Men and women like Minh and Thanh have dreams, but their dreams clash. He wants the best of tradition and she wants the best of modernity. He believes the respect he has been searching for did not arrive with him when he migrated to the United States almost 20 years ago, but instead was left back safely in Vietnam. She feels that the marital respect she needs is waiting for her in the United States and that she will get it when she joins him through marriage migration. Minh, 37, represents one of the more than two million _Viet Kieu_, or Vietnamese people living overseas, who make up an aging diaspora that largely began in the mid-1970s, after the postwar years. He is also one of over a million _Viet Kieu_ who returned to visit family and friends during the year 2000, a dramatic increase from the 160,000 who did so in 1993 (Nhat 1999). Thanh, 32, will soon join Minh as one of over 200,000 women and men worldwide who come to the United States each year through marriage migration, the number one mechanism for contemporary legal migration to the United States. In general, females have dominated in U.S.-bound migration since the 1930s (Houstoun, Kramer, and Barrett 1984) and, historically, women more often than men have migrated as spouses (Thornton 1992). Women currently make up more than 65 percent of all marriage migrants. While male marriage migrants make up about a quarter of all men who enter the United States each year, female marriage migrants make up over 40 percent of all women who enter (USINS 1999a; USINS 1999b).

During 14 months of fieldwork done in phases in Vietnam and in the United States from 1997 to 2001, I got to know couples like Minh and Thanh. In addition to understanding their distinct national and local cultures, I paid particular attention to some of their most private matrimonial thoughts—thoughts that they have not yet disclosed to each other. For they are in a migration waiting period, a period in which the women are waiting to be united with their husbands.
through migration. In this distinct and emergent global marriage market, the immigrant Vietnamese men typically go to Vietnam to marry through arrangement and subsequently return to their places of residence in the Vietnamese diaspora (most are from the United States, Canada, France, and Australia) to initiate paperwork to sponsor their wives. During this waiting period, I came to know them by first entering the lives of the brides in Vietnam and later the U.S.-based grooms.

The marriage of Minh and Thanh characterizes a distinct and growing global stream over the past 40 years of immigrant or immigrant-origin men returning to their home countries for marriage partners through processes of family-forming migration (Lievans 1999), thus significantly transforming gender and race relations in the communities of both origin and destination. Same-ethnic individuals constitute an estimated two-thirds of all marriage migration couples, and among international marriage migrants of U.S. non-citizen permanent residents, who are presumably immigrants, almost 90 percent of them are women (Thornton 1992; USINS 1999a; USINS 1999b). Like many international marriages between same-ethnic individuals, especially in Asia, the marriage of Minh and Thanh was arranged. While there are varying flexible meanings of marriage arrangements and class compositions, I focus on marriages of the two “unmarriageables”—highly educated women in Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese men who do low-wage work. These couples make up roughly 55 percent (n = 38) of the 69 marriages I studied.

GLOBALIZATION AND MARRIAGE SQUEEZES ACROSS THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA

Before I began this study, I was fully aware that Vietnamese people worldwide are pressed unusually, if not uniquely, by what demographer Daniel Goodkind (1997) calls the “double marriage squeeze,” which has resulted from a high male mortality rate during the Vietnam War and the larger number of men than women who emigrated during the last quarter of the 20th century. A shortage of one sex or the other in the age group in which marriage generally occurs is often termed a marriage squeeze (Guttentag and Secord 1983). The Vietnamese double marriage squeeze specifically refers to the low ratio of males to females in Vietnam and the unusually high ratio of males to females in the Vietnamese diaspora, especially in Australia and in the United States. For example, by 1999, among people between the ages of 30 to 34 years in Vietnam, statistically speaking, there were approximately 92 men for every 100 women. At the other end of the diaspora in 2000, among Vietnamese Americans between 25 to 29 years, there were 129 men for every 100 women; for the age group of 30 to 34, there were about 135 men for every 100 women. While these numbers are important, they tell only part of the story about the recent dramatic rise in Vietnamese transpacific marriages. The link between demographic numbers, intensified transnational and global processes in Vietnam and worldwide, new contours of kinship, and the intersection of gender and class in marriage markets throughout the Vietnamese diaspora provides a much more in-depth look at social processes involved in the emergence of a Vietnamese transpacific marriage market.

The most striking aspect about marriages of the two unmarriageables like Minh and Thanh is that they have globalized and reversed the marriage gradient, an old and almost universal pattern that women “marry up” and men “marry down,” which is to say women marry older men who earn more money and have more education and, conversely, men marry younger women who earn less money and have less education (Fitzgerald 1999). But depending on the measure one uses in the marriages I studied, it is difficult to tell who is “from below.” In demographic marriage market language (Guttentag and Secord 1983), women worldwide often find that the pool of marriageable men declines as they move up the educational ladder. Thanh is part of this emerging group of highly educated women in Vietnam who have delayed or avoided marriage with local men. These women have found the pool of marriageable men in Vietnam, who are employed and successful relative to them, to be too small. More importantly, Thanh’s status as a highly educated woman made her unmarriageable to many men still influenced by the Asian and Confucian ideologies of hierarchical relations in terms of gender, age, and class. Like highly educated African-American women, women like Thanh in Vietnam are a “surplus” relative to their educated male counterparts. Minh, on the other hand, belongs to a group of surplus men, accumulated in part by the scattering of post-war Vietnamese migration, who are unable to find marriage partners partly because of their current low-wage work status. Some of these men, though certainly not all, experienced tremendous downward mobility as they migrated overseas.

Men like Minh who work in the low-wage labor market made up 80 percent of the men in my study.
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. In contrast, women like Thanh represent almost 70 percent of the brides. These women come from college-educated backgrounds, with about 40 percent having advanced degrees and working as doctors, lawyers, computer programmers, and the like. The remaining 60 percent are teachers, service sector workers in foreign companies, etc. To be sure, not all college-educated women in my study married low-wage working men, and not all low-wage working men married college-educated women. Men like Minh and women like Thanh are unmarriagable along both gender and class lines. Statistically, because of the double marriage squeeze, there is simply a surplus of women relative to men in Vietnam and a surplus of Viet Kieu men relative to Viet Kieu women overseas. But their unmarriagability does not end there. If the demography of the double marriage squeeze is a structural condition propelling these transpacific marriages, the cultural belief in the marriage gradient is perhaps a more powerful force driving these marriages. Vietnamese women and men worldwide have not dared to break the marriage-gradient norm in their local marriage market. They believe, as other unmarriageables do, that by globalizing the gradient, they have somehow solved the potential problem of breaking the marriage-gradient norm. That is, if a 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-world” and “third-world” would inherently penetrate deeply into the private lives of Vietnamese transpacific couples, it is not always clear who has the third-world life in marriages of the two unmarriageables.

Globalization seems like a perfect solution to the dual problem facing the Vietnamese diaspora of “too few women here” and “too few men there,” yet there is an untold story about the unanticipated collision of gender ideologies and strategies many of these couples will face.

Couples like Minh and Thanh—the unmarriageables—will bump into a clash of dreams as the women join their husbands overseas. Looking far across the Pacific, both were enamored, not necessarily by the economic, but powerfully by the gender allures of the other side: on one end of the Vietnamese diaspora, for educated women like Thanh, a man living overseas in a modern country will respect women more than men still held back by ancient traditions in Vietnam; on the other end of the diaspora, for low-wage working men like Minh, it is precisely these ancient traditions that he desired and perceived are still maintained by women in Vietnam, the sort of traditions that he believes have been eroded by America’s modernity.

Both have turned to the old and new, relying foremost on the tradition of marriage arrangements vis-à-vis family members to introduce them to each other. Yet, it is the new globalizing culture of Vietnam that offered them that opportunity. In 1986, after having 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 encouraged private enterprise, free markets, and global engagement. Particularly in the 1990s, Saigon was reemerging as a major international city, first within the Asian landscape and soon to the rest of the world. At the time, Vietnam was in the news and was projected to be one of Asia’s next “tigers” (Pierre 2000). Recognizing an enticing labor and consumer market of 80 million people, foreign companies were eager to move their factories there and make their products known. Globalization rapidly opened impersonal markets of capital, goods, and labor, and in conjunction with these markets, it also opened a rather personal market of emotions and marriages. Like global corporations and factories that recently moved to Vietnam because of its large supply of labor, one of the reasons Viet Kieu men go there for brides is because they have a much larger selection of marriage partners. However, unlike locals who eagerly work at foreign factories mainly for the monetary rewards, Vietnamese transpacific brides don’t always share the same reasons for choosing to marry Viet Kieu men.

THE HIGHLY EDUCATED BRIDE’S STORY

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 few thousands of Vietnamese who were airdropped out of Vietnam on April 30, 1975, when Saigon surrendered to North Vietnamese military troops. 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—money sent back—from
Thanh’s uncle helped her parents open a small candy factory in the late 1980s which now has over 40 employees. Like the “new class of everywhere” in the global economy, her parents are now members of a class that represents a small but very visible percentage of families in Vietnam who enjoy access to overseas resources, such as Thanh’s uncle and the remittances he sends home. They are part of a Viet Kieu economy, of which remittance plays an important role, that has grown from roughly $35 million in 1993 to an estimated $2 billion in 2000 (Pierre 2000). The remittance upward mobility is of course associated with Thanh’s educational and social mobility. It has helped Thanh, her parents’ only child, earn not only a good high school education, but also continue to study law and take lessons at international English schools in Saigon.

After graduating from Le Buon Phong High School, Thanh and a small group of her female friends did not choose early marriage, a path that most of their peers took soon after high school. Although Thanh and her friends did want to marry one day, they all wanted to further their schooling. Of her seven close female friends from high school, only one did not go to college. That friend opted for early marriage. The rest, including Thanh, quietly took various professional routes. Most went into fields traditionally reserved for women, including education and nursing. Two went on for higher education. Thanh obtained a law degree, and the other friend went on to become a prestigious physician at Vinh Bien, a private hospital catering to Saigon’s middle class. Four of the seven, now in their early 30s, remain single. The pathways of Thanh and her four friends who chose singlehood illustrate a quiet gender revolution among highly educated women in Vietnam. These women have opted for singlehood in a culture where marriage is not only presumed, but often coerced. And if marriage is not achieved by a certain age, women and men are often dismissively referred to as simply “ơ,” a derogatory term referring to commodities that are unmarketable. In contrast, women (often young and beautiful) and men (often educated and financially secure) who fare well on the marriage market are considered “đạt,” or scarce goods. As Thanh explained to me:

I am already “ơ” 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 on the outside [to the outsider] we are very successful.

In truth, Thanh is not completely “ơ” for there have been several men who, sometimes with their families, have come to propose marriage to her. In contemporary Vietnam, arranging marriage remains common practice, though more so in villages than in urban areas. For women in Vietnam, especially those who have passed the marriageability age, individual and family success often come with being unmarriageable. Thanh had several proposals for marriage arrangements when she was in her mid-20s before she got her law degree, all from men who wanted to marry down socially and economically. Now, at age thirty-two and highly educated, she believes that marrying up is no longer an option as there are few available men in that category. Marrying down is not an appealing choice either, although she has many suitors in that category. Speaking in the marriage gradient mode, Thanh explains:

When I look up, there are few men “ơ 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 non-quality men I could choose from, but that’s what they are—non-quality.

Thanh’s marriage procrastination was partially anchored in her confused class and gender status, for her educational and remittance upward mobility puts her one up locally, but one down globally. On the one hand, if by tradition, a man is to be above her, he must be the one to provide economically, but given that she married a low-wage worker, she may end up being the one to seek economic security through her own means. On the other hand, by traditional Vietnamese culture, Thanh knows her high educational status would not necessarily help her escape the gender subordination in marital life in Vietnam for few men she knows respect women in the everyday contours of marriage. On our third and final interview, Thanh and I walked
along the Saigon River early one evening. As the city’s buildings rose arrogantly in the background through the din of countless motorcycles, cycles, and taxis, she explained to me, with a sense of disconsolation:

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 me who 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, Thanh’s priority, as an educated woman, in the selection of a marriage partner is for someone to respect her and for a marriage in which a man does not control her like most men in Vietnam she observes do. As Thanh explained to me:

When I find a nice man “below” me who 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’S STORY

Through complicated logics of transnationality, Thanh found a suitable spouse across the Pacific. But if Thanh’s desire for respect was prompted by her educational and remittance upward mobility, her husband’s need for respect was prompted by his migratory downward mobility. Minh, whose hands, facial expressions, and graying hair make him seem older than his 37 years, was the only member of his family to leave Vietnam during “wave II” of the boat refugee exodus that took place after the war (Zhou and Bankston 1998). As the eldest son, he holds a position of distinction and responsibility of six siblings in a family of educators. 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 21, Minh, then a man of intellectual ambition and curiosity, 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 fled and safely reached a Western country. Of those who successfully made the trip, over 90 percent eventually settled in France, Australia, Canada, or the United States (Merli 1997). Minh’s parents also knew that as many as half of the refugees on any particular boat trip did not succeed. They died along the way due to starvation, pirate attacks, and often, in the case of women and children, 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, his parents were confident that he would make it and have a better life abroad. After all, they spent their entire life savings to put him on one of the safest and most reputable boats run by private individuals, to leave the Mekong Delta for Western lands of opportunity via refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Like the Underground Railroad established for slave escapes during the American civil war, details about these refugee boats were kept secret. But unlike the railroads, the boats were made accessible only to wealthy or well-connected families. Many who were not wealthy, such as Minh’s family, managed to pool their resources so that one person could go, usually a son. They saw this as an investment made with a hope of high returns, as in the case of Minh’s family.

Today, Minh considers himself one of the lucky ones. After surviving two years—a lifetime to Minh—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. As with current migration from Vietnam, the United States was then considered the top destination choice, followed by Canada, France, and Australia. Minh arrived in rural Wyoming under the sponsorship of a local Catholic church. Like many of the churches scattered across the United States who sponsored Indochinese refugees from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s (Zhou and Bankston 1998), his church sponsored only one individual. He spent the first five years of his life in America 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 of 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, though today plagued by urban problems reported regularly by the media (Leonard and Tran 2000a; 2000b; Los Angeles Times 1995; Marosi and Tran 2000; Paddock and Dizon 1991; Terry 1999). But he had little money and no connections in or around Los Angeles. Then one day, in one of the Vietnamese-produced newspapers in the United States that flourished 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 thought a move there would bring him closer to other refugees.

Eleven years later, at age 37, 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. Though known as one of the best and most authentic ethnic restaurants in town, the Panda mainly serves a “white American” clientele who, according to the owners, probably wouldn’t know the differences between authentic Chinese food and Sara Lee frozen dinners. Quincy is similar to many suburban towns in Middle America—not quite rural, but far from urban. People who live here drive to Seattle to shop and eat if they have money, but stay in town if they want to see a movie. Minh knows five other Vietnamese people in the town, 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 co-workers.

Similar to many Viet Kieu people, Minh is a good example of a giver caught in the irony of a remittance-ship. Receivers of remittances enjoy first-world consumption, while their givers often only enjoy it when they go to Vietnam: on returning to a first-world setting, some givers like Minh, regress to a third-world consumption pattern. Like Thanh’s family, Minh’s family enjoys remittances, albeit much smaller ones than Thanh’s family enjoys from her uncle. He 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 send to their wives and/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 his family has more than enough constant capital from his remittances to keep connected in the small, though conspicuous, circles of families who have overseas kin networks.

And while Minh’s family enjoy their new consumption patterns, Minh finds himself lacking the luxury they afford—most importantly the luxury of having the kind of respect he was used to before migration, particularly the kind of respect he once had in intimate markets. Minh remembered vividly that in his early 20s, he had been considered a good catch among his peers. He was heading for an engineering career and was from a well-respected family. Recounting stories of masculinity from his early adulthood, Minh told me that young men he knew had not one, but several, girlfriends at a time, and that it was accepted and celebrated. After all, life after the war was particularly difficult for many families he knew. But he was relatively fortunate, for his parents were well-respected teachers with a small, but steady, income and, therefore, could afford to spend small amounts of money on leisure activities and materials that bought them some status in their pre-remittance circles. As he told me in one conversation when we were talking, with beers and cigarettes in our hands, rather loudly in the hot and sizzling kitchen where he worked:

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 [dia di]. 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 16 years since he arrived in the United States. In his social world, Minh believes money can, and often does, buy love, and that if you don’t have much of it, you live “by yourself.” His yearly income puts him
just above the poverty level for a single man, but when I did a budget analysis of his expenditures, I discovered that after remittances, his available funds place him well below the poverty level. The long hours that often accompany low-wage work have also made it particularly difficult for him to meet and court marriage partners. If Minh worked long hours for a law firm or a large business corporation, he would not only get financial rewards, but also the status and prestige which 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 women in the local marriage market. 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. Like highly educated women such as Thanh, men like Minh are on the market for more than just intimacy. They are on it for respect, a sense of respect for marital life which they perceive they cannot find in their local marriage market. For men in general, but especially for working-class men, as sociologist Lillian Rubin (1994) argues in a compelling study, a sense of self is deeply connected to the ability to provide economically for the family. For low-wage workers like Minh, the ability to provide, or lack thereof, is sharply linked to earning respect in marital life. 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 can not 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. 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?

AND SO THEY MEET

Although Minh was headed for upward mobility in 1985 before he migrated to the United States, and would have become an engineer one day if he had remained in Vietnam, he is now an assistant cook and has spent the bulk of his adult working life in the confines of a small Chinese restaurant in Middle America. He hasn’t read a book in recent memory. In fact, he didn’t have much to share 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 from Paris and American designer Ann Taylor’s 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, Washington. Thanh is currently attending an international adult English school to obtain her English proficiency degree and her current reading list includes Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. She often prides herself on the fact that she is not as thin as the average woman in Vietnam, nor does she conform to the stereotypical image of Vietnamese women with 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, an emerging activity among Saigon’s middle class. Pointing to her access to and practice of modernity, she often joked, “Some people in Vietnam think that I’m a Viet Kieu woman.”

Minh and Thanh, thus, live in noticeably different social worlds. They were united by a network of kin and acquaintanceship that was spatially separated, yet held together by the histories, memories, and connections of the prewar years. This network of kin helped arrange the marriage of the two and started when Minh’s siblings expressed concerns that their eldest brother appeared lonely and “needed” a wife, though they never asked him. After all, he was the eldest brother and the only sibling not yet married and still childless. The average age of marriage for his three younger sisters was 21 and for his two brothers, 24. His next brother’s eldest child is now attending her first year at Le Buon Phong High School, a sign to Minh that he’s getting old. Minh was often embarrassed when asked, “Why didn’t you bring your lady friend back to visit us, too?” What his family did not understand on his first few visits back was that long hours of work, as well as the scarcity of Vietnamese women (relative to men) in the United States in general and Quincy in particular, were reasons why the “lady friend generally was too busy to make the trip home this time.”

If Minh’s choice to return to Vietnam to find a wife was propelled by siblings and then followed by his
individual discretion, Thanh’s entrance into the transpacific marriage market was the complete opposite. Both faced structural and demographic limitations in their local marriage markets, but in different and reversed ways. On the one hand, Minh knew very few Vietnamese-American women, and those he knew usually earned the same amount of, or more, money than he did, which made him a less attractive marriage candidate in the United States. Research has shown that in the low-wage labor market among Asian Americans, especially in California, women tend to get jobs more easily, work longer hours, and earn more money than men (Espiritu 1999). In contrast, Thanh knew many single men in Saigon, but those she knew were far below her in educational status and made much less money than she did working as a part-time lawyer and for her father’s factory, all of which made her a less attractive marriage candidate in Vietnam. By Vietnamese standards—and for some, by any global standard—women like Thanh come from solidly middle-class backgrounds, through acquired or inherited wealth, educational mobility, or remittances. Thanh’s education, combined with the income she and her family generate, have been real trade-offs 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. They look for a real marriage. And a marriage that will last forever. And so it’s important to them to check everything about the woman they will marry and her background. These men [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.

Fearful that they may be seen as sex-workers, local women in Vietnam who want a transpacific spouse rarely allow themselves to be courted by foreign men in public spaces as is the case for women in Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and other Asian countries I’ve visited and learned about. According to most women and men I talked to in Vietnam, Viet Kieu men often come back and visit local bars and dance clubs in search of “one-night stands” either with prostitutes or non-prostitutes, but they would never marry women they meet in those public spaces. If women are fearful of the possibility of being sexually exploited, Viet Kieu men are wary of being used as a “bridge” to cross the Pacific (Ong 1999). These reasons, as well as the availability of transnational networks, have propelled women in Vietnam and Vietnamese men who live overseas to rely on the old practice of marriage arrangements by family and kin members, rather than engaging in individual courtship, what we call “free love” practices of choosing a marriage partner. 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. Here, Thanh explained the logics of marriage arrangements that 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. And 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 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.

The marriage arrangement between Minh and Thanh was initiated by Minh’s parents, who have known Thanh’s family for over 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 only a few people get involved, many people wanted to be matchmakers for the family and added so much anxiety and fear about people’s intentions. But the first choice 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 know that they already have overseas people who help them out so 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/her whole family.”

Thanh’s family was finally contacted by Minh’s parents, a traditional way of arranging marriages in which a groom’s parents represent him to propose, often with rituals and a ceremonial language that date back for centuries. Like most brides in my study, Thanh relied on an overseas relative—in this case, Thanh’s uncle, Tuan—for advice on Minh’s economic and social situation in the United States. The family discovered that Minh was a low-wage worker, but a full-time worker nonetheless. Virtually all of the locals I met in Vietnam viewed overseas men as a two-tiered group: the “successful” who succeeded in owning ethnic enterprises or through obtaining an education, and the “indolent” without full-time jobs who were perceived as being welfare-dependent or as participants in underground economies, such as gambling. Some saw the latter group as men who took up valuable “spots” that others from Vietnam could have filled. “If I had gotten a chance to go,” I heard many men say, “I would be so rich by now.” Most people, however, did not have an explanation for 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 also alcoholics and gamblers. Her parents were worried that their daughter was unmarriageable as there was certainly no shortage of young and younger women in Vietnam for local men her age to marry. In addition, Thanh was already convinced that she was “e.” All three were concerned that Thanh was facing a life of permanent singleness for she was getting old by Vietnamese standards. In the back and front of these pre-arrangement thoughts, all three parties—Thanh’s uncle, her parents, and herself—saw the option of marrying Minh, a Viet kieu man, more desirable than marrying a local man in Vietnam. For Thanh’s parents, Minh’s status as a full-time worker and someone who sent remittances back home to his family translated into a potentially suitable husband. For her uncle, most Viet Kieu single men he knew were part of 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 will respect women.

CLASH OF DREAMS

Women like Thanh want a respectful marriage based on principles of gender equality. By these principles, women expect to work for a wage, share in making social and economic decisions for their future households, and have their husbands share in the household division of labor. Above all, they did not want to live in multi-generational households serving as the dutiful daughter-in-law and housewife, the two often inseparable and presumed roles historically delegated to women in Vietnam. Many express that reluctance, for they know numerous Viet Kieu men who live with their parents or plan to do so in the future when their parents are old. The women’s concern about having to live in multi-generational households is anchored in the fact that in Vietnamese culture, and more generally in Asia, elderly parents prefer to, and often do, live with their sons, usually the eldest one. Much less is known about the fact that it is their daughters-in-law, the wives of their sons, who do the fundamental daily caring work.

For Thanh, living with one’s in-laws is the most symbolic act of feminine submission. For Minh, a wife’s insistence on a nuclear household represents a desire for an equal marriage—and is one of the gendered anxieties of modernity:

Vietnamese women, they care for their husbands and they are more traditional. I think non-VN women and
Viet Kieu women, are too modern. They just want to be equal with their husbands and I don’t think that it is the way husband and wife should be. [What do you mean?] 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 try 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 like white Europeans and Americans who search for wives through commercialized systems of mail-order brides, men like Minh seek marriage arrangement with educated women as part of a careful gender strategy for a perceived future marital stability. Minh outlines his strategy:

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, because if they are uneducated [the family] they don’t know how to teach their daughters about morals and values. 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 marry and stay married forever. As they say in Vietnam, “trum nam han phuc,” [a hundred years of happiness]. Educated women must protect their family’s reputation in Vietnam by having a happy marriage, not end in divorce.

UNIMAGINABLE FUTURES

At first glance, Minh and Thanh seem as if they are from different social worlds, two worlds accidentally assembled by a complex Vietnamese history. But once closely acquainted with them, we learn that they are very much alike. First is the class of their past—both sets of their parents were educated and middle class. Second, they are both lonely human faces of globalization who lack the emotional and intimate details that adults of their social worlds enjoy. Most importantly, it seems, because of the gendered meanings embedded in their opposite trails of class mobility, they both long for marital respect, the kind of respect they perceive is scarce in their local marriage market. From Minh’s side of the gender scene, he experienced downward mobility quickly and immensely as a result of migration and is eager to get back the respect he has lost. Thanh, a woman who has, in part, priced herself out of the local marriage market by acquiring a higher education, paid for by a remittance upward mobility, wants a man who respects her as an equal and as a woman who embraces modernity. He wants to regain what he sees as something men like him have lost, while she has, in part, challenged the local marriage norm and, in effect, the “control-norm” in the gender world of Vietnam.

The global forces and global histories that have mobilized their marriage—and their clashed dreams—will assuredly usher in marital conflicts. These conflicts will lead to several possibilities as women quietly migrate to join their husbands overseas. In a happy global story, Minh will join in the feminist revolution and leave behind the tradition he never had as he moves forward with his new marriage. I believe some, but few, men will join women in this revolution. In a tragic global story, these couples may end in divorce or worse, women like Thanh will be abused by their husbands. Many women like Thanh have thought about this possibility and have told me that their connection to transnational networks will ensure that they avoid abusive marriages. The most likely possibility for married couples like Minh and Thanh is that men will get what they want in the market of respect and women will consent to subordination in the name of family and kinship. Thanh will enjoy some aspects of modernity she cannot acquire in Vietnam, but she will be burdened by tradition she doesn’t expect to see in the United States. For she will be going from a patriarchal frying pan to a patriarchal fire, but with one big difference. In the United States she has more support for her desire for gender equity where more women dare to quit a marriage if they don’t get it. But she has the powerful burden of tradition in Vietnam to hold her back from choosing this option.
In Vietnam, marriage is an important matter not only because it unites two people, but also because it has significant implications for extended networks of kin (Tran 1991). In a culture where divorce is stigmatized and where saving face is a sacred activity especially among the educated and middle class, if Thanh daringly divorces her husband, she will cause her family and kin a loss of reputation in Vietnam and overseas, a risk she told me she is unlikely to take. If she stays in the marriage, she will give up her need for the respect and equality she thinks are waiting for her in the United States. And she will likely serve as the traditional wife Minh needs in order for him to gain back the respect he left back in Vietnam almost 20 years ago. Simply put, Vietnamese politics of kinship promise that couples like Minh and Thanh will remain married—for better or worse.

REFERENCES


