk in front of his wife, not side by side with her”, this attitude being the result of the deeply ingrained Confucian conviction that women are not equal to men in any respect. Another blow came when W1 started taking her stepdaughter to school. A few days after the beginning of the school year, the child's schoolmates started laughing at her stepmom, whom they considered an “alien” on the grounds of her white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, which were in stark contrast with the Asian features. Moreover, when W1 eventually got a job in a Korean company, her co-workers would call her “alien” and “prostitute” and even went on strike because they did not want a foreigner to be paid the same salary as they received. Interestingly, in a time span of more than 20 years, W1 hoped that the attitude of the Koreans towards foreigners would have changed for the better, but much to her surprise, her eldest stepdaughter, now a young adult on the point of marriage, has problems with her fiancé's mother, who does not want her as a daughter-in-law because of the fact that her stepmother is a foreigner and Caucasian. She would even address the young woman as “that foreigner's daughter”.

Couple 4 also mentioned some unpleasant situations they experienced in Romania because of their different physical features. Thus, W4 mentioned that “[t]he Romanians look at us not only with curiosity but sometimes also with malice or even with a certain degree of aggressiveness.” She continued saying that sometimes the Romanian people also verbalized their feelings, especially towards H4. “An elderly couple said in a mocking manner that he is Chinese and that he found himself a Romanian girl.”

On a more positive note, H7 stated that as far as his family is concerned, they have not experienced any kind of negative attitude either on behalf of the Romanian people or from his co-nationals. As he revealed:

(8) in Korea, there is very little negative emotion towards foreigners. Large cities in Korea are pretty international. It's because this English that we have to learn – like that's the social pressure, you know, since they are very little. Because of that, since many years ago, we started having teachers from the States, from Australia, New Zealand, those native-speaking teachers, as well as international business in Korea. We see a lot of foreigners here. So, this is not really something new, like a different hair colour or skin colour. To me, this is nothing to be worried about. [H7]

H7 also contends that Koreans would not have a negative attitude towards mixed-race couples, as the country has accepted people coming from various corners of the world. A possible explanation for this opinion, which differs from that of the other informants, could be the fact that he spent a long period of time in the States, a multi-ethnic and multi-racial country, where people do not care much about mixed-race couples. My personal opinion is that South Koreans may be less conservative in this respect than they used to be half a century ago, due to the phenomenon of globalization. Their openness to foreigners could be determined by each and every Korean's personal experience with people from other countries, as well as by their level of education.

4.3. Attitudes to mixed-race children

In an article published in 2008, Lee (2008: 56) mentioned the fact that “mixed-race people in Korea are regarded as an aberration or a regrettable phenomenon” or a “national embarrassment” (Demick 2014) due to the fact that especially during and after WWII, most of the mixed-race children were considered to be the result of the union between prostitutes servicing US troops or between American GIs and poor war brides. This is why even nowadays, when the number of interracial marriages has grown, children of mixed heritage are very often referred to by the derogatory terms *damunhwa*⁵ ‘mongrel’ or ‘halfies’ even if they are born and raised in South Korea. Despite the economic and technological progress of the country and its exposure to the Western values, this long-standing prejudice is still present among many Koreans who are keen on keeping their society pure in terms of race.

As Demick (2014: n. p.) stated, in South Korea, “biracial men cannot join the army, which makes them ineligible for many jobs and benefits”. This could be one reason (not clearly stated in the interview) why C6 decided to leave South

5 *Damunhwa* is a derogatory label and evokes low socio-economic status (Kim & Kim 2015).

Korea and move to Romania after their first child – a son – was born. Another reason could be the fact that the Koreans still discriminate and have “prejudices against migrant women and their children who do not look or speak like ‘pure Koreans’” (Park 2017: 67).

W6 confessed that:

(9) The main reason why we left Korea was the child, because we do not want – especially my husband does not want – to send him there to kindergarten and to school (...). We left because of the child, because multi-cultural children – I have sensed that myself – are marginalized, and we didn’t want this to happen to our son. In Korea, whenever I went to the park with him, no Korean child would play with him. (...) He was 2 years old at that time, and we would often go to playgrounds, but nobody would play with him. [W6]

Couple 2 also has a child (a beautiful daughter), who is at the moment protected against a negative attitude/discrimination on behalf of her Romanian peers by being enrolled in a private school. As the child’s mother stated:

(10) This is the reason why we have chosen a private school for her, a school where we could manage [all possible problems] with the teachers, because everywhere there are persons who pass judgments without thinking first. (...) So far, she has not experienced any negative attitude. They may appear in the future, but before the evil things may touch her, she will be older and she will be able to control the situation. She will undoubtedly be the target of “hateism”, but this will make her even stronger, and she will learn to manage it herself. [W2]

The same fear of having their child discriminated against or even bullied on grounds of being bi-racial may have weighed heavily on C3’s decision to move from Romania to Canada. This decision was also fuelled by H3’s dissatisfaction with his Romanian colleagues, who would make fun of him because of his grammatical or lexical mistakes in using Romanian, as well as by the idea that the new country would offer them better job opportunities than Romania. Here is what he stated:

(11) There were many reasons [for leaving Romania], but mainly thinking of our future child (name mentioned), I felt it was gonna be harsh for her because of the fact that she was mixed. [H3]

According to the statements made by my interviewees, it seems that mixedness poses serious problems in mono-racial countries like Korea and Romania. The

pressures on mixed children could be quite intense. Such children may not be easily accepted as members of a society that defines itself as mono-racial. Despite this, I tend to agree with W2 in believing that for all the hardships “halfies”⁶ may experience, they will become stronger and richer, as they will be bilingual and bicultural human beings.

4.4. Making adjustments

4.4.1. Sharing various activities

It is a well-documented fact (Clark 2000, Kohls 2001, Yu & Clark 1987) that in South Korea men are supposed to support the family financially while women to take good care of the house and children, very few male spouses getting involved in the raising of their children or in sharing the house chores. A typical example of such a husband is H1, who acknowledged the fact that his confrontations with his father-in-law were triggered by the latter’s reproaches that H1 did not do anything in or around the house, like most of the Romanian husbands. H1 could not understand this attitude, as “in Korea husbands are supposed to work and earn money, everything else being in the charge of their wives”.

A rather similar attitude is adopted by H5, also residing in South Korea, who is not as much dominated by the Confucian philosophy concerning the roles of wives and husbands as H1, but who, nevertheless, does not do much in the house. As his wife acknowledged, “[t]ruly speaking, he is not a big fan of house chores. For the moment, he is responsible of earning the money. Sometimes, he takes out the garbage, some other times he helps me with the dishes, or drives me to the shopping mall, lest I should carry the shopping bags.”

H7 used to help his wife too, “more than the traditional Korean husbands, but less and less lately”, as his spouse confessed. From among the house chores, he does the dishes (which he claims he does better than his wife), sometimes the cleaning of the house, and he also cooks now and then. H7 also mentioned that, as far as he knew, there are “more and more men who take care of the house well, doing the house chores”, something that would have been unconceivable in the Korean society of the 20th century.

The interviewed Korean husbands who are much younger than H1 or H7 and who left Korea, being exposed to the Romanian or a Western culture, tended to help their wives both in the domestic activities and in the raising of their children. H3, for example, mentioned the fact that after he had got married, he tried hard to prove himself to his in-laws.

6 *Halfie* refers to a person with two different racial backgrounds.

(12) I started working; I proved myself, my abilities, my capabilities. I could see my father-in-law would trust me more. (...) I did what I could do to support W3 [he uses his wife's name], doing together chores, preparing meals. [H3]

For the sake of his baby, H3 also agreed to be on paternal leave from work for 2 or 3 years, not at all feeling that his ego would suffer if his wife were the breadwinner during this time. In South Korea, the cases of paternity leave are rather scarce in comparison with other developed countries. According to Kim (2021: 375), the Korean “male employees who took parental leave in 2020 represented 11.2% of all parental leave takers”, while in Romania the trend for fathers taking paternal leave has been on the rise in the past 2 years (Popescu 2021), slightly exceeding their South Korean peers (in 2020, 12.7% of the Romanian fathers chose to take paternal leave, while in 2021 the percentage rose to 13.4%, according to: <https://panorama.ro/concediu-parental-romania-mama-tata/>).

An equal contribution to the raising of the children and the house chores was also mentioned by W6, who stated: “He cooks, I do the cleaning, and we both take care of the children.” W4 confessed that she and her husband cook together, but that her husband is more frequently involved in doing the dishes than she is.

A nice confession made jointly by Couple 2 shows that they are equally involved in everything that takes place in their home. W2 stated that they do together most of the house chores after they return from their work places. When W2 is involved in the house chores, her husband spends time with their daughter, “playing video games, traditional Korean games, and teaching her the Korean language”. The change in attitude of the Korean men in terms of their responsibilities is nicely captured in H2's confession:

(13) In Korea, it is assumed that if I, the husband, bring in the money, then you, the wife, have to do everything related to the household. But in our case [referring to himself and his wife], both my wife and myself are employed. Consequently, there is no such thing as “my role” and “your role”. There is no such division! Today, I have more time, and I will do most of the work, and tomorrow, my wife may have more time, and then she will take over the house chores. [H2]

H7 also disagrees with the old-fashioned Korean idea that “the man is the person working outside and the woman the person working inside, taking care of everything at home”. A possible explanation for these more advanced views concerning the sharing of the house chores and also an equal involvement in bringing up children could come from my male respondents' exposure to the Western values: four of them live abroad, while three in South Korea. It appears

that the long period of time spent in the United States contributed to H7's perception of the roles of the spouses in the nuclear family.

With two of the interviewed couples, the conviction that both the wives and the husbands will share all private activities proved to be a source of tensions, especially because the deeply rooted beliefs concerning gender roles were at odds with the cultural expectations. As the Korean society is a patriarchal one, where men have more privileges than women, especially when it comes to private activities, it was not at all surprising to find out that the Romanian wives vented their frustration at this state of affairs. Below is W3's confession:

(14) From what I have seen in Romania, after you get married, you go to any social event as a couple, you have family friends; you do no longer have your own friends who[m] you go to meet alone. Somehow, the two circles of friends merge, and you partake [in] the social activities and gatherings as a couple. I have the feeling that in the Korean culture things are completely different. Even after marriage, a person keeps his/her circle of friends for himself/herself. Now that we have moved to X [name of the city in Canada], he joined a Korean community; it's an online community, so he communicates with its members mainly online. But when it came to meeting the members in person, he went alone to make their acquaintance, so I kind of felt left aside (sad laughter). And this thing started bothering me now because I would like us to go together to such gatherings, to develop a circle of common friends. I think this is a cultural difference, yes. [W3]

And despite the fact that W3 did tell her husband about her disappointment of being left behind when he went to meet his Korean friends, he responded that he got her point but that "there are also the other persons (i.e. the Koreans) who[m] he needs to consider" (H3). This comes to demonstrate how deeply loyalty to one's compatriots had been ingrained in the Koreans' socialization practices and value systems.

4.4.2. Adopting the spouse's religion

Most of the couples had to navigate their different cultural heritage in planning their weddings, bringing together the grooms' Asian background with the brides' Christian religion so as to make both families feel content. Some couples (C1, C4) opted for a Western-style wedding with church service. In order to satisfy the Korean families, some of the interviewed couples also organized a small Korean ceremony (but not necessarily with all the traditional elements – like the traditional bowing in front of the in-laws, a ritual called *pyebaek*).

Faith and religious practice were the central elements that brought one particular couple together (C6). Both the woman and the man had embraced the same religion, and they belonged to the same (international) church, which has a Facebook account. Seeing him on this platform, W6 sent him a friend request, which he accepted, and this is how their love story began.

In other two couples, one of the spouses adopted the other's religion in order to show their love for their partners and their commitment to their union, being aware that this might be a tremendous help in navigating the "the hurdles of dating cross-culturally and interracially" (Coquet-Mokoko 2020: 155). Thus, H4, an atheist before marriage, agreed to embrace Orthodox Christianity⁷ for the sake of his wife, who is a devoted Christian. In the case of Couple 2, it was the wife who adopted Catholicism, her husband's faith.

4.4.3. *Adopting the husband's Korean surname*

Despite the fact that in Korea married women do not adopt their husband's names,⁸ five out of the seven Romanian wives decided to take their husband's family names, as it is customary in the Romanian culture. I think that they have taken this decision first and foremost for their (future) children, as in the Romanian culture, if the parents have different surnames on the child's birth certificate, this may lead to the assumption that the child was born out of wedlock. On the other hand, the woman herself may experience a hostile attitude on behalf of her co-nationals, even more so if the name of her child's father is foreign. Just like the Korean society, the Romanian one is still very traditional and conservative as compared to other cultures. A second plausible reason for the change of name could be the women's desire to be one in faith, in spirit, and in name with their husbands.

Two of the female interviewees (W5 and W7), both residing in South Korea, decided to go with the Korean tradition, that of preserving their maiden names, despite the fact that they are difficult to pronounce by the Koreans. One of them made, nevertheless, a compromise in that she started writing her name in *Hangeul*, the Korean alphabet.

4.4.4. *Learning each other's language*

The process of adapting to the spouse's culture may also involve learning each other's mother tongue. W1 is a fluent speaker of Korean, which she learned by

7 In the Orthodox religion, in order to be married in church, you first have to be baptized. So, H4 had to go through both the "ordeal" of being baptized and that of being married in church, two ceremonies that he did not really understand and that, for him, were way too long.

8 Since times immemorial, Koreans have considered bloodlines of great importance. Thus, they assumed that the surname inherited from one's own father should not change from birth until death. One other reason is that women are never considered part of their husband's families.

living and working in South Korea for 25 years. Her husband, on the other hand, can utter only a couple of Romanian words. W3 had been fond of the Korean culture, as she was keen on watching K-dramas and TV shows, which helped her become aware of the Korean social norms. After she met her husband, she also started learning the language for the sake of being able to communicate with her future in-laws. As she recounts:

(15) Before we got married, I went to South Korea to visit him. He was working, so I was kind of left alone with his parents. And I had to communicate with them somehow. I had tried to learn more Korean, but I can't say I have reached a conversational level. I also used English or non-verbal elements, whereas other times I would tell them: 'Let me look for the translation!' and I would use Google translate. [W3]

If religion united the members of C6, it was the love of each other's language and the desire to speak it better that brought W4 and H4 together. They met via the *Hello Talk* application and tried to help each other in their endeavour. After they got married, as well as before, they used both languages in the family. The same love for languages was the starting point of C5's relationship. They were both students in Korea, where she was studying Korean while he Romanian. In the interview, W5 confessed that "[o]ur meeting was arranged, actually for an exchange – I was to teach him Romanian, and he was to teach me Korean." And their love for the other's language also made them embrace the culture in which the language is spoken, so she very often wears a *hanbok*,⁹ while he proudly shows the Romanian traditional man's shirt.¹⁰

4.4.5. Dealing with conflict

No marriage, not even one between partners belonging to the same race, culture, and religious faith, is all milk and honey. But the sources of conflict may multiply when it comes to international, interracial marriages. What is important is for the spouses to identify the source of the conflicts and to try to find a solution out of the disturbing situation. When asked about who makes the first step towards reconciliation, the answers provided by the interviewees differed.

(16) It's interesting because we have different approaches when it comes to reconciliation after an argument. He prefers to take time, alone, to sort

9 *Hanbok* is the typical Korean woman's traditional costume made up by a short blouse and a long, pleated skirt.

10 The Romanian "peasant shirt" is made of white cotton or linen fabric, and it is richly embroidered.

his emotions [out], to calm down. I am his total opposite; I like to express my emotions immediately and to move on. Maybe I am the one to make the first step because I have this mechanism which makes me speak out about what I feel. [W3]

The same idea is expressed by W7:

(17) Both of us are making this step, but somehow, lately I have the feeling that I am doing it more often, cause I am a Christian at the same time, and I follow the slogan “show some grace”. [W7]

W7 is also the one who provides a reason for the Korean husbands’ desire to be left alone after an argument. She mentioned the fact that from an early age men are taught to hide their inner feelings like frustration, disappointment, or excitement. This makes it very hard for a Romanian person to understand what the problem is about and to solve it immediately.

And despite this tendency of Korean men to let the problem roll over for some time because of fear of being seen as weak if they admit they were in the wrong, one Korean husband (H2) confessed instantly and smilingly that it is he who tries to make up with his wife after an argument. Immediately, his wife confirmed that “he tries to make her laugh, and off is the sorrow”.

One thing worth a mention at the end of this part of the paper is the gratitude expressed by two of the interviewees for having been invited to participate in this small-scale project. W2 and W7 confessed that it was by answering the questions in the interview that they came to realize the cultural differences in their families and the need to pay more attention to them and fight for minimizing them.

5. Conclusions

As the world economy continues to develop, there will be an even greater amount of contact between nations. Thus, the number of mixed-race/international marriages will no doubt rise as well. After all, love does not respect national, racial, or religious boundaries. But people who commit themselves to mixed-race marriages should listen to the advice given by others who have already learned some lessons from their own experience.

The themes that have emerged from the interviews and that have been analysed in the present article indicate that some of the cultural issues that may cause problems in international mixed-race marriages relate not only to the physical features of the spouses (one Caucasian, the other Asian) that may lead to being discriminated against both in their own countries and in their spouse’s

hometown, but they are more deeply rooted in the mindsets of the partners. One such factor could be the different gender roles: while in the Korean society women are expected to be more submissive to men, being to a great extent financially dependent on them, in the Romanian culture, women and men may both have jobs and will expect their spouses to be partners in the literal sense of the word: they need to complement each other, to have (almost) the same degree of involvement in the house chores as well as in the upbringing of their children. When the opinions concerning gender roles differ, problems may emerge, but they can be dealt with on the basis of an open dialogue. Also stemming from the divergent mindsets, another cause of friction identified in the analysis was the Korean men's practice of socializing with other Korean men, whether in South Korea or abroad, where they could find a small Korean minority. Their Romanian wives, who assume that once they got married, their circles of friends would merge, do not seem to be very happy when left behind at home. They feel that they are ignored/overlooked.

With respect to RQ2 (What steps are taken by the spouses to solve the problems?), the most frequently emerging measure was that of discussing the problem with the partner, expressing one's own opinion with respect to it, and trying to find a compromise which could satisfy both of them. In extreme situations, as was the case of W1, talking with her husband about the cultural hurdles she had to overcome in South Korea did not work. Thus, she resumed to fighting on her own to solve her problems: she left her mother-in-law's place, she found herself a job and a place where to live with only her nuclear family, and, in the long run, when her in-laws realized that all W1 wanted was the well-being of her husband and of his two daughters, they slowly adopted a different attitude, so now that the couple has moved to Romania after 25 years of living in South Korea, they often speak over the phone. From among the Romanian women married to Korean men, I think that W1 had the hardest experience of all, and this could be because of the fact that she married a longer time ago than the others, when inter-racial marriages were not accepted by the Korean society. She confessed having participated in a TV show (*Candid camera*) in South Korea, where Korean parents were presented foreign suitors for their children. The majority would not accept the idea of having a foreign daughter-/son-in-law, and the extremist ones would often disown their children on such grounds. Within a time span of 25 years, the Koreans' opinion concerning mixed marriages seems to have changed, but not totally.

As far as the last research question is concerned, the data have shown that there are some more disadvantages than advantages of interracial marriages. In terms of the former, we have seen that mixed couples have to face prejudices and sometimes a hostile attitude, both in South Korea and in Romania. The interviewees who are already parents mentioned their children's marginalization

by some members of the Korean society and possibly by the Romanian people, too. When it comes to the advantages, for these interracial families, “the process of give and take while bringing together different cultural practices has enabled them to create a blending of traditions that recognises the different heritages the two families have brought together” (Prentice 2020: 5). Even W1, the one who was initially rejected by her husband’s family, acknowledged the fact that in time, as her relationships with her in-laws have improved, her nuclear family would often spend the Korean traditional holidays together with her husband’s relatives, obeying all the rituals and sharing the traditional food prepared by her mother-in-law. Now that C1 has moved to Romania, it is H1 who appreciates most of the Romanian traditions and the celebrations accompanying them. On the other hand, W5 acknowledges that, as at home she and her husband spoke both Korean and Romanian, her marriage has contributed to her higher proficiency in the Korean language, while her husband considerably improved his Romanian. Couple 7 mentioned the fact that in their South Korean home, they celebrate both the Romanian traditions and the Korean ones, each spouse showing appreciation for the other’s culture.

Coming back to my motto, *marrying a foreigner is an often failed project*, I would not put it as strongly as my friend, Mohamed Elaskary, as some of the couples in the study have enjoyed long marriages (Couple 1 – 25 years, Couple 2 – 10 years). It is also true that at the time I finished writing the present article, much to my surprise, the youngest couple had decided to go separate ways. In what concerns such international marriages, I would rather agree with Coquet-Mokoko, who stated that “[b]uilding a couple while having to navigate the racial and cultural parameters specific to each country remains a complex task” (2020: 156).

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