Chapter Eight

The Legacy of Doi Moi, the Legacy of Immigration
Overseas Vietnamese Grooms Come Home to Vietnam

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The mass out-migration of Vietnamese to the West was part of a specific phase in global history. The political turmoil of the mid-1970s in Southeast Asia resulted in more than two million people leaving Vietnam, primarily as political refugees, and relocating in more than eighty countries worldwide (Tran 1997). More than 90 percent of these post-1975 international migrants reside in the core countries of the United States, Canada, Australia, and France (Merli 1997). Vietnamese out-migration can be categorized into six different waves which were closely associated with socioeconomic origins and whether one came from an urban or rural background. In general, the earlier waves came from more affluent urban backgrounds (Chan 1991; Kibria 1993; Whitmore 1995). While they continue to be associated with refugee out-migration or “the scatterings of war,” as Zhou and Bankston (1998) call them, the majority of Vietnamese immigrants currently enter such countries as the United States through family sponsorship, as is the case for the general immigrant population. Scholars continue to write about this group’s sense of displacement and their experiences as refugees in settlements worldwide (Freeman and Huu 2003; Thomas 1997; Zhou and Bankston 1998) but have paid little attention to the global links Vietnamese emigrants have maintained with their families and networks of kin in Vietnam over the past three decades.
By attending to the emergence of a transpecific marriage market that has been made available to women in Vietnam and Vietnamese men who live overseas, I disembark from the refugee model of Vietnamese migration. This marriage market is invariably gendered because very few Vietnamese women return from overseas to Vietnam to find husbands as I discovered in my investigation of case studies and confirmed by consulting marriage registration lists at the Vietnamese Department of Justice. This gendered pattern resulted from a high male mortality rate during the Vietnam War (known in Vietnam as the American War) and the emigration of more men than women during the last quarter of the twentieth century. This 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 communities overseas.³

In this chapter, I argue that the recent return of immigrant Vietnamese men to their homeland to find wives is not just a matter of an emigration history, nor is it simply a matter of demographic skews. It has emerged in the context of global forces and transnational ties that have changed Vietnamese society on many levels, and as a consequence of changing gender relations in postmigrant overseas Vietnamese communities that are only partly related to demographic skews (Klibria 1993). After having no contact with most of the Western world between 1975 and 1986 for the south, and much longer for the north, in 1986, Vietnam adopted a new socioeconomic policy called Đổi Mới (renovation) which did not end state ownership or central planning, but moved the country from complete state-sponsored socialism to partial free-market capitalism (Ebashi 1997; Morley and Nishihara 1997). Vietnam was admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1993, but it was not until August 1995 that former U.S. President Bill Clinton established full diplomatic relations with the country (Morley and Nishihara 1997).

The normalization of economic and social ties by 1995 gradually increased the number of individuals from the Vietnamese diaspora, known as Việt Kieu, who returned to Vietnam to visit family members or to vacation. Incentives provided by the state for the overseas population, like the ability to purchase land and make investments, have created an extraordinarily important Việt Kieu economy. For instance, remittances grew dramatically from only $35 million in 1991 to more than $2 billion by 2002 (Nguyen 2002). The Vietnamese government estimates that there are currently more than one million Việt Kieu who return to visit annually, a dramatic increase
from eight thousand in 1988 and eighty-seven thousand in 1992. The traffic of Viet Kieu goods, people, and ideas has manifested itself in profound gendered ways, one of which is the ability for men overseas to improve their social status in their pursuit of marriage when they return to Vietnam.

In Vietnam, family life has undergone dramatic socioeconomic changes since Doi M{"o}i. This chapter joins others in this volume to shift the spotlight from macrotransformations to daily activities by focusing on global economic changes on the subjective experiences encountered by family and kinship across the Vietnamese diaspora (see B{é}langer and Barbieri, this volume). In this chapter, I point to the significance of Vietnamese international migration and international marriages on a particular segment of Vietnamese families. As noted by Jayakody and Huy as well as by Xenos et al. in this volume, a number of significant changes have taken place in mate selection and union formation since Doi M{"o}i, including diminished parental influences and the rise of personal choice. Others in this volume, including Luong, Chi, and B{é}langer and Pendakis, have shown how migration has modified families' economic circumstances and social practices. This chapter provides an exploratory look at the nexus between international migration and international marriage against the backdrop of a Viet Kieu economy and the 1986 policy shift of Doi M{"o}i.

I identify the logics of consumption, defined here as the usage of goods and services at the end of the chain of production, that allow some low-wage-earning Vietnamese immigrant men to create definitions around social worth, status, and national identity when they return to Vietnam for marriage. I establish that consumption among Viet Kieu provides a crucial platform from which to understand Doi M{"o}i and the dynamics of change among a specific segment of families in Vietnam. In describing the lives of low-wage immigrant men in the context of Vietnam’s post-1975 emigration to the West, this chapter engages in two important conversations among scholars doing work on globalization and national identity. First, I address the power of status across transnational social fields by highlighting relations between class and masculinities in globalization (Connell 1995, 2000; Goldring 1998, 2003; Jones-Correa 1998a, 1998b; Smith 1998). Second, by bringing questions of masculinity into the discussions on globalization, I join the dialogue of feminist theorists who have demonstrated that gender plays a key role in the constitution and formation of national subjectivities and collectivities (Abu-Lughod 1998; Alonso 1994; Chatterjee 1993; Espiritu 1997; Lowe 1996). Focusing on
men, this chapter draws upon a study consisting of 189 interviews with men, women, and their families who have participated in the recent formation of the Vietnamese transpacific marriage market that links Vietnamese men overseas and women in Vietnam (Thai 2008). In a larger study, about 80 percent of the men in my sample who returned to Vietnam for wives were part of the low-wage, low-status labor market in their diasporic locations.

Interviews used in this analysis come from the narratives of two Viet Kieu whom I shall call Teo and Toan. Teo was a thirty-two-year-old man who worked for his parents at a small sandwich shop in the Silicon Valley, where the second highest concentration of Viet Kieu reside. Thirty-year-old Toan was the afternoon janitor at a public elementary school in urban Los Angeles, the metropolitan area with the highest concentration of Viet Kieu in the diaspora. Since both Teo and Toan wanted to marry women of Vietnamese origin, they had recently returned to Vietnam to obtain wives through the arrangements of family and kin in the Vietnamese diaspora, despite the demographic advantage of living in two heavily populated Vietnamese metropolitan areas in the United States.

The stories of Teo and Toan illuminate the linkages between certain historical and structural factors, including the demography of marriage markets in postimmigrant communities and to what Constable (2003) calls "marital subjectivities" in global space. Their narratives illustrate how some immigrant men of color, particularly those in low-wage work, utilize globalization as a gender strategy to increase their sense of self-worth by converting their social status across national boundaries (Hochschild with Machung 1989). This international convertibility allows men, in turn, to feel as if they have more options available to them in the global hierarchy of marriage markets. These narratives also reveal how "subaltern men" construct their own masculinity and sense of respectability given that their lives are placed "at the intersection and interstices of vast systems of power: patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and capitalism, to name a few" (Chen 1999, 589).

Similar to Mexicans in the United States, as described in Goldring's study of transmigrants, Vietnamese immigrant men orient their lives to their place of origin because the "locality of origin provides a unique social and spatial context within transnational communities for making claims to and valorizing social status" (1998, 165). Thus, the place of origin provides an important social space to which immigrants can return and improve their social position based on material consumptions, which are often translated into
symbolic power, since enormous differentiation in purchasing abilities exists between unequal nation states in the global economy. I assert that, at this juncture in the twenty-first-century global economy, it is necessary to situate Vietnamese society in relation to transnational links from abroad, and, when speaking of the family, it is crucial to identify the links and manifestations of Vietnamese post-1975 emigration history.

Following research questions concerning immigrant men, social status, and transnational practices that have been raised by scholars like Goldring (1998, 2003), Jones-Correa (1998a, 1998b), and Smith (1998), I address the questions of how social status is converted across transnational social fields, and, more importantly, how this convertibility is gendered across transnational space. In Bourdieu’s (1984) view, as a point of reference, social status and distinctions are not only based on economic capital (for example, income) but they are also linked to other forms of capital, namely cultural, social, and symbolic. Status distinctions and class boundaries are sites of conflict for Bourdieu because differentiations are made by social groups in order to legitimize symbolic and material power. For scholars of globalization, one of the most insightful and relevant critiques of Bourdieu is the question of convertibility across national boundaries, for while Bourdieu’s approach “does not preclude the notion of transnational social fields, he does not directly discuss the implications of social fields that are not coterminous with state boundaries” (Schiller 2005, 442).

One of the most striking observations regarding the question of convertibility across national boundaries was Espiritu’s compelling argument that it is not often possible to use standard measures, such as education or occupation, to talk about class status among transnational and immigrant populations. As Espiritu (2001) suggested in her study of the Filipino community in San Diego, California, the class status of most of her informants was both ambiguous and transnational. Espiritu explained: “I met Filipinos/as who toiled as assembly workers but who, through the pooling of income and finances, owned homes in middle-class communities . . . I encountered individuals who struggled economically in the United States but owned sizable properties in the Philippines. And I interviewed immigrants who continued to view themselves as ‘upper class’ even while living in dire conditions in the United States” (2001, 425).

As I will demonstrate, the case of convertibility among the Vietnamese reflects, in some ways, Espiritu’s observations, but the Vietnamese situation is
also significantly different given the specific histories of migration from the Philippines and Vietnam that are linked to specific colonial moments. Filipinos/as were much more likely to have migrated as professionals, whereas the Vietnamese were initially part of a refugee dispersion that flung them to different parts of the world, tremendously affecting their job prospects when they arrived on Western soil. The Vietnamese continue to be one of the lowest income-earning groups in Asia America (Yamane 2001). In my years of fieldwork in Vietnam, I have witnessed and read about numerous Viet Kieu who, indeed, do return to invest and buy property. Yet, I have found that, as with diverse patterns of migration and return in the global economy, there are enormous variations in patterns of who returns to Vietnam and why.

In my study of international marriages in the Vietnamese diaspora I found that, while most Viet Kieu who return could participate in consumption patterns that they otherwise could not afford in the West, most Viet Kieu transpacific husbands, in fact, lived in minimal housing situations, could not afford properties in Vietnam, and had very modest self-worth in their overseas contexts. It is the power of convertibility in globalization at the everyday level of food consumption, small gift-giving activities, and recognition of differences from very poor kin members in third world Vietnam that allow some Viet Kieu to recuperate from the loss of self-worth caused by migration.

Methods

The empirical evidence for this study originates from a larger ethnographic, mainly interview-based, research project that I conducted between June 1997 and March 2001 among women in Vietnam and Vietnamese men overseas who had recently married across the Pacific. During fourteen months of fieldwork done in phases in Vietnam and the United States, I studied sixty-nine transpacific marriages. In this distinct and emergent global marriage market, the immigrant Vietnamese men typically return to Vietnam to marry through arranged marriage and, subsequently, return to their place of residence in the Vietnamese diaspora (usually, the United States, Canada, France, and Australia) to initiate paperwork to sponsor their wives as immigrants. The couples in these marriages were, therefore, in a “migration waiting period.” That is, they were transnationally separated as the women waited
to be united with their husbands. During this waiting period, I met the brides in Vietnam and later the grooms in the United States.\textsuperscript{8}

I present two life histories and purposely move away from the conventional technique of weaving in multiple stories from several respondents. Of course, the technique of using in-depth life histories is limited, namely in achieving any sort of generalizability. Nevertheless, I have taken this approach in order to provide analytical clarity. In addition, in this chapter, I have avoided relating stories of specific women or particular marriages, as I have done elsewhere (Thai 2002, 2003). Rather than focusing on decisions around marriage selections, this chapter concentrates on the ways in which low-wage men convert their social status across transnational social fields in the wake of the *Doi Moi* policy in Vietnam. To develop my analysis, I begin by briefly tracing the chronological paradox to the literature on gender and (trans) migration. I then chronicle the migration and marriage narratives of Teo and Toan to illustrate how globalization is used as a gender strategy. I echo Constable’s observations on global marriage options—they should not be understood as a “simple unilinear movement from East to West, from underdeveloped ‘South’ to developed ‘North,’ from so-called traditional societies to so-called modern ones, or from oppression to liberation” (Constable 2003, 165). In this contribution, I imply that international marriages among coethnics living in different parts of the world are not only anchored in a history of migration that dispersed this group of people involuntarily from their homelands, but are also motivated by the need for material, as well as emotional, recuperations of self-worth that make such marriages necessary.

*Gender and Transmigration*

There is a chronological paradox to research on gender and transmigration. From the 1950s to the 1970s, scholarship on migration focused almost exclusively on men as the “birds of passage,” while women, children, and the elderly were seen as following in their paths (Bodnar, Simon, and Weber 1982; Handlin 1951; Howe 1976; Piore 1979; Simon and Brettell 1986). This earlier research assumed that males were more inclined and better able to take risks and to journey abroad in search of better job opportunities, whereas women, if they migrated at all, were depicted as emotional caretakers
who accompanied men to ensure family and community stability. This earlier research suppressed women's (and children's) agency in family migration processes and assumed that "children are carried along by their parents, willy-nilly, and wives accompany their husbands though it tears them away from the environment they love" (Lee 1966, 578).

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars and policy makers began to focus on women as central actors in the migration process, in part because of the dramatic growth in feminist scholarship and women's studies programs. As well, demographic reports showed that more women than men were migrating to the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Houston, Kramer, and Barrett 1984; Pessar 1999). By the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, numerous migration scholars included women in their research. This effort resulted in a collection of important anthologies, articles, and books focusing on women and the migration process (for example, Brettell and deBerjeois 1992; Brettell and Simon 1986; Buijs 1993; Chant 1992; Donato 1992; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parrenas 2001a, 2001b; Pedraza 1991; Phizacklea 1983; Romero 1992; Simon and Brettell 1986).

The most recent collection of essays assembled by pioneering gender and immigration scholar Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003) suggests that, currently, there is relatively little attention paid to the situation of men in the contemporary literature on "gender" and migration. Furthermore, very few studies have highlighted gender in transnational social fields. Notable exceptions include the works of a few scholars doing research on domestic workers in the new global economy (Ehrenreich 2002; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parrenas 2001b). Mahler (1999) was one of the first to critique the bipolar approach to understanding gender and transmigration. She argued that the emergence of transnationalism as a "critical optic" mirrors the emergence of gender in migration scholarship (693). "Migration was (and continues to be) gendered long before scholars perceived it as a fundamental axis," Mahler writes, "transnationalism itself is not completely new, yet the predominant doctrine of bipolar migration deterred its detection and investigation" (694). The research by Jones-Correa (1998a, 1998b) and Smith (1998) strongly suggests two important gendered patterns among Mexican, Dominican, Colombian, and Puerto Rican transmigrants. First, compared to immigrant women, immigrant men are more likely to shift their orientation to their home countries and to the prospect of return migration as
they lose status in the United States. Second, correlated with the first finding, immigrant women are more likely to interface with American institutions.

More recently, Goldring (2003) has documented how Mexico’s outreach programs reinforce gendered projects of transmigrants because they “offer a context for exercising substantive citizenship that enhances immigrant men’s status and citizenship vis-à-vis the Mexican State while marginalizing women by excluding them from positions of power and status” (347). In all these studies, mainly men on the lower rung of the U.S. labor market are compelled to maintain strong ties with their homeland. I have not systematically interviewed Vietnamese women overseas in order to compare their situations to those of Vietnamese men overseas; however, my data suggest, at least through the prism of marriage during fieldwork in Vietnam, that immigrant Vietnamese men are more likely to orient themselves to “home” in order to valorize social status. I have found, for example, that in Vietnam it is Viet Kieu men, as opposed to Viet Kieu women, who are more visible in the growing leisure economy catering to the overseas Vietnamese population, like Western style cafes, bars, and dance clubs. Also, in my interviews I have found that it is overwhelmingly men who initiate remittance relationships and consumption chains, such as buying small gifts and inviting large groups of people out to eat. Thus, this chapter adds, in an exploratory way, to the small body of literature on gender and transmigration by drawing on studies of masculinity and consumption and by focusing specifically on the meanings of masculinity and consumption in globalization among immigrant men of color.

*Gender Strategies and the Convertibility of Social Status in Transnational Social Fields*

A Vietnamese immigrant man utilizes globalization as a gender strategy when he “performs” transnationalism in order to “achieve” masculinity. He deliberately converts his relatively low status in the West to a higher status when he goes to Vietnam. To do this, a Vietnamese immigrant man engages in small-scale conspicuous consumption, such as everyday drinking and eating activities and simple gift-giving practices (that are often beyond his Western means). This convertibility becomes most, sometimes only, meaningful when he establishes and maintains translocal relations which “are constituted within historically and geographically specific points of origin and migration
established by transmigrants” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998b, 13). He thereby forms a “triadic connection that links transmigrants, the localities to which they migrate, and their locality of origin” (Ibid.). Convertibility across national borders benefits a Vietnamese immigrant man by offering him the ability to cross international borders geographically and go from the status of low marriageability to relatively higher marriageability.

Hochschild (with Machung 1989) argues that gender strategies are utilized by women as well as men. I also found that both men and women pursue gender strategies based on their gender ideologies. In Hochschild’s study, men from various social class backgrounds pursued gender strategies, meaning that gender strategies were important for both working-class and middle-class men. In this study, I found that both men and women of the diaspora pursue convertibility of economic capital. Likewise, men from across social class backgrounds also take part in convertibility, which is to say that convertibility across social fields was important for both working-class as well as middle-class men. But I make the point here that the interrelated issues of global convertibility, social status, and masculinity are particularly central, salient, and relevant to the lives of low-wage immigrant men because of their very marginal economic status in their overseas locations. This is especially true when one considers that about 80 percent of the men in my sample of sixty-nine marriages were low-wage workers who, because of their low-wage status, found it difficult to find marriage partners in their overseas locations. These men viewed their jobs as not being highly respected, which they felt also made them unmarriageable overseas.

In the following pages, the narratives of Teo and Toan illustrate the following argument. First, low-wage Vietnamese American men are able to convert their “low-income” status in the first world to a relatively “higher-income” status when they visit third-world Vietnam. Second, material convertibility through small-scale, conspicuous consumption translates into symbolic status that is used to “trade off” in the Vietnamese transpacific marriage market. Third, convertibility of material and symbolic differences is usually, if not always, anchored in a tangible transnational relation that people recognize as having differential purchasing power in the first and third worlds. If the convertibility goes unnoticed, it is often meaningless to the person doing the converting. Finally, convertibility is practical, if not necessary, to increase self-worth among low-wage Vietnamese immigrant men, but it is tremendously costly.
Bottom Among Men, Top Among Nations

In many ways men like Teo and Toan belong to the lowest social status group in their local overseas contexts. Although Asian Americans are reputed for having the highest median income of all racial groups in the United States, Vietnamese American men earn on average 30 percent less than their white counterparts and are one of the lowest income-earning ethnic groups in the United States (Yamane 2001). Except for a few men who worked in ethnic enterprises, such as nail salons where average hourly wages ranged from $8 to $12 per hour, I refer to low-wage Vietnamese American men in this study as men who generally earned from $6 to $8 per hour, on average. These low-wage workers usually worked in jobs that offered them very little stability. Their yearly salaries ranged between $8,000 and $20,000, and many fall below the U.S. poverty level. Yet, compared to Vietnamese men globally, they are at the top since the United States holds enormous social and economic power in the global economy and makes wage differentials dramatically obvious. For example, at the time of my research for this project, 2 million Vietnamese Dong (US$133) was usually considered the typical monthly wage earned in Vietnam among professionals, such as foreign translators, pharmacists, and even some medical doctors (General Statistics Office [GSO] 2003). Thus, while some of the low-wage men in this study experienced tremendous downward social and economic mobility after migration, their overseas low wage takes on different economic and social meanings when they return to Vietnam. Most of the men felt that they had experienced nonmobility, as most entered very low-paying jobs after migration that, as Teo said, only allowed them “to survive” (để sống).

I met Teo in the Vietnamese enclave of the Silicon Valley, approximately one hour south of San Francisco, where Teo grew up as the middle child in a relatively comfortable home. His parents were able to move to the Silicon Valley because their kin networks helped them settle there after migrating as boat refugees in 1984. His parents’ lifestyle, as exhibited by the house they lived in and the cars they drove, indicated that they were at least economically middle class. But, because his parents, both in their late fifties, owned a simple sandwich shop catering to the mixed-income ethnic community in which they lived, Teo thought of his parents, and by extension himself since he also worked at the shop, as being part of the working class (tăng lớp lao động). Each day, his parents woke up at four in the morning to prepare for
the shop's early opening hour and worked until past eight in the evening. The "style" (khien) of their lives, as Teo emphasized, is one of "laborers who work with [their] hands so [they] can have enough to survive."

Teo had internalized his style of living in his early adulthood, particularly when his older brother and younger sister both earned educational credentials to secure "office jobs." Because Teo did not have an "office job," as he explained, he had unofficially assumed responsibility for his parents' elderly years in place of his brother who was two years older. He assumed this responsibility, in part, because he was also working for his parents at the sandwich shop and still living in their home (which saved him a tremendous amount of money in the expensive Silicon Valley). This was partly an economic exchange for Teo since he did not have better alternatives. Working in his parents' sandwich shop seemed to be a better option than obtaining a low-wage job that tended to offer little autonomy. As Teo told me, "I work whenever I want and can take vacations whenever I want."

When Teo spoke about his brother, he spoke with a sense of discomfort about the fact that his brother and his brother's wife were both professionals. "They are very critical people (phe binh)," he remarked. Teo said that they were critical of the fact that he had never earned a college degree, which would likely make him unmarriageable. Yet, when I was able to persuade him to talk about his romantic history, Teo was moderately confident about his ability to court women in the United States. Like many men in this study, he made sure to convey that he did not go to Vietnam to marry because he was simply e vo or unmarriageable, a term frequently referring to commodities at markets that remain unsold and metaphorically used to stigmatize those at the marriageable age and not yet married. Teo went a little further than most men, however, by taking out photo albums to show me pictures taken with about half a dozen ex-girlfriends throughout his early adulthood, as if to offer evidence of masculinity. When we spoke at length about his last serious relationship, Teo explained that it was a very difficult breakup "for her." As I continued in this line of inquiry, I learned that it took Teo two years to realize that he was "over" [xong] the relationship. He met this ex-girlfriend at the community college in the Vietnamese Student Association in 1988 when he was nineteen. According to Teo, she courted him more aggressively than he courted her. They had a very romantic beginning and he even bragged that they once took a trip together to Hawaii—something he felt only married people do.
Two years after they started dating, when Teo was midway through his community college education, his ex-girlfriend was accepted into one of the best University of California campuses. Although they remained committed to each other while she went to university, he felt that she lost interest when she was accepted into another University of California school to earn her pharmacy degree. He said he always felt comfortable going out with her school friends; however, she did not like to meet or go out with his community college friends—a sign of disrespect to him. According to Teo, he eventually broke up the relationship due to her disinterest. “She was fine with the break up,” Teo explained, “but I know she was in pain.” Several more visits with Teo revealed that he had broken up that serious relationship because he could not envision himself marrying a woman who he felt had so much more education than he did. As he explained to me:

I know I should be happy if my wife is successful, but when the wife feels she is better than the husband, it is not a good situation [boun cunh khong tar]. My ex-girlfriend and I almost got married, but I think she did not feel very easy with me not having an advanced college education. And you know how Vietnamese people are: they are very snobby if they have advanced degrees like they only care about doctorates (tr).

Teo’s ability to court women in his early adulthood did not follow him through his early thirties when people he knew obtained “careers,” rather than the sort of job that Teo took. Moreover, the fact that he felt his last ex-girlfriend did not “respect” him because of his lack of high education prompted Teo to look elsewhere for a marriage partner. “As a man,” Teo said to me with a strong sense of depth, “you have to have a certain kind of status.” However, as Teo looked elsewhere in the highly populated Vietnamese enclave of the Silicon Valley, he found that social status was relatively difficult to achieve, regardless of what social circles he entered, because he was still a sandwich shop worker. “Vietnamese people here [in the United States] only pay attention to how much money you make or what kind of degrees you have,” Teo said. “The women don’t want to marry men who don’t have comfortable jobs.”

When Teo began seriously looking for marriage prospects, he moved out of his Silicon Valley cultural corner and, in effect, turned to a transnational space in which he could convert his relatively low social status. Teo had a good
friend, Manh, who had a single younger sister still living in Vietnam. According to Teo, Manh was also a low-wage worker who had been to Vietnam several times and had each time tried to persuade Teo to take the trip with him, in part because Manh had wanted to arrange a marriage for Teo with his younger sister. The two men took their first trip together in 1998, and by early 1999 Teo had married Manh’s younger sister. When I asked Teo to chronicle that first trip back to Vietnam, he immediately raised the issue of convertibility:

I felt like a different person when I went to Vietnam for the first time, like I had another life in another world. Everything was so cheap, and I could just spend money on luxuries. I didn’t have to worry about the cost of anything, like you can take twenty people out to eat a huge feast and it could cost you less than what you would spend on two people in San Jose. It’s very luxurious (sùng suông lớn).

Partly as a reflection of his low level of education, Teo barely earned $1,500 per month, which did not go far in the United States, especially living in the expensive Silicon Valley. Both the low-income and absence of a college degree in the United States meant that Teo had little opportunity for social mobility in the formal U.S. labor market, or, in Teo’s eyes, to acquire social status, particularly in the Vietnamese American marriage market. Like many Viet Kieu who journey home, Teo converted his low income into the ability to enjoy luxuries that he could not otherwise usually afford in the United States, like taking “twenty people out to eat a huge feast.” The convertibility of money is linked immediately to the convertibility of status and esteem. This process of convertibility allows men like Teo to participate in a marriage market because they feel they have something to offer, and, in turn, something to obtain. As Teo explained:

In America, I don’t have any class/rank (bang), because I only work as a laborer (ong vai lao dong), but when I go to Vietnam, I only need to spend a few hundred dollars and people see the value in me (gia tri). In the U.S., single women see me as nothing because I have nothing. In Vietnam, I have a lot. I can drink and eat much more with the money I make in the U.S. than if I try to spend it there . . . I think it is better (rat hon) that I married someone in Vietnam, because we can try to spend more of our time there. We both have family there, and they
don’t judge me because of my education. In Vietnam, it’s all about money, you know (cái gì cũng là tiền).

When men like Teo talk about consumption and being in Vietnam, it is most often in the context of being under the watchful eyes of family and kin. The anchoring of transnational ties to specific communities of origin means that Teo had a particular network to validate his social worth. There seems to be a need for an audience of convertibility, as Teo explained:

When you are a Viet Kieu, people in Vietnam watch you. They want to see that you have the ability (kha năng) to buy what they cannot. And, if you cannot, they will think of you as one of them. And then you are a useless (cô đùng) Viet Kieu. If you love your family, you also want to show them that you can afford what they cannot, that you can take care of them . . . But for yourself, you also don’t want to have a reputation (tiếng tam) as someone who cannot buy the things they cannot. Like me, I have been gone for over fifteen years so I have to show that I did something important. I don’t want to be a useless Viet Kieu.

The Lowest-Wage Among Low-Wage Men

Among the low-wage earners, there were different types of “lowness.” If income level and the type of work each man did were associated with his sense of self-worth, then the lowest of the low had internalized his low-status in compelling ways. The lowest-wage men tended to powerfully avoid anchoring themselves in the overseas community, as one way of avoiding being contextualized and compared with other overseas Vietnamese, or as Katrak (1996) succinctly describes some transmigrants—they “live here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination” (115). This was especially true among the most recent arrivals, like thirty-year-old Toan who, because of the timing of his migration, had more concrete and tangible connections with people in Vietnam than those men who had been gone for longer periods.

I met Toan one weekday afternoon in January 2001 at an inner city elementary school in urban Los Angeles where he worked as an after-school janitor. Toan, like other lowest-wage men, perceived his job, which usually barely paid the legal minimum wage and sometimes less, as being a site of degradation. “It is maybe better not to work at all,” as Toan told me, “than to work at a
job where you feel humiliated (nhúc) to tell people you know.” Such feelings of humiliation led Toan eventually to globalize his marriage options. Prior to leaving Vietnam in 1996, Toan had a serious relationship with a woman he met in the eighth grade from his home village in the province of Se Long (name changed). When Toan left Vietnam through the sponsorship of his father, he said he did not intend to keep the long-distance relationship with this long-term girlfriend. Nevertheless, after being in the United States for only a few months, Toan soon realized that his prospect for marriage in the United States was low, in large part because of his low-wage job. As Toan explained:

I know I came to America late and that is why I have to work like a buffalo in this school, clean the toilet. There is no status with society in this job. No woman will want to marry a man like me. I can barely make enough money to feed myself, how can I provide for a woman in America? No woman here will respect me for what I do. If I married a woman here, she will get tired of seeing me with this job and she will leave me. If a woman does not respect what you do, she won't respect you. And what kind of marriage will you have if there is no respect?

Thus, after having been in the United States for only two years, Toan returned to Vietnam to propose marriage, having kept in touch with his serious girlfriend in Se Long. Like my interviews with most men in this study, I asked Toan to recount his feelings and experiences with the first visit home. He said:

We live overseas, we have nothing. We just work. When we go to Vietnam, we have happiness (to sa sung sوم). [Why?] Because we have money when we go to Vietnam. There are people who will look at us, people who will pay attention to us because we have the behavior of a person (tu cach con ngaui) that is enough for others to have a relation with (quán họ), we are not an ordinary person (nguai tam tung) [in Vietnam].

Indeed, as a janitor in Los Angeles, Toan viewed himself as an “ordinary person,” someone who was embarrassed to tell people what he did for a wage. For in the landscape of urban Los Angeles, Toan’s hourly income of $6.75 meant that he literally could not afford the sort of lifestyle that he enjoyed whenever he visited Vietnam. I have heard and witnessed hundreds of stories
of *Viet Kieu* who barely made minimum wages in their overseas contexts, but who consumed haphazardly when they visited Vietnam. Regarding his consumption patterns, Toan succinctly confessed: “In the U.S., I often spend a whole day thinking about whether I should go and eat a five dollar bowl of beef noodle soup (*phở*) when I get off work, but in Vietnam, I don’t even think twice when I go to a bar or café and pay 2 million Vietnamese dongs (US$133) for a bottle of Hennessy (*cognac*)!”

How is the convertibility of money, status, and consumption related to marriage choices? If Teo felt that an absence of a college degree meant that he could not earn respect by marrying his ex-girlfriend who was studying for a pharmacy degree, then Toan’s very low-wage job led him to believe that he was completely *unmarriageable* in the United States. “If I want to find a wife in the U.S.,” Toan said, “I will have to wait for the next life (*kếp sau*)”. Both Teo and Toan felt marginal in their overseas marriage markets, although in different ways. Whereas Teo sensed that he deliberately rejected the marriage market in the United States, Toan felt he was rejected. Both experiences of rejection were anchored in the same way as both men sought to participate in small-scale conspicuous consumption in Vietnam. They returned to Vietnam in order to convert their low income to a relatively higher income as a gender strategy to make themselves marriageable in the Vietnamese global hierarchy of marriage markets. Although some men like Teo and Toan are successful at achieving their goals of upgrading their sense of self-worth, their use of globalization as a gender strategy comes at a cost that often results in sacrifices at the everyday level in their overseas contexts.

As Packard (1999) observes, “over time, stereotypical images of rich, ostentatious and arrogant *Viet Kieu* on the one side, and of ignorant, backward and beggarly ‘country bumpkins’ on the other, have been replaced by more nuanced views” (82). Indeed, the initial view of Vietnamese nationals was that *Viet Kieu* had an impressive purchasing power because of income differences between Vietnam and the West. Initial views have changed, although not entirely, as locals learned that, while the *Viet Kieu* salaries could purchase a luxury life in Vietnam, they, in fact, could not go far in the West. Thus, men like Teo and Toan gradually realized that, in order to keep up their images of *Viet Kieu* who were “ready to play” (*trêu chuyên*), they must spend all their savings during the few weeks or months that they visit Vietnam. Meanwhile, they live minimal lives in their overseas locations for the rest of the year; they, in effect, reverse their “worlds of consumption.”
Materially, they live a first-world life in Vietnam and a third-world life in the United States. Many Viet Kieu, including Toan succinctly explained this reversion to me: "I abstain from eating and drinking (nhìn ăn nhìn uống) as much as possible in the United States so that I can live like a king when I go to Vietnam." This means that, for example, Toan survives on the most basic needs when he is in Los Angeles, in part, he says, "because there is no one to look at you and judge what you eat and drink." Toan told me that in Los Angeles, he ate instant ramen noodles for dinner at least three or four times a week, packed all of his lunches for work, and rarely ate at a restaurant. In contrast, he says, in Vietnam, "instant noodles are for the poor," and, as a Viet Kieu, he needs to demonstrate his ability to pay for expensive food items, like jumbo shrimp or abalone shellfish (two items he said he never consumed in the United States). Toan’s explanation of the social meanings of consumption in the West and in Vietnam was as follows: "When I am in Vietnam, people know that I have money, and they expect me to pay for everything. It is embarrassing when a Viet Kieu goes back to Vietnam and he is cheap (kéo). And you can never let anyone in Vietnam pay for you when you go back there. People expect you to be able to afford anything (người hưởng co du khách)."

Thus, in order to recuperate from their loss of status in their overseas locations, low-wage Vietnamese immigrant men attempt to live up to the expectation that they can afford anything in Vietnam. This means that they often deprive themselves of necessities in their overseas contexts in order to accumulate resources, which then allows them to consume "like a Viet Kieu" when they visit Vietnam. Some family members in Vietnam have realized that, while income disparities exist between the West and Vietnam, some Viet Kieu do struggle financially to make ends meet in their daily overseas lives. This knowledge sometimes leads kin members in Vietnam to prevent Viet Kieu from overspending by, for example, cooking at home rather than eating huge feasts at restaurants with the entire family and kin.

For the most part, however, I found that most kin members in Vietnam attempt to "save face" for all involved, particularly for the visiting Viet Kieu, by embracing and participating in small-scale conspicuous consumption when the Viet Kieu visits. They do so in order to prevent any embarrassment for the visiting Viet Kieu, especially men, since men most often pay in the leisure economy of Vietnam. Family members save face even as they know that it comes at a tremendous cost for their overseas loved ones; they, in effect, help the visiting Viet Kieu garner a sense of self-worth in the public's eyes, especially when there is a large network of people observing the visitor.
Kin members in Vietnam who benefit materially from *Viet Kieu* small-scale conspicuous consumption patterns often do not want to undermine it. In fact, they go to great lengths to commend *Viet Kieu* for having a "luxurious life in the West," even to the extent of recognizing that *Viet Kieu* can "burn money." On many occasions, transpacific husbands confided in me the burden of consumption when they go to Vietnam. Toan recounted numerous stories of how kin members in Vietnam did not fully understand his income in the United States was very low. In one story, Toan told me of a twenty-something female cousin of his wife who, in the presence of over twenty kin members, publicly asked Toan to buy her a bottle of perfume at a department store that had just opened in central Saigon. In her public request, Toan told me, she jokingly said, "A $50 bottle of perfume means nothing to you, Toan. You can burn money when you visit here, right?" Toan described that, as the noisy and attentive audience watched for a reply, Toan simply said, "Fifty dollars is nothing (không có gì)." When I asked what happened afterwards, Toan said some family members laughed, some clapped their hands at Toan's reply, and that eventually, but reluctantly, Toan bought the cousin the bottle of perfume. "Fifty dollars could buy me several hundred packages of instant noodles in Los Angeles," Toan explained with laughter.

*The Meaning and Masculine Politics of Consumption Across Transnational Social Fields*

This contribution focuses on the meaning of consumption across national boundaries, that is, to recognize social action, according to Max Weber (1978), we must examine the meanings that people attach to their own behaviors and experience. I have found that, in an effort to recuperate from a loss of status after migration to overseas communities, Vietnamese immigrant men engage in small-scale consumption and, subsequently, attach a particular social meaning to their consumption pattern in the home country in order to upgrade their social status and improve their sense of self. As shown, Vietnamese low-wage immigrant men convert "low-income" status to a comparatively "higher-income" one when they return "home," draw upon this convertibility to raise their marriageability, and anchor the practice of convertibility in translocal relations. As the stories of Teo and Toan illustrate, convertibility is tremendously costly because low-wage Vietnamese immigrant men often
Notes

This chapter is based on a presentation given at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in San Diego, California. It is also a revised version of a shorter essay previously published in Critical Globalization (2004) edited by William Robinson and Richard Appelbaum. I would like to express gratitude to Jane Zavisca for supplying me with ideas on consumption studies, and to the anonymous reviewer for comments on a previous draft of this chapter. Special thanks to Magali Barbieri and Danièle Bélanger for organizing the conference in Paris on Vietnamese families, and for their helpful comments on this chapter.

1. The first exodus of Vietnamese immigrants who arrived as political refugees began days before the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, after American troops withdrew from Vietnam. The second wave, which included mostly ethnic Chinese, left in 1978 and 1979; the third wave included those who escaped by boat or overland between 1978 and 1982. The fourth and fifth waves occurred between 1983–89 and after 1989, respectively, and mostly included asylum seekers and those who sought resettlement from refugee camps in countries such as Thailand and the Phillipines. Currently, those arriving in the United States and elsewhere enter primarily through family reunification programs.

2. Legal immigrants are defined by U.S. immigration law as persons admitted to the United States for legal permanent residence. They comprise two categories: those with immigrant visas obtained from abroad and those adjusting their status in the United States from temporary to permanent residence (see United States Immigration and Naturalization Service 2002, 13–18, for a detailed discussion of this point). Vietnamese migrants arrived on the American scene mostly as refugees from the 1970s to the early 1990s, with the largest flows coming between 1978 and 1988. By the mid-1990s, Vietnamese refugee flows dramatically declined so that by 1999, refugees accounted for only a little over 20 percent of all Vietnamese immigrants. As the proportion of Vietnamese refugees declined and as earlier arrivals settled and became naturalized U.S. citizens, the proportion of family-sponsored immigrants increased. The proportion of Vietnamese immigrants arriving through family-sponsorship between 1992 and 1999 increased notably from about 30 percent in 1992 to nearly 75 percent in 1999 (United States Immigration and Naturalization Service 2002).

3. A shortage of one sex or the other in the age group in which marriage generally occurs is often termed a marriage squeeze (Guttmann 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 thirty to thirty-four 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).

4. Literally, "changing for the new."

5. For an excellent up-to-date and critical literature review on consumption studies, see Zavisca (2004).

6. To protect the privacy of informants, all names have been changed. As well, I have changed the names of villages in Vietnam and small towns in the United States. I have kept the real names of all metropolitan areas. And while full Vietnamese names are usually indicated in the order of last, middle, and first names, I will use "American" standards of referencing names since I used this format when I got to know informants.

7. According to sociologist Hochschild (with Machung 1989), there are differences between what people say they believe about their marital roles and how they seem to feel about those roles. Furthermore, what they believe and how they feel may differ from what they actually do. Hochschild distinguishes between gender ideologies and gender strategies to point out that ideology has to do with how men and women draw on "beliefs about manhood and womanhood, beliefs that are forged in early childhood and thus anchored to deep emotions" (Hochschild with Machung 1989, 15). "Gender strategies" refers to people's plans of action and to their emotional preparations for pursuing them.

8. I began to set up this research project with an initial visit in June 1997, with the most intensive research periods beginning with the "bride phase" in Vietnam from December 1999 to August 2000 and the "groom phase" in the United States from January to March 2001. In 1999, the Vietnamese Department of Justice provided randomly generated lists of 200 names of couples who had marriages registered in Saigon and 120 names of couples who had marriages registered in a Mekong Delta province I call St Long (220 kilometers southwest of Saigon). These lists contained names of both grooms and brides who registered their marriages between September and December 1999. These couples were in a migration-waiting period as the grooms returned to their places of residence and work to initiate paperwork for sponsoring their wives as immigrants. I systematically selected every fourth name from top to bottom of each list and literally went to the brides' houses, knocked on their doors, and invited them to participate in the study. The response rate for the brides was 86 percent (sixty-nine of eighty brides). Once I captured the experiences of brides in Vietnam, I went to the metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Boston to interview grooms who married the brides I met in Vietnam. Of the twenty-eight grooms I contacted, all participated in the study. In total, I learned about sixty-nine marriages, some from brides only, and some from both grooms and brides. In addition to formal tape-recorded interviews with brides, grooms, and their families, I was a participant observer of eight
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families in Saigon, maximizing variation (for example, by age, level of education, income, contexts of transnational networks). I transcribed and translated about half of the interviews, and two research assistants in the United States did the rest.

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