

Experience of Relationship between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law among Korea Rural Married Immigrant Women: with a Focus on Daughter-in-laws from China, Vietnam and the Philippines Who Live with their Mother-in-laws in Korea

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aimed to understand the ML-DL relationship as experienced by foreign DLs, and to identify the essence of such experiences. **Methods:** Immigrant women from China, Vietnam or the Philippines who married Korean men and have lived in rural areas with their ML for three years or more were recommended as study subjects by the Center for Support for Multi-Cultural Families. A phenomenological study method was employed. **Results:** Herein, meaningful phrases were extracted from the statements made regarding the experience of the foreign DLs in their relationships with their Korean MLs. By forming a meaning cluster and a theme cluster, 847 meaningful sentences, 82 general sentences, 22 sub-themes and 6 main themes were drawn. From the clustering, 6 fundamental themes were indicated for analysis, including: 'a stranger who has a hard time adjusting herself to a new lifestyle', 'a mother-in-law that does not treat the daughter-in-law as she would her own daughter', 'mother-in-law that hangs onto her son's every word', 'daughter-in-law with a lot of pent-up anger', 'someone who understands me' and 'living together in harmony as a family.'

Keywords: China, Experience, Married Immigrant Women, Philippines, Vietnam

1. Introduction

A multi-cultural family refers to a family that has more than one national culture. In Korea, the term usually refers to families formed from international marriages¹. This study focused on multi-cultural families that were formed through the marriage between a Korean man and a foreign woman who moved to Korea. As of 2013, women from China accounted for 33.1% of such marriages, followed by Vietnam 31.5% and the Philippines 9.2%, with these countries making up 73.9% of the total population of

foreign women married to Korean men in Korea². There is a pattern wherein the relationship between the couple and between family members becomes strictly hierarchical, as the effect of the economic hierarchy between different countries spill over into these marriages³.

The relationship between a Mother-in-Law (ML) and a Daughter-in-Law (DL) is a legally and artificially formed relationship between people who do not share a bloodline. It is also a relationship that has conflicting duties and rights, and thus, carries a high likelihood of conflict, which, in turn, affects other family members⁴.

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The issue of the ML-DL relationship is serious enough to be attributed as one of the reasons for hwa-byung, which is a uniquely Korean syndrome related to stress^{5,6}. This is a unique byproduct of Korean family culture. Although families with a foreign DL are not exempt from this phenomenon^{7,8}, the ML-DL relationship in a multi-cultural family shows a different pattern from that of a traditional Korean family^{9,10}. DLs who have moved to Korea for marriage suffer from communication problems, heavy household labor, a patriarchal culture, difference in customs, and too much intervention and suppression from the ML¹¹⁻¹⁴, making the relationship with the ML one of the causes for conflict between the couple¹⁵. They also experience conflict with their parents-in-law due to distrust and prejudice, resulting from deep cultural differences⁸.

Meanwhile, the Korean ML suffers from difficulty in communication, as well as disappointment with the fact that the DL does not abide by the Confucius values of looking up to her husband and parents in law, and that the DL's behaviour that does not fit in with Korean culture¹¹.

The ML-DL relationship is affected by whether the two live together, as well as where they live¹⁶. Rural areas have more cases of living together compared to urban areas¹², which means they have to take care of the household economics together¹⁷, leading to increased exhaustion and dissatisfaction of the DL from the heavy household workload^{11,18}. Meanwhile, in cases that the ML takes living together for granted, the DL is required to take on a more accommodating attitude as she hopes to assimilate quickly into the family culture¹⁹. Rather than trying to learn the culture of the DL, the ML tends to take on a passive attitude, complaining about inconvenience due to cultural differences^{11,18}. Therefore, the ML-DL relationship wherein the DL is a foreigner living in a rural area with the ML has great significance in the DL's life. This study aimed to focus on this aspect.

The pattern of the ML-DL relationship experienced may, of course, differ depending on the culture from which the foreign DL has come. In preceding studies^{1,20}, statistically significant differences were found in the level of adjustment to the relationship in accordance with the cultural background of the DL. Compared to those from China, those from the Philippines, Vietnam or Cambodia showed a lower level of adjustment. This is because unlike China, where Confucius values are shared, the Philippines and Vietnam have a matriarchal culture where gender equality is influenced by a history of colonization, making

them different from Korea from a cultural perspective. Therefore, the stronger differences in background pose more difficulty to cultural adjustment.

The present study, under the assumption that there will be common experiences regardless of nationality, sought to identify the ML-DL relationship experienced by foreign woman living in Korea and married into Korean families, centering on women from China, the Philippines and Vietnam, who together account for 73.9%² of all foreign women in Korea married to Korean men.

With the growth in multi-cultural families, various studies have been conducted over the years. In the early years, the majority of studies were quantitative, including those on the level of satisfaction among foreign women married to Korean men in Korea²¹⁻²⁴ and those to identify the causes of cultural adjustment and stress²⁵⁻²⁹. Over the years, the themes were expanded to include the relationship between the couple^{1,30,31}, child rearing³²⁻³⁵, and relationships with parents-in-law^{7,10,16,19,36,37}. While such studies contributed to the identification of the causes of and types of conflict within multi-cultural families, they did not carry out in-depth investigation of the conflict and adjustment associated with ML-DL relationships, which carry a uniquely Korean characteristic of hierarchical structure, and therefore were limited in concluding on a more practical and specific approach to ML-DL relationships, which are often the cause of conflict within multi-cultural families.

As such, various studies focusing on qualitative research regarding the experience within ML-DL relationships have been presented in recent years. Some studies have focused on cases with decent communication^{7,19,37}, and others used both foreign DLs and their MLs as subjects^{1,16}; however, there has been insufficient in-depth research on the relationship with the ML from the point of view of foreign DLs, especially those living in rural areas with their ML. Therefore, this study aimed to use a qualitative research method to allow a more in-depth study of the fundamental meaning of the ML-DL relationship as experienced by foreign DLs. Among qualitative study methods, the phenomenological research method of Colaizzi³⁸, known to be the most appropriate in understanding the inner experiences of an individual, was employed.

As stated above, this study aimed to understand the ML-DL relationship as experienced by foreign DLs, as well as to identify the essence of such experiences. The questions posed in order to achieve this objective were as

follows: What are the phenomena experienced by foreign DLs in rural areas in terms of their relationship with their ML, and what is the essence and the meaning of the ML-DL relationship experienced by foreign DLs in rural Korea?

2. Methodology

2.1 Procedures and Method

In order to identify the essence of the ML-DL relationship as experienced by foreign DLs in rural areas, a phenomenological study method, one of the qualitative research methods, was adopted herein. The analysis was done by using the Colaizzi³⁸ method, which gradually draws abstract statements rather than relying on individual statements, based on the testimony given by subjects.

The subjects selected for this study were those possessing knowledge and experience of the phenomenon that was to be researched, and those who could express their experience with competence. An intentional sampling was used, including foreign women from China, Vietnam or the Philippines who married Korean men and have lived in rural areas with their ML for three years or more. Participants meeting such qualifications were recommended by the Center for Support for Multi-Cultural Families. Of the women recommended, those who agreed to the terms of the study and expressed willingness to participate were selected after one-on-one interviews, and signed consent was obtained. A total of 5 Chinese, 5 Vietnamese and 5 Philippine women were included. In-depth interviews were conducted with the 15 women. Data were collected for seven months from June, 2013 to December 2013. The in-depth interviews were conducted using unstructured questions, at a time and place convenient to the subjects. Each interview lasted an average of 60 to 120 minutes, and took place 1-2 times per subject. With the consent of the subject, the interviews were recorded and the facial expressions, tones, and behaviour were noted. After each interview, the languages used by the subject were projected as they were, through repeated listening sessions.

2.2 Characteristics of Subjects

The socio-demographic characteristics of the study subjects were as follows. There were 5 each from China, Vietnam and the Philippines, for a total of 15 subjects.

Nine were in their 20s, 5 in their 30s and 1 in her 40s. The length of marriage was 5 years or less for 7 of the participants, 5 to 10 years for 5, and more than 10 years for the remaining 3. The 3 who had been married for more than 10 years were all from China. In terms of education level, the largest portion was made up of high school graduates at 8 participants, followed by 4 with only elementary education, and 3 who had graduated college. It appeared that compared to those from China or the Philippines, those from Vietnam had a lower educational background. Out of the participants, 12 had lived with their parents-in-law for 3 to 5 years, 2 for 5 to 10 years, and only 1 for more than 10 years.

3. Result

In order to identify the essence of the ML-DL relationship as experienced by foreign DLs married into Korean families in a rural area, a phenomenological method was employed. To accomplish this, the meaningful phrases were extracted from the statements describing the experiences of the foreign DLs in their relationship with their Korean MLs. By forming a meaning cluster and a theme cluster, 847 meaningful sentences, 82 general sentences, 22 sub-themes and 6 main themes were drawn.

From the clustering, 6 fundamental themes were analyzed, including the following: 'a stranger who has a hard time adjusting herself to a new lifestyle', 'a mother-in-law that does not treat the daughter-in-law as she would her own daughter', 'mother-in-law that hangs onto her son's every word', 'daughter-in-law with a lot of pent-up anger', 'someone who understands me' and 'living together in harmony as a family'.

3.1 A Stranger Who has a Hard Time Adjusting Herself to a New Lifestyle

The first theme, <a stranger who has a hard time adjusting herself to a new lifestyle>, is an indication of the stress foreign DLs experience while adjusting to the Korean lifestyle, which is different from their own. 'Difficulty in communication', 'difficulty from the difference in napping and food culture', and 'difficulty in accepting traditional etiquette and culture' were the sub-categories under this theme.

Foreign DLs experienced difficulty transitioning from their own culture to Korean culture. In particular, the language barrier often led to hurt feelings with the

ML. In addition, those from the Philippines, southern China, and Vietnam have a custom of taking a nap when the temperature of the day is at its highest, but were not able to do so while living with a Korean ML, which led to fatigue. Unlike their own culture where breakfast is often eaten out or in a simple form, they had to prepare a proper breakfast, which was also exhausting. Not being familiar with how to use refrigerators or washing machines also led to being scolded by the ML. A lack of understanding of Confucius culture, where courtesy is valued, as well as of superstitions held by their ML also made adjustment difficult. As such, the foreign DLs were living as strangers in their families due to difficulty in communication, difficulty in adjusting to Korean culture, and the ML's demand for assimilation.

3.2 A Mother-in-law that Does not Treat the Daughter-in-law as She Would Her Own Daughter

The second theme, <a mother-in-law that does not treat the daughter-in-law as she would her own daughter>, refers to the disappointing feeling felt by the foreign wives when the ML discriminates against them and do not grant the same affection that would have been granted to the ML's own daughter. 'In consideration during pregnancy and childbirth', 'being treated as a servant of the family', and 'putting the daughter ahead of the DL' were the sub-categories of this theme.

The subjects of this study made an effort to treat their parents-in-law as their own parents and become close with them; however, they expressed disappointment with the discrimination they felt from their ML. In particular, they indicated that they had to carry out agricultural work even during pregnancy and morning sickness, even up until the moment of childbirth. They were not able to rest after childbirth, but instead had to take care of household chores and agricultural work. They felt disappointed with MLs who treated them more like a servant to the household.

3.3 A Mother-In-Law that Hangs onto Her Son's Every Word

The third theme, <mother-in-law that hangs onto her son's every word>, is an indication of the stress coming from the excessive love of MLs towards their sons, and the culture where women are considered secondary to men. The sub-categories here were 'ML that only takes

care of her son', 'ML that doesn't let her son help his wife with household chores', 'ML who does not want to undermine the confidence of her son', 'ML who feels hurt from the husband taking my side', and 'ML who expects grandchildren.'

One of the major characteristics of Korean family culture is the patriarchal structure. A patriarchal culture refers to the power structure where the rights of a father are emphasised and come before the rights of women or younger men. While this culture has been somewhat weakened in Korea over the course of modernization, there is still a long way to go for gender equality.

The participants in this study experienced a strong resistance to and difficulty from Korea's patriarchal culture and the excessive love of MLs towards their sons. Conflicts often arose from MLs prioritising their sons ahead of the DLs or grandchildren, preventing the sons from helping their wives with household chores, or trying to boost the authority of the husbands while suppressing that of the DLs. They also found it difficult to understand when MLs expressed disappointment with the fact that their sons would sometimes take sides with their wives. The excessive expectation for grandchildren was also indicated to be a burden, as well as the hurtful words targeted at the DLs when they gave birth to a daughter. As such, foreign DLs experienced conflict with their MLs who valued only their sons or grandsons.

3.4 A Daughter-in-law with a Lot of Pent-up Anger

The fourth theme, <daughter-in-law with a lot of pent-up anger>, refers to the humiliation that DLs experience in the situation where they are dependent on the ML in terms of economic or household decision-making power, about which they can't even share their feelings to others outside the family. The sub-categories here were 'economic dependence and not being able to express their own thoughts', 'being treated as if their marriage was just for economic purposes', 'being used as a shield of embarrassing family affairs', 'suffering ridicule and criticism of one's own family of origin' and 'being the target of the ML's pent-up anger'.

The participants in this study experienced the pain of not being able to express what they were thinking, as the parents-in-law intervened in everything, all the time. The parents-in-law often had the decision-making power in economic matters, causing the DLs to receive allowances and have their consumption controlled. There were also

conflicts arising from the cost of the wedding, and the fact that the DLs had to send money to family in their home country. Embarrassing parts about the family, such as disharmony, alcohol addiction and family violence, also had to be kept secret by the DL, which posed an emotional burden on them. That is, such issues were attributed as being the fault of the DLs, and as such they had to endure this blame. They also had a lot of pent-up anger due to the fact that they could not express the feelings of humiliation they felt from the condescending attitude of the ML, or from being the target of their MLs' anger.

3.5 Someone Who Understands Me

The fifth theme, <someone who understands me>, refers to the support received when the DLs experienced conflict with their MLs in a foreign country. The sub-categories were 'a husband that sincerely wishes well for my own family of origin', 'a husband that listens to my complaints' and 'family that takes my side'.

The participants in this study expressed feeling a lot of loneliness in their lives in Korea. Whenever they experienced misunderstandings or conflicts with their MLs, the feelings of loneliness and hurt were amplified. When their husbands understood their feelings and listened to their complaints, they expressed decreased disappointment with the ML, and felt thankful towards their husbands. They also felt a strong sense of support when family members were aware of the personality of the ML and took sides with them during a conflict with the ML, as well as when someone such as a father-in-law or a grandfather-in-law showed particular affection towards them. One participant from Vietnam said that she was able to overcome the loneliness and conflict with her ML thanks to her husband, who genuinely cared for her family of origin and understood what she was going through.

3.6 Living Together in Harmony as a Family

The sixth theme, <living together in harmony as a family>, refers to the experience of being assimilated into the family and finding hope despite the difficulties of living with one's parents-in-law. The sub-categories were 'feeling sympathy towards the ML', 'Seeking ways to live in harmony' and 'gratefulness and wishes for the ML'.

The subjects of this study still expressed a sense of affection for, and understood the life of their ML as a fellow woman, despite their conflicts. They felt sympathy towards

MLs who had to suffer a tough life as a DL themselves, who had to respect the status of their husbands even when the husband was incapable of providing sufficient financial support, and who had to bring up children while taking care of all household chores. They also felt a sincere sense of gratitude towards their MLs, who had become their own family, and wished them health and happiness as well as a life of harmony together. In certain cases, the resolution of conflicts with the ML was not easy, therefore causing the DLs to seek a way to co-exist, such as through living separately or achieving economic independence.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In order to identify the essence of the ML-DL relationship experienced by foreign DLs married into Korean families in rural areas, a phenomenological method was used herein. For analysis, meaningful phrases were extracted from the statements made by foreign DLs about their experiences in their relationships with Korean MLs. By forming a meaning cluster and a theme cluster, 847 meaningful sentences, 82 general sentences, 22 sub-themes and 6 main themes were drawn.

The following 6 fundamental theme were examined: 'a stranger who has a hard time adjusting herself to a new lifestyle', 'a mother-in-law that does not treat the daughter-in-law as she would her own daughter', 'mother-in-law that hangs onto her son's every word', 'daughter-in-law with a lot of pent-up anger', 'someone who understands me' and 'living together in harmony as a family'.

The results of this study are as follows:

First, the subjects of the study commonly experienced conflict due to the different lifestyle and life structure, coming from differences in cultures as well as the rural life, respectively. The conflict resulting from life structure, as seen in <a stranger having a hard time adjusting to a new lifestyle>, showed the same pattern as the conflict seen in traditional ML-DL relationships in patriarchal Korean families³⁹. However, given the peculiarities of multi-cultural families, they also experienced difficulty in communication^{14,37} and stress from MLs who attributed all issues of cultural difference as being the fault of the DLs' personalities⁴⁰, as well as the pressure of having to assimilate themselves to Korean culture without reciprocity from the ML. Therefore, an approach

reminiscent of a 'salad bowl' rather than a 'melting pot' is required, where the culture of the foreign DL is also respected¹⁶.

Second, the subjects of the study expressed disappointment with the fact that their MLs did not treat them the same way they would their own daughter. As shown in the second theme, their own daughters were treated with special affection, while DLs were treated as if they were a family servant. This observation was not dealt with in preceding studies, and is the result of a patriarchal culture wherein the DL, who does not share the same bloodline, is considered to have lower status than the daughter¹⁶. This influence seems to have given the feeling to the foreign DLs that they were being discriminated against. The subjects of the study were also unable to rest sufficiently during pregnancy or childbirth, because they were treated as a servant of the family. Therefore, a program is needed for MLs of multi-cultural families, focused on raising awareness of different cultures and on the building of a healthy ML-DL relationship.

Third, the subjects of this study experienced conflict due to the excessive love of the ML towards her own son. The third theme of 'a mother-in-law that hangs on to the every word of her son' shows that this also shares the same pattern as that resulting from the traditional ML-DL relationship in patriarchal Korean families³⁹. The excessive affection of the MLs towards their sons in this patriarchal culture⁴¹ was considered particularly hard to understand by the study participants. In a patriarchal society, it is said that the relationship between a mother and son is stronger than that between the couple⁸, with the ML thinking that the DL took away her son, a belief which results in resistance and aggressive attitudes towards the DL, which in turn leads to increased conflict⁴⁰. The MLs also feel a sense of insecurity towards DLs who may be smarter than their own sons⁷, and consequently try to artificially boost the ego of the son while preventing the DL from having a social life. Therefore, a program that focuses on offering social support for MLs in the local community and promoting healthy family relationships needs to be operated.

Fourth, the participants in the study expressed that conflict also occurred due to the power structure, wherein the ML held all decision-making power in regards to household chores and the DL was expected to follow all orders. The fourth theme examined herein, 'a daughter-in-law with pent-up anger', shows a power structure that leads to conflicts that are of a similar pattern to those

found between the ML and DL in traditional, patriarchal families of Korea³⁹, and is also in line with preceding studies that argued different values and family cultures from those of one's country of origin are the cause of conflict^{1,16}. The ML typically perceives the DL's country of origin as a 'poor country' or a 'country where it's hard to get by financially'³⁹, and used this as the grounds for which she had the upper hand in her relation to the DL. Such MLs often looked down on the DLs or exercised unilateral power¹⁶, leading to conflict originating from power structures. However, since the foreign DLs could not become financially independent from the parents-in-law, they had to put up with such treatment. Therefore, in a program to facilitate better ML-DL relationships, the need for allocating decision-making powers on matters of child education, household chores and other issues concerning the family more evenly for a more collaborative relationship should be emphasised.

Fifth, the participants in this study were more able to deal with the difficulty in their relationships with their MLs thanks to the support of their husbands and/or other family members. The fifth theme herein, 'someone who understands me', shows that support from one's husband and other family members eases the conflict with one's ML⁴, and is of the same pattern as seen in ML-DL relationships in Korean families. Foreign DLs who were stressed due to conflict with their MLs were consoled by their husbands or other family members, which served as a cushion in their tough life in a foreign country. Foreign DLs are likely to be emotionally isolated due to language barriers, cultural differences, child-rearing and family relationships¹⁰. In this situation, the support of family members provided a great boost in their ability to overcome such challenges, the understanding and support of the spouse in particular had an absolute influence in this regard⁴². Therefore, this aspect needs to be emphasised in the development and operation of programs where international couples are the focus.

Finally, the participants in the study, despite their conflict with their MLs, were understanding and accepting of the life of their MLs, and tried to adjust to the relationship. The final theme explored herein, 'living in harmony as a family member', showed a result that is unprecedented in previous studies. That is, the foreign DLs showed sympathy and acceptance towards their MLs. They felt sympathy towards the life of MLs, wherein they also had to go through a lot. As such, the DLs showed a transition of perception as they took on a more

accepting attitude towards their MLs. The participants in this study, despite conflict with their MLs, felt a sense of sympathy towards them, worried about their health as a family member, and expressed hope that they would be able to live in harmony as family members. Therefore, a program that specialises in the promotion of a better family relationship between the ML and DL needs to be developed.

The study participants also sought alternatives in order to live in harmony and resolve the conflict with their MLs. The sub-theme, 'seeking ways to live in harmony', showed efforts to fundamentally resolve the issues of the conflict, which is also unprecedented in other studies. Some lived separately but close by to gain privacy, and others looked for jobs to gain economic independence. The participants in this study expressed that they made efforts to resolve conflicts with their MLs in a positive manner through acceptance, negotiation and adjustment. Therefore, the development and operation of a program that promotes better family relationships and proper conflict management within multi-cultural families is required.

5. References

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