

WHOM TO MARRY? WHY WOULD SOME KYRGYZ WOMEN PREFER WESTERN MEN?

By
Zarina Isambaeva

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*Supervisor: Professor Éva Fodor
Second Reader: Francisca de Haan*

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes spouse selection preferences between Kyrgyz men and men from Western countries of highly-educated Kyrgyz women in terms of their Western education and international experience. By referring to the literature about spouse selection patterns and mixed-marriages, this work shows that the women of the study tend to pay more attention to the kinship relations in their spouses' families than to any other of the marriage aspects. The study argues that these Kyrgyz women prefer nuclear families with Western men over joining extended families of Kyrgyz men in order to avoid the downshift in the hierarchal structure of the Kyrgyz families from a higher position of an ordinary member of their own families to the disadvantaged position of a *kelin* (the daughter-in-law) in their Kyrgyz husbands' families.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I got the idea to start this research due to my personal interest in marriage migration and spouse selection among foreigners. During my study abroad, I have been meeting people from all over the world, and they introduced me with their cultures. It turned out that I started comparing them to my own culture, what helped me to evaluate for myself advantages and disadvantages of my own culture. I got interested whether other students from Kyrgyzstan do the same, and particularly do women from Kyrgyzstan, while studying abroad, look critically at their culture and compare it to the Western cultures¹ or any other cultures in terms of spouse selection and institute of marriage? ² And if they do, what causes these thoughts of marrying someone from the outer group? Since people usually expected to choose someone alike from their social group (among others see, Rubin, 1970), why would these women want to marry someone coming from another social group, having other cultural background?

As Erik Cohen (2003) pointed out in his work about transnational marriages between Western men and women from Thailand, globalization nowadays opens up “a potentially worldwide marriage market” (p. 57). Educational exchange programs, rise of the traveling industry, media influence and other globalization factors may influence the rise of a number of transnational marriages. It also influences people’s perceptions and attitudes towards such marriages and towards the marriage institution in general. Rosemary Breger and Rosanna Hill (1998, p. 7) in their book about cross-cultural marriages, noted that what constitutes good marriage varies not only from one society to another, but also among generations within the social group. What meant for women to be in a good marriage fifty years ago could change

¹ What I mean here and further by “Western cultures” see section 1.4 of this chapter.

² For the concrete description of my respondent group see 1.3 section of this chapter.

through the time due to historical, political and cultural changes in a country and means different things for brides today. The significance of such studies on spouse selection and consequent intermarriages is in the discovery of how societies change (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 417).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz Republic had a lot of political and cultural changes, but the main one related to the topic of this work change was the fall of so-called “iron curtain” and, as a consequence, the possibility for people to cross the borders of the former-Soviet Union republics. Since that time people are moving, migrating, and later sharing their experience with others. According to Kalmijn (1998, p. 417), “ethnic, religious, and particularly racial boundaries still exist, but they are weaker than they used to be.” Nowadays change in generational preferences of young Kyrgyz women in their spouse selection could be explained by globalization flow coming through the media, other people’s experiences and other factors of globalization.

1.1 Research topic and research question

In my thesis I analyze Kyrgyz women’s perceptions of their own culture and Western cultures through the narratives about their friends’ and relatives’ experiences of being in marriage with either Kyrgyz men or foreigners from Western countries. My main research question is what might be the reasons of highly educated Kyrgyz women to prefer Western spouse over Kyrgyz man for the marriage. I am also interested in the personal and cultural characteristics that the women of my study are looking for in their spouses.

At the beginning of the research, my hypothesis was about Kyrgyz women to prefer foreigners not only due to the beneficial cultural differences between Western and Central Asian

cultures, such as equal division of domestic responsibilities, equal rights to work, and others, but also due to the desire to migrate to wealthier countries of residence of their foreign husbands. However, my respondents tended not to include, or at least not to mention it in the interviews, the economic factor in their preferences of foreigners. This mismatch of my hypothesis with the results will be discussed further in the forth chapter of the thesis.

1.2 The setting

My study focuses on Kyrgyzstan, an independent land-locked country located in Central Asia, which borders four other countries: China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Its population is approximately 5.4 million people (U.S. Department of State 2011). It consists of seven regions: Issik-Kul, Talas, Naryn, Batken, Osh, Djalal-Abad and Chui. The study includes representatives of almost all of the regions. According to Central Intelligence Agency (2012), “Kyrgyzstan is a poor, mountainous country with a dominant agricultural sector”, where about forty percent of the population are classified as poor (NSC of the Kyrgyz Republic 2007, as cited in Nedoluzhko & Agadjanian, 2010, p. 163).

Kyrgyzstan is a former Soviet Union Republic, which gained its independence in 1991. Popular uprising against the government in March 2005 have led to the ouster of Askar Akaev, the President, who ruled the country for fifteen years. The next President became Kurmanbek Bakiev, who “manipulated the parliament to accrue new powers for himself” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012), and was deposed in April 2010. Roza Otunbaeva worked as transitional president, and in 2011 Almazbek ATAMBAEV became the acting President of the Kyrgyz Republic (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). The continued political instability caused by all of this political events negatively influenced the migration situation in the country and caused

mass migration of Kyrgyz people, as well as people of other nationalities to other countries. As Handrahan (2004, p. 208) pointed out “after 70 years of USSR and intense Russification modern Kyrgyzstan now encompasses over 51 ethnic groups...Modern Kyrgyzstan is a jumble of dramatically confused and overlaid identities.” Nowadays ethnic Kyrgyz constitute seventy percent of total country population, while Russian and other Europeans constitute approximately ten percent of total population (Nedoluzhko & Agadjanian, 2010, p. 163).

1.3 Research methods and the sample

During the research I conducted nine interviews with unmarried women from Kyrgyzstan (with Kyrgyz nationality) coming from different regions of the country, who never had an experience of either being married or living together with a man. Their age range is from twenty to twenty six years old. For the interviews, I used semi-structured, open-ended questions, which allowed me to concentrate on my main research area. During the interviews I also had lots of follow-up questions, which helped me to discover some additional details connected to the topic of the interview. In general the interviews rather seemed to be friendly conversations (Seidman, 1998, p. 9), than structured survey interviews. The length of the interviews ranged from forty-five to sixty minutes depending individually on each respondent. By the end of the interview taking process I have transcribed and translated the records of the interviews.

There are two types of socioeconomic statuses mostly discussed in the literature: ascribed status and achieved status. As Matthijs Kalmijn (1998) explained, “ascribed status positions are measured by the occupational class of the father and the father-in-law”, while “achieved status positions are measured by education and occupation” (p. 403). Educational factor is the most

used one among scholars, since “it is the convenient status indicator of women and changes little after marriage” (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 403). As Kalmijn reported, in most countries educational homogamy is stronger than occupational and even stronger than the correlation between the spouses’ class origins. As Jane Khatib-Chahidi, Rosanna Hill and Renee Paton (1998) pointed out, earlier studies have shown that people who “marry out” tend to be ‘highly educated professional middle-class or working class’ (p. 50). Since, according to Kalmijn (1998, p. 413), “more highly educated persons...have a more individualistic attitude, are less attached to their family and community of origin”, for the research of possible reasons of Kyrgyz women to marry Western men I chose specific group of highly educated women with rich experience of living in an international community, assuming that these women might have more reasons to name for marrying foreigners, than women with other educational and cultural background.

All of the women from the sample are coming from middle-class families living in Kyrgyzstan, as well as all of them are university educated. One is now getting her doctoral degree; seven others are getting their masters degrees at the moment and one is studying at a college. It is important to note that all of them are studying abroad in different countries of Europe, since their education obtained in one of the Western countries could influence their preferences in spouse selection. In addition to that, as Kalmijn (1998) pointed out, “the chances to marry endogamously are higher the more often one meets people within the group and the more often one interacts with group members on a day-to-day basis” (p. 402). This means that the fact that these women were living abroad and rarely or almost never have interacted with other Kyrgyz people at the moment of the interviews were taken could also influence the results of the interviews and explain why they are not strongly attached to their social group in spouse selection process.

It is also important to note that all of them had more or less significant interaction with foreigners in their life experience before. Apart from their study at the moment, some of them have studied in the United States during the educational exchange program for school children and as part of that program have lived in different families. One of my respondents, who participated in such program, emphasized that her perception of the West does not come only from the media, but also from her life experience:

I know that Western men are helping not because that is the way they show them in the movies, but because I have lived in American family for a year and I actually saw him helping his wife in everything. (Ainura)

Other interviewees either had experiences of communicating with their friends' or relatives' foreign husbands or dated foreign men themselves. I believe that these factors are important to keep in mind during the analysis, since, as Khatib-Chahidi, Hill and Paton (1998) emphasized, they might work in tandem with experience of "being marginal within the community (society or family) in which they were raised" (p. 56) and could lead to 'pushing' away from Kyrgyz culture and 'pulling' towards representatives of other cultures.

Seidman (1998, pp. 11-13) described several in-depth interview patterns, which researchers usually use for their studies. The way I interviewed my respondents may be described as "focused life history" and "reflection on the meaning" techniques. These techniques help to a researcher to discover the context of the interviewees' experience and encourage the respondents "to reflect on meaning their experience hold for them" (Seidman, 1998, p. 11). Lori Handrahan (2004, p. 211) in her article about bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, pointed out that non-western women define their problems and achievements in terms of "imagined free white liberal democracy." That is why I asked my respondents to share their reactions and perceptions of other women's experiences of getting married to Kyrgyz men in comparison to those who

married Western men. Through the narratives about their friends' and relatives' experiences and about respondents' own experiences and families, I tried to understand what these women understand by marriage, what are their main criteria for spouse selection and what do they think of their own culture in terms of marriage and family relations in comparison to Western cultures.

It is also very important to note that I personally knew all of my respondents before the interviews, because it might have influenced the way they were feeling with me during the interviews. With some of them I was studying in the same university, some of them are coming from the same city where I come from, in other words, with all of the interviews I share something in common: same cultural and educational background, same class and social status, etc. As Seidman (1998, p. 92) pointed out, "interviewers and participants are never equal", since both of them "want and get different things out of the interview." The fact that I, the person my respondents knew as equal before the interviews, step on the other position of a researcher during the interviews could also influence their attitude towards me and consequently their answers. That is why I tried to involve equity in every part of the interview, including scheduling the convenient for both of us time for the interview, in order to reduce hierarchal positioning. By equity Seidman (1998) meant "a balance between means and ends, between what is sought and what is given, between process and product, and a sense of fairness and justice that pervades the relationship between participant and interviewer" (p. 92). As we will see later in section 2.2, the relationships between me and my interviewees influenced the results of the interviews, what gave me a chance to make additional conclusions about my respondents' perceptions of Western spouses and their reasons to marry Western men.

1.4 Terminology

Sociologists point out numerous types of mixed marriages: cross-cultural, cross-national, interethnic, interfaith, and others. This work concentrates on those marriages that might occur as a consequence of women from Kyrgyzstan and men from Western countries being attracted by either cultural, status, educational differences or contrary similarities of each other, thus I tend to use here the term of cross-national marriages, since this term indicates marriages due to international migration (Gorny & Kepinska, 2004).

Although from the perspective of my respondents on the provided topic of family and marriage structure most of the countries, including Eastern and Western Europe, will constitute so-called “Western world”, I am aware of the over-simplified nature of this term, since there might be lots of different cultures inside any of those countries. By saying “Western cultures” in this work I mean cultures of European countries and the United States of America. Terms like “Western marriage” and “Western men” are used in order to indicate the differences between Kyrgyzstan and Western countries in questions of marriage and spouse selection. Using terms in quotation marks means the suggestion of continuous questioning of designations of these terms. Even when the terms are used without quotation marks, the generalizing terms are meant to be used critically (Mohanty, 1991, p. 354).

Throughout the work I will use term ‘foreign’ in order to indicate representatives of various nationalities and countries other than Kyrgyz nationality and Kyrgyzstan. Most of the time due to the meaning my respondents put in this word, ‘foreign’ will be used as an indicator of a representative of a Western country with different from Kyrgyzstan’s culture, kinship system and mentality.

The term ‘nuclear’ family used in order to explain the type of households, which “were linked to kin through economic and social relationships, but primarily organized around the relationships between husband and wife” (Sissons Joshi & Krishna, 1998, p.172). Unlike in extended families, it is usual in nuclear families for a new couple to live separately from the parents from the day of wedding or earlier (Sissons Joshi & Krishna, 1998, p.172).

1.5 Structure of the thesis

After introducing my research topic I present theoretical background for the spouse-selection and mixed-marriages topics. In Chapter 3 I analyze the significance of the role of family and kinship structure in my respondents’ spouse selection preferences. In Chapter 4 I present other reasons of the women of the study to prefer Western spouses and I argue that these reasons lack romantic nature and that the economic factor, although being underrepresented in the interviews, plays its important role as much as cultural factors. At the the end of the thesis I present my conclusions based on the research done and discuss the mismatches with the initial hypothesis.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

The topic of spouse selection from outer groups and the topic of mixed marriages are broadly discussed among sociology scholars since they raise important discourses of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’, endogamy and homogamy creation patterns, and others. As Matthijs Kalmijn pointed out in his work *Intermarriage And Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends* (1998), sociologists tried to explain patterns of partner choice in terms of the groups selection, particularly they studied “why people marry within their group (endogamy) and why people marry persons close in status (homogamy)” (p. 396). Jane Khatib-Chahidi, Rosanna Hill and Renee Paton (1998), for example, in their study of women in cross-cultural marriages tried to answer the question of “Who intermarries?” Particularly the discussion was about the choices that people make in their spouse selection process: are they predetermined by some criteria or “is it a purely matter of chance meeting and romantic love as many of us like to believe: an inherently random choice” (p. 49)? Their research done on mixed-married couples included a sample of twenty educated women being in long mixed marriages. The authors have identified several factors which could influence their respondents’ decision to marry foreigners, such as previous experience with foreigners, feeling of marginality in their own culture and the attraction of ‘Otherness’ of the foreign mates.

Unlike their sample, the sample of my study does not include women other than Kyrgyz nationality who could experience feelings of exclusion from their culture due to their belongings to ethnic minorities or immigrant status. My interviewees also did not experience so-called “familial/ personal marginality” rooted in migration from one social group to another and leaving place where they were born in. Although some of my interviewees had moved from the place

they were born to the capital, they did not feel any significant difference for themselves, thus there was no feeling of exclusion. During my research I noticed some particularities that could be connected to the results of the study by Khatib-Chahidi, Hill and Paton (1998). In my study and in their study the factor of escaping cultural gender roles in women's place of origin explains the desire to use marriage with a foreigner in order to "avoid the gender role expectations" within their culture or their families (p. 61).

Kalmijn (1998) in his study presented theoretical and empirical sections for the hypotheses about "why people marry within their group and why some do while others do not" in the context of the Western societies (p. 397). He emphasized the limitations of the studies of spouse selection by saying that such hypotheses "are often not tested directly" (Kalmijn 1998, p. 397), especially very often these studies do not consider the fact that "partners choose each other on the basis of multiple choice" (Kalmijn 1998, p. 415). Thus he highlighted two main hypothesis, which more than others include multiple dimensions in their research: the by-product hypothesis and the exchange hypothesis. According to the by-product hypothesis there are more cases of intermarriage if people share one socialcultural characteristic despite the differences in other (Kalmijn 1998, p. 415). The exchange hypothesis states that people "trade characteristics when choosing a spouse", which means that representatives of low ethnic minorities have higher chances to marry representatives of higher ethnic minorities "if they offered a higher socioeconomic status in return" (Kalmijn 1998, p. 416).

According to Kalmijn (1998) in order to understand "patterns of marriage selection", scholars use "the concept of a marriage market" (p. 398). People search for a spouse within a marriage market where potential spouses are been evaluated according to the resources they are able to present. There are several kinds of these resources, but sociologists mostly highlight two

of them: socioeconomic and cultural resources. Kalmijn (1998) explained that socioeconomic resources may be defined “as resources that produce economic well-being and status” (p. 398). This means that people increase “their income and status by searching for a spouse with attractive socioeconomic resources” (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 398), which in turns means that representatives of less economically developed countries may create a pattern of homogamy with representatives of countries with richer economies. As we will see later, although my respondents are representatives of a Third World country with undeveloped economy, this resource seem to be less relevant for these women than the other one – the cultural resource. I found Kalmijn’s work very important for my project since there are a lot of connections between the two, thus I will use his work in my analysis and try to apply his findings and theories on my respondent’s answers.

The topic of cross-cultural marriages has been broadly studied by scholars all over the world. Cohen (2003, p. 58-59) pointed out, “the great majority of studies deal with intermarriage between members of different groups within the same society; there exist only few studies of marriage between members of different societies.” A lot of literature has been written about Muslim women in Third World countries, and there is a number of works written on the topic of cross-cultural marriages between representatives of Western culture and former Soviet Republics. However most of them studied Russian and Ukrainian cases of marriage migration (Chuiko & Romaniuc, 1999; Gorny & Kepinska, 2004; Ginter & El'chinova, 2001; Vission, 2001), while less literature can be found on marriages between Western and Central Asian representatives, particularly cross-national marriages with people from Kyrgyzstan have been rarely studied among scholars. That is why, in order to analyze the differences between western nuclear families and Kyrgyz extended families, I am going to use the research of Khatib-Chahidi,

Hill and Paton (1998) about Indian joint families, since Indian kinship structure is very similar to Kyrgyz kinship structure and family relations. Due to the small amount of studies on spouse selection topic from the perspective of highly-educated Asian women, I believe that this thesis contributes to the field of studying of women's spouse-selection preferences in general, which is been less studied among other sociological topics (Robinson, 2001), and of educated Asian women's spouse-selection preferences in particular.

An important part of cross-cultural marriage studies constitute so called 'mail-order' marriages, which usually describe the marriage of a man from a richer country with a woman from a Third World country that became possible as a result of correspondence between the two sides. The purpose of such kind of marriages lies exactly in the benefits from the differences between the cultures. As Velly Villapando (1989) described in her study of mail-order catalogs, they involve "an Asian woman" who "dreams she will meet and marry someone rich and powerful, someone to rescue her and free her from poverty-stricken bondage" and "an American man" who "dreams he will meet and marry someone passive, obedient, nonthreatening, and virginal, someone to devote her entire life to him, serving him and making no demands" (as cited in Constable 2003, p. 14).

Mila Gladova and Richard Onizuka, in their book about mail-order brides in the United States, claimed that "economic or political condition constitute 'the main reason' for women's departures from their homelands" (as cited in Constable 2003, p. 84), while Constable in her book *Romance on A Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, And "Mail-Order" Marriages* (2003) argued that material motives are not the main factor of the relationships between women from Third World countries and their foreign husbands, but rather "political economy is important for the way it is linked to the cultural logics of love and desire" (p. 85). Although my

research is not concentrated only on so called mail-brides, but rather may include them among other groups of women who are expressing a desire to marry a foreigner and migrate from Kyrgyzstan to Western countries, I see the connection between mail-brides and women of my research. The connection lies in the pull migration factor of images of romantic love and marriage. Studies of transnational families report that “women seem to be more likely than men to move to live with a partner and/or to follow a partner’s career” (Cartledge & Scott, 2009, p. 65), which means that so called ‘love migration’ is more likely for women. The dream about cross-cultural marriage with Western man means for these women a promise of better and happier life abroad, on the foreign husband’s land. Russell King (2002) in his work on transnational family structures noted that the tendency of ‘love migration’ is rising through the years: “The possibility for the initiation of such “transnational intimacy” is greatly increased by mass travel, study abroad, and tourism; whilst the accelerating speeds and technologies of travel and communication in a shrinking Europe increase the chance of such transnational love being maintained” (p. 99-100).

Chapter 3: The role of the family

Throughout the interviews with my respondents I found several patterns of explaining preference of getting married with Westerns men over getting married with Kyrgyz men, which indicate general characteristics that women seek in men and appealing characteristics of foreigners in particular. Kinship relationships and family structure appeared to be very important issue for the woman of the study. This chapter analyzes the women's preferences of Kyrgyz or Western kinship structures in order to understand their perceptions of their own culture, images of Western men and Western marriage, and such sociological and philosophical concepts as family, marriage, respect, patriarchy and others.

3.1 Extended family vs. nuclear family

In the research of Khatib-Chahidi, Hill and Paton (1998, p. 56) women expressed less concern about the country of origin and the families of their future husbands than of personal characteristics. One of their interviewees framed it in a following way: "You are marrying me, not my family" (Khatib-Chahidi, Hill and Paton, 1998, p. 50). Unlike these women my interviewees expressed their main concern about marriage with Kyrgyz men by talking about hierarchical family structure and interpersonal relationships inside the family. Generally they were concerned about woman's position in her new family, lack of privacy and husband's family intervention in a couple's life. But probably the most discussed topic during the interviews was the topic of family structure and cultural differences that lie in the family models of West countries and Kyrgyzstan. The respondents emphasized the differences between their own society with Central Asian mentality and Western society in family structure, in meanings that

people put in the concept of family and attitudes towards it. I believe that the women in this study, although tend to generalize the patriarchal structure of Kyrgyz society and liberal gender-equal structure of so-called Western society, are far more than victims of romanticized images of Western men and Western marriage, and that these images indeed in some cases work as an empowering tool for these women in their attempt to review their own culture critically. Although I do believe that the interviewees are attracted to Western world thought the generalized and idealized images of “Western” family and “Western” marriage, I also believe that this is not the main reason for them to pick a foreigner as a spouse. In this section I argue that the perception of Western world does not play a crucial role in their preferences of foreigners, and neither does the idea of living in an extended family. What is playing a key role in my respondents’ preferences of Western men over Kyrgyz men, when they talk about family structures, is the unwillingness to make a downshift in the hierarchal system of Kyrgyz families, in which marriage for them means a move from higher position in their families to the lower position in the husbands’ families.

The typical Kyrgyz family can be described as ‘extended’ type of family. An extended family is “a corporate economic and political unit”, members of which “work for the mutual benefit and welfare of all individuals and (nuclear) families” (Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995, p. 100).³ The traditional type of postmarital residence in Kyrgyzstan, as in most of clan societies, is patrilocal type of residence, which increases husband’s family authority since “he remains in his childhood home but the bride is removed from hers” (Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995, p. 104). Very often a just-married couple joins the husband’s family and stays at the big house, built specially to accommodate all the nuclear families. As one of my interviewees explained, couple’s privacy and private space are not even in question in such houses. Madina, a twenty-five year old

³ For more information about Kyrgyz genealogical construction and kinship structure see Gullette (2010).

respondent from Osh, told me about her friends from Osh and his wife, who share their private space with his parents:

He married a young girl, who, of course, moved to his parents' place. He said they live in the next room and share the same cardboard wall with his parents. He is ok with that, but I immediately thought of his wife. There is no private life in there!

To stay under the roof of husband's parents for some couples means not only to share their private space, but also to be under the total rule of the parents – economically as much as emotionally. The authority of the husband's parents is not supposed to be questioned in any of Kyrgyz families. In some cases, a husband cannot buy a dress for his wife without permission of his mother, who usually rules the family budget, but as we will see later, it is not only the economic factor creates *kelin's* (daughter-in-law) subordinate position.

But even if a just-married couple has its own place of residence separate from parents' house, there is a common tradition for just married couples to stay under the roof of the husband's parents for first six months in order to let the parents get closer with *kelin* and teach her all the family's traditions, including proper food preparation for their son. During this period of time a woman joining the family "has to adapt to the existing organization of the household" (Liddle & Joshi, 1986, as cited in Sissons Joshi & Krishna, 1998, 183); she is been taught to cook the way her mother-in-law cooks, so that her husband would get the same food quality he got used to before the marriage. She also gets to know all the relatives of the family, as well as relatives get a chance to assess the new *kelin's* skills and education. After this period of time, when the couple moves to their own house, or even if they lived separately from the wedding day, the doors of their house has always to stay open for all the relatives, as well as the couple has to participate in everyday life of other nuclear families' lives and help with the domestic work.

According to Kyrgyz traditions, every new *kelin* steps into the lowest position of a family's hierarchy, which means that she is responsible for the most difficult and routine work at a house. In many cases the new *kelin* lacks a lot of basic rights, such as making economic decisions, freedom of movement and freedom of speech. She is not allowed to participate in making important decisions for the family, to run the family budget, even if she constantly contributes to it, to argue with elder family members, to find a job without having a permission for it and finally to visit her parents' house without permission of her parents-in-law. Just like in Indian joint families, in Kyrgyz families' "authority pattern of the joint family, the daughter-in-law is directly subordinate to the mother-in-law" (Sissons Joshi & Krishna, 1998, p. 180). Basically she gets a new "boss" – her *kainene* (the mother-in-law); as Mies (1980) explained in the work about joint families and patriarchy, a woman gets the "primary relationship...with her mother-in-law not her husband" (as cited in Sissons Joshi & Krishna, 1998, p. 180). She has to adopt and assimilate in the new environment without a chance to become a mistress of the house, since "the young woman joins an existing household managed by her husband's mother" (as cited in Sissons Joshi & Krishna, 1998, p. 180). Not only does the economic status quo create the subordinate position, but also the concept of respect, which remains very important in Kyrgyz families. The older the person in a family, the more respect he gets. Children, especially children-in-law, have to show their respect through the help they give, gestures, speech, etc.

That is why my interviewees see the difference in types of families between the Kyrgyz extended type of family and Western nuclear type of family as a difference between oppressive patriarchal and more liberated and freer way of life for themselves. Compared to Kyrgyz family life conditions, Western nuclear families with fewer obligations to meet and communicate with husband's family on a daily basis and with less relatives' intervention in their lives perceived by

my interviewees as an empowering way of escaping subordinate position in a family. By intervention here they mean lack of personal freedom, which includes freedom of movement and freedom of speech. Of course this kind of representation of Kyrgyz families would be over-generalized, if I said that one hundred percent of Kyrgyz families are extended families with strong interconnections between the relatives. There should be some families which due to some circumstances or by their own choice live as nuclear families and prefer not to be involved in traditional type of Kyrgyz kinship formation. But in terms of this research about spouse selection with women who only consider their perspectives for getting married and try to find a better option for themselves, this type of extended families with all the attendant details is the main model to imagine their future in case of marrying a Kyrgyz man, since this type of family formation and in-family relations is the major one in Kyrgyz society. So the problem lies not that much in the lack of choice of living in a nuclear family, although it might be hard to get the nuclear family out of the extended family, but rather in the fear of my respondents that this chance might not be available, in case if they marry a man from very traditional Kyrgyz family, and he would refuse to be separated from the rest of the family.

Akylai, a twenty-two year old economist, told me about her friends' experience of living in Kyrgyz families:

Those girls who got married and stayed in Kyrgyzstan, very often complain about husbands' families. They complain about relatives that make visits too often, that they have to go to relatives very often to help with something, that they have to get close with brothers and sisters of the husband, who very often live with them under the same roof. In this case you have to be nice and you can't really say what you are thinking of them.

Akylai is coming from the Issik-Kul region. Although it is a touristy place, towns and villages in the Issik-Kul region are never big; some villages may totally consist of one extended

family, so that close relative relationships are essential for every person from the very childhood. Akylai's family consists of two brothers and her parents, but the extended family includes numerous cousins and other relatives, who defined as close and actively participate in Akylai's life. When I asked the woman about her own family and the intervention of her relatives in her personal life, she said that it is not a problem at all, since they are her relatives and she likes to be a part of a big family. This means that the problem being a part of an extended family and lacking personal freedom for this woman is valid only in case of marriage and communication with husband's relatives.

Another respondent Jibek, a twenty-three year old journalist from Bishkek, was also concerned about the question of personal freedom. She told me a story of her close friend, a young highly educated bank manager, who has been living with her husband's family for two years, but still depends on *kainene*:

Nargiza always was a funny and easygoing person, but since she moved to that family, she changed. She rarely laughs and smiles now and always worries about the time she spent with us. That's all because her *kainene* controls her all the time. Once Nargiza's phone started to ring, when we were sitting at the café. She was so afraid her *kainene* will know that she went to café to hang out with friends, that she went to the toilet to talk and pretend she was somewhere in town.

Jibek told me that her friend's *kainene-kelin* relationship model makes her turn towards Western families, where "nobody will bother" her. When I asked her why she thinks that Western families lack controlling mothers-in-law, Jibek seemed surprised by my naive question; she answered: "That's the way their families are pictured in movies and everywhere. Plus everybody say that. It is kind of obvious." Talking about husband's parents Jibek said that it would be nonsense to tolerate regulative control from their side. From her explanation I understood that Jibek sees the Western model of family as one made up of individual cells,

which barely communicate with their relatives, while Kyrgyz family is more like a ‘large beehive’, where someone sees his relatives every day. “In Western countries we would see his parents ones a week or two or even less” said Jibek. These answers show how much the woman tends to generalize her perceptions of both Kyrgyz and Western cultures through the experience of her friend and the media images of Western cultures.

Jibek mentioned that there are other examples of Kyrgyz marriages she knows, but most of the knowledge about married Kyrgyz family’s everyday life she gets from her friend. And this example Jibek considers as very negative. She told me that some aspects of family relations scare her and make her disgusted with Kyrgyz *kainene-kelin* relationships, as for example her friend’s Saltanat *kainene*’s controlling behavior:

His mother wants her to be close all the time. Even if there is no work for her, she has to sit near *kainene*. I do not know why. Once she told me that while being pregnant she was lying on a drip in a clinic and felt dizzy every time after. But her *kainene* anyway made her to sit close to her and didn’t let her sleep! Once Saltanat fell asleep after clinic, *kainene* came to her room and woke her up to force her to come to the dining room and have a tea with her. What the hell is that?

The woman’s reaction on the story and her consequent decision to date only foreigners mean that the only negative in Jibek’s perception example of Kyrgyz culture and the positive media images of other cultures are capable of creating strong motivations of marrying foreigners from a hardly geographically defined so-called Western culture.

The examples of some women married to Kyrgyz men who moved in with the husbands’ families show that higher or lower class position and secondary or high education obtained, do not play substantial role in helping a woman escape this subordinate position in a family. One of my interviewees, Aiganish, a twenty-two year old respondent from a middle-class family from

Bishkek, told me a story of her friend, who, according to Aiganish, is having a hard time with living in husband's place and dealing with his mother:

There is my friend that came from China and got married to a Kyrgyz guy. She is a girl like me and you, who has got a lot of parental love. Parents contributed a lot in her education and spend a lot of money on that. She is very young, only 20 year old. So she gets married to an oldest son in a family and stays with his family, which has only a mother. So there the hard pressure started.

"The hard pressure" here, according to Aiganish, means the amount of domestic responsibilities put on her friend in the new house and *kainene's* constant control over the *kelin*. The foreign education Aiganish's friend has received and the spent part of family budget on this education, in terms of "the hard pressure" in the new family looks useless and wasted for my respondent. She admitted the fact that "Europeans also might have annoying mothers", but at the same time emphasized that even if she marries Kyrgyz man, her husband "would not be really traditional with 'bai manap'⁴ manners" anyway, but rather she would pick "somebody with closer to Western education." At the moment Aiganish is receiving her Masters degree in Europe and has a serious relationship with a student from her university, who came from one of the European countries. If this relationship leads to a marriage, the woman's case would fall under the broadly discussed pattern of marriage migration, when the spouses meet each other during their studying abroad (Cartledge & Scott, 2009, 65).⁵

But more important to note is Aiganish's attitude towards her friend's experience in terms of her own personal experience. As Kalmijn (1998, p. 403) pointed out, there are several so-called "marriage markets", which let unmarried people easily find spouses for themselves instead of wandering "around a region looking for a spouse". Such marriage market as school is considered to be the most efficient one among the other markets, since college, for example,

⁴ A bai manap is a representative of Kyrgyz top feudal nobility, who, not having personal property, lived by the population and its property, a person with arrogant manners (Central Asian Historical Server, 1999-2007).

⁵ For example see King (2002), Findlay et al.(2006).

“promote educational homogamy more than neighborhoods do” (Kalmijn, 1998, p. 404). In terms of her own experience of getting a foreign boyfriend and foreign education, it is not understandable for Aiganish why her friend, after getting foreign education, picked a Kyrgyz man from a traditional family and used neither the education provided, nor the chance to meet a foreign spouse. Contrary to Kalmijn’s and other similar studies about marriage markets, Khatib-Chahidi, Hill and Paton (1998) claimed that working, studying or traveling abroad very rarely leads to cross-national marriages: “for the few who meet foreigners and choose to marry them, the vast majority, despite foreign travel and prolonged residence abroad, prefer their own compatriots as marriage partners” (p. 50).

Some of the respondents were concerned about *kelin*’s position as a servant and mother-in-law’s humiliating treatment. Aiganish, middle class and a highly educated specialist, who obtained her education abroad in Western university, was very upset continuing to tell me her friend’s experience:

If she is cleaning, then *kainene* goes in the wake of her. There was a case when she cleaned a room, and *kainene* stepped into that room to check her work. She held her finger down the windowsill to check the dust! Honestly that would kill me right there! That is sick! How can she do that? It is like checking a housekeeper’s work, when you are checking the work you paid for. But it should be different here, it is a family. I really didn’t like that.

Aiganish said that she would not keep silent in this kind of situation, since it shows that the mother-in-law does not have any respect towards her son’s wife. The concept of respect appeared to be popular topic among my respondents’ stories. Most of them emphasized that respect they deserve as human beings might be taken away in case of marrying Kyrgyz men. Aiganish called the relationship between *kainene* and *kelin* “the main minus” of the Kyrgyz culture. “There is a feeling of servant. They don’t treat you like a human being. You have to deserve the respect” said Aiganish.

Another respondent, Aigerim, also mentioned that it is very important for her to receive respect from her husband and his family. She explained what she means by ‘respect’ as “no pressure with domestic responsibilities, equal treatment, and ability to work”. In terms of her cultural experience the woman sees expression of respect to a daughter-in-law as freedom from subordination in traditional Kyrgyz family and ability to work without receiving permission for it. None of my interviewees mentioned any situation with acts of expression of respect, which would bring them any material or emotional benefit, such as compliments for example, instead all of them considered ‘respect’ as an equal position in a family and lack of superior attitude from their future mothers-in-law.

My interviewees tend to perceive the absence of negative factors as a presence of respect in their new families. They also tend to become satisfied with their position in a new family in case of lack of negative attitude and additional domestic responsibilities. Some of the statements, such as Aigerim’s explanation of respect, also show that some of these women tend to include in their understanding of respect the family’s recognition of their personal freedom by saying that they want to receive family’s permission to work outside of the house. This fact also shows that the notion of respect for these women is narrowed down to a number of minimal requirements, which may differ from a list of requirement of other culture representative, a representative of one of the Western cultures, in which these women are so interested in, for example. The result of my interviews shows that they tend to believe that the notion of respect in Kyrgyz families nowadays has to be applied not only to elder people, parents, parents-in-law, but also to younger members of family, particularly to daughters-in-law. They believe that the expression of respect has to become a two-way flow, which means to be expressed to younger generations as well as to

older generations in the society. This, they believe, can help to solve the problem of subordinate position of daughters-in-law.

The story that Altynai, a twenty-two year old respondent from Bishkek, shared with me about an American woman who got married to Altynai's cousin, shows that the subordinate position of *kelin* does not depend not only on education obtained or class position, but also on the nationality and cultural background of a woman. The assimilation process of a foreign woman in a Kyrgyz family includes giving up some aspects of personal and cultural backgrounds, getting used to new food preferences, local name, new traditions and the subordinate position according to the husband's family. The foreign woman had to sacrifice some of her personal principles in order to be accepted in a traditional Kyrgyz family:

We made *neeke*⁶ for them, although she is not Muslim. She loves my brother so much that being a vegetarian she ate meat on the wedding and even horseflesh, because our relatives did not understand how it is possible not to eat meat. Her name is Barbara, but we call her with Kyrgyz name Bermet. After *neeke* my aunt made her to wash the dishes, sat there and was staring how she was doing it.

The way Altynai was telling me the story helped me to understand the way she positioned herself in it. She was smiling and laughing while telling me about Barbara's experience, which was completely opposite to the way she was telling me about her anxiety of becoming "the last person in a family" after marriage. In this story about Barbara, Altynai was a member of accepting family, she was *kaineje* (husband's cousin), which means being on a superior position than Barbara, who was just a *kelin*. This contrast between the two reactions of the woman on experience of another woman being accepted in Altynai's family and her own future experience being accepted in any other Kyrgyz family tells a lot about the problem of being on an a subordinate position of *kelin*. Altynai's disappointment with Kyrgyz culture, which she expressed before telling the story of Barbara, lies not in the hierarchial structure of Kyrgyz family itself,

⁶ Neeke - Muslim wedding.

since she is happy to be on a superior position of *kaineje*, but rather in her fear of becoming *kelin* and moving down the hierarchial stairs.

By framing Barbara's conformational behavior as "she loves my brother so much", Altynai's example shows the way she defines love. To sacrifice personal and cultural backgrounds and principles means for this woman to love someone very much. In terms of possible marriage between Altynai and her twenty-five year old boyfriend from Germany, whom as she said she loves "very much", Altynai might as well sacrifice her cultural identity and change it in order to assimilate in husband's usual environment.

But not all of the respondents were ready to give up their cultural identities and usual environment because of the foreign husband. Despite the majority opinions in favor of representatives of Western countries to be selected as spouses, there were two women from my sample who refused an idea of marrying a foreigner. While for the majority extended family structure remained to be a problem after marrying Kyrgyz men, these two women named extended family structure as the main advantage of their own culture and the main reason to marry Kyrgyz men. Their main argument was about fear of loneliness and lack of communication while being abroad at the foreign husband's country.

Bermet, a twenty-six year old PhD student of Law department, preferred extended type of family for her future marriage and refused even the idea of marrying a foreigner by giving reasons completely opposite to reasons of other women, who considered mixed marriage as better option. The idea of "otherness" of a foreigner, which appeared to be so attractive for other respondents, seems problematic for Bermet. She emphasized that cultural and educational differences might lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in a family. Although she admitted some disadvantages for women in Kyrgyz culture, such as dependency on husband's opinion in

career decisions, she said that in general it is all “acceptable and not a big problem”, as well as the *kainene-kelin* relationships and hierarchical structure of the family are “not a disaster”.

Another interviewee Nurgul, a twenty-six year old MA student, also does not consider foreigners as an option to marry with, but in comparison to Bermet, Nurgul’s main reason to do so lies in unwillingness to leave her family and move abroad, even though she admits that sometimes she sees more in common between herself and some of her foreign friends. Although during the years spent abroad Nurgul met people whom she liked and was attracted to, she still prefers to choose her spouse from the same social group due to the fear of loneliness in case of moving to a country of husband’s residence. Nurgul is basing her preference on the experience of friend, who divorced a foreigner and returned home, mainly because her husband did not help her to assimilate in the new environment abroad.

My friend was telling me a lot about difficulties of being far from a family and inability to simply talk to somebody sometimes because people are close to foreigners. I know it also, because I spent three years studying abroad. I really miss my family. I would consider a marriage with foreigner only if he moved in my country, so that I stay close to my family.

Nurgul told me that she feels comfortable being surrounded by lots of her relatives and loves when the whole family of two hundred people is gathering for the summer vacation. She also told me that in comparison to the fear of loneliness while living with a foreign husband in his country of residence, she prefers Kyrgyz family “with its disadvantages, such as unfavorable position of the daughter-in-law”:

It is possible to find a Kyrgyz guy, whose family might be modern enough not to treat *kelin* as a servant, I hope. But if honestly my own family is not this modern. Sometimes I ask my aunt not to be so strict with their daughters-in-law. Sometimes I feel sorry for them.

Afterwards she admitted, smiling, that it is easier to be on the more advantageous position of a member of accepting family than on the position of *kelin*.

The women of this study, when comparing Kyrgyz extended families with all the accompanying factors to the nuclear type of family, which they call ‘Western’, in most of the cases tend to prefer the second one due to the beneficial cultural differences, such as rare inter-relative combination and absence of hierarchy in a family, which for them means absence of subordinate position. The problematic side of such negative vision of their own culture is the tendency to generalize cultural disadvantages and apply them on each possible candidate from Kyrgyzstan. Despite the fact that the respondents’ imagination of Western family and Western marriage are built not only on the media representation in movies and other media, but also on their close friends’ and relatives’ experiences⁷, these women tend to idealize Western families according to their images of ideal family and perceive “Western” category of men, as well as “Western” family as universal archetypes. Nuclear, strongly separated and “not annoying each other” families⁸ are presenting the ideal image of the family for some of the respondents.

The motivation of marrying a foreigner is built upon the assumptions of Western men acting in a certain way, as living separately from their relatives, being supportive in wife’s attempt to find a job, sharing domestic responsibilities and demonstrating other behavioral patterns. These beliefs appeared to be widespread and popular among my respondents. The same can be said about their perception of Western family life. Not only do they believe in these stereotypes, but also tend to assume them as universal archetypes for all the ‘Western’ category of people, which according to them may include different European countries and the United States. Stereotypes, which include generalized social group, very often ignore social diversity. A

⁷ All of the interviewees said that they have at least one close friend or relative married to a foreign man

⁸ From the interview with Jibek.

number of scholars (Said, 1978; Steadman, 1969; Dower, 1986) emphasized that particular characteristics and behavioral patterns are “presented as if they are universal to the group, often as specific group or national ‘characters’ that are inherent, ‘natural’, and therefore unchangeable” (Breger & Hill, 1998, p. 11). These kind of generalized stereotypes are problematic since they lead to false expectations of certain behavior from every representative of the social group, as in this case from every “Western” man. I call it problematic because such spouse choosing criteria as family relations with certain patterns described above in terms of generalized stereotypes and assumptions about all the Western representatives may lead to blind choice of a spouse due to the ignorance of diversity inside the group. The fact, that even if some characteristics could be justified for some parts of the Western world, they cannot be applied for its other parts, is forgotten.

In general most of the interviews gave me a sense of the meaning these women put in such concepts as ‘Western family’ and ‘Western marriage’. According to them to be in a Western family means to spent most of the time with a spouse and friends than with relatives, whom one supposed to see not that often or at least much less often than as it would be in a Kyrgyz family. Interesting fact is that these women are ready to give up their traditions to meet with their relatives, if that would be the condition to avoid meeting husband’s relatives. At the same time they do not see their extended families as a problem, as they see their future husbands’ extended families. The amount of intervention in their personal freedom from the side of their own relatives expressed in controlling behavior, close and frequent communication and sharing living space does not seem to be overwhelming to them. These women tend to see Western family with much weaker inter connections between its members than it is in Kyrgyz families, which for them it appears to be a positive criteria to chose nuclear type of family by marrying a

foreigner. Thus I conclude that the reason to marry a foreigner, which my respondents frame in the problems connected with living in extended Kyrgyz families, lies not that much in the fact of living in extended family, but more in their wishes to avoid a subordinate position in husbands' families. Since all of the interviewees said they are happy with their own families, the choice of Western model of nuclear family is caused not by general disappointment with extended family structure, but rather by their unwillingness to move down from a higher position in their own family's hierarchy to a lower one in a new husband's family's hierarchy.

Chapter 4: No room for romance? The economic and other reasons

Most of the women of this study expressed their preferences of foreigners by his “otherness” from the men of their own culture. Despite the variety of different explanations for this term, most of the time they referred to favorable cultural qualities, which their own culture either lacks or has it in a different way. This chapter explains my respondents’ reluctance to mention economic factors of spouse selection process and analyzes some other reasons to marry Western men.

During the interview with Jibek I asked her what would be her reaction, if her Western husband decides to stay at the parents’ house. The woman was very surprised with the question. She did not accept my suggestion about other possible relationships between the husband and his parents, as for example in case if they are very close emotionally and would like to live together with his new family. She said that it never happens to Western men that they do not live with parents unless there is a financial inability to live by their own. “Oh, no! It is impossible! We definitely will live separately, otherwise what is the point to get married to him?” said Jibek, smiling. The point to get married to a Western man narrows here to a particular criterion of a man, who is supposed to own his own house or at least be able to rent a separate place of living apart from his parents. This criterion of spouse selection includes not only the cultural variable, such as nuclear type of family, but also economic factor, which was barely mentioned during the interviews. Such selection process focused on certain criteria leaves no room for romance and makes it clear that some women of this study have particular idea of what a good marriage is and who their future husband should be.

Basing my contemplations on the other reasons to prefer foreign spouses apart from listed above, in this chapter I intend to show that my interviewees, although possibly been influenced by romanticized images of Western men and Western marriage, tend to perceive the Western men first of all as conductors between their past and their wealthier and patriarchy-free future. Although these women might not always recognize all the problematic sides of mixed marriages and not to overview critically real economic and social conditions of potential foreign husbands, still I tend to agree with Nicole Constable about the need to review and criticize the images of Asian ‘mail-order’ brides as ‘sold’ victims of sex-trafficking, which are popular among scholarly works and media in the West.

Considering the fact that, as Kathryn Robinson (2001) pointed out, “there have been few studies that focus on the women themselves: their motivations and aspirations...or what their experiences are once marriages have been constructed” (as cited in Constable 2003, p. 14), Constable (2003) tried to show that the women “are far more than the products” and the men “are more than consumers” in this type of marriages (p. 15). In this section I argue that despite their unwillingness to show it in this research, the reasons of these women to prefer foreign spouses lack romantic characteristics, but rather caused by mercantile and realistic factors, such as inability to find a spouse inside their social group due to an old age, a desire to share domestic responsibilities with the husband or a desire to migrate to a Western country with better economy, more career perspectives and more stable political situation than in Kyrgyzstan.

4.1 The economic factor

Probably the most interesting finding of this work is the tendency of these women to avoid such important aspect of the marriage topic as the economic factor. Covering by cultural differences as reasons to marry foreigners my respondents avoided talking with me about economical differences between their country of origin and those Western countries that they expect their future foreign husbands to come from. The marriage itself is the economic unit, as David R. Shumway (2003) pointed out in his book *Modern Love*, “marriage in most cultures has been understood mainly as a social institution and a property relation rather than a personal commitment and an emotional relation” (p. 12). So the economic reasons are supposed to be the first things to discuss while talking about marriage. In addition, considering the fact that Kyrgyzstan is a Third World country, it is quite logical that at least some of the women from this country would want to marry representatives of wealthier countries in order to live in a country with better economy and bigger range of career perspectives. I want to emphasize here that I do not mean that only the money could be the decision making factor for these women for marrying foreigners. Contrary to that I believe that cultural factors are the same or even more important for my respondents than the economic factor. Kalmijn (1998, p. 409) suggested that according to more detailed analysis on homogamy, “preferences for cultural similarities are stronger than preferences for economically attractive spouses.” Still I consider the economic factor of the topic very important and necessary to mention while talking about marriage, and the absence of mentioning them as an important sign of something else to discover.

During the interviews the respondents tried to show that they do not care about economic factors as much as they do care about cultural and personal characteristics of the future partner. The reason for that I see in their wish to show that they are independent educated women, who

represent social elite of their country and have their dignity to not to depend economically on their foreign spouses, or at least not to put the economic reason on the first place. Some of them even mentioned that they have more career perspectives at home than abroad, so that marriage with foreigner would cause additional inconveniences, such as learning again, re-skilling or getting additional education in their field of work.

I don't want to marry a foreigner because I really love my country and want to stay there. I am sure not a lot of foreigners would like to move to Bishkek and live there, they just would not have good career perspectives. I can't follow him to his country because I am a lawyer, not a software engineer, I can't change my qualification, I studied Kyrgyz law. So my career is another reason not to marry a foreigner. (Bermet)

Bermet was the only woman from the sample, who expressed a strong desire to return to Kyrgyzstan, the rest of the respondents⁹ said they would like to stay in Europe or move to the United States of America, if there is going to be a chance for that, including the possibility of getting married to a Western man. Unlike in Augustin Barbara's study (1989, p. 18), in which people from Morocco and their French spouses tend to underestimate the importance of personal circumstances of unemployment by talking about their marriage and emphasize more the fact that it was love that made them to marry so fast, my respondents do have good career perspectives back in Kyrgyzstan, so that marriage with Western men and consequent migration are not the only options that they see for their future. Still I find it interesting that while willing to stay in Europe or move to the U.S. some of my respondents presented migration to Western countries due to the marriage as a necessary measure, but not something desirable: "I actually do have better perspectives in Bishkek. But if I really decide to marry my foreign boyfriend, I would follow him, because he is my husband" said Aiganysh, MA student of Law department.

⁹ One respondent said that she would stay in Europe, if that depended purely on her decision, but due to family situation she has to go back home as soon as her study is over.

The unwillingness to talk about the economic factor of the marriage might tell about their attitude to me as an interviewer. One of the interviewees while trying to explain me a social status and class position of her friend in Kyrgyz society made it very clear that she considers herself and me to be on the same class, educational and social position:

...my friend, that came from China and got married to a Kyrgyz guy, is a girl like you and me, who has got a lot of parental love. Parents contributed a lot in her education and spend a lot of money on that.

Later she told me what kind of guy she wants to meet and emphasized the importance for him to be on the same intellectual level as much as have same international experience, and again she referred to the similarities between the two of us: “I think you wish the same, right? I think if both of us meet that kind of person, then it would be ok.” The fact that I am a Kyrgyz woman from the same society, approximately same class position and have similar educational background could influence her attitude and cause some difficulties with expressing true reasons to marry a foreigner, or at least cause partial cover of those reasons.

Even though the participants did not mention economic factors directly, it was clear from the interviews that some of these women tend to perceive foreign spouses as all-mighty persons, who, if necessary, are able to bring them into economically wealthier societies. The image of a Western man as a problem solver was described in many of the interviews. Nurgul, for example, who had moved from peripheral region to the capital and had met there an American man, told what important role this man played in her life:

There was this guy, my good friend, he was a little older than me and I think liked me a lot. We were just friends, but he helped me by paying for my education at the university. I wish at that time I understood that we could be together, but I was not interested. Now he is married, and I am happy for him. If I met him now, we could be a couple, I think.

Eldana, living in London twenty year old student from Bishkek, told me a story of her friend, who during the summer spent in the U.S. found husband and stayed there:

She decided to stay, but stayed illegally. So of course she had problems with visa and work. Then she met him and after a couple of months he proposed to her. Isn't it amazing? He helped her to solve all the problems with visa and work permission, and now she is happily living in New Jersey.

Eldana seemed to be very excited while telling me this story. She admired her friend's success and ability to find common ground with people from other countries so fast. "I wish I had the same skill" said Eldana after finishing a story. When I asked her whether she wishes to find a husband during her staying abroad as well, she seemed to become confused and said that the main goal for her is the education at the moment. All of it made me think of the unwillingness of Eldana to seem desperate for marriage with Western man and uncover the desire to stay in Britain. In general I think that answers of all or some of my respondents might be different, if I as a researcher was a representative of another society, coming from another country and not knowing these women in person before the interviews. I believe that the economic factor would be presented much more broadly in the interviews if the respondents did not know me in person.

4.2 The age factor

Another reason to marry a foreigner named by my respondents lies in the age factor. Kalmijn (1998) states that marriage patterns depend on "both preference and opportunity", while "opportunity to marry within the group depends on many factors" (p. 397). As Khatib-Chahidi, Hill and Paton (1998) pointed out those who "marry out" tend "to marry later than the average age of their particular group" (p. 50). This might happen due to different reasons, such as

postponing marriage due to career building or education obtaining, for example. However in Kyrgyzstan an 'age' factor might become a problem for a woman to find a spouse due to her "old" age. As Nedoluzhko and Agadjanian (2010) reported, in Kyrgyzstan during the post-Soviet period there was a tendency of postponement of marriage: "the mean age at first marriage between 1991 and 2007 rose from 24.4 to 26.8 for men, and from 21.7 to 23.4 for women" (p. 165). Still according to this data the average marriage age for women in Kyrgyzstan is about twenty-one – twenty-three years old, which means that the older a woman than this age border, the harder it must be to find a spouse. Thus among other factors, which may influence homogamy, in Kyrgyzstan the 'age' factor plays an important role.

Bermet told me about her friend, whose decision to get married to a foreigner was caused by her age:

I had a friend who married a British guy, because she was thirty year old already and could not find a husband in Kyrgyzstan. It is kind of late to get married at this age in our country. I think age was the only reason she made it.

Barbara (1989, p. 14) in his book not only doubted the 'age' factor to be the main explanation for some mixed marriages, but also called it "popular notion...with a naive force". If people seem unhappy about choosing partners because of forcing special reasons, such as late age in this case, "why then do they not marry as the majority of people do" (p. 14)? Bermet seems to be exactly the person, who is not unhappy about her unmarried status. Although she believes that the late age of a Kyrgyz woman is the reason that can force her to turn to a foreigner, she, being twenty-six year old by now and, as she told me, not engaged in any relationships at the moment, does not worry yet about not finding a husband for herself. She is also very confident about going back after finishing her PhD, by the end of which she is going to be about same age as her friend was – thirty year old. "If I will not find a husband among Kyrgyz

men, I will probably consider marrying a foreigner” said Bermet. In this case even those who do not want to marry foreigners at first consider those, who come from Western countries where the usual marriage age is later than in Kyrgyzstan, as the reserve option in case there will not be a possibility to find a spouse among Kyrgyz men.

4.3 Kyrgyz men vs. Western men

While explaining “what is wrong with Kyrgyz men so that they need to be changed”¹⁰, the women of the study mostly concentrated on problems with the mentality of Kyrgyz and Central Asian people in general. “I don’t want to be a slave of my husband, but this is what my society says me to do. I want to be on the same position with my husband and this is what I can get from a foreigner” said Aigerim. The women of the study strongly differentiated Western men who ‘adore’ their wives from Kyrgyz men, who are ‘not respecting their wives’.

All of the reasons to marry Western men or contrary to stay inside the social group and marry Kyrgyz men listed above support my respondents’ hopes to meet a Kyrgyz man with, how they call it, ‘pro-Western’ education and mentality. This man would present the ideal mixture of supporting and helping at the house husband, who is at the same time earns enough to not to oblige his wife to work. “I would pick a Kyrgyz guy only if he would be liberal, not conservative at all, wouldn’t be oppressive. Unfortunately, I have not met such kind of Kyrgyz guys” said one of my interviewees. Other respondents also expressed their wish to meet ‘Other’ Kyrgyz man, who would be different from everybody they knew before, who would be “just like Western guys”. Most of the young women emphasized their readiness to include Kyrgyz men in the scope of candidates to become their husbands, but with particular limitations and terms. The way they

¹⁰ From the interview with Eldana, 20 year old respondent from Bishkek

explained these terms shows that nationality does not matter unless the mentality is not traditional Central Asian, but ‘Western’, which means that a man’s views on family, marriage and domestic work should include equal opportunities for both partners, equal division of labor and domestic work, equal treatment of the wife. Although all of the respondents said that they have not met this kind of ‘Other’ Kyrgyz men and barely believe in fact that they might exist at all, they would be happy if this happens, since they could share same cultural background with the husband while escaping oppressive treatment.

Cohen (2003, p. 71) described the reasons of Western men to want to change sometimes their ‘Oriental’ wives from Thailand and make them a little more Western, “so that the disparity between them could be overcome.” Contrary to that, women of my study wish to change men from their own social group, so that they would be more ‘Western’, which means to be more similar to the Western men my interviewees meet abroad. Breger and Hill (1998) stated that “two people from different cultures may actually have more in common than they have differences, especially if they share similar urban highly educated, professional background” (p. 8). The result of the interviews shows that most of my respondents, except from two of them, tend to find something in common with foreigners coming from Europe and United States than with majority of men, whom they met in Kyrgyzstan. As Eldana expressed it, sometimes it is easier to communicate with people out of the social group:

When I talk to them [British men] I feel that I can share my thought freely and not to think of my reputation, which our guys are crazy about, or about their opinion. They are easier in most of the things. They are open-minded, which is very important.

Another respondent, Madina, also emphasized that personal characteristics and the level of education are very important for mutual understanding between the partners:

European guys that I met during my study have read a lot, they are interested in deferent fields, they draw, sing and play musical instruments. What do our guys do? All they can think of is how to get a nice car.

There are several problems that I see in these and other comparisons of my interviewees between Kyrgyz men and Western men. First of all, these women tend to idealize marriage with Western men, as well as the image of Western men itself by opposing them to Kyrgyzstanis and assuming that this opposition works in a totally positive way for foreigners. There is a tendency to generalize Western men in one group without differentiation on nationalities and different cultures. I asked my friends from which particular places these ideal husbands come from and received a simple answer: “United States and Europe.”¹¹ I also see the lack of understanding that there are might be some difficulties connected with cross-cultural marriage.

Still the experience of living abroad and communicating with Western men influenced some of the respondents’ perceptions of the differences between men of their country and Western men. All of the respondents agreed on the difference in education and the fact that unlike Kyrgyz men Western men are willing to help with the domestic work, but some of them also pointed out that apart from the domestic labor division there are other important factors to note, which might be not so different from Kyrgyz men. Akylai talking about her experience of living abroad pointed out changes in her perceptions:

Before I thought they are very different from our guys. And of course they are different, but at the same time you start to realize that they might be jealous and oppressive as well as our guys. So it is not that different if you look closer.

Akylai told me that since she by herself is coming from a traditional family, in which gender roles are set according to general assumption that running the house and cooking are the women’s responsibilities, she would rather prefer to get married to a man with more pro-Western

¹¹ From the interviews with Jibek and Eldana.

education. According to Akylai, this means that her husband supposed to put less domestic responsibility on her, but rather share them. At the same time, Akylai said that it is not that hard for her to do the domestic work, but she is rather annoyed by the position of her family members, who reject the idea of helping at the house. This means that her desire for the husband to be ‘pro-Western’ means not necessarily to actually help with the domestic work, but mainly not to reject the possibility to do so as Kyrgyz men do. On the other hand she brought a question of the role of the bread-winner in a family saying that this role somehow exempts a man from domestic responsibilities:

Yes, our men do not cook for themselves, but on the other hand they totally take responsibility of earning money, while in Western countries both partners are obliged to work equally. Yes, my father does not help at the house, but he does not require money from my mom, so she is free of that. In that sense it becomes balanced.

This explanation of balancing the gender roles inside the family shows that the patriarchal oppression which has led to this division is rather under thought and misunderstood. Considering that Akylai as she said is going to build a career and not going to give it up due to the marriage, she probably did not think of the consequences that may appear after the marriage. The role of the bread winner in Kyrgyz society automatically prescribed on the husband, even if there is a working wife in the family as well, what causes the double work day for her – at the work and at home. At the same time this explanation of Akylai raises a question of her sincerity. Does this woman really want to work or if there would be an option to choose, she would prefer to run the house? Again my person as a researcher could play here an important role. Since both of us have received the same level of education, Akylai could become uncomfortable to share with me the possibility to prefer same division of gender role, as it was presented by her parents, despite of the education obtained and good career perspectives.

Like in Cohen's study of marriages between Thai women and Western men (2003, pp. 78-79) my respondents also have a chance to select spouses outside of their social group and local marriage market. The assumption that the marriage markets are given also seem to be not applicable to the women of my study, as it is not for the women of Cohen's study, since they have access to several marriage markets, including local marriage market in Kyrgyzstan, the university market and the work marriage market in Western countries. They have a choice between these marriage markets, while other women from Kyrgyzstan without Western education and experience of living abroad have limited or simply other range of choices. As the interviews showed some of these women have strengthened, obtained or completely changed their attitudes towards cross-national marriage with Western men after some time spent being abroad and on other marriage markets.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In this thesis I analyzed the spouse selection preferences and the marriage perceptions of highly educated Kyrgyz women with rich international experience and education obtained in Western countries. The study showed that my respondents perceive marriage in different ways, what makes the difference between those who want to marry local men and those who prefer to marry foreigners. All of my respondents agreed on the definition of good marriage as to live separately from the husband's family, have ability to work and equally share domestic responsibilities. Although all of them also agreed that there much more chances to achieve this with Western husbands, some still preferred to marry Kyrgyz men, but at the same time preferred them to be pro-Western. So that concept of being Western remains in any case and constitutes the image of ideal husbands for these women.

The study also showed that my position as a researcher during the interviews might have confused the interviewees and influenced their answers. The fact that the respondents perceived me as a woman from the same society and same social position made them partially cover their reasons and avoid the discussion of important aspect of marriage topic – the economic factor.

By the end of the research I found several mismatches between my initial hypothesis and the results of the interviews. The main mismatch with the initial hypothesis and the main finding of this research at the same time was the fact that the women of the study in most of the cases prefer Western men not much due to the cultural differences between Western societies and Kyrgyz society, but rather due to their reluctance to make a downshift in the hierarchal system of the family, in case of marrying a Kyrgyz man. By escaping the accession the extended family of a Kyrgyz husband, these women try to avoid double-oppression put on them: not only the

patriarchal oppression from the husband, but also the oppression put by the mother-in-law. The way my respondents see the differences between Kyrgyz type of marriage and Western one can be formulated in a following way: while Western marriage includes only a husband and a wife, Kyrgyz marriage includes the whole family in it. These women choose marriage with Western men and Western, which includes mainly the couple, while marriage with Kyrgyz men includes close family relations in extended families from both sides and means a woman's move from the higher position in the hierarchal structure of her own extended family down to the bottom position in the hierarchal structure of husband's family.

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Appendix 1

List of the interviewees:

Respondent 1: Aiganysh, 22 year old highly educated middle-class woman from Bishkek, lives in Budapest, has studied abroad for one year, has a boyfriend from Romania.

Respondent 2: Akylai, 22 year old highly educated middle-class woman from Issik-Kul region, lives in Budapest, has studied abroad for two and a half years.

Respondent 3: Bermet, 26 year old middle-class woman from Bishkek, is doing her PhD in Budapest, has studied abroad for three years.

Respondent 4: Ainura, 22 year old highly educated middle-class woman from Naryn region, lives in Budapest, has studied abroad for two years, has a boyfriend from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Respondent 5: Jibek, 23 year old highly educated middle-class woman from Bishkek, lives in Budapest, has studied abroad for one year, has a boyfriend from Italy.

Respondent 6: Eldana, 20 year old upper-middle-class Bachelor student from Bishkek, lives in London, has studied abroad for two years.

Respondent 7: Madina, 25 year old middle-class woman from Osh, lives in Budapest, has studied abroad for three years.

Respondent 8: Altynai, 22 year old middle-class woman from Bishkek, lives in Bishkek, has studied abroad for two years.

Respondent 9: Nurgul, 26 year old middle-class woman from Talas region, lives in Bishkek, has studied abroad for two years, lives alone for five years.

Appendix 2

The interview collection process:

The first half of the interviewees from the sample consisted from my friends or schoolmates, whom I asked to participate in the study. In order to find other interviewees I used anthropological method of snowball sampling. I posted an advert on my Facebook page and in my Twitter account about a need in unmarried highly-educated Kyrgyz women to participate in my study about spouse-selection. Later it turned out that all of those, whom I found through this method are my acquaintances, so that I personally knew all of the respondents before the interviews. It also turned out that most of the women had rich international experience of living abroad and studying. Since I wanted my sample to be as similar as possible I did not interview those women, who had not have any experience of living abroad in one of the Western countries in an international environment.

Three out of nine interviews were collected by Skype, the rest of them were collected in person. After transcribing and translating them, I started to look for similar patterns and trends throughout the interviews. I tried to understand whether there are similar reasons of marrying Western men or contrary to marry Kyrgyz men. It helped me to specify the general reasons to marry foreigners in order to move later to more individual specific reasons to marry or to not to marry Western men of each respondent. Considering individual experience of each respondent I tried to analyze these reasons, what can be seen in chapters three and four of this thesis. Before collecting the interviews I prepared the set of questions consisting of 10 questions, additional questions were asked in consideration of individual experience of each interviewee. In general the questions were about respondents' experience of communicating with Western and Kyrgyz

men, their observations of Kyrgyz married couples and mixed-married couples, their feelings about their own families and their perception of the marriage experience.