Clashing Dreams:  
*Highly Educated Overseas Brides and Low-Wage U.S. Husbands*  

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Hours before her husband’s plane was due, on a rainy day in July 2000, Thanh Nguyen¹ and about thirty members of her family anxiously waited outside of Tan Son Nhat, Saigon’s international airport.² Thanh’s family was understandably excited. For many families expecting a relative or a close friend from the Vietnamese diaspora, the waiting is an event in itself: they come to the airport long before the plane is due, creating such a commotion outside that it is difficult to follow any one conversation.

I watched and listened, like a waiter at a busy restaurant—intently but discreetly. I could make out only fragments of conversations among people of a culture known for making sure: “Make sure you greet him properly,” adults told young children. “Make sure the restaurant knows we are coming,” men reminded women. And of course, “Make sure you always show him love and respect,” Thanh’s parents reminded their thirty-two-year-old daughter.

The Nguyens were prudent people. Although they knew Thanh’s husband, Minh, well—he had made the long journey across the Pacific from his home in Quincy, Washington, three times in the last year—they wanted him
to feel welcome and important each time he visited. Their instinct was a
good one: when I visited him in Quincy, ninety miles from Seattle, the
thirty-seven-year-old Minh revealed to me that he often did not feel impor-
tant or respected in the small suburban town where he lived.

Seattle is one of the most heavily Vietnamese cities outside of Vietnam,
and Thanh’s husband is one of more than two million Viet Kieu, or Vietnamese
people living overseas, who make up an aging diaspora that largely began
emigrating in the mid-1970s. Thanh will soon join Minh in Quincy as one
of more than 200,000 legal marriage migrants who come to the United States
each year.

About a quarter of all men and more than 40 percent of all women who
currently enter the United States are marriage migrants. Of these marriage
migrants, more than 65 percent are women. It is no news that women have
dominated U.S.-bound migration since the 1930s and that, historically,
more women than men have migrated as spouses. However, despite the fact
that marriage remains the number one reason people migrate to the United
States, we know very little about the specific contemporary marriage migra-
tion streams or about why women overwhelmingly dominate them. More
familiar is the often sensationalized phenomenon of mail-order brides; though an important part of the female marriage migration puzzle, such women constitute at most 4 percent of all marriage migrants.

The marriage of Minh and Thanh follows a global trend that has been
gathering momentum over the last forty years: immigrant and immigrant-
origin men are more and more frequently seeking wives in their countries of
origin. An estimated two-thirds of all marriage migrants are of the same
ethnicity, and among migrants who come to the United States married to
noncitizen permanent residents (presumably immigrants), almost 90 percent
are women. Like many international marriages between same-ethnic indivi-
duals, especially in Asia, the marriage of Minh and Thanh was arranged.
Marriage arrangements come in many forms, and I have addressed these
elsewhere. What Minh and Thanh represent is a specific and fairly typical
pattern: the marriage of the two “unmarriageables,” namely of highly edu-
cated women in Vietnam to Vietnamese men who do low-wage work over-
seas.

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The Double Marriage Squeeze

Vietnamese people worldwide are pressed by what demographer Daniel Goodkind calls the "double marriage squeeze." A high male mortality rate during the Vietnam War, combined with the migration of a larger number of men than women during the last quarter of the twentieth century, has produced a low ratio of men to women in Vietnam, as well as an unusually high ratio of men to women in the Vietnamese diaspora, especially in Australia and the United States. Of the fifteen most populous nations in 1989, Vietnam had the lowest ratio of men to women at the peak marrying ages. By 1999, there were approximately 92 men for every 100 women between the ages of 30 and 34 in Vietnam. The reverse situation prevails in the diaspora: in 2000, there were 129 Vietnamese-American men for every 100 women between the ages of 24 and 29. Among Vietnamese-Americans aged 30 to 34, there were about 135 men for every 100 women.17

Those who study marriage markets have long documented a nearly universal pattern, called the marriage gradient, whereby women tend to marry men who are older, better educated, and higher earning than they are, while men tend to marry younger women who earn less money and have less education.18 Men "marry down" economically and socially; women "marry up." Transnational couples like Minh and Thanh, however, seem to reverse the marriage gradient. But depending on the measure one uses, it is often difficult to tell who is really marrying up, and who down.

Thanh belongs to an emerging group of highly educated women in Vietnam who have delayed or avoided marriage with local men. These women have found that too few men in Vietnam are employed and successful relative to them. More important, in the eyes of many men influenced by traditional Asian and Confucian hierarchies of gender, age, and class, a highly educated woman like Thanh is unmarriageable. As with highly educated African-American women in the United States, there is a surplus of women like Thanh in Vietnam relative to their educated male counterparts. Minh, on the other hand, belongs to a surplus group of Viet Kieu men, many of whom are unable to find marriage partners partly because they are low-wage workers. Some of these men, though certainly not all, experienced tremen-
dous downward mobility when they migrated overseas after the Vietnam War.

In my study of sixty-nine Vietnamese transpacific marriages, 80 percent of the men were low-wage earners like Minh. These men generally work for hourly wages, though some work in ethnic enterprises where salaries are negotiated under the table. For the most part, they work long hours for low pay. Almost 70 percent of their brides are women like Thanh, who are college-educated; about 40 percent of these women have advanced degrees, which permit them to work as doctors, lawyers, computer programmers, and the like. Of my entire sample about 55 percent were marriages between these two “unmarriageables.”

The double marriage squeeze is one force propelling these transpacific marriages of the two unmarriageables, but the cultural belief in the marriage gradient is at least as powerful and probably more so. The marriage gradient is a strict norm in Vietnamese culture. Many Vietnamese, including the unmarriageables themselves, believe that by making these unorthodox matches transnational ones, they somehow get around the discomfort of breaking the marriage gradient norm. It is as though despite their relative incomes and education, if the man is from a First World country, he has the “up,” while a woman from Third World Vietnam has the “down.” And though it is no surprise that the economic divide between the First and Third Worlds deeply penetrates the private lives of Vietnamese transpacific couples, it is not always clear who has the Third World life in marriages of the two unmarriageables.

While reaching out overseas seems a perfect solution to the double marriage squeeze, it gives rise to an unanticipated collision of gender ideologies in 90 percent of these couples. The reason is that the dreams that led both partners into the arrangement often had as much to do with gender as with economic mobility. Educated women like Thanh hope that a man living overseas in a modern country will respect women more than men at home, who may still be in the sway of ancient Vietnamese traditions. Low-wage working men like Minh, meanwhile, often look to women in Vietnam precisely because they wish to uphold those ancient traditions, which they believe have been eroded in modern American life, but which they expect a woman in Vietnam will maintain.
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In their search for spouses, both parties have relied to some extent on tradition, which leads them to agree to a marriage arranged by family members. But it is the modern, globalizing culture of Vietnam that makes the transnational match possible. In 1986, after having had no contact with the outside world for over a decade, the Vietnamese government adopted a new economic policy known as doi moi. It did not end state ownership, but it encouraged private enterprise, free markets, and global engagement. In the 1990s, Saigon reemerged as a major international city, first within Asia and then in the world more generally. Vietnam was projected to be one of Asia’s next “tigers.” Enticed by an emerging labor and consumer market of eighty million people, foreign companies were eager to move their factories there and to make their products known.

Globalization rapidly opened the Vietnamese market for capital, goods, and labor. At the same time, it also opened a more personal exchange of emotions and marriage partners. But while goods and capital tend to flow in two directions, the divide between the First World economy of the West and the Third World economy of Vietnam makes it impossible for women in Vietnam to go abroad to look for grooms but very easy for Viet Kieu men to go to Vietnam for brides. Just as global corporations and factories moved to Vietnam to partake of its large supply of labor, Viet Kieu men go there to choose among its large selection of potential brides. But unlike locals who eagerly take jobs at foreign factories for the pay, Vietnamese transpacific brides have a wide range of reasons for choosing to marry Viet Kieu men.

The Highly Educated Bride

Twenty years ago, Thanh’s father was a math teacher at Le Buon Phong, a prestigious high school in Saigon. After the war, Thanh’s uncle, her mother’s younger brother, and his family were among the several thousand Vietnamese who were airlifted out of Vietnam on April 30, 1975, when Saigon surrendered to the North Vietnamese. They eventually settled in Houston, one of the larger Vietnamese enclaves in the United States, and started a successful restaurant business specializing in pho, the popular Vietnamese beef noodle soup. Remittances from Thanh’s uncle helped her parents open a small candy factory in the late 1980s; that factory now has more than forty employees. Thanh’s parents belong to a small but very visible class of Viet-
namese families who enjoy access to overseas resources. They are part of a
Viet Kieu economy that has grown from roughly $35 million in 1993 to an
estimated $2 billion in 2000.21

Thanh was only seven years old when Saigon fell. She is not as old as
Minh, whose memory of the war is very strong and formative; nor is she able
to put that era completely behind her, like her peers born after the war, who
are eager to move forward and to join the global economy. She embraces for-
eign influences and appreciates the access she has to them. Many of her
friends work in foreign companies as translators, or in marketing or sales;
some have become local branch supervisors for international corporations
such as Citibank and IBM. Nevertheless, Thanh is conscious that her parents
have sustained hidden injuries from accepting remittances from her uncle in
Houston, and this saddens her. She observes:

My father is a very strong man; nobody ever tells him what to do
with his life, like how to raise his children. But I think it is very hard
for him when he has to deal with my uncle. My uncle is a very nice
man, and he cares a lot for our family. But even though he’s younger
than my mother, his older sister, he doesn’t respect my father. He
thinks my father has to listen to him about everything, like how to
run his business. When he comes back to Vietnam, he always tries
to change the ways my dad runs things. And my father always
defers to him. He feels that because my uncle helped him financially
to open up the candy factory, he has to do everything my uncle says.
I know he feels very embarrassed and humiliated inside, but would
never tell anyone about it.

Thanh’s family is not alone in its discomfort with receiving money from
abroad. Remittances create social inequality and stress between givers and
receivers, and even greater inequalities between receivers and nonreceivers in
the same community. Nonetheless, Thanh knows that she owes the lifestyle
she enjoys at least partly to her uncle’s remittances. After all, the average
salary for Saigonese lawyers, according to Thanh, is a little over 2 million
Vietnamese dong (VND), or US$150 per month, whereas the net profit of
her father’s candy factory averages close to VND 900 million a year. Thanh
earns about VND 2.5 million a month as a part-time lawyer in a small firm
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that handles legal contracts of all sorts. Although her salary is six times the standard income of the average worker in Saigon, it is still low on a global scale. But the remittances that gave her parents’ business a leg up have also allowed Thanh, an only child, to have a greater than average degree of educational and social mobility. She has been able to obtain a good high school education, to study law, and to take lessons at international English schools in Saigon.

Most of Thanh’s peers married soon after high school, but Thanh and a small group of her female friends from Le Buon Phong High School decided to continue their schooling instead. Of her seven close female friends from high school, only one did not go to college, choosing instead to marry early. The rest, including Thanh, quietly built professional careers. Most went into fields traditionally reserved for women, including education and nursing. Two pursued advanced degrees. Thanh obtained a law degree, while her friend became a prestigious physician at Vinh Bien, a private hospital catering to Saigon’s middle class. Four of the seven, now in their early thirties, remain single. At the time of this writing, there is no available data on the extent of delayed marriages across class and educational levels in Vietnam. But if the paths of Thanh and her four friends who chose singlehood are any indication, a quiet gender revolution is taking place among highly educated Vietnamese women. These women have opted for singlehood in a culture where marriage is not only presumed but often coerced. Women and men who have not yet married at the appropriate age are often dismissively referred to as “e,” or unmarriageable. By contrast, women (often young and beautiful) and men (often educated and financially secure) who fare well on the marriage market are considered dat, or scarce goods. As Thanh explained to me,

I am already e in Vietnam. You know, at thirty-two here, it’s hard to find a decent husband. I knew that when I decided to get a good education here that many men would be intimidated by me. But it was important to me to get an education, and I know that for women, marriage is more important. In Asian cultures, but maybe in Vietnam especially, the men do not want their wives to be better than them. I think for me it’s harder, too, because my parents are successful here, so to the outsider we seem very successful.
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In truth, Thanh is not completely e: several men, sometimes with their families, have come to propose marriage to her. Arranged marriages remain common in Vietnam, although they are more common in villages than in urban areas. Young couples who marry by arrangement are susceptible to significant difficulties if class differences divide their families. Individual and family success can make a Vietnamese woman, particularly if she has passed the socially accepted marriageability age, unmarriageable. Thanh had several proposals for marriage arrangements when she was in her mid-twenties, before she got her law degree, from men who wanted to marry down. Now she is thirty-two and educated; she believes that marrying up is no longer an option, since there are few available men in that category. Although she has many suitors of lesser means and education than herself, Thanh explains that she does not find marrying down to be an appealing prospect:

When I look up, there are few men “up there” who I could see as suitable husbands. But those men, the few men I know who have more education and who are more successful than I am, usually want to marry young, beautiful women. To them, I am now too old. The backward thing about life is that the men below are very unappealing. And of course there are many of them! There are many, many nonquality men I could choose from, but that’s what they are—nonquality.

Thanh’s marriage procrastination was partly anchored in her confused class and gender status. Her upward mobility put her at the top locally, but globally, she is at the bottom, since Vietnam has low status among nations. In a traditional marriage, her husband must be the household’s provider; but given that she is marrying a low-wage worker, she may end up being the one to seek economic security through her own means. Yet marrying a low-wage worker overseas looks attractive to Thanh because she knows that in Vietnam, her high educational status will not help her escape the gender subordination of marital life. She can think of few men she knows in Vietnam who show respect to their wives.

On our third and final interview, Thanh and I walked along the Saigon River. It was early evening, and the city skyline loomed in the near distance,
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separated from us by a cacophony of motorcycles, bicycles, and taxis. Disconsolately, Thanh explained:

In Vietnam, it is hard being single, female, and old. People will criticize and laugh at you. People always ask me, “Where are your husband and children?” And when I think about that, I realize that I have two choices. I can marry a man in Vietnam who is much less educated and less successful than I whom I will have to support and who will likely abuse me emotionally or physically or dominate me in every possible way. Or I can marry a Viet Kieu man. At least Viet Kieu men live in modern countries where they respect women.

Ultimately, what Thanh wants in a marriage partner is someone who will respect her, and who will not seek to control her the way she sees so many Vietnamese men control their wives. As she told me:

When I find a nice man “below” me I could marry, he wouldn’t want to marry me because he’s afraid that I’ll take control of the house or that if anything goes wrong in the marriage, I could turn to my family for help. Most men in Vietnam want to control their wives, they want their wives to be subordinate even when she is more successful and educated. That leaves me with very few choices in Vietnam, you see, because I for sure don’t want a man to take control of me.

The Low-Wage Working Groom

If Thanh’s desire for respect stems from her upward mobility, her husband’s parallel desire has everything to do with his downward mobility. Minh, whose hands, facial expressions, and graying hair make him seem older than his thirty-seven years, was the only member of his family to leave Vietnam during “Wave II” of the boat exodus that took place after the war.24 As the eldest son, he was vested with a special status and with a good deal of responsibility for his six siblings. Both of his parents were teachers of philosophy at Le Buon Phong, where they have known Thanh’s parents for many years. Today, three of Minh’s sisters are teachers and his two brothers are successful merchants in Saigon.
In 1985, at the age of twenty-one, Minh was a man of intellectual ambition and curiosity. He had just completed his third year of engineering school when his parents asked him if he wanted to go to America. They didn’t know anyone overseas at the time, but they knew of several people among the many hundreds of thousands of refugees, who had safely reached a Western country. More than 90 percent of these refugees settled in France, Australia, Canada, or the United States. Minh’s parents also knew that as many as half of the refugees on any given boat did not reach their destinations. They died along the way due to starvation, pirate attacks, and often, in the case of women and children, in the combination of rape and murder en route to a refugee camp. Many were also caught by the Vietnamese government and severely punished with long prison sentences.

Nevertheless, Minh’s parents were confident that he would survive and find a better life abroad. They spent their entire lives’ savings to put him on one of the safest and most reputable boats to leave the Mekong Delta for Western lands of opportunity. These boats and their routes via refugee camps in Southeast Asia were a carefully guarded secret in Vietnam, and they were accessible only to wealthy or well-connected families. Being caught by government officials could lead to severe punishment. Many who were not wealthy, like Minh’s family, managed to pool their resources so that one person, usually a son, could go. They saw this as an investment, which they made with the hope it would yield high returns.

Today, Minh considers himself one of the lucky ones who left. After surviving two years in a refugee camp in Malaysia, he was selected in 1987 for entry to the United States. Many people he met at the camp ended up in less desirable places, like Finland, Belgium, or Hungary. Back then, as now, the United States was the top-choice destination, followed by Canada, France, and Australia. Minh arrived in rural Wyoming under the sponsorship of a local Catholic church. Like many of the American churches that sponsored Indochinese refugees from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, Minh’s church sponsored only one person. He spent the first five years of his new life as the only person of color in a rural town in Wyoming, the name of which he doesn’t even want to remember.

Like many Vietnamese refugees in the past three decades, Minh decided to migrate a second time. He wanted to go to Little Saigon, the most highly concentrated Vietnamese enclave outside of Vietnam, located in a seemingly
quiet Los Angeles suburb that is today plagued by urban problems. But he had little money and no connections in or around Los Angeles. Then one day, in one of the Vietnamese-produced newspapers that flourished in the United States following the influx of refugees, Minh read about a Chinese restaurant called the Panda Garden that needed dishwashers. Unfortunately, it was not in Los Angeles but in a small town called Quincy, ninety miles from Seattle. Minh heard that Seattle also had many Vietnamese people, and he hoped that moving there would bring him closer to other refugees.

Eleven years later, Minh still lives in Quincy and works at the Panda Garden. He is now a deep fryer and an assistant cook, which is several steps up from the dishwashing position he was first given. Although to him, an assistant cook carries less stigma than a dishwasher, it is far from the engineering career he envisaged in his pre-migration years. His responsibilities include helping the main cook with various kitchen tasks and making sure that the restaurant has a constant supply of egg rolls and wontons. Though known as one of the best and most authentic ethnic restaurants in town, the Panda serves a mainly white American clientele that, according to the restaurant’s owners, probably wouldn’t know the difference between authentic Chinese food and a Sara Lee frozen dinner.

Quincy is similar to many suburban towns in Middle America: it is not quite rural, but far from urban. People who live here drive to Seattle to shop and eat if they have money, but they stay in town if they want to see a movie. The town has two Chinese restaurants, a dozen other ethnic restaurants, and numerous chain-store franchises. Minh knows five other Vietnamese people in Quincy. They are all men, and three of them work with him at the restaurant. He shares a modest three-bedroom apartment with the barest of furnishings with these coworkers.

Like many Viet Kieu people, Minh sends remittances to Vietnam. But though remittances allow their receivers to enjoy First World consumption, givers often only partake of these fruits when they return to their Third World homes. In the First World settings where they live and work, some givers, like Minh, are able to sustain only a Third World consumption pattern. Minh earns approximately $1,400 a month in Quincy and sends $500 of that back to his family. That amount is much higher than the average of $160 the grooms in my study remit to their wives or families on a monthly basis. At $900, his remaining budget would be considered way below the
poverty level anywhere in the United States. But the stream of cash he sends his family permits them to stay connected in the small, though conspicuous, circles of families who have overseas kin networks.

In the meantime, however, Minh finds himself lacking not only in material comforts but in the kind of respect he had come to expect before he migrated. Minh remembers vividly that in his early twenties, his peers considered him a good catch. He came from a well-respected family, and he was headed for a career in engineering. Young men he knew had not one but several girlfriends at a time, and this was accepted and celebrated during those difficult postwar years. Minh was relatively fortunate: his parents were respected teachers with small but steady incomes. They could afford to spend small amounts of money on leisure activities, and on materials that bought them some status in their pre-remittance circles. When we talked over beer and cigarettes in the hot kitchen where he worked, Minh told me:

Life here now is not like life in Vietnam back then. My younger brothers and sisters used to respect me a lot because I was going to college and I was about to get my degree. Many young women I met at the time liked me, too, because I came from a good family and I had status [điể]. But now, because I don’t have a good job here, people don’t pay attention to me. That’s the way my life has been since I came to the United States. And I don’t know if I’m lucky or unlucky, but I think it’s hard for a [Vietnamese] man to find a wife here if he doesn’t make good money. If you have money, everyone will pay attention [to you], but if you don’t, you have to live by yourself.

For the most part, that’s what Minh has done in the sixteen years since he arrived in the United States. Minh believes that money can, and often does, buy love, and that if you don’t have much of it, you live by yourself. Although his yearly income puts him just above the poverty level for a single man, I discovered in a budget analysis of his expenditures that after remittances he falls well below the poverty level. The long hours that often accompany low-wage work have made it particularly difficult for him to meet and court marriage partners. If Minh worked long hours for a law firm or a corporation, he would not only get financial rewards but also the status and prestige that
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men often use as a trade-off in marriage markets. If he were a blue-collar white man in Quincy, he could go to church functions, bowling alleys, or bars to meet and court local women. For Minh, a single, immigrant man who does low-wage work in a low-status job with long hours in Middle America, the prospect of marriage has been, and remains, low. Even under slightly more favorable circumstances, Viet Kieu men complain of a lack of marriage partners. Men I interviewed in ethnic enclaves such as Little Saigon faced difficulties because, as one man told me, “Viet Kieu women know that there are many of us and few of them!”

Low-wage workers like Minh find it especially difficult to compete in intimate markets. Unlike women like Thanh, men like Minh are at the bottom locally, while globally they are at the top, since the United States enjoys high status among nations. That is one reason they turn to Vietnam. After all, men like Minh are in the market for more than just intimacy. They are in it for respect and for a kind of marital life that they believe they cannot obtain locally. For men in general, but especially for working-class men, as sociologist Lillian Rubin has argued in a compelling study, a worthy sense of self is deeply connected to the ability to provide economically for one’s family.28 As Minh movingly explained to me,

I don’t know if other men told you this, but I think the main reason why a lot of Viet Kieu men go back to Vietnam for a wife is because the women here [Viet Kieu] do not respect their husbands if the husbands cannot make a lot of money. I think that’s why there are a lot of Viet Kieu women who marry white men, because the white men have better jobs than us.29 Many Viet Kieu women, even though they are not attractive and would not be worth much if there were a lot of them, would not even look at men like me because we can’t buy them the fancy house or the nice cars. I need my wife to respect me as her husband. If your wife doesn’t respect you, who will?

How They Meet

Although Minh was upwardly mobile in 1985 and would have become an engineer had he remained in Vietnam, he is now an assistant cook who has
spent the bulk of his adult working life confined to a small Chinese restaurant in Middle America. He hasn't read a book in recent memory. In fact, he says little about what he does, except work, or what he owns, except a used Toyota Tercel he recently bought. Meanwhile, Thanh is a relatively successful lawyer in urban Saigon, where Chanel perfume and Ann Taylor shirts are essential components of her daily life. Thanh speaks very good English, the language we used when she and I met in Vietnam; Minh and I spoke Vietnamese when I interviewed him in Quincy. Thanh is currently working toward an English proficiency degree at an international adult English school, and her reading list includes F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. She often prides herself that she is not as thin as the average woman in Vietnam, nor does she have the stereotypically Vietnamese long, straight black hair. Instead, Thanh has a perm with red highlights, and she spends a large part of her leisure time taking aerobics classes at the Saigonese Women's Union. She likes to joke, "Some people in Vietnam think that I'm a Viet Kieu woman."

Today Minh and Thanh live in seemingly separate worlds. The network of kin and acquaintanceship that unites them was riven by the war, but it still shares the history, memories, and connections of the prewar years. In 1997, when he was nearing his mid-thirties, Minh's family pressed him to find a suitable wife. In Vietnam, there is a strong cultural belief that one should marry in early adulthood, and most certainly before one turns thirty. In 1997, Minh, at thirty-four, was getting old in the eyes of married Vietnamese people. At twenty-eight, Thanh was considered even older as a woman, and both were very old according to Vietnamese notions of fertility. Most people are expected to have a first child, preferably a son, early to ensure patrilineal lineage. Although the average age of marriage has increased in Vietnam in the past few years, as it has worldwide, Vietnamese women are often stigmatized and considered unmarriageable at as young as twenty-five. In the villages, some women are considered unmarriageable at twenty.

Transpacific marriage arrangements are not always the idea of the grooms or brides involved. More than 55 percent of the grooms I interviewed said the idea of a transpacific marriage did not occur to them until a close friend or family member suggested it. The same was true of only 27 percent of the brides. In other words, more brides than grooms expressed an
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initial desire for an overseas spouse, while grooms were somewhat hesitant until encouraged. The arrangement for Minh and Thanh started when Minh's siblings expressed concern that their eldest brother appeared lonely and needed a wife (though they never asked him if this was the case). After all, he was the eldest sibling but the only one who remained unmarried and childless. The average age of marriage for his three younger sisters was twenty-one and for his two brothers, twenty-four. While these ages seem lower than the current Vietnamese average of twenty-four years for women and twenty-five years for men, they were not unusual at the time, since all five siblings married in the late 1980s and early 1990.31 Minh's next brother's eldest child is now in her first year at Le Buon Phong High School. Minh feels old when he thinks of this. He is often embarrassed when his family asks him, "Why didn't you bring your lady friend back to visit us, too?" Minh's long work hours, along with the scarcity of Vietnamese women (relative to men) in the United States in general and Quincy in particular, were among the real reasons why the lady friend was generally "too busy to come home this time."

Both Minh and Thanh faced structural and demographic limitations in their local marriage markets, but in different and reversed ways. Minh knew very few Vietnamese-American women, and those he knew usually earned the same amount or more than he did, which made him a less attractive marriage candidate in the United States. Among Asian-Americans, especially in California, women tend to get low-wage jobs more easily, to work longer hours, and to earn more money than men.32 By contrast, Thanh knew many single men in Saigon, but they were far below her in educational status and made much less money than she did. Her economic and educational status made her a less attractive marriage candidate in Vietnam, but the same qualities served her well on the transpacific marriage market. As Thanh explained to me:

Any Viet Kieu man can come here to find a wife. And he can surely find a beautiful woman if he wants because there are many beautiful young women willing to marry anyone to go overseas. I think there is something different when you talk about Viet Kieu men coming back here to marry. The women here who marry for money, many of them will marry other foreign men, like Taiwanese and Korean

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men, but they have sacrificed their lives for their families because they think they can go off to another country and later send money back home. Those [non-Viet Kieu] men seldom check the family backgrounds of the women they marry, because they don't care. They, the women and the men, know it's something like prostitution, like selling oneself, even though they have weddings and everything. But it's not really a marriage. If the brides are lucky, their foreign husbands will love them and take care of them. But when it has to do with Vietnamese men, they are more selective. They look for a real marriage. And a marriage that will last forever. So it's important to them to check everything about the woman they will marry and her background. These [Viet Kieu] men want a woman who is educated and who comes from an educated family, because that means she comes from a good family. And if her family has money, he knows she just doesn't want to marry him to go overseas because she already has a comfortable life in Vietnam.

News of a split marriage market, one for foreign non-Viet Kieu men and the other for Viet Kieu men who usually have family connections, has circulated extensively throughout the Vietnamese diaspora. Men who want “real” marriages are careful not to meet women on their own, because they fear they will be used as passes for migration. When I visited Saigon nightclubs, cafés, and bars where overseas Vietnamese men and local women converge, I found that both men and women approached public courtship with a lack of trust. Like women in Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries I’ve visited or studied, Vietnamese women who seek transpacific spouses are so afraid of being seen as prostitutes that they rarely allow themselves to be courted by foreign men in public. Some Viet Kieu men come back and visit local bars and dance clubs in search of “one-night stands” either with prostitutes or non-prostitutes, but they rarely marry women they meet in these public spaces. My sample of marriages yielded only one couple who met by any means other than kinship introduction or arrangement. That couple had met through an international Vietnamese newspaper based in Sydney. Ninety percent of the couples had their marriages arranged, and of the
remaining 9 percent, the men had returned to Vietnam to court old school friends or neighbors.

If women are afraid that they will be sexually exploited, Viet Kieu men are wary of being used as a “bridge” to cross the Pacific. These concerns, combined with the availability of transnational networks, have propelled women in Vietnam and Vietnamese men who live overseas to rely on marriage arrangements rather than engaging in individual courtship. As in the case of arranged marriages among other ethnic groups, marriage candidates in the Vietnamese diaspora believe that family members make the best judgments in their interests when looking for a spouse. Thanh explained the logic of marriage arrangement, which may seem illogical to a foreigner:

It's very easy to trick people now. Both men and women can trick each other. Women will pretend to love so they can go abroad and men will pretend to love so they can get a one-night relationship. So that is why people will choose a family member who could investigate both sides for them. Most of the cases I know are similar to mine. Usually a Viet Kieu man says he wants a wife, and then he will call a family member here who will search for him. His family member will try to contact friends, neighbors, whoever he can in search of a suitable wife who happens to also be waiting for an overseas man to court her. There's always a lot of women willing to marry a Viet Kieu man, even though she may never have thought about it until someone asks them. If you have a family member to choose for you, as my uncle helped me get to know my husband, you will end up with a real marriage. Otherwise, it can be risky for both people if they meet each other on their own.

Minh's parents have known Thanh's family for more than two decades. Even though Thanh's father taught at Le Buon Phong two decades ago, and was a friend and colleague of Minh's parents, the current consumption gap between the two families has created a social distance over the years. When Minh's siblings convinced him to search for a wife in Vietnam, he was hesitant at first, but later followed their advice when his parents promised that they would invest time and care in finding the most suitable spouse.
According to Minh, however, they were surprised to discover that arranging a marriage for a Viet Kieu was more complicated than they had anticipated:

I thought that it would be easy for them to find someone. I thought all they had to do was mention a few things to their friends, and within days they could describe a few possible people to me. But my parents told me that they were afraid that women just wanted to use our family to go abroad. We had many people get involved, many people wanted to be matchmakers for the family, and they added so much anxiety and fear about people’s intentions. But the first goal for them was to find a woman from a wealthy family so that they were sure she wasn’t just interested in money, because if she has money she would already be comfortable in Vietnam. And it would have been best if she had family in the United States already, because we would then know that they already have overseas people who help them out and they would not expect to become dependent on us. In Vietnamese, you know, there is this saying, “When you choose a spouse, you are choosing his or her whole family.”

Minh’s parents finally contacted Thanh’s parents, after the traditional fashion in which the groom’s parents represent him to propose, often with rituals and a centuries-old ceremonial language. Like most brides in my study, Thanh relied on an overseas relative—in this case her uncle, Tuan—for advice on Minh’s situation in the United States. The family discovered that Minh was a low-wage worker, but a full-time worker nonetheless. During a walk Thanh and I took through the busy Ben Thanh market in the center of Saigon, she revealed that she and her family were already prepared to support a reversed remittance situation:

My father and mother didn’t care about how much money Minh has. They figured that they could help us out if Minh doesn’t do so well; it sounds strange and hard to believe, but my parents said that they could help us open up a business in the United States later on if Minh wants us to do that. They liked the idea that he is a hardworking man and that he comes from a good family. . . . They know he
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comes from a good family because he sends money back to his par-
ents. He knows how to take care of them.

Virtually all of the locals I met in Vietnam viewed overseas men as a two-
tiered group: the “successful,” who were educated or who succeeded in own-
ing ethnic enterprises, and the “indolent,” who lacked full-time jobs and
were perceived as being welfare-dependent or as participating in under-
ground economies, such as gambling. Some felt that the latter group had
taken up valuable spots that others from Vietnam could have filled. “If I
had gotten a chance to go, I would be so rich by now,” I heard many local
men say. Most people, however, could not explain a man like Minh, who is
neither lazy nor extremely successful. Thanh’s uncle Tuan seemed to know
more men in Houston who were not only unemployed but alcoholics and
gamblers. Her parents were worried that their daughter was unmarrigeable,
because there was certainly no shortage of younger women in Vietnam for
local men her age to marry. Thanh, too, was already convinced that she was
“e.” Both her parents and her uncle worried that Thanh was facing a life of
permanent singlehood. Finally, they all believed that marrying Thanh to
Minh, a Viet Kieu man, would be more desirable than arranging her mar-
rriage to a local man in Vietnam. Thanh’s parents were confident that Minh’s
status as a full-time worker who sent remittances back home to his family
spoke well for him as a suitable husband. Most Viet Kieu single men her
uncle knew belonged to an underclass of which Minh was not a part. For
Thanh, Minh’s geographical advantage translated into something socially
priceless: a man living in a modern country, she was sure, would respect
women.

A Clash of Dreams

Highly educated women like Thanh resist patriarchal arrangements by
avoiding marriages with local men. They do not want to “marry down” eco-
nomically and socially—though this seems to be their only choice—because
they believe that marrying local men will only constrain them to domestic
roles in a male-dominated culture. As Thanh told me, some women will
endure the often painful stigma of singlehood and childlessness over the
oppression they could face from dominating husbands. For some of these

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women, the transpacific marriage market holds out hope for a different kind of marriage—one in which Vietnamese women imagine that their husbands will believe in, and practice, gender equity. Many such women will instead find themselves back in the pre-modern family life they hoped to avoid. As Minh told me, "A woman's place is in the home to take care of her husband and his family."

All but three of the twenty-eight grooms I interviewed shared Minh's view. But this conflict in gender ideology between the two unmarriageables never seemed to come to the fore until it was too late. During the migration period, each expensive phone call and visit is an occasion for love, not for discussing the details of what life will be like when the woman joins the man abroad. Most couples shared only words of joy about being together in the future.

And yet, as I interviewed the couples in their separate countries during this period, I found that the two parties usually held conflicting views of the life they would soon lead together. I did not interview all of the grooms, but I did ask all of the brides about their husbands' ideas about gender relations, and about how they envisioned the organization of their households after they joined their husbands abroad. Among other things, I asked about household division of labor, about whether the couple would live with or without kin, and about whether or not the women expected to work outside the home. Although these concerns address only a fraction of a marriage's potential promise or pitfalls, they can certainly help us understand the interplay between a husband's gender ideology and his wife's.  

Nearly 95 percent of the brides in Vietnam wanted to work for a wage when they joined their husbands abroad. Though wanting to work outside the home is not the ultimate measure of a modernized woman in Vietnam, it does indicate these women's unwillingness to be confined to domestic work. Some women who wanted paid jobs were not averse to the idea of doing second shift work as well. However, most of the women, and virtually all of the educated ones—the unmarriageables—wanted and expected to have egalitarian relationships with their husbands. In general, they objected to traditionally female tasks, although they did not fully embrace what we might call a peer marriage. For the men and women I interviewed, as for mainstream dual-career American couples, marital life consists of much more than just household tasks. But these tasks are important symbols in the
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... economy of gratitude among married people, "for how a person wants to identify himself or herself influences what, in the back and forth of a marriage, will seem like a gift and what will not." As Thanh explained when I asked her about the implications of a purely egalitarian marriage:

I don’t want everything split fifty-fifty. For example, I like to cook. But it’s important for me as an educated woman not to be controlled by my husband. I don’t mind cooking for my husband, but I don’t want it to be forced on me. That’s what the men in Vietnam feel like; they feel that their wives are like their domestic workers. Men in Vietnam never do anything in the house. I think they have to know how to respect educated women.

Women like Thanh want a respectful marriage based on principles of gender equality. According to these principles, women expect to work for a wage, to share in making social and economic decisions for their future households, and to have their husbands share in the household division of labor. Above all, they do not want to live in multigenerational households, serving as the dutiful daughter-in-law and housewife, the two often inseparable roles historically delegated to women in Vietnam. Many express that reluctance, because they know numerous Viet Kieu men who live with their parents or who plan to do so when their parents are old. In Vietnam, and more generally in Asia, elderly parents often live with their eldest sons. The daily caring work then falls to their sons’ wives. Forty percent of the U.S.-based grooms and a third of all Vietnamese grooms live with their parents, most of whom are elderly and require care. Of all low-wage working men married to highly educated women, about 35 percent currently reside with their parents. Virtually all of the men in my study who resided with their parents wanted to continue to do so when their wives joined them abroad.

For Minh, the possibility that a wife will insist on an equal marriage is one of the anxieties of modern life:

Vietnamese women, they care for their husbands and they are more traditional. I think non-Vietnamese women and Viet Kieu women are too modern. They just want to be equal with their husbands, and
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I don’t think that is the way husband and wife should be. . . . I mean that husband and wife should not be equal. The wife should listen to husband most of the time. That is how they will have a happy life together. If the woman tries to be equal they will have problems. . . . I know many Vietnamese men here who abandon their parents because their wives refuse to live with their parents. If my parents were in America, I would definitely plan for them to live with me when they are old. But because they are in Vietnam, they are living with one of my brothers.

Instead of seeking peasant village women or uneducated ones, after the fashion of white men who pursue mail-order brides because they believe such women consent to subordination in marriage, men like Minh seek marriage arrangements with educated women. As Minh explains:

For me, I want to marry an educated woman, because she comes from a good, educated family. It’s very hard to find a poor woman or an uneducated woman who comes from an uneducated family to teach their daughters about morals and values, because if they are uneducated they don’t know how. I know many men, Viet Kieu and foreign men, who go to Vietnam to marry beautiful young women, but they don’t ask why do those women marry them? Those women only want to use their beauty to go overseas, and they will leave their husbands when they get the chance. They can use their beauty to find other men. I would never marry a beautiful girl from a poor, uneducated family. You see, the educated women, they know it’s important to marry and stay married forever. As they say in Vietnam, “Tram nam han phuc [a hundred years of happiness].” Educated women must protect their family’s reputation in Vietnam by having a happy marriage, not have it end in divorce.

The Inflated Market of Respect

At first glance, Minh and Thanh seem to come from two vastly different social worlds, assembled only by the complexity of Vietnamese history. But at a closer look, we learn that these two lonely faces of globalization are very

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much alike. Both of their parents were educated and middle class. Both lack the emotional fulfillment and intimate partnership that adults of their social worlds enjoy. Both long for a kind of marital respect they perceive as scarce in their local marriage markets. Minh has experienced immense, swift downward mobility as a result of migration, and he is eager to regain the respect he has lost. Thanh has practically priced herself out of the local marriage market by acquiring an advanced degree, which she could not have obtained without her uncle's remittances. She wants a husband who respects her as an equal and who accepts that she is a modern woman. He wants to regain something he thinks men like him have lost; she wants to challenge the local marriage norm, including the very preindustrial Vietnamese family life Minh yearns for. Many men in Vietnam do live that life. As Minh told me:

My younger brothers have control over their homes. Their wives help them with their shops selling fabrics in Saigon, but their wives don't make any decisions. I think that if they live in America, and their wives were working, they would not let my brother make all the decisions in the house. . . . And I think that Vietnamese women, when they come to the United States, they are influenced by a lot of different things. That is why there are a lot of divorces in America.

Minh believes that when he migrated to the United States, he left the respect he now craves behind him in Vietnam. Thanh imagines that the marital respect she craves is unobtainable in Vietnam, but awaits her in the United States. Each has inflated the true extent of the respect the other is willing to give. For though there is a quiet feminist revolution of sorts going on among highly educated women in Vietnam, that revolution has not entered the experience or expectations of the less educated, low-wage husbands living overseas. And while many of these Viet Kieu men seek reprieve from modern Western life, the women they marry have washed away those traditions during the long years that the men have been gone.

The Future of Transpacific Marriages

Surely, this clash of dreams and expectations will result in marital conflict when the couple is united overseas. Such conflicts have several potential out-
comes. The happiest would have Minh joining the feminist revolution and abandoning his desire for the preindustrial, traditional family life he never had. Some men will go this route, but only a few. In other cases, such marriages may end in divorce—or worse, domestic battery. I believe the latter scenario is an unlikely one for the couples I studied. Many women like Thanh have considered the possibility and are careful to maintain contact with transnational networks that will look out for them. Seventy-five percent of the women in my study have at least one overseas relative. Virtually all the middle-class and college-educated women do.

Most likely, these marriages will resolve themselves with the men getting the respect they want and the women consenting to subordination in the name of family and kinship. Thanh will be going from the patriarchal frying pan to the patriarchal fire, but with one big difference. In the United States, her desire for gender equity will find more support, in a culture where women dare to leave their husbands if they aren’t treated equally. But Thanh will still bear the burden of Vietnamese tradition, which will prevent her from leaving her husband. In Vietnam, divorce is stigmatized, and saving face is especially important to educated, middle-class families. If Thanh daringly divorces her husband, she will damage her family’s reputation in Vietnam and overseas. She told me she would not be likely to take this risk. If she stays in the marriage, she will probably wind up serving as the traditional wife Minh desires.

Although globalization appears to offer some Vietnamese women an escape from local patriarchal marriages, it may in fact play more to the interests of certain Vietnamese men, offering them the opportunity to create the traditional life they’ve always wanted within the modern setting where they now live. Strong traditions back in Vietnam protect them against instability in their marriages. But the women they have married don’t share their husbands’ traditional vision of marital life. The only thing educated women like Thanh have to look forward to is more waiting—waiting for men like their husbands, who live in a modern country, simply to respect women.