Hung Thai has established himself as one of the leading voices in the sociology of Vietnam. Thomas Maresca speaks to Hung about examining big change in Vietnam on a human level.

There are countless stories and studies about the big changes happening in Vietnam—urbanization, globalization, the flows of people, capital and culture. But what motivates sociologist Hung Thai is something on a more personal scale.

“I’m interested in how these changes seep into the contours of people’s everyday lives,” says Hung. “In any macro change in society, people still have to make decisions about their lives.”

Hung looks like he should still be in grad school, but the 32-year-old Viet Kieu is already a tenured sociology professor at Pomona College in California, and is well on his way to becoming one of the leading voices on the contemporary sociology of Vietnam.

The young academic is here in HCM City on a year-long sabbatical, having recently finishing a worldwide speaking tour for his first book, For Better or For Worse: Vietnamese International Marriages in the New Global Economy.

In the book, Hung examines the increasingly common phenomenon of Vietnamese women migrating to the United States to get married. While the stereotype is of mail-order brides or green-card marriages, in fact the overwhelming majority of these women are marrying Vietnamese men who are immigrants themselves.

And what Hung has found, through extensive interviews with 69 couples, are the curious ways the big changes in Vietnam—immigration patterns and modernization—are having a very distinct effect on marriage and family life. “People have had to redefine their understanding of their marriage-ability,” says Hung.

On the one side, most Vietnamese men in the United States work low-wage, low-prestige jobs and feel incapable of attracting a wife abroad. On the other, as women are becoming increasingly educated and adopting modern mindsets in Vietnam, they’re encountering a lack of suitable partners at home. It’s been called a “double marriage squeeze.”

The result has been that Vietnamese men in the United States are coming back home, where they have far more status and prestige, to find “traditional” wives. And women in Vietnam are looking to the United States hoping to find more modern-minded men.

“They’re very mismatched expectations,” says Hung. “I believe these couples love each other—but they have very different conceptions of what constitutes a good marriage.”

Hung’s own story doesn’t fit any sociological pattern. He is, in the terminology of his field, an outlier. Born in the Mekong Delta, he and his four siblings were taken from Vietnam by their father as boat refugees. In 1982, when Hung was six years old, they ended up in the small city of Pass Christian, Mississippi, where they lived on welfare in a public housing project.

“I grew up in a very dysfunctional family,” Hung says. Yet, surrounded by poverty and violence, and with siblings that turned to crime, Hung somehow worked his way to earning a PhD from UC Berkeley at 25.

His early experiences made him hyper-conscious of notions of status and self-worth, which ultimately led him into sociology. But Hung didn’t intend to focus on his home country. When he entered grad school, I had no interest in Vietnam,” he says. “I had no Vietnamese friends growing up. My friends were mostly black.”

A phone call from his long-lost mother opened the door to a career defining experience. Hung hadn’t heard from her since he was taken from Vietnam, but she managed to track him down when he began graduate school, and he began to visit regularly.

It was during a trip to Vietnam in 1996 that he discovered the topic for his book. Sitting in a cafe, Hung was approached by a group of young Vietnamese men curious about where he was from. Their curiosity turned to hostility when they learned he was Viet Kieu. They accused him of coming back either for sex with local women or to “buy” a beautiful wife.

“There was an assumption from the locals that overseas Vietnamese men were coming back to utilize their status as Viet Kieu to hook up with beautiful women. That exchange struck me as interesting and I began to wonder to what extent it was true.” The study became his PhD dissertation and ultimately, For Better or For Worse.

Hung is currently writing his second book. The topic is the ways in which Western expats, Viet Kieu and middle-class Vietnamese interact in contemporary HCM City. “It’s kind of like AsiaLIFE gone academic,” he jokes. “I’m looking at how these three segments of Saigon’s economy intersect and how those intersections are either enforced or impeded by notions of racialization, power dynamics and class identity.”

The professor is spending his sabbatical writing the book, which is based on 6,000 pages of interview transcripts and 2,000 pages of field notes he’s accumulated over the past four years. And the work, tentatively called Sleepless Saigon, is bound to open eyes.

“It’s incredible how Viet Kieu men talk about white men,” says Hung, “how locals talk about both Viet Kieu people and white people, all these barriers that exist.”

AsiaLIFE HCMC 15