MONEY AND MASCULINITY AMONG LOW WAGE VIETNAMESE IMMIGRANTS IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

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This article utilizes data from in-depth interviews to present three types of economic remitters among low wage immigrant Vietnamese men who have recently renewed or formed transnational family ties in the process of returning to Vietnam for marriage. Remittances provide low wage Vietnamese immigrant men an important platform from which to maintain social ties in Vietnam. Low wage Vietnamese immigrant men who take on the role of regular remitters face extreme economic hardships in their lives, hardships that are rarely, if ever, made known to their family members in Vietnam. This is because while they can barely afford to remit, their family members often have very different conceptions of how much they can afford to send. These three patterns show that while economic remittances are financially difficult for low wage men to maintain across time, they serve different purposes for different men depending on their migration history and transnational networks.

Remittances—that is, the money sent by migrants to their families from urban to rural areas and between countries—have been an ongoing concern among migration scholars across the disciplines (Russell, 1986; Sofranko and Idris, 1999; Yu, 1979; Menjivar et al., 1998; Taylor, 1999; Jones, 1998; McKay, 2003; Wucker, 2004; Burman, 2002; Jr., 1998; Brettell, 2000). Recent data show that in 2005, among the 191 million immigrants worldwide (United Nations, 2006), $167 billion US dollars was sent back as remittances to home countries (The World Bank, 2006), a dramatic increase from the $70 billion sent in 1995 (Taylor, 1999). For many households, especially in the developing world, international remittances no doubt change the quality of life
for family members left behind by providing disposable income that could not otherwise be earned. Yet, several problems may arise when remittance relationships are established and maintained across transnational space. For one, while it may be obvious that remittance is sent as a form of what Lucas and Stark (1985) calls “pure altruism,” that is, the care of a migrant for those relatives left behind, remittances can also be motivated by “pure interest,” such as the possibility of future inheritance or land ownership in the community of origin. At another problematic level, remittances can significantly widen inequality in the community of origin, as well as contribute to global inequality because it benefits the country of destination by offering a cheap labor pool.

Michele Wucker (2004) reports that today’s remittance senders are generally low wage workers. Among immigrants in the United States, for instance, only 19 percent of immigrants who earn more than $50,000 a year send any remittances to their families in the community of origin, while 46 percent of those who earn less than $30,000 do so. Thus, those who send remittances are generally the least able to do so. They are, as Wucker succinctly puts it, “heroes of the developing world (Wucker, 2004: 37).” The questions I pose in this article include: What compels some low wage immigrants to remit, especially in situations where they do not need to do so? And, how, as a consequence of remitting, do low wage men experience the emotional and material force of being providers to transnational families? I focus on the links among money, masculinity, and migration among transnational families in the Vietnamese diaspora. I present the situations of low wage immigrant Vietnamese men by focusing on their roles as consistent, though modest, economic remitters to family members in Vietnam, despite their general inability to and difficulty of doing so. I suggest that there are three specific patterns, or ideal types, that explain the impetus for why different low wage men remit money. These three patterns show low wage Vietnamese immigrant men who remit money as status remitters, altruistic remitters, or contractual remitters in what Burman (2002) calls “diasporic economies of yearning,” which conceives remittances as investments that include emotive as well as material investments in the country of origin. These patterns show that while economic remittances are financially difficult for low wage men to maintain across time, they serve different purposes for different men depending on their migration history and transnational networks.

The growth in transnational families, defined as the existence of core family members in two or more countries, is well established (Levitt, 2001; Parrenas, 2001b; Parrenas, 2005; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Chan and Doraï, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). While we know a great deal about remittance behaviors among transnational families in various parts
of the world (Levitt, 1998; Nguyen, 2002; Russell, 1986; Sofranco and Idris, 1999; Yu, 1979; Menjivar et al., 1998; Funkhouser, 1995; Taylor, 1999), there is little work done on the emotive nature of remittances from the standpoint of remitters. In this article, I focus specifically on how transnational families create remittance cultures and how remittance cultures are connected to Vietnamese diasporic masculinity. I follow the mandate by Mahler and Pessar (2001) to focus on the “gendered geographies of power” in transnational processes, a framework for analyzing “people’s social agency—corporal and cognitive—given their own initiative as well as their positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains” (p. 447).

Whereas labor migration from various parts of the world, especially of contractual workers, have been the main focus in studies of contemporary transnational family ties (McKay, 2006; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Hochschild, 2002; Gamburd, 2000; Parrenas, 2001a; Parrenas, 2001b; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Goldring, 2003), this article examines the situation of members of a refugee diaspora who migrated because of political reasons over the past three decades. Vietnamese mass out-migration and the formation of a diaspora began days before April 30, 1975 with the fall of Saigon when U.S. troops pulled out of Vietnam. Post-1975 Vietnamese international migrants first came as refugees directly to the United States as part of the airlift effort that evacuated more than 130,000 Saigonese, who were mostly from the urban middle class (Freeman 1995). Subsequent waves of refugees included a large number of “boat people” from diverse regions of Vietnam who spent some time in refugee camps in another Southeast Asian country (most notably in Hong Kong, Thailand, and the Philippines) before they were sponsored by a country in the West.

Since April 1975, over two million people emigrated from Vietnam, about 3 percent of the country’s current population of eighty million. Approximately 60 percent left as boat refugees; the remaining 40 percent departed from Vietnam and went directly to resettlement countries. Ninety-four percent of those who left Vietnam eventually resettled in Western countries. Between 1975 and 1995, the U.S. accepted 64 percent of that group; 12 percent went to Australia and 12 percent to Canada. Among European countries, France received the largest number, although this represents only 3 percent of total resettlements (Merli, 1997). As the refugee influx declined over time, family reunification and family sponsorship, such as family-forming migration, have dominated Vietnamese out-migration at the beginning of this century. In 1986, after having no contact with the outside world for over a decade, Vietnam adopted a new socio-economic policy called doi moi (renovation) which, although did not end state ownership or central planning, moved the country
from complete state-sponsored socialism to partial free market capitalism (Morley and Nishihara, 1997; Ebashi, 1997). The normalization of economic and social ties by 1995, the year that former U.S. President Bill Clinton re-established full diplomatic relations with Vietnam, gradually increased the number of individuals from the Vietnamese diaspora who returned as tourists or to visit family members.

The Vietnamese government estimates that currently more than one million Viet Kieu, or overseas Vietnamese, return annually for tourism and to visit relatives, a dramatic increase from the 87,000 who came in 1992, and from the only 8000 who visited in 1988. This relatively recent Viet Kieu traffic has facilitated in many ways new global family forms and practices, including remittance relationships. The United Nations reports that in 2004, overseas Vietnamese remitted about $3.2 billion US dollars, an increase from only $35 million in 1991 (United Nations, 2006; Nguyen, 2002). In the same year, Vietnam also ranked sixteenth among the top remittance-receiving countries worldwide and fifth among all Asian countries after India, China, the Phillipines, and Pakistan. Like Vietnam, the latter four countries have large diasporic populations, but they have a much stronger migrant worker population base than Vietnam. For example, between 2000 and 2003, Vietnam sent only 47,000 migrants for employment abroad, whereas the Phillipines sent 867,000 and India sent 297,000 migrant workers (United Nations, 2006). Thus, current remittances to Vietnam probably come mostly from refugees who migrated over the past three decades rather than from migrant workers.

The purpose of this article is to build on previous perspectives on remittances (Orozco, 2002; Burman, 2002; Zarate-Hoyos, 2004; Vanwey, 2004) in order to expand our understanding of transnational families by focusing on emotional and material sources that explain some variations in why and how immigrant low wagers send money to families left behind. Indeed, research on migrants and their families often frame them as merely “part of the ongoing circulation of resources, both capital and labor, within the boundaries of a single global division of labor.” (Friedman-Kasaba, 1996, p. 24). This “labor and capital” analysis situates migrants and migration as important sources and outcomes of globalization. Yet, while globalization is defined as “the “social, economic, cultural and demographic processes that take place within nations but also transcend them” (Kearney, 1995: 548), most writings on globalization focus on “money, markets, and labor flows” (Hochschild, 2000: 33-34), paying little attention to the emotional impact that the circulation of money and capital have on individual migrants and their families.

In what follows, I first examine competing arguments on the impact of remittance flows among immigrants. Then, I supply three examples of low
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wage immigrant Vietnamese men who regularly remit to demonstrate three dominant patterns of remittances. I argue that the concept of emotional economies provides us with an important tool for understanding the emotional and material dynamics that compel immigrants to establish and maintain transnational family ties. We see that remittances provide low wage Vietnamese immigrant men an important platform from which to maintain social ties in Vietnam. These social ties are especially important because of the very fact that they are low wage workers since it is these ties and membership in the community of origin that provide these men a sense of self worth. Low wage Vietnamese immigrant men who take on the role of regular remitters face extreme economic hardships in their lives, hardships that are rarely, if ever, made known to their family members in Vietnam. Thus, while they can barely afford to remit, their family members often have very different conceptions of how much they can afford to send.

methods

The analysis for this article relies on ethnographic and interview data drawn from a larger project that I conducted on the emergence of a Vietnamese transpacific marriage market that has been gathering momentum in recent years (Thai, Forthcoming). During fourteen months of fieldwork from December 1999 to March 2001 done in phases in Vietnam and in the United States, I got to know sixty-nine Vietnamese transpacific arranged marriages between women in Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese men living in the diaspora. The contemporary Vietnamese transpacific marriage market is demographically gendered because very few overseas women return to Vietnam for husbands as I have discovered in my investigation of case studies and in my confirmation with marriage registration lists at the Department of Justice in Vietnam. The basis of this gendered pattern is that 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 twentieth century has produced what demographer Daniel Goodkind (1997) calls the “double marriage squeeze,” a situation resulting in a “surplus” of women of marriageable age in Vietnam and a “surplus” of men of marriageable age in Vietnamese overseas communities, especially in Australia and in the United States.3

In this distinct and emergent global marriage market, overseas Vietnamese men typically go to Vietnam to marry through arrangements and subsequently return to their places of residence in the diaspora (most are from the United States, Canada, France, and Australia) to initiate paperwork to sponsor their wives as immigrants. The couples I got to know in these marriages were, therefore, in a “migration waiting period.” That is, they were
transnationally separated as the women were waiting to be united with their husbands through migration. 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. In 1999, the Vietnamese Department of Justice provided two randomly generated lists of 200 names of couples whose marriages were registered in Saigon and 120 names of couples whose marriages were registered in a Mekong Delta province I call Se Long (220 kilometers southwest of Saigon). These lists contained names of both grooms and brides who registered their marriages between September and December 1999. Although a few of the transpacific wives do not eventually migrate abroad to join their husbands for various reasons (Thai, 2003b), marriage registration at the Department of Justice in Vietnam is the first step a transpacific couple must make in order to begin the paperwork to sponsor the wives as immigrants. From the two lists of names, I systematically selected every fourth name from the top to the bottom of each list and literally went to the brides’ houses, knocked on their doors, and invited them to participate in the study.

The larger project is based on a sample of 69 marriages. To underscore the diasporic nature of Vietnamese emigration, I note that the overseas grooms in the original two lists of married couples came from over 35 countries, although in my probability sample, the men came from a total of eight countries. In the bride phase in Vietnam, I conducted multiple formal tape-recorded in-depth interviews with 93 individuals, including 66 wives and 27 of their family members. I did not meet 3 of the 69 brides, since they had already migrated by the time I got to their homes, but I interviewed their relatives and decided to include their marriages in this sample. In the groom phase of the project, based primarily in the United States, I interviewed 36 individuals, including 28 husbands and 8 of their family members. In the United States, they came from 16 states. For the scope and feasibility of this project, once I captured the experiences of brides in Vietnam, I was able to only interview the U.S.-based grooms in the metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Boston. In total, then, the U.S.-based husbands I got to know and interviewed constituted one-third (n=24/69) of all the men who married the women I met in Vietnam. I selected the United States for the groom phase of the project not only for practical reasons, but also because the United States is the country of residence of over 55 percent of all Viet Kieu (Merli 1997). Vietnamese American men constituted about 68 percent (n = 47) of all the grooms in my study. I should emphasize here that while I only use interview data from the men in the analysis that follows, I sometimes learned much more about the husbands from their wives, and vice versa.
Eighty percent of the men in my entire sample were low wage workers, men who generally earned at or near the minimum wages in their respective labor markets. Yet, I found that it was these men who were most likely to remit money to Vietnam, and who, in fact, not only remitted more in the proportion of their earned incomes than the other men in this study, but the low wagers tended to also remit more money in absolute terms. It is this striking pattern that is the basis for the analytics of this article. For clarity, I present the situations of three men who talked about the nature, extent, and dynamics of their remittances to family members in Vietnam. Remittances to family members may have started once they married in Vietnam, but not necessarily so. I present life histories and purposely move away from the conventional technique of weaving in multiple stories from multiple respondents. I have also avoided telling stories of money with the men’s wives and of particular marriages in this article as I have done elsewhere (Thai, 2003; Thai, 2002).

Remittances in the New Global Economy

Scholars divide analytical focus on two dominant theoretical models that help explain the effects of remittances on home countries. These two models stem from key arguments in immigration studies, namely the classic “push and pull” or “equilibrium” theory of migration (Brettell, 2000). First, the “dependency model” generally has a bleak view of remittances, arguing that on one level, remittances widen inequality in the home country by encouraging conspicuous consumption among recipients. On another level, this model argues that remittances also widen inequalities among nation states as it ensures that a cheap labor pool will always be available in peripheral countries. The argument is that those who have not yet migrated will be compelled to do so because of the remittances they either receive or observe others receive in their communities. That is, remittances introduce or increase dependency on both emigrants and the countries to which they migrate, factors that induce desires to migrate and therefore lessen productivity in the local community. In short, remittances act as a “perpetual migration machine” (Wucker, 2004) that over time turn small villages, provinces, and even countries into nurseries for prospective migrants and into nursing homes for those who have no prospect for migration (Massey et al., 1998).

In contrast to the dependency model, the “development” model argues that remittances play an important positive role in helping poor developing countries. For one thing, remittances provide economic growth for both local communities and the national economies of the developing world by raising household incomes and facilitating investments at all levels of the economy. The economist J. Edward Taylor (1999) provides important evidence to support this view. He further argues that not only does remittances improve
developing countries, it also helps "immigrant receiving" countries. This is because remittances facilitate social ties that provide a social safety net in the long run. Essentially, this means that when immigrants face problems (such as health and medical needs), they can return to the home country for support that was built with social ties created by remittance relationships.

There is evidence to support both of these models, such that Taylor (1999) convincingly suggests that the reality of the process and outcome of remittances "clearly lies somewhere in between these two extremes (p. 64)." Studies have shown that remittances are no doubt often used for conspicuous consumption such as buying luxury goods that locals cannot generally afford (Cornelius, 1991) or that remittances are used to invest in real estate or economic enterprises (Durand et al., 1996; Massey and Basem, 1992). Reichert (1981) reports that social ties in the community of origin promotes conspicuous consumption from remittances, both among recipients and among immigrants who return home on family visits. In contrast, Mooney (2003) found that immigrants from Mexico who have social ties in the country of origin are much more likely than those who do not to invest on production (such as business enterprises) or on real estate. Investments provide immigrants with a strong basis for claiming membership in the communities of origin and as a result can be important mechanisms for status claims. Recent evidence suggests that over the long run, remittance-receiving households are similar in their consumption patterns to households that do not receive remittances (Zarate-Hoyos, 2004).

Until recently, the competing viewpoints on remittance behaviors generally analyze remittance as a one way phenomenon with the effects, such as modes of consumption, on either the emigrants or the community of origin. Jeffrey Cohen (2001) proposes that a transnational approach to analyze remittance allows us to "break down the contradictions of dependency and development and defines the outcomes of migration and remittance use as rooted in a series of interdependencies that emphasize production and consumption, class and ethnicity, and the individual and the community while transcending localities and national boundaries (955)." Drawing on this approach to remittance, I establish that social ties and membership in the community of origin among low wage men in the Vietnamese diaspora frequently require them to remit money to transnational family members. Such remittances, however, can only be used to help households in the community of origin boost their everyday quality of life through small scale consumption rather than through conspicuous consumption of luxury goods as other studies suggest is the case among other immigrant groups. Yet, while these remittances do not help family members invest in large scale items like real estate, they are in fact a significant proportion of the income that low
wagers make in the United States. In what follows, I describe three types of remitters among low wage immigrant Vietnamese men: status remitters, altruistic remitters, and contractual remitters. These three types have been documented by previous studies among migrants in Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Russell, 1986; Sofranko and Idris, 1999; Yu, 1979; Orozco, 2002; Wucker, 2004; Papademetriou, 1991; Adams, 1998; Vanwey, 2004; Hoddinott, 1994; Lillard and Willis, 1997; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Agarwal and Horowitz, 2002; Briere et al., 2002).

Status remitters send money for claiming and valorizing social worth in the community of origin. These men benefit from remittances upon their return to Vietnam as they gain deference, recognition, and a general sense of respect from their recipients. Elsewhere, I have argued that these types of remitters engage in small scale conspicuous consumptions that are often beyond their means, but consumptions that are made possible because of the convertibility of low incomes from the West to high incomes in Vietnam (Thai, 2005). Altruistic remitters send money and other forms of support (like commodities from the West) to help increase the welfare of their family members (Lillard and Willis, 1997). These remitters do not generally talk about status claims as important reasons for remitting. They are usually adult children or siblings of recipients of remittances, and they tend to also be more consistent remitters. Finally, contractual remitters send money as payment for either past or future expenses that they have created in connection with relatives left behind. They, for instance, may pay for financial support that helped them to migrate in the first place. More often, however, contractual remitters enter a remittance relationship because it allows them leverage for taking partial ownership of properties and land that they could take residence upon their visits (Thai, 2005). This is especially salient for overseas Vietnamese since current laws make it difficult for them to own properties in Vietnam, unlike laws that promote ownership among overseas Filipinos/as when they return to the Philippines. Some, though few, of these remitters hope to one day return to live in Vietnam. In this pattern, then, remittances act as a sort of insurance for future residency (Agarwal and Horowitz, 2002).

At the onset, I want to clarify that these three types of remitters do not identify the entire range of remitters among low wage overseas Vietnamese men; they, however, represent the dominant types, what I estimate to represent nearly 95 percent of the cases I studied, with altruistic remitters constituting about half of the remitters. Furthermore, it is likely that some remitters will fall into more than one category. For example, altruistic remitters who send money back consistently to help entire households also gain enormous status as “heroes” in their communities of origin. What I present in the following are three examples to provide an exploratory look at remitters who are low wage
immigrant men from the Vietnamese diaspora. Further research can identify the salience and significance of social class, gender, and age on each type of remitter and among other overseas immigrant groups in transnational families.

Remittance as a Status Strategy

Ly Tran is a thirty-six-year-old nail salon worker who lives near the center of Lion Plaza, the well-known Vietnamese enclave of San Jose, California, where the second highest concentration of Vietnamese Americans resides after Orange County. One might expect that Ly would know many of his Vietnamese neighbors, not because they are mostly Vietnamese, but because it is a highly dense apartment complex. Yet, Ly said that he rarely speaks to people in the working class apartment complex where he lives. He tried on occasions over the years to make friends with his neighbors, but said that most of them worked long hours and do not have time. In fact, he doesn’t have much time either, but according to him, he has more time than most of his neighbors. Ly commutes about thirty minutes each way to a posh and mostly white neighborhood where he works in an upscale nail salon. When I went to meet and interview Ly at his workplace, the symbolism of the sight was striking: Ly was in the process of cleaning a middle-aged white woman’s feet, massaging it after he had given her a “full set” pedicure. Over the thirty minutes I waited for him, he exchanged very few words with his client. The race, gender, and class dynamics of the sight provided an important window into how Ly talked about his work, transnational life, and immigration history.

Ly had taken on “nail work,” as he framed it, after stints at other less lucrative, though as he said, “more masculine” jobs. He had once taken on an apprenticeship to be a jeweler, but saw little money in it as he had little capital to open a jewelry store; he then spent several months learning to deal cards at casinos, but decided he didn’t like the long hours of that occupation. The truth is that he doesn’t like the long hours of doing nail worker either, but he prefers this occupation because he said the job entails consistent working hours, makes quick money, has a lot of flexibility since his co-ethnic employer gives him time off when he wanted it, and because he could speak to his fellow coworkers in Vietnamese. But his job was one where he had very little of what Arlie Hochschild (1983; 1981) calls “status shields,” not because of his social class, since being a man of working class meant that he felt fine with serving “social betters,” or women of higher means. Yet, his working class position was a gendered and internally racialized one, since he had very little status shields in working for a co-ethnic female employer. This situation was more pronounced since most of his fellow workers were also women, despite the increase in men in the Vietnamese manicurist labor niche (Federman et al., 2006).
A year before I met him, Ly had returned to Saigon to marry a woman he met through the introduction of a cousin he kept in touch with over the years. As someone who migrated to the United States when he was a teenager, Ly writes and reads Vietnamese fluently and had kept in touch with various kin members in Vietnam throughout the years, though both of his parents and two brothers live in the United States. He took a liking for the cousin in Saigon who shared many of his life paths in their local and national contexts: they both did not particularly like school, but had aspirations for moving up economically through other approaches, and they both took the delayed route towards marriage, in large part, because they could not afford to marry earlier in their lives. As was the case with many of the men living in the Vietnamese diaspora in my study, marriage was often delayed because they could not “afford” to choose that life stage earlier. Social ties with the cousin eventually led to a marriage arrangement for Ly and his wife, but that initial renewal of social ties also obliged Ly into a remittance relationship, partly because his cousin had helped Ly meet his wife, and partly because Ly had maintained strong social ties that gave him a concrete sense of respect and recognition in the community of origin. Ly said that he first helped the cousin buy a motorbike in the late 1990s so that the cousin could take tailoring classes in a nearby district. In addition, after he bought the motorbike, Ly also began sending about $100 USD a month to this cousin: Ly said he felt sorry for the cousin initially, but also felt, as he said, “so respected. If I did not send money when he asked, I was afraid that other relatives in Vietnam would know that, and they would treat me differently. Besides, I am a Viet Kieu man. I have to help out some family in Vietnam. It’s important to keep the image of a Viet Kieu so that people in Vietnam know you earn good money in the United States.” When I asked Ly why he sent $100 in the first place, he explained,

If you are a Viet Kieu, they expect you to help them. I first thought about how much that would help my cousin, and it was not that much money. I mean, I make over $2000 a month in San Jose, and so I thought $100 is only 5 percent of my salary. It was fine. He was also very nice to me when I came back to Vietnam. He treated me so well, and people knew that I was his sponsor in the United States. When I visited, all the relatives did everything I asked for, always paid attention to me. I know some of the cousins were hoping that I would help them, too. I guess I never get that kind of attention in the US. I also felt bad that he was really poor. I mean, he was only making about fifty dollars a month.

The combination of sympathy and status claims reveal a contradiction as to why men like Ly send money. Indeed, men like Ly talk about getting attention, respect, and “everything I ask for,” as important reasons for starting remittance relationships, but they also acknowledge that the enormous disparity in incomes between the first and third world make it more
compelling (and possible) to help out transnational family members. It is precisely this disparity in incomes—the general ability to convert low incomes of the West to high incomes of third world Vietnam—that makes status claims possible through remittances. At the same time, remitters who send money for status claims like Ly, however, generally do not have immediate transnational family members in Vietnam. They are usually not sons, fathers, or brothers. As such, they are generally not obligated to support the social welfare of households like altruistic remitters; that is, these men tend to support individual relatives rather than households. Instead, men like Ly enter remittance relationships as a “status strategy” to maintain social ties in Vietnam. Such social ties bring them an enormous sense of self worth. As Ly explained, “When you live in America, anyone is like anyone [ai cung nhu ai]. But in Vietnam, as a Viet Kieu, you are important.” The importance of being “important” is only accentuated when Viet Kieu have translocal relations with a community of origin. Otherwise, the recognition of income disparities is meaningless for immigrants who have no family members in Vietnam to do the recognizing with them. As Goldring (1998) describes, the “locality of origin provides a unique social and spatial context within transnational communities for making claims to and valorizing social status (p. 165).” Transmigrants who assert status across transnational social fields do so because they are able to identify tangible translocal relations, which “are constituted within historically and geographically specific points of origin and migration established by transmigrants;” (Guarnizo and Smith. 1998b: 13).” Remittances serve to enhance the meaning and value of those memberships in the locality of origin.

Altruistic Remitters as Heroes of Global Families

Altruistic remitters like Tai Dang, a twenty-six year-old man from the San Francisco Bay area, tell us that obligatory immediate family ties (i.e., parents, children, or siblings) remain the most crucial relationships for sending remittances. Such men rarely speak of status or contractual agreements, which I detail below, as the key motivations for sending money. These men tend to talk most about the burden of sending money, since they see their remittance relationships as the most obligatory of all three types of remitters, which means they feel they have the least choice to decline requests for money by family members. Whereas status and contractual remitters could stop sending remittances with minimal impact on their family relations, altruistic remitters most often feel that by ending remittances, they would end ties with family members. In this way, altruistic remitters are also least likely to tell their families about the hardships they endure in the United States when they send money; as such, these men are often the most frugal with their consumption in
the United States since they generally have the least disposable income after they account for remittances. Such men talk about sacrifices they make in their everyday lives so that they save all the money they could to send to family. As Tai explained,

If you follow me for a month here, you will see that I never eat out. Every time I go out and drop $10 or so, I think about how that money can feed my entire family in Vietnam for three days. I don’t buy anything. If I did not have my family to worry about, I would have a descent life here, but sometimes, I just see myself as a worker here. When I visit my family in Vietnam, I get to enjoy life a little because things are cheaper there, but I buy nothing and do nothing in America.

If transnational networks explain, as some scholars have done (Vanwey, 2004; Hoddinott, 1994; Agarwal and Horowitz, 2002), the significance of altruistic remittances, then we can say that most of the remitters in this study are in fact altruistic remitters. Over half of all grooms and brides are part of transnational families in which core family members (parents, siblings, or children) are dispersed in at least three countries. Virtually all of them are part of transnational families where at least one relative (including grandparents, uncles, and aunts) live abroad. Overall, if one examines social networks of international migrants, there are far more people in any social network who stay put than those who migrate. For this reason, it is easier to identify and calculate which and how many relatives brides have abroad. Grooms’ transnational networks are more complex because, on average, they have more kin members in Vietnam than brides have in the Vietnamese diaspora. For example, nearly all of the grooms have at least a cousin, grandparent, aunt, or uncle in Vietnam; most have large extended networks of kin in Vietnam. All the grooms have at least one relative in Vietnam, which meant that no groom, probably like all Vietnamese emigrants of the past three decades, emigrated with their entire kin network. About one third (n=20) of all the grooms have at least one parent in Vietnam and 23 percent (n=16) have at least one sibling in Vietnam.

Tai is part of the nearly one third of the men in my study who have at least one parent living in Vietnam. Not only is he supporting his parents, but there are also three sisters and two brothers who supported themselves off Tai’s monthly remittances. He is typical among the low wage workers who toil many hours in menial jobs only to send as much as he could to family members in Vietnam. In his own words, “I sacrifice everything for my family in Vietnam.” Tai came to the United States in the late 1980s as a boat refugee when he was a young thirteen-year-old with his father’s younger brother. This uncle took good care of Tai, but Tai attributed his lack of interest and general failure in school due to his uncle’s long working hours in a factory on the east bay of San Francisco. When they arrived in the United States, Tai recalled
having to do virtually all the household labor for the uncle while attending high school. Given the situation, Tai said he decided to drop out of high school after tenth grade and took a job working in the seafood department at the local chain grocery's store. Over the ten years that Tai worked there, he said his hourly wage increased by about four dollars, which at the time that I met him, gave him a full $14 per hour pay. When he turned eighteen, Tai returned to Vietnam to visit his parents for the first time. Comparatively, he said that his life is much better than his family who are farmers in the Mekong Delta province of Se Long. He said that after that initial trip in 1992, about eight years before I met him, he returned to the United States with a different view of money and family. In short, he said, "I started to save every penny I could. I did not spend anything on myself. I stop going out with friends, and I generally isolated myself. The only thing I knew was my family in Se Long."

Whereas status and contractual claimers send what they can afford or want to in order to serve their purposes—they were what one might call "limited remitters"—altruistic remitters are most likely to send more than they can afford and therefore often go into debt to help entire households. Tai said that he took out a credit card loan of ten thousand dollars that accrued more than 15 percent annually in interest in order to help his two brothers start a small market in his home village. He said that he initially declined the request from his two brothers, but letters were arriving every week for over a year to his home in the United States pleading for his assistance. As Tai described those letters,

First, the letters started out with them telling me how much they cared for me, how they wished they were in America to take care of me, how they were worried about me. Then, they started to talk about their difficulties, not enough food, not enough clothes, not enough money to make money. Then, my two brothers asked for $10K to help them open up a market. They said they would help the entire family out. I was worried because I did not go home for 18 months and they started to talk about people getting sick, needing money for medicine. I could not sleep for a while because I felt so bad that I could not help them out. I finally took the credit card loan out. It's been five years, and I am still trying to pay it off.

**Contractual Remitters as Potential Future Return Migrants**

Unlike altruistic or status remitters, contractual remitters view long term economic contributions to transnational families as an economic strategy that would benefit them in the future when they return to live or to make long visits. They, therefore, have the most tangible reason for sending money—that is, sending remittances serve as a literal investment of sorts. They are the most likely to plan return migration to Vietnam, and as such they tend to be older men. And because of their age, these men tend to, though not always (despite their low wage work) have more money to remit for larger purchases. Some
contractual remitters come into specific agreements with family members in order to take partial ownership of land or real estate. When real estate is involved, contractual remitters frequently contribute by renovating homes or adding modern appliances like air conditioners or refrigerators. Many of the contractual remitters renovate one room in a home so that they could stay there upon their return, a practice that not only literally accentuates inequality in the home, but also promotes a desire among those who do not get to live in the remodeled room to have luxury items like air conditioners. Agreements range from explicit written contracts to implicit verbal agreements. The former practice is rare since few of the men have enough money to make explicit promises that would provide a basis for requiring written contracts. Whether written contracts or verbal agreements are made, a remodeled home or an addition of modern appliances surely benefit families in Vietnam, but they also mean that family members in Vietnam are bound to the remitters for the long run. I have found cases in which families in Vietnam rescind verbal contracts for various reasons (for example, interpersonal conflicts that arise over time) and cases in which the start of building a home go unfinished, effectively ending remittance relationships and social ties altogether. Such was the case for Phung Nguyen, a forty-three-year-old gas station worker from Orange County, California.

Phung migrated to the United States with three of his siblings under the sponsorship of his elderly parents in the early 1990s through a family reunification visa that he and his siblings waited for eight years to obtain. When Phung arrived in the United States, he was in his mid thirties and still had not married. Shortly after his arrival in Orange County, he began to work at a gas station owned by a co-ethnic. Having been relatively unhappy living in Orange County for three years, despite the large number of Vietnamese there, he took his first trip back to Vietnam in 1996 as soon as he saved five thousand dollars, an amount that was enough to buy him a roundtrip ticket and to also live comfortably in his village in Se Long for at least six months. Because he and his siblings had sold all their land and homes prior to their migration to the United States, they no longer had a home for which to return. Phung, therefore, spent his first trip back living with an aunt, his father’s youngest sister, who was in her late forties. Phung said he had a great liking for this aunt, and thus began to give money to her, in part, he said, “because I wanted to pay for living in her house for six months when I returned in 1996. But we never said how long I would give money after I left.” He said, however, it was difficult to calculate how much he needed to pay her because, “we are family, so really, I am not supposed to pay. But at the same time, I had much more money than her family had because I was a Viet Kieu. It would not have been right if I did not give her money when I was staying there for so long. I had
about four thousand dollars when I returned after my flight, which was how much she and all of her five children would make in five years in the village doing their farming work!"

During that first visit, Phung married a woman he had known in the village prior to his migration, but because of traditional customs having to do with patrilineal residency after marriage (Tran, 1996), Phung decided that he would not live with his wife's family in the village. He and his new wife, therefore, decided to move in with his aunt shortly after his wedding. This, in effect, meant that Phung now had no choice in sending money because once he returned to Orange County to start the migration paperwork to sponsor his wife, she continued to live with the aunt. At this time, because Phung was only a green card holder, and not a U.S citizen, they not only had to wait longer than other international couples where the "sponsoring" spouse is a U.S. citizen, but a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service quota system limiting how many spouses could be sponsored by green card holders meant that they had to wait indefinitely (USINS, 2002). Although U.S. immigration policy sets no limitations on how many "foreign" spouses of American citizens can migrate to the United States, foreign spouses of green card holders are second in a complicated "preference system" for family reunification. Knowing that his wife had to wait indefinitely, Phung returned to Orange County and continued to work at the gas station, saving another five thousand dollars, which he sent back home to his aunt to remodel half of her house. She installed modern plumbing and built a western style bathroom, as well as putting in an air conditioner in his wife's room. Over time, Phung explained that his aunt had placed more demands on his wife to put in more money for her share of living in the household as well as made constant requests for extra money to remodel the other half of the house, including adding another floor to the house. Phung explained.

I told her (my aunt) that I did not have the money, but she did not believe me. I was sending all my money to my wife, and I didn't regulate how she spent it. But my aunt wanted us to give her money to rebuild the other half of the house. After two years, when I did not send the money, she started to give my wife a lot of problems even though my wife was giving money to her regularly to buy food for the family and to pay for electricity.

After two and a half years of separation, Phung returned to visit his wife for four months, and learned that she had been eating separately from her aunt's family. She only used the bedroom they had remodeled with the air conditioner. As conflicts escalated to the point that the aunt no longer talked to Phung's wife, Phung decided that they would leave his aunt's house and started to rent a small house not too far from the aunt's family.
The Politics of Sending and Receiving

All three remitters send money despite the fact that they find it difficult to do so. One striking similar pattern among all three men is their discussions about their family's—the recipients of their remittances—general misinformed knowledge about their inability to send money and the general hardships they faced in doing so. As Ly explained,

It's like receiving money becomes a full time job for them; they sit there, writing letters of pity, of sadness, and they spend all their energy to call you, and to send you little cheap things you don't need so that you feel connected to them. So you can't help but to feel sorry for them because they do really spend a lot of time. I mean, once, I received a 15 page letter from my cousin telling me about his hardships. A lot of it was phony, I think, but I think it's hard to say because the reality is that they are really poor in Vietnam. But I wish he just knows that I can only send so much, that I will have to take care of my wife, and move my life along. I can't send money for the rest of my life. I think he wants me to help him out with a house, a business, these are the things that I can't afford.

The three types of remitters use various strategies to cope with unrealistic expectations from family members. Status remitters generally continue social ties they built with regular small remittances they initiated so long as recipients continue to remain in contact. Because status remitters have little to lose from discontinuing sending money and because receivers have little to gain from ending social ties, remittance relationships among status remitters and their recipients generally continue with little transnational tensions. This is also because status remitters generally remitted the least amount since they tend to support individual relatives rather than households. Contractual remitters, on the other hand, use their remittances as insurance for various purposes, including the possibility of return migration. But when demands are too unrealistic or impossible to meet, contractual remitters like Phung sometimes take the route of dissolving transnational social ties altogether. Contractual remitters who are successful at keeping transnational ties amicable and effective (that is, they benefit materially) usually make agreements explicit from the beginning. Finally, altruistic remitters experience the most hardships since they have very little options, if any, for discontinuing remittance relationships. Altruistic remitters keep silent about their hardships; the strategy they often take is to go into debt, like Tai, in order to continue supporting the social welfare of households, even when they find that expectations are unrealistic to meet.

The Politics of Money and Migration in the New Global Economy

This article focuses on the hardships that low wage immigrant Vietnamese men experience in three types of remittance relationships they form as part of
transnational families. In an effort to maintain transnational ties for a variety of reasons, low wage immigrant men find that they must enter remittance relationships with various kin members left behind in Vietnam. As shown, Vietnamese low-wage immigrant men convert "low-income" status to "high-income" when they return ‘home,’ use money as an important element for establishing social ties with kin left behind, and experience a general hardship in their lives as a result of remittance relationships. Such social ties through remittances are embedded in emotional and material sources, sources anchored in migration histories and transnational networks. As the stories of Ly, Tai, and Phung illustrate, remittances, even when they involve small amounts, are tremendously costly for low-wage Vietnamese immigrant men who often deprive themselves of basic needs in order to remit.

The arguments outlined in this article provide an exploratory look at the intersection of social class and masculinity among low-wage immigrant men, augmenting other research that examine the constitution of gender in migration streams. There has been a tremendous amount of research in recent years that have tried to rethink the issues of gender and migration, but few have focused on masculinity (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Jones-Correa, 1998b; Jones-Correa, 1998a; Goldring, 2003; Smith, 1998). Although I do not have comparative insights from overseas Vietnamese immigrant women and how they differ in their remittance relationships across national borders, in many ways, I echo what other scholars have pointed about masculinity and migration among Mexican and Latino men (Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Goldring, 2003; Jones-Correa, 1998a; Jones-Correa, 1998b; Smith, 1998). That is, among low wage men, transnational ties are vital for their sense of self, but such ties are only made possible by the formation of remittance relationships. I suggest that many of these low wage men are more likely than women, and are more likely than economically privileged Vietnamese immigrants, to feel compelled to claim social positions at “home,” social positions that are often denied to them in the country of migration as a result of being low wage racialized ethnic men. My work moves away from, and at the same time, adds to the “refugee model” that characterizes many previous important studies on Vietnamese in exile (Kibria, 1993; Freeman, 1989; Zhou and Bankston, 1998). I build on these previous works on Vietnamese refugees and immigrants by emphasizing research on transnationalism from “below,” (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998a) and by foregrounding everyday life and the emotional and material nexus in processes of transmigration (Hochschild, 2002; Parrenas, 2001a; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997).
NOTES

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2. Literally, “changing for the new.”

3. A shortage of one sex or the other in the age group in which marriage generally occurs is often termed a marriage squeeze (Gutentag 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. Among the fifteen most populated nations in 1989, Vietnam had the lowest ratio of men to women among those at the peak marrying ages. 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. In 1990, for Vietnamese Americans in all age groups, there were about 113 males for every 100 females (Zhou and Bankston 1998). By 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. These calculations are based on Goodkind’s (1997) 1990 data. I simply added ten years to each cohort, though I acknowledge that mortality for either sex as a whole may have caused a shift in sex ratios since 1990.

4. Although Saigon’s name changed to Ho Chi Minh City when the South surrendered to Northern Vietnamese military troops in 1975, most people I met in the course of this research project still refer to the city as “Saigon.” or simply “Thành Phố” [The City]. In this chapter, I echo their frames of reference by using the name “Saigon,” and “Saigonese” to refer to the locals there. All names in this essay have been changed to protect the privacy of informants. I have also changed the names of peasant villages in Vietnam or small towns in the U.S. I have kept the real names of all metropolitan areas.
5. I did not meet three of the wives who were included in my sample because I discovered that they had already left Vietnam to join their husbands abroad. Two of these wives emigrated to France, and the third to Australia. In Vietnam, many people, including officials from the U.S. embassy, told me that compared to other Western countries, the United States had the strictest and slowest process for clearing paperwork for family reunification migration. I decided, nevertheless, to include the marriages of the three women whom I did not meet in my analysis because interviews with their families who were still in Vietnam gave me extensive information about their marriages. In addition to formal tape recorded interviews with brides, grooms, and their families, I was a participant observer of eight families in Saigon, maximizing variation (e.g. by age, level of education, income, contexts of transnational networks). I transcribed and translated about half of the interviews, and the rest were done by two research assistants in the United States.

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