"My Mother Fell in Love with Mỹ-Xuân First": Arranging "Traditional" Marriages Across the Diaspora

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ARRANGED MARRIAGES HAVE BEEN AROUND throughout global history. And although they are still the norm in large parts of contemporary Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Ahuvia 1992; Applbaum 1995; Batabyal 2001; Blood 1967; Goode 1963), the idea of marriage through arrangement often disturbs Westerners for it is often presumed to involve complete strangers and no sense of individual choice. Mainstream media such as the New York Times and the New Yorker (Dugger 1998; Gourevitch 1999) have published stories depicting how Westerners often simply cannot fathom how practical strangers can be married to each other and settle down for a life together in the name of family. Yet, arranged marriages vary in different parts of the world, in patterns related to social class, family ties, and historical contexts (Applbaum 1995; Batabyal 2001). As Sunaina Marr Maira (2002) argues, the trope of arranged marriages "fits too neatly with Orientalized understanding of Asian cultures that sacrifice personal freedom to inexplicable but ancient traditions and collectivist control, unlike the individualist liberty of the rational, enlightened West" (p. 153).

In this chapter, I examine the interactions between personal freedom, cultural traditions, and material motivations to shed light on arranged marriages in the Vietnamese diasporic context. Vietnamese mass out-migration and the formation of a diaspora was part of a specific historical phase in global history that ended on April 30, 1975, with the fall of Saigon when U.S. troops pulled out of Vietnam. One of the most profound results of this phase in history has been the movement of a large population of Vietnamese to Western countries over the past three decades. 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 Sàigonese 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 United States 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 the twenty-first century. In 1986, after having no contact with most of the outside world for over a decade, Vietnam adopted a new socioeconomic policy called doi moi (renovation) which, although it did not end state ownership or central planning, moved the country from complete state-sponsored socialism to partial free market capitalism (Ebashi 1997; Morley and Nishihara 1997). The normalization of economic and social ties by 1995, the year that former U.S. President Bill Clinton established full diplomatic relations with the country, gradually increased the number of individuals from the Vietnamese diaspora who returned as tourists or to visit family members. The traffic of Vietnamese diasporic goods, people, and ideas has manifested itself in profound gendered ways, one of which is the ability for overseas Vietnamese men and women in Vietnam to globalize their marriage options.

The recent formation of a transpacific marriage market in this “aging” diaspora 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 kinship ties across the diaspora that have changed Vietnamese society on many levels, as well as consequences of changing gender relations in postmigrant overseas Vietnamese communities that are partly related to demographic skews (Kibria 1993). In the larger project, I argue that transpacific marriages involve men and women who are pioneers in what I call the Vietnamese double gender revolution, a revolution among men in the diaspora and women in Vietnam to postpone or resist marriages with their local counterparts and to subsequently globalize their marriage options. In Vietnam, some single women are resisting marriages with local men who they believe are still held back by outdated gender traditions. At the same time in overseas Vietnamese communities, some single men are resisting marriages with women who they believe have undermined Vietnamese traditions that the men want to preserve (Thai 2003b). To explain some variations in this double gender revolution, this chapter focuses on a situation where there is little “revolt” on the female side of this transpacific marriage market. I present a case study of one anomalous couple in which the successful arrangement of a “traditional” marriage has much to do with individuals’ decisions to bargain with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988) and the ways in which kinship politics play a role in retaining traditions across the diaspora.

During fourteen months of fieldwork 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.

In this distinct and emergent global marriage market, overseas Vietnamese men typically go to Vietnam to marry through arrangement 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 that I detail elsewhere (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 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. 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 thirty-five countries, although in my probability sample, the men came from a total of eight countries. In the United States, they came from sixteen 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.5

In my interviews with grooms and brides, I found that their conceptions of Vietnamese migration through the prism of transpacific marriages were diasporic in scope and not simply a transnational connection between Vietnam and one other country. In other words, like Siu and Parreñas (this volume), I found that diasporic ties entailed displacement from the homeland, experiences of alienation and maintenance to both the country of residence and the homeland, and a sense of collective consciousness and solidarity with other people across the diaspora. To illustrate this point, the brides in Vietnam often asked me, “Where are you from over there?” This question indicates that they conceptualized overseas Vietnamese locations on a global terrain and not just one particular country. Grooms, on the other hand, understood diasporic ties by often referring to their knowledge of many overseas men from “everywhere” who return to Vietnam for wives. I suspect that one of the reasons why grooms conceived the transpacific marriage market as a diasporic phenomenon was because some of them felt stigmatized for returning to Vietnam for wives, often because they were labeled as “unmarriageable” upon their return to Vietnam. In response, they often made claims about the “normative” nature of this transpacific marriage market because Vietnamese men were coming from “everywhere.”

This chapter offers a glimpse into the complicated interplay of what Mahler and Pessar (2001) call the “gendered geographies of power,” 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). For analytical clarity, I present an anomalous marital case study of Joe Ngô and MÝ-Xuân Quść in my sample of sixty-nine marriages. The successful matchmaking of Joe and MÝ-Xuán was unexpectedly unique to my sample of marriages, because they represent the “highly marriageable,” and were the only couple from my sample of sixty-nine marriages in which a high-wage man married a woman without at least a high school degree. In the larger project, I found that most couples involved the “unmarriageables”—low-wage men and highly educated women (in their own national contexts), a topic I cover elsewhere (Thai 2002, 2003a, 2005). Unlike cases involving the unmarriageables in my study, the anomalous case of Joe and MÝ-Xuán fits the ideal “traditional” arranged marriage whereby a man marries “down” and a woman marries “up.” In the following pages, I make two implications. First, the marriage of Joe and MÝ-Xuán shows that even as contemporary transpacific arranged marriages differ from traditional arranged marriages in crucial ways, they resemble them in some ways. Second, notions of tradition and particularly traditions along gender lines are often preserved because of the interplay between kinship politics and the decisions of individual couples to “bargain” with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988) within complicated “geographies of power” across the diaspora.

The Intimate Details of Diasporization
Joe Ngô, a thirty-six-year-old software engineer, had changed his name from “Cuồng” when he went to college in the United States because that was when he realized that it bothered him when people had difficulty pronouncing “Cuồng.” The changing of his name was not a racialized issue for Joe, for people’s mispronunciation of his name was not something he particularly noticed while growing up in the suburbs of the San Francisco Bay Area. As a child, Joe had many white friends, and he said that that “made life easier.” Joe was proud that he was able to navigate in the many racial worlds that characterize the Bay Area. Yet, although the multicultural Cuồng dated white girls in high school, he was more racially exclusive in college. With a near perfect American accent that distinguished him from most of the men in my study,
Joe had neat model-minority hair, the sort of hair that some men in Asia refer to as 7-3: 70 percent on one side and 30 percent on the other. Just under six-feet tall, but clearly above average size for a Vietnamese man, Joe spoke Vietnamese with a sense of confidence and properness that I rarely got a chance to hear during the course of pursuing this research project.

On the coffee table in his living room, Joe had a faded picture of his family when Joe was in high school, which included his parents and older brother, Lâm, all of whom migrated with Joe to the United States when he was eleven. They were part of the first large cohort of Vietnamese migrants who were evacuated directly out of Vietnam days before the fall of Sài Gòn. Shortly after they arrived in the United States, Joe's father worked in a middle-class job as an accountant while his mother worked as an instructional assistant for the local school district. Few of the men in my study had parents with such respectable postmigration jobs. The sorts of jobs most parents of the men in my study took after migration were most often in the secondary or enclave labor market, jobs in the service sector with relatively low pay. Because his father had a middle-class job, Joe explained, his parents had high expectations for him and his brother. And the two young men met those expectations by going to the local University of California campus. Both majored in electrical engineering, and both were active in the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA).

Unlike his brother who met his wife in the VSA club, Joe was somewhat disillusioned with the ethnic organization, and he eventually worked his way out of the club. He said he initially ran for leadership positions, but often did not like the cliques that formed. "Most of them," Joe said, "were interested in looking pretty and wearing nice clothes." Joe was turned off by what he described as the "material performances" that many of his Vietnamese peers participated in, and after two years in the club, Joe ended his membership. When I asked if there were gendered patterns in performances of material differences, Joe explained:

Of course, the women were especially materialistic. They wanted boyfriends who they could brag about, and the guys would spend all their money to get a trophy girlfriend. It was all a game of good looks and spending, and I knew many other Vietnamese students who did not join because of that. You can say that it was a marriage market for many of those people, but I did not like it. I did not like to compete with people and date girls who cared only if a guy could spend all of his financial aid package in one week. It was stupid.

This did not mean that Joe was not interested in meeting Vietnamese American women at his university, but he avoided those in the ethnic club, a place where students celebrated history and culture, but which Joe felt was too pretentious. Yet, Joe was conscientious about maintaining his sense of being Vietnamese, while embracing the middle-class privilege that he seemed to identify with while growing up as a product of the 1975 cohort of Vietnamese refugees. For example, he proudly spoke about his love for music produced by Vietnamese American singers living in Southern California like HƯNG Lân and THẾ Son, two well-known performers in overseas Vietnamese communities. Yet, when he spoke of his childhood in the United States, he evoked his middle-class background, and by extension, did not talk much about the migration experience, an experience marked by poverty for most Vietnamese refugees regardless of what social class background they came from in Vietnam. "My parents were involved in the PTA and my brother and I did everything our white friends did," he said, as if to demonstrate his family's exceptionalism in the refugee experience. Often, as with other studies done on adult children of immigrants (Kibria 2002; Pyke 2000), men like Joe in my study referred to whiteness as middle class and vice-versa, and instances of parents participating in their school life were markers of being middle class. Such men viewed white "mainstream" families, particularly in television sitcoms (Pyke 2000), as emblematic of middle-class life. And it was often class privilege, although rare, that made up for racial marginality among some of my informants.

Joe was very proud of his role model middle-class family—two parents and a good brother—who he said "all worked hard." For him, as it is the case for many young adult children of immigrants, the family is a place where "normative structures" of American life are enacted (Pyke 2000). Pride in his family meant that Joe had transplanted some of those normative structures—like a nuclear family, middle-class status, and the American Dream ideology—into his personal life. Joe recalled memories about how his parents defied stereotypes of Asian people as not being publicly affectionate. He said that his parents were "emotionally healthy" and often displayed their love for each other in front of him and his brother. Joe also evoked nostalgia of his nuclear family. He said they were protected from the pressures of pooling resources that he had heard many other Vietnamese families experienced, since his family had no extended relatives around. And when I inquired about the gender practices between his parents, particularly how they divided
household chores as he grew up, Joe said he was proud of his mother. "She never complained."

Unlike most early waves of Vietnamese refugees who relied on public assistance regardless of their social class, Joe's parents were employed in good jobs that enabled them to almost immediately buy a house not too far from San Francisco where Joe and his brother attended good public schools. Even though both of his parents worked, Joe recognized that his mother did the bulk of household labor. She also took responsibilities for Joe's and Lâm's schooling. The fact that this setup "worked" for Joe's parents led him to associate it with a Vietnamese ethnic model that he felt many of his friends' families lacked, especially those who came from "broken" homes. "Most of the friends I had who come from divorced families," he said, "were people whose parents fought because their mothers were resentful about their roles [phân] as mothers." Joe saw a good figure in his father, someone who peacefully commanded authority over the family. He recalled that his brother and he gave great respect to his father:

Both of my parents are good people. They worked hard. My mother never complained about being a mother. And my father was always in control, but not mean about it. He knew that it was important for him to be in charge of the house, to make sure that my brother and I listened to him. And if we were to listen to him, my mother had to make sure that she also showed him respect as the man of the house. I admired him for that. That he never made life difficult for my mother, I think mostly because my mother just never complained.

That makes life very easy on children, you know.

Joe said that prior to being married, he was concerned about stability in family life. He drew on his ethnic identification to critique mainstream America's practice of individualism to family and kinship, a practice he felt could cause problems in the family. Joe also felt his middle-class background was central to his sense of self. "I think that success and a good life means that a man is able to financially support his wife and children. If you can't support a family as a man, you should not get married," Joe explained. Middle-class life for Joe also meant that a husband and wife are able to neatly divide what is traditionally thought of as "women's work" and "men's work." To assert masculinity, Joe needed to feel that he could easily support his family (Kibria 1993), and if he could not, then he had not reached middle-class life. As an immigrant child and a child of immigrants, Joe lived in the context of traditional gender arrangements that he saw his parents lived by despite the fact that his mother worked. Because his father enjoyed the label of being the "provider," even as his mother also contributed to that role, Joe did not see the social "costs" to men and women—both physical and psychological—as men seek to take on the provider role (Farrell 1975). Thus, Joe aspired to be the provider, and he said he yearned for a life that his father enjoyed: two sons with a wife whose work did not interfere with her role at home.

When Joe entered college and subsequently thought about marriage, he was caught in a gender, class, and ethnic paradox: he was in a marriage market in search of Vietnamese women where most women were receiving an education so they could work to partially become part of the provider in family life. Had he sought a blue-collar occupation like some of his friends from high school, he may have been able to find a marriage partner who would be happy with staying at home. "If I met a woman with a horrible job, she would definitely want to be a housewife," Joe explained. Because Joe went to a prestigious university, he had few outlets to meet young women who had prospects of having "horrible jobs" or who did not want to work or who did not go to school in order to work. "I think it is hard to find someone like my mother," Joe said, "she took good care of her children and she worked and it was no problem."

But the problem was that Joe wanted to marry a Vietnamese woman (of which there were a limited number, in part because many Joe knew dated white men) who shared in his conception of family and marriage. His conception of a good family and a good marriage involved a man doing paid work and a woman "taking care of the house." Most of the women he knew in college were children of immigrants whose parents worked hard in low-wage jobs to earn their way up in order to send their children to college. Joe acknowledged that few people he knew, women or men, were as lucky as he was. "Most of my friends had parents who worked very hard while they were growing up, worked in minimal wage jobs for very long hours. So I think most people I know saw college as truly a way to move up economically." Yet, Joe was hopeful that he would find a woman in college he would marry and who may or may not work, but who would be happy with her role as a housewife, too.

After graduation in the late 1980s, such a woman never entered Joe's life. His excuse was that the university he attended had too many overachievers. "They all wanted to be superstars," he said, "and most of them wanted to get the best job possible which meant that they had to work really long hours." Joe is no exception. His electrical engineering degree earned him a very nice
job with all the long hours and stress that it entailed. He worked for a start-up company not too far from the university he had attended, and at the age of twenty-five, he bought a house near his parents. After the house purchase, Joe’s parents pressured him to “acquire” a wife and some children to fill the house.

The Politics of Kinship in Marital Choice

Shortly after he bought his house in 1990, Joe and his mother took their first trip back to An Hới, the Mekong Delta village they had left fifteen years earlier for a life that they had admittedly achieved in the United States. For Joe’s mother, Mrs. Bùi, bringing home her youngest educated son was an opportunity to display the success for which she and her husband had taken the risk of migration. Many Vietnamese immigrants I met throughout various corners of the diaspora, particularly in Europe, Australia, and the United States, delayed the trip back to the homeland because they did not have the material or the symbolic capital to show for their migration. In some ways, migration is like a contest. Losers are those who do not have the material evidence to show that they competed well in the migration game. As Mrs. Bùi explained to me when Joe took me to his parents’ house one day:

That’s how you should live if you left Vietnam, like my sons. They worked hard and they got a good education at a very good university. There are too many men their age who have nothing to show for their trip. They should have just stayed in Vietnam. They wasted a space that many hardworking men in Vietnam would die to have. You know in Vietnam, if you go back to visit, you really have to have something to show like a big house or you have to have children who were educated well. We are lucky. We worked hard and my children have good jobs. We have what we came to America for.

On the first trip back to their hometown in Vietnam, neither Mrs. Bùi nor Joe intended to look for a potential marriage partner for Joe. “We joked about it,” Joe said, “but I never considered it seriously the first time. It was just talk for fun [nói cho vui].” Thus, the trip was simply to be part of the first groups of Việt Kiều, a term referring to Vietnamese people living overseas, to return home after many years of migration. Mrs. Bùi said she knew about the discourse that circulated throughout overseas Vietnamese communities about the danger of international marriages between Việt Kiều men and women in Vietnam, in particular, the reputation of “bad girls” who just wanted to have a good life abroad. Yet, she believed that if done carefully, transPacific arranged marriages can “succeed” [thành công]. She explained, as if to also warn me:

You really have to be careful, you know. Vietnam is very poor, and everyone wants to leave the country if they can. Many of these young Việt Kiều men do not know that those young girls in Vietnam only want to marry them for money or the chance to go to the United States. They might love each other for a time period, or they can pretend to love, but it can always change. If they discover that their husbands cannot afford to buy them this and that, they will leave the husbands very soon.

Because Joe had the ability to fulfill the provider role, to buy “this and that,” Mrs. Bùi had confidence, as she said, that “Joe’s wife would not go anywhere.” This reflects the usual first thought many families in bride-receiving communities expressed to me, the fear that “passpor: chasers” would leave men once they migrated abroad. Some families looked into the bride’s “credentials,” that is to say, her family’s background, to make sure she was not simply using marriage as a bridge to a Việt Kiều community. Few people like Mrs. Bùi relied on their son’s ability to provide in order to secure a stable marriage. But aside from her confidence in Joe’s ability to “afford” a stable marriage, Mrs. Bùi also had a special affinity for her new daughter-in-law, Mụ-Xuân Quốc. Mrs. Bùi was the key person in arranging the transPacific marriage for Joe, and as he told me, “my mother fell in love with Mụ-Xuân first.”

At nearly sixty-years, Mrs. Bùi came of age in An Hới in postcolonial and prewar Vietnam. She was from a poor family and was married off to the son of a wealthy farmer in a neighboring village. Her father was a teacher of French and his education combined with her good looks gave them the matching currency to compete for her husband, someone who came from the prewar upper class. From her own experience, Mrs. Bùi believed in arranged marriage, as she agreed to her own, and saw good things in it. “It takes away a lot of thinking for young people,” she said. “Older people know what their children need.”

Indeed, Mrs. Bùi knew, if only from her own arranged marriage, what a man needs to be successful and what it takes to make a family harmonious: a wife who “bargains” with patriarchy by exchanging submissiveness and propriety for economic protection (Kandiyoti 1988). For Mrs. Bùi, just as for the women in Nazli Kibria’s study (1993) of new Vietnamese refugees, preserving traditional gender arrangements ensured male economic protection. Mrs. Bùi felt she got what she bargained for in the family, and her traditional family system gave her the status to exercise considerable authority over her two sons. So if, in the eyes of Joe, their family setup “worked” for his parents, in the eyes of Mrs. Bùi, it was “necessary” for her children. And in Mrs. Bùi’s
world of two sons, where the idea of “feminism” or
thuểt nam nữ bình quyền did not exist in her vocabulary, she was not impressed by women with an
education. “You know the Vietnamese phrase, trai tài gái sắc [boy success, girl
beauty]?” It means that a girl does not need to be successful, she needs to be
beautiful and she needs to be a good wife.”

Moment of Encounter

When Mrs. Bùi held a celebration for her and Joe’s homecoming in An Hôi,
a socially required event for Việt Kiều returning home for the first time, she
instantly “fell in love” with Joe’s wife. “She was proper, a very polite girl,” Mrs.
Bùi explained. “She reminded me of when I was a young single woman, quiet,
spoke well, but very considerate of older people.” And if twenty-four-year-old
Mỹ-Xuân competed for a daughter-in-lawship in An Hôi, she probably would
have been highly ranked. Although she did not have any formal college
education, Mỹ-Xuân respectfully finished eleventh grade in the Vietnamese
college village of educational mobility for women. And in the same line of
logics, many villagers told me “girls don’t need too much education or they will become unmarriageable [con gái học nhiều quá thì sẽ ē].” Mỹ-Xuân was thus highly marriageable not only because she had limited
education, but also because she was blessed with attractive features, the least of
which was long, dark, and straight black hair that exemplified popular
conceptions of Vietnamese beauty.

Mỹ-Xuân had never thought much about going abroad until she was pro-
posed for marriage by Joe and his mother. This made sense because Mỹ-Xuân
did not have much contact with the overseas world; all of her immediate rela-
tives were in Vietnam. One cousin, who she said she was not particularly close
to, was living and working in construction in Korea. When I asked Mỹ-Xuân
why she delayed marriage, because, after all, twenty-four was considered be-
Yold the marriageable age in village life, she explained that her parents had
not “approved” of anyone:

My father has high expectations. He is a rather difficult man, and he told me
that I could not find a boyfriend because he and my mother would try to find
a husband for me. Because my father has many friends and he does business
often in the city, he said that I could trust him to find a suitable groom for me.
Did you believe he could? I think my father could, probably better than I
can. My parents are really smart people, especially my father. He knows how
to be diplomatic and he has a lot of contact people.

Mỹ-Xuân was an “obedient daughter”—apparently a declining popula-
tion even in villages, according to some of the older village folks I spoke to.
As Vietnam continues to rely on the West and on overseas capital, many lo-
cals place the “feminine subject” under moral surveillance, and young rural
women who embrace overseas opportunities like taking English classes,
engaging in advanced education, or making friends with Việt Kiều and Western-
ers easily become objects of critique. And those who maintain the traditional
inscriptions of the “authentic” Vietnamese female subject celebrate this ideal
as a reminder that not all of Vietnam had been abducted by the West. Thus,
Mỹ-Xuân was a celebrated figure in the eyes of fellow villagers and her par-
ents. Mỹ-Xuân, according to Mrs. Bùi, embodied all that the true Vietnamese
woman should be. She had long, straight, black hair and she regularly wore đồ
bộ, the Vietnamese colorful matching blouse and trousers that the younger
generations are beginning to see—and reject—as emblematic of a Vietnamese
past. Desires of the present mean that the younger generations, both men and
women, are now opting for commodities of the West, in part, because notions
of “cool,” which are critiqued by the older generation, have also arrived on the
scene, all symbolizing a new, modern Vietnam.

Mỹ-Xuân offered a striking contrast to most of the women in my study,
because she had a strong identification with being an “authentic” Vietnamese
woman, a label that rendered her traditional, and thereby, hiền, a Vietnamese
word used to describe gentle people. For wives and daughters, it often means
that they are submissive. “Mỹ-Xuân is very hiền,” as Mrs. Bùi emphasized
to me. “I have never seen her talk loudly, she always uses the right term to
address me, and she never speaks out of turn. I know many of the villagers
around there who said that she does whatever older people ask her to do. She
respects and listens to older people.”

Listening to and respecting people were two activities of the everyday that
Mỹ-Xuân had done well all her life. As the middle daughter (she had one older
brother and one younger sister), Mỹ-Xuân always deferred first to her father,
then to her older brother and mother in the decisions they made concerning
her life. And when I spoke to neighbors in An Hôi about Mỹ-Xuân, they
almost always referred to her as đúng là con gái Việt Nam [truly a Vietnamese
girl]. This echoed the “listen and respect” repertoire that is often expected
of Vietnamese women. The identification of an imagined feminine authenticity,
organized by family, fellow villagers, and recent overseas actors, had normalized the gendered vision that Mỹ-Xuân managed for herself and her "role" as a daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. So when I asked Mỹ-Xuân how she felt about her recent decision to marry a Việt Kiều, she abstractly explained: "In Vietnam, a duty of a woman [bộ phận của dàn tử] is to care for her family and her husband. She has to respect her parents and husband and her husband's family. If a woman wants happiness, she has to listen to her husband and her family. For me, my duty is to listen to my husband and to respect my husband." Although she considered her family's financial situation as "just enough," compared to many families in the provincial capital of Se Long, Mỹ-Xuân's family was probably living somewhere near "middle" class in their cultural contexts. Her father, Mr. Thống, had a position in the local government in the district [huyện] where they lived, serving on several councils that made decisions about things like when a foreign company could move a factory into district boundaries. This meant, according to Mỹ-Xuân, that her father commanded a lot of respect in public life. "Sometimes, he could earn 'gift' money from people to get their permits approved quickly," she said. Her mother ran a small shop selling watches in the provincial capital, a thirty-minute motorcycle ride from their house. Despite having no overseas remittances, with local incomes from two people and many years of savings, they were able to buy a fairly decent house with some of the amenities that are usually only found in remittance-receiving homes.

Mỹ-Xuân's father's level of public respect had a lot to do with how Mỹ-Xuân got to know Mrs. Bùi and Mrs. Bùi's subsequent encouragement for Joe to marry Mỹ-Xuân. When Mrs. Bùi and Joe held their homecoming celebration back in Vietnam Mỹ-Xuân's parents were invited along with many other relatives that Joe did not recall knowing. At the celebration, according to Joe and Mrs. Bùi, where there were over 100 guests, Mỹ-Xuân's father had been highlighted as a key village leader, someone whom virtually everyone held in high esteem. His reputation was followed by an impressive meeting with Mrs. Bùi and Joe, which Joe described: "Everyone told us we had to meet him, that he was fair, smart, and a very respectable person. We felt special that he genuinely welcomed us home ... he never talked badly about Việt Kiều as everyone had something bad to say about Việt Kiều being stuck up, and he did not talk about money, which everyone seemed to ask about."

The fact that money was never a topic of conversations between Mrs. Bùi and Mr. Thống served as a compelling confirmation to Mrs. Bùi that Mr. Thống was a person of respectability. "In Vietnam, everything is about money [Ô Việt Nam, cái gì cũng là tiền]." For many Việt Kiều, the subject of money, especially the explicit request to remit after the initial visit, is a common source of dispute with the very families they visit. Often, relationships tragically disintegrate or simply end when expectations are too high or too unreasonable for Việt Kiều to fulfill. Some people in Vietnam claim that Việt Kiều have "forgotten" their familial obligations, and those who do not remit or fail to remit sufficiently are often socially indicted for having "lost" their culture. Those who remit sufficiently are often called dinh công or "real" Việt Kiều.

If there is a "realness" that characterizes Việt Kiều, then there is a Vietnamese "realness" that Việt Kiều search for themselves when they go to Vietnam on their visits. For Mrs. Bùi, authentic Vietnamese was clearly in Mỹ-Xuân's family, not only because Mỹ-Xuân represented authentic Vietnamese femininity, but also because her father knew how, according to Mrs. Bùi, to tôn trọng người người ngoài or "respect those from overseas." Respect for those in Vietnam means that Việt Kiều fulfill their obligation of kinship by remitting, while respect for Việt Kiều means that local Vietnamese do not make the topic of money explicit. For Việt Kiều, gift giving is done without explicit requests. For the Vietnamese, Việt Kiều need to be "reminded."

But Mrs. Bùi explained, "Khi người ta ngồi tời tiền, là đối hỏi" or "when they talk about money, it is to demand." Mrs. Bùi admired Mr. Thống not only because of the respect he had from her relatives and former fellow villagers (which included one sister), but also because Mr. Thống had an honorable presentation of a Vietnamese self: he never talked about money. Her judgment of Mr. Thống combined with a peculiar identification and affinity for Mỹ-Xuân led her to propose marriage for Joe for which: Mr. Thống agreed after he had điêu tra or "investigated" Mrs. Bùi's background.

Like many overseas Vietnamese who return, especially to small villages that often remain unchanged over many years, Mrs. Bùi eventually connected a past to her present. Mr. Thống had been a neighborhood friend of one of Mrs. Bùi's male cousins in the 1960s when they were young men coming of age during the war. Mrs. Bùi learned that the two family's history went as far back as the 1940s when Mr. Thống's father and Mrs. Bùi's father were fellow landowners [chủ đất]. This history marked a peculiar nostalgia for Mrs. Bùi, and she helped to persuade Joe to agree to a marriage with Mỹ-Xuân. The marriage of Joe and Mỹ-Xuân was a way for Mrs. Bùi to reclaim a geographical identity, an identity that she left behind more than twenty-five years ago. Her support of patriarchy because it "worked" for her and her children,
combined with an absence of feminist consciousness in Mỹ-Xuân, will ensure that Joe's marriage will not include "complaints."

The marriage Joe entered was anomalous and will most likely "work" for him because, in contrast to most of the women in my sample, his wife had not entered the quiet feminist revolution in Vietnam among women who resisted local marriages, the main reason that, unlike Mỹ-Xuân, most of the women in my sample opted for a transpacific marriage. Most women resisted local marriages because they are participating in a version of what Shere Hite (1988) calls a "female revolt" in Vietnam against traditional and patriarchal marriages. Mỹ-Xuân, however, participated in the Vietnamese transpacific marriage market because of traditions of familial piety. She "listened" to her father's encouragement and of other adults who she came to respect, including Mrs. Bui and numerous other villagers who urged her that Joe was "the most suitable groom" she could ever marry. She was not particularly drawn by the potential material advantage of marrying an overseas man, but she knew that it would immensely help her family. "I want to help my family in the future," Mỹ-Xuân explained. "Even though we are not poor, we should always aspire to be better." And while nobility in her family had never come from remittances, their marriage to a high-wage overseas family meant that they had a bright future to anticipate. "If you have children overseas," as Mr. Thong explained in a polite, yet matter-of-fact, demeanor, "they have to help their families [cô con đồng nợ ngoài phải giúp đỡ gia đình]."

Notes

This is a slightly different version of a chapter in my forthcoming book, tentatively titled, For Better or for Worse: Marriage and Migration in the New Economy, forthcoming from Rutgers University Press. I wish to thank the editors of this volume, Rachael Parreñas and Lok Siu, for their helpful feedback on this chapter.

1. Literally, "changing for the new."

2. Incentives provided by the state for the overseas population, like the ability to purchase land and provisions for investment opportunities, have created an extraordinarily important Việt Kiều, or overseas Vietnamese, 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 currently more than one million Việt Kiều return annually for tourism and to visit relatives, a dramatic increase from the 87,000 who came in 1992, and from the only 8,000 who visited in 1988.

3. A shortage of one sex or the other in the age group in which marriage generally occurs is often termed a marriage squeeze (Guttenberg 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 1990, 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). By 2000, among Vietnamese Americans between twenty-five to twenty-nine years, there were 129 men for every 100 women; for the age group of thirty to thirty-four, there were about 135 men for every 100 women. These calculations are based on Goodkind's (Goodkind 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. The final analysis in this project is based on a sample of sixty-nine marriages. In the bride phase in Vietnam, I conducted multiple formal tape-recorded in-depth interviews with ninety-three individuals, including sixty-six wives and twenty-seven of their family members. In the groom phase, based primarily in the United States, I interviewed thirty-six individuals, including twenty-eight husbands and eight of their family members. 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 went 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, and 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.

5. To protect the privacy of informants, all names have been changed. As well, I have changed the names of peasant villages in Vietnam and small towns in the United States; I have kept the real names of all metropolitan areas. I have also placed diacritic/accents marks on all Vietnamese names of my informants as well as any Vietnamese words I translated into English. However, all scholarly references remain as they are used in the original source (most do not have diacritic marks). Finally, 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.

6. The reader will note that Joe does not share the same surname as his mother; this is because it is uncommon for women in Vietnam to take their husbands' surname.
Children generally take their father’s surname. I have kept this pattern throughout to maintain the authenticity of identities. In addition, to make generational distinctions, I refer to brides and grooms by their first names; and I refer to their “elders” using proper titles, although when I spoke to these individuals, I employed Vietnamese kinship terms since all titles of address are kinship terms.

7. Indeed, Mrs. Bui’s anxiety echoed the concerns that U.S. immigration officials had pertaining to foreign wives of American citizens, which prompted the Marriage Fraud Amendment Act of 1986. This act allowed the Immigration and Naturalization Service to impose conditional permanent resident status after the migration of foreign brides. This act stipulated that an immigrant spouse could be deported if she left the marriage before two years elapsed. As Constable (2003) notes, although immigration laws are theoretically gender neutral, legal scholars have argued that the Marriage Fraud Amendment Act was fueled by concerns surrounding foreign brides, particularly mail-order brides from Asia.

References


