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HUNG CAM THAI

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1. *In your book, For Better or for Worse (2008) you describe your motivation for undertaking a study of transnational marriage. Could you talk about how personal motivation and sociological design can productively intersect?*

In the book, I focused on a transnational marriage market that emerged in the mid-1990s linking women in Vietnam and overseas immigrant men living and working in the Vietnamese Diaspora. The project started in Vietnam because I was initially motivated to spend time with my mother, with whom I was united in my early 20s, after having lost touch since leaving the country as a child. I had been interested in immigration, but not necessarily marriage migration until I met a group of young local men who thought I was there to search for a wife. The encounter was an unpleasant one, but it led me to

pursue the topic. My personal motivation was very important for the success of the project: I was compelled to spend as much time in Vietnam as possible to be with my mother. I was able to immerse myself immediately into Vietnamese culture, despite not having been back for over 15 years since I left the country as a child. That made the project go very smoothly since I designed the project in a way that I got to talk to the women in Vietnam (prior to their migration) as well as the men they married, who were living in the United States at the time.

2. *Your study began as a dissertation and ended up as a book with Rutgers. Would you describe the challenges of that transformation process?*

I was very lucky to have a number of people who helped along the way in terms of turning the dissertation into a book. I think faculty advisors from my graduate days were instrumental, especially my PhD advisor, Barrie Thorne, who talked with me about the process and got me in touch with potential editors very early on. I also think that because I knew I wanted to turn the dissertation into a book, I wrote it very much like a book, and Barrie was very helpful at seeing the early stages of that development.

3. *One of the aspects of your work that people find compelling is the way in which your discussions of large-scale global diasporic movements still convey an individual, human—even personal—quality. Presuming this is no accident, can you talk about what practices produce that result?*

Because I was one of the “boat people” in Vietnamese diasporic history, I find it impossible to ignore the fact that I was part of a larger global process of diasporic movements. Furthermore, I decided in my early adulthood that I would lead a transnational life after returning to Vietnam for the first time since I had migrated as child. So I think that the fact of being a refugee, an immigrant, and then a transmigrant across different stages of my life has had an enormous impact on how I see the world from the angle of different interpersonal relationships and lives across different corners of the globe. Sociology has helped to put all this experience—this transnational life—into perspective, not only because I am able to understand the macro processes involved, but also because I am able to appreciate how I need to sustain my own interpersonal relationships given my constant global traversing.

4. *You have managed to live each year in two places, with nearly 6 months in Vietnam and 6 months in the United States. What difference has that*

made to your professional life, what advantages does it provide to you as a researcher, and what sacrifices does it demand?

As one of the few people in the field who do research on the impact of immigration on the homeland, I find it necessary to split my time between the United States and Vietnam, where I do fieldwork. To take seriously the notion of transnationalism, I think researchers of global migration need to focus more on the homeland of different diasporic groups. I initially devoted myself to splitting my time in Vietnam and the United States for personal reasons, but very soon realized that my research agenda required me to be in Vietnam regularly in order to understand social changes that unfold over short periods of time. The major advantage I have as a researcher is the privilege of living in the field regularly and being able to see social changes taking place without too much time lapse. Besides personal sacrifices, I think that professionally, I have had to scale back on my involvement with professional organizations, like going to professional meetings that happen during the times that I am in Vietnam.

5. *You've been training some talented undergraduates to do research in Vietnam. What advice would you give to White scholars who want to do research outside the United States?*

In terms of guiding my students, what helped tremendously was having a large social network of friends and institutional support from the local university in Vietnam that I developed over a decade. I also began to bring students to Vietnam with me only when I felt I was fully immersed in Vietnamese culture; that is, only when I felt that I considered Vietnam my home just as much as I considered the United States. I am not sure how I would do it otherwise. I know a number of non-Vietnamese scholars who bring students to Vietnam for research, but they often rely on formal organizations to facilitate their students' experience in Vietnam. In terms of research, in area studies and international studies, many non-native scholars, including Whites, have done work outside the United States. The experience I had as a bilingual speaker in Vietnam made things go much smoother, something that I think non-speakers of languages in locations where they do research would have to acquire early on. I knew many people in graduate school who had to take several years of language training in order to prepare themselves to do work outside the United States. I think I had that very important linguistic advantage. I also think that a lot of patience—as with any kind of fieldwork—is required, but doing fieldwork overseas requires even more patience. One just must expect to lose some time in doing fieldwork overseas.

6. *In your book For Better or for Worse (2008), you describe your fateful journey with your family from delta to delta: in 1979 leaving your small village on the Mekong River in Vietnam to relocate to Mississippi. Your background and your professional path give you a distinctive perspective on the privileges of the academy. How does that affect how you see your students at Pomona? What do you try to impart to them?*

I was born into poverty in rural Vietnam, migrated, and lived in rural poverty in Pass Christian, a small town in Mississippi, then returned to Vietnam as an academic in my adult life. This trajectory has taught me a lot about different vantage points, but I think my experience at Pomona College is shaped mostly by the fact that I have had a parade of wonderful teachers who guided me in various stages of my academic life, from the rural schools of Mississippi to the global community that made up Berkeley, where I attended graduate school. Because I was fortunate to have great mentors throughout my life, I wanted very much to give back to my students the same gift of mentoring that my teachers gave me, which is one of the primary reasons why I returned to Pomona College (where I began my career) from UC Santa Barbara (where I taught for nearly 4 years). At Pomona, I try to assist my students in seeing the world by using the craft of sociology—that is, to see the world with a lens of difference, inequality, and structure. I work very hard to show my students the power of empirical data—however they can collect it—in order to understand the social order. This is important because I think many undergraduate students think that Sociology is often sentimental or reactionary.

In what ways do your students' lives of privilege prove a help or a hindrance to really learning these lessons of difference, inequality, and structure?

When I decided to leave UCSB to return to Pomona College, many of my academic friends and colleagues thought I had made a bad decision because I was leaving a prestigious research university for a small liberal arts college. But I think a major reason why I made the decision was because I strongly feel that it is the sorts of students at places like Pomona—where most of my students come from wealthy families, if not solidly upper class—who most need to learn about difference and inequality. I think many of my privileged students struggle to understand the world in ways that are very different from the ways my students at UCSB struggle to understand the world. The big difference is that many more of my students at UCSB experience in their lives the kind of inequality we teach about in Sociology

7. *Your present research focuses on Viet Kieu (VK), Vietnamese who return to Vietnam to seek employment. What fascinates you about them? What do you hope readers of this next book will gain from your sociological take on the VK?*

Over the past two decades, since they have been returning in large numbers, the Viet Kieu population has been dramatically altering class and gender relations in Vietnam. My current book is about the nexus between return migration and consumption among Viet Kieu visiting or living in Vietnam. Basically, I am examining various patterns of “return” and how different returnees are able to use consumptive power, through spending money and gift-giving, in order to obtain social status. What fascinates me most about Viet Kieu is, I think, one of the concerns that other “homelands” may have about their respective diasporic groups. We know that across the world, immigrants are increasingly returning to their home countries for various reasons (including to live and to work). Many of these home countries are in the developing world, and the immigrants returning are mostly returning from the developed world. The fascination I have is with the ways in which these immigrants can create disparities within the homeland, even among those who work in low wage jobs overseas. They are able to do so in symbolic and pragmatic ways that non-Viet Kieu cannot. For example, a White tourist can travel or work in a third world city like Saigon and certainly have more economic power and status, but that impact is vastly different from when a Viet Kieu returns to do the same. Why? Because the Viet Kieu person generally will have some community, some family members who recognize that gulf in economic power and status, and who will defer to them in ways that are very different from the ways in which White tourists get deference. This process of returning among immigrants worldwide is severely understudied, yet so important because it sheds light on how immigrants, by building ties to the homeland are shaping their notions of belonging, status, and self-worth in a global age.

Maybe you could elaborate on the interactional differences in responses to the VK versus to the tourists. In the future, perhaps as people acclimate to the presence of the VK, do you think these interactional styles will change again?

This is a tough question, one that is actually a chapter in my book—focusing on interactions and exchanges between returnees and Vietnamese locals. Locals tend to have a very obvious kind of deference to VK. For example, it is not uncommon to see local family members carrying the purses and bags

for their family members as they walk around town. Also, in the presence of VK, local family members tend to talk less, offer fewer opinions or objections in conversations, and tend to agree on almost everything VK purport. With Whites, these sorts of exchanges do not exist. I think this kind of deference will surely change over time as locals begin to learn that VK have very little economic power on the global stage. And over time, I also think that low-wage VK will not be able to afford to sustain the kinds of lifestyles they try to cultivate upon their return to the homeland.

8. *Among male scholars who study global migration and transnational experience, there are few who focus as much as you on women. What would you say about the advantages, disadvantages, and unanticipated insights that came from interviewing Vietnamese women?*

For my first book on marriage and migration in the Vietnamese Diaspora, it was the research design that led to the focus on women; I was attempting to get at the “his” and the “her” side of the international marriage market, and I purposely designed the study to focus on the stage in the marital unions when the internationally married people were waiting for visas for the wives to join their husbands in the West. This research strategy was important to capture not only the different gendered ideals about marriage, but also about migration. I went into the project very much like a sociologist who might study across racial or class lines. I found it more difficult to understand some women in my study, not because they were women, but perhaps because they were from the upper class. On the other hand, sometimes it was difficult for me to connect with the working-class men in my study because they did not see me as working class.

9. *Hung, you are known as an ethnographer who can “talk to anyone,” regardless of class, race, ethnicity, occupation, nation, or sex. What do you make of that quality, how do you deploy it, and how do you impart it to students? In other words, what’s the secret?*

I don’t think there’s a secret, but I do think that I constantly have a desire to understand individual lives no matter where I travel, even when I am not doing fieldwork or interviewing a research subject. I always believe that everyone has an interesting story to tell about their lives. I think my childhood has a lot to do with how I am able to cross lines of differences easily and with great interest. I grew up in the housing projects of Mississippi where the boys rejected me in my surroundings because I was not an athletic kid and failed miserably at basketball in particular. I made great friends with

the African American girls in the housing projects, who introduced me to the world of cross-gender and cross-racial friendships very early on. In those years, I also got to know many of the adults in the lives of my female Black friends. So I think the fact that I had to cross lines of differences to make friends made it a part of who I am, always interested in the worlds of people who are not like me. In my teaching, I always encourage my students to do projects and study subjects that enable them to cross lines of difference.

So it was class, and not so much gender that primarily shaped the interactions you had with men and women respondents?

I think class probably accounts more for what results from interactions, but gender certainly also matters. For example, in many cases when I interviewed the women in my first book, many of them wanted to matchmake me with their family—and they also had a certain kind of interaction with me that was also very gendered, which I had to react to. I think in interviewing men, I also had to perform masculinity, by being less talkative, for example, or by being talkative about more masculine “stuff.”

The Tenth Question

What was the worst (or most difficult, or most embarrassing) interview/encounter you have had in the field?

I talked about several embarrassing moments in my book, *For Better or for Worse*, but the most embarrassing one was when I was talking to a groom in my study at a restaurant in Los Angeles where he worked as a waiter. I had already interviewed his wife in Vietnam, who was waiting for paperwork to clear so she could join him. When I met him, he was skeptical about my intentions because, I think, he felt that I could not possibly understand his life; we were at that point very different people (he being a waiter and I aspired to be a professor). I had committed myself to tell my respondents the truth about myself if they asked questions about me because I expected them to tell me the truth about themselves. In this incident, the groom asked me how many times I had been to Vietnam. I told him I had been back seven times in a span of 3 years to visit my mother, even though I knew that it was very difficult for low wage grooms like him to go so frequently. Once I told him this, he got very angry, got up, and asked me to leave. I was very ashamed because it was the first time a respondent asked me to leave—in this case, he was quite hostile. I left feeling very discouraged and wondered for weeks why he had reacted the way he did, and what I could have done to prevent the situation.

In the hindsight of some years, what do you think you might have done to make that encounter run more smoothly?

I have actually thought a lot about this incident, and how it shapes my subsequent interviews. I do believe in the principle of sharing your lives with your respondents when they ask, and so I think I would have done the same thing. I think that man took it differently than many others would have taken it. Some men found it impressive that I could live out a transnational journey and encouraged it. In general I think that when we are truthful with our respondents, sharing with them our lives in ways we expect them to share theirs, they will know it and sense our authenticity. I believe this helps tremendously in most cases.

What did you really want to do for a living? Where were you afraid you would end up doing?

As a refugee kid growing up in the housing projects, I had no role model for a professional life, and therefore, I really did not know what I wanted to do for a living until I reached college. I ran away from home when I was 15 years old because I got into a fight with my father. I had to support myself working three different part-time jobs in my last 2 years of high school. One of the jobs was working as the guy who took orders from customers who wanted to refill their medication at the pharmacy of a drug store—I was the assistant to the assistant of the pharmacist. I remembered thinking that ultimately the job of the “assistant to the pharmacist” was such a good one and I aspired to that job! I was very afraid that I would end up doing physical labor—one of the three jobs I did to support myself was lifting boxes at a flea market and I remember hating it. The job at the drug store was so posh and in an air-conditioned room!

What’s the study you never pursued, but really wanted to?

I regularly dream of doing a project about African American girls in the housing projects, perhaps about schooling or gender relations. This project would bring me back “home” in the same ways I think that going to Vietnam brought me home to my roots.