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Transnationalism from Below: Evidence from Vietnam-Taiwan Cross-Border Marriages*

Danièle Bélanger  
The University of Western Ontario

Hong-zen Wang**  
National Sun Yat-sen University

This paper examines marriage migration in Asia through the lens of transnationalism. We pull together results from various studies we conducted on marriage migration in Vietnam and Taiwan between 2004 and 2010, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Our main contention is that marriage migration constitutes a significant vector of social change for both sending and receiving areas of migrants. We examine the gendered aspects of this transformation, since the vast majority of migrant spouses in Asia are women. We use the concept of 'transnationalism from below' to frame the social impact of marriage migration. In this paper, we first review activities of marriage migrants and their families that constitute either economic or

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** Corresponding author
social transnationalism. In the second part, we discuss how these transnational activities contribute to social change in both societies. In brief, the paper shows the far-reaching significance of this migration flow for the region and aims to move forward the conceptualization of marriage migration in Asia.

Introduction

Within two decades, marriage migration in Asia has gone from a relatively marginal phenomenon to a major migration flow inserted in commercial and personal networks of citizens from various countries of the region with far-reaching economic, social, and political ramifications. Two patterns of marriage migration are the most common in the Asian region. In the first type, spouses are sponsored by partners they meet or form relationships with while overseas. Some marriages result from trips organized by agencies in which men travel to other countries to find potential brides, and some involve Taiwanese or Korean men who go on business trips abroad and meet their future spouses there. In the second type, marriages take place between foreigners who sojourn as workers or students and citizens of their country of temporary residence.¹ In both situations, the foreign spouse becomes a permanent resident of the other spouse’s country of residence. These marriages account for a large proportion of all international marriages that entail a spousal migration, particularly in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Most marriage migrants that fall under these categories are women from Southeast Asia and Mainland China.

The governments of Taiwan and South Korea did not expect the rapid growth in this type of immigration because of family reunification rights, to which they had to subscribe as young democracies endorsing international conventions and striving to gain international recognition. Because these receiving countries appear ambivalent about how to manage this migration, we refer to it as the side-door migration frame (Yamanaka and Piper, 2005; Wang and Bélanger, 2008). In this context, ‘side-door’ refers to the governments’ viewpoints on these migrations rather than to migrants’ strategies, as generally suggested. In the East Asian context, front-door migration would refer to highly-skilled individuals who move to another country, while side-door migration would include migrant workers, for-

¹This type of marriage migration is part of Khoo’s typology established for the case of Australia or a typology that applies to immigrant countries such as Australia and Canada (see Khoo, 2001).
The main objective of this paper is to examine this particular flow of marriage migration within Asia under the paradigm of transnationalism. We focus on the Vietnam-Taiwan marriage migration as a case study. The field of demography has given limited attention to recent developments in migration theory calling for dynamic and up-to-date concepts suitable to new features of the age of migration (Castles and Miller, 2009). The necessity of reconsidering conceptualizations of migration is critical in the era of globalization characterized by an increase in the volume, speed, and intensity of the circulation of capital, goods, people, and services, and rapid, enhanced communication that alters the meaning of distance and physical separation. As a conceptual lens to study migration, transnationalism seeks to shed light on processes that are simultaneously considered causes and consequences of migration, as well as to capture processes that involve both sending and receiving nations of migrants. Moreover, the forms of transnationalism emerging from marriage migration are highly gendered and, with a gender lens, we are better equipped to understand the specificities of social change brought about by the combined phenomena of international marriages and migration in the Asian context. This paper thus aims to provide a framework to push forward our understanding of the way marriage migration is generally and currently conceptualized in most research.

In this paper, therefore, we use the concept of transnationalism to examine some aspects of this migration flow and highlight how marriage migration serves to connect families, communities, and nations across national borders. First, we examine marriage migrants’ transnational activities in the realm of economic and social fields. Second, we discuss how transnational activities of marriage migrants penetrate political boundaries and lead to significant social change. Immigrants living in a host society are not dislocated from their home society, and “complete” assimilation into the host society should not be taken for granted. Political national borders are distinct from ‘social borders.’ The fluidity of social borders explains why immigrants are new residents with a complex socio-cultural background that contributes to the making and make-up of their host society. Host societies alter the social worlds of immigrants, but host societies are reshaped by the presence of the immigrants’ own social worlds. Simulta-

2 Back door migration would refer to unauthorized or undocumented migration. We use side-door migration as a way to convey the idea of less desirable immigration flows than those entering through the ‘front door.’
neously, the emigrants’ absence and their relationships with natal families, communities, and country serve to reshape their home country. We contend that such social changes are not initiated by powerful capital flow or political arrangements, but by the grassroots close links and intensive social exchanges between people without high social or economic capital.

Both authors of this paper have been involved in various research projects dealing with marriage migration in Taiwan and Vietnam since 2005 (first author) and 2000 (second author). They have conducted extensive fieldwork in the two countries with marriage migrants themselves, their natal families in Vietnam, and their husbands and parents-in-law in Taiwan. They write on trends (see Bélanger, 2010) and policies (Wang, 2011), and they have studied such topics as remittances from marriage migrants (Bélanger et al., 2011), impact on gender relations in Vietnam (Bélanger and Tran, 2011), social links of Vietnamese spouses in Taiwan (Wang, 2011), media representation in Vietnam (Bélanger et al., 2007), strategies of resistance of Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan (Wang, 2007), the experiences of Vietnamese migrant wives who suffer domestic violence in Taiwan (Tang et al., 2011; Tang and Wang, 2011), the experiences of women who returned to Vietnam after divorce (Bélanger et al., 2008), the marriage migration industry (Wang, 2002), the social constructions of marriage migration by various stakeholders (Bélanger et al., 2010; Wang and Bélanger, 2008), and the agency of disadvantaged female immigrants (Tang and Wang, 2011; Wang, 2007). These various studies use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to shed light on various aspects of marriage migration. In this paper, we pull together the lessons learned in the course of these various research projects to synthesize our thinking, show the far-reaching significance of this migration flow for the region, and move forward the conceptualization of marriage migration in Asia. In framing Vietnam-Taiwan migration as a transnational phenomenon, we argue that marriage migration is a major factor of social transformation both for source and settlement countries of migrants. In the discussion, we elaborate on the main aspects of changes brought about by marriage migration.

**The Vietnam-Taiwan Marriage Migration Flow**

The worldwide increase in international migration flows linked to marriages between individuals from different countries has been situated within larger trends taking place in the era of globalization (Constable, 2005; Glodava and Onuzika, 1994; Kojima, 2001; Piper, 1997; Suzuki, 2000; Thai, 2008). In Taiwan, the number of female migrant partners from Southeast Asia and China has increased significantly since the early 1990s (Bélanger, 2010). Table 1 shows that in the years from 2000 to 2007, between 5.78 and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Married Couples</th>
<th>Nationals</th>
<th>Subtotal Couples</th>
<th>Foreigners (including China)</th>
<th>Other Foreigners Couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Couples</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Couples</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>181,642</td>
<td>136,676</td>
<td>75.24</td>
<td>44,966</td>
<td>24.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>170,515</td>
<td>124,313</td>
<td>72.90</td>
<td>46,202</td>
<td>27.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>171,483</td>
<td>116,849</td>
<td>68.14</td>
<td>54,634</td>
<td>31.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>131,453</td>
<td>100,143</td>
<td>76.18</td>
<td>31,310</td>
<td>23.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>142,669</td>
<td>118,739</td>
<td>83.23</td>
<td>23,930</td>
<td>16.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>135,041</td>
<td>110,341</td>
<td>81.71</td>
<td>24,700</td>
<td>18.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>154,866</td>
<td>133,137</td>
<td>85.97</td>
<td>21,729</td>
<td>14.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>117,099</td>
<td>95,185</td>
<td>81.29</td>
<td>21,914</td>
<td>18.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>138,819</td>
<td>117,318</td>
<td>84.51</td>
<td>21,501</td>
<td>15.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>165,327</td>
<td>143,811</td>
<td>86.99</td>
<td>21,516</td>
<td>13.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15.47 percent of marriages registered in Taiwan involved a Taiwanese citizen and a foreign spouse. If we include marriages to individuals from Mainland China (who are not considered foreigners in Taiwan, although they hold a different passport than Taiwanese citizens), the proportion of marriages reaches nearly one-third in 2003 and 18 percent in 2007. Despite a decline between 2000 and 2008, such high proportions of marriages with foreign spouses still significantly impact Taiwanese families; for example, between 2000 and 2008, 10 percent of newborns had an immigrant mother (MOI, 2009). Up to the end of 2009, over 100,000 cross-border marriages involved a Vietnamese woman and a Taiwanese man. Vietnamese residents in Taiwan constitute the largest ethnic group after Han people (ethnic Chinese).

This significant phenomenon does not result from a marriage squeeze caused by high sex ratios at birth, but by a marriage squeeze that relates to marital hypergamy whereby women marry up (a man more educated and earning a higher income than themselves). With more women being highly educated and earning higher incomes, there is a shortage of ‘higher’ men to marry. Scholars have shown how this type of marital preference partially explains the high rate of female singlehood in East Asia (Jones and Ramdas, 2004; Tsai, 1996).

This type of marriage squeeze is a common explanation for why men with a disadvantaged socio-economic status in the domestic marriage market seek foreign brides (Wang and Chang, 2002). Also, related to preferences in the choice of a spouse is Taiwan’s gender culture of masculine domination. Men who marry Vietnamese women want to affirm their masculinity by marrying a subservient wife (Wang and Tien, 2009). It is natural for Taiwanese grooms to believe that they should be the main economic material providers for the family and that their wives should be dependent and deferential with few material desires. Family members and friends share the same image of an ideal wife and exert great influence on a man’s decision to marry a foreigner. Moreover, the matchmaking industry plays an important role in the social constructions of Vietnamese brides. Vietnamese women are represented by matchmaking agencies as being like traditional Taiwanese women of the 1950s: young, pretty, virginal, hard working, submissive, and obedient. Furthermore, because women from Vietnam (and other countries) come from poor, inferior countries of the ‘Third World,’ Taiwanese men can feel stronger and more superior.

In addition to demographic and gendered cultural factors, the political economy of the public welfare regime influences the increase of cross-border marriages between Taiwan and Vietnam. Families in Taiwan have the responsibility of taking care of their elderly, which has become more difficult since women now tend to be better educated and more active in the
VIETNAM-TAIWAN CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES

labor market. One solution to the expectation of caring for elderly family members at home has been the guest worker scheme for live-in caregivers.\(^3\) Data shows that, as of July 2011, 45 percent of temporary migrant workers (194,141 persons) were working in the social and personal service industry, and almost 99 percent were elderly caregivers (191,832) (BEVT, 2011). However, only middle and higher class families\(^4\) can afford to hire caregivers for their elderly family members, so the lower socio-economic families use international marriage as a strategy to provide care to dependent elderly family members. This strategy also solves the problem of social and biological reproduction. As our past research has shown, many marriage migrants become wives, mothers, daughters-in-law, and care workers for elderly family members. The multiple roles played by marriage migrants indicate the wide scope of their contributions to Taiwanese society.

**Conceptualizing Marriage Migrant Transnationalism**

In this analysis, we use the concept of migrant transnationalism as “a broad category referring to a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people, and organizations in their homelands or elsewhere in a diaspora” (Portes et al., 2007 cited in Vertovec, 2009:13). According to Portes, transnational activities are those that “take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants” (Portes, 1999:464). These activities can be conducted by powerful actors, such as governments or corporations, but also by ‘modest individuals, such as immigrants and their home country kin and relations.’ In addition, Portes argues that these activities are not circumscribed to the economic sphere, but include political, cultural, and religious activities as well. A conceptual distinction relevant to our analysis is the notion of ‘transnationalism from below,’ which entails activities of “grassroots initiatives by immigrants and their home country counterparts” (Portes et al., 1999:221). In this paper, we understand ‘transnationalism

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\(^3\) The guest worker scheme is to ensure that Taiwan is a zero migration country, and all migrant workers are required to leave after the end of their contract. The government worries that the influx of migrants workers from Southeast Asia might reduce the overall ‘population quality’ and excludes any possibility for migrant workers to apply for permanent residence (see Wang, 2011).

\(^4\) A migrant worker costs an employer at least US$8,400 a year (Yeong You International Company, 2011, http://www.yuwei-agency.com.tw/note2.htm), but the annual average household income in Taiwan was only US$20,640. The lowest 20 percent of families earned only US$9,630 in 2010 (Commercial Times, 29 August 2011).
from below’ as coming from individuals who are not considered to be significant economic actors by states because they come from ‘low’ social strata. In the case of Vietnam, women who marry Taiwanese men are considered low class and poorly educated. In Taiwan, men who marry Vietnamese women are looked down upon and considered poor men who failed to marry locally, and their foreign wives are seen as lower class women from developing countries. In Taiwanese media, Hsia (2007) argued that the whole phenomenon is constructed as a ‘social problem.’

Most scholarly migration work focuses on societies bounded by political borders, which are often regarded as homogeneous, and equates national boundary as research boundary, and nation as society, hindering our understanding of the activities and processes that frequently crosscut borders (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller, 2002). Pries (2005: 180) suggests that we should describe the transnational social process and social relations to avoid the pitfall of seeing absolute flows of space without political boundary. Transnational social relations are located in and, at the same time, go beyond one or many national boundaries. Harney and Baldassar (2007) remind us to pay attention to three critical aspects of transnational studies: spatial/temporal movement, decentering the nation, and power inequality. Decentering the nation might be the most important viewpoint in transnationalism studies. A good example of this approach is Deng (2009) who interviewed skilled Taiwanese managers living in China. He found that they travel back and forth between Taiwan and China and use different resources to establish transnational networks and pluri-local connections.

Sociological concepts like social networks, social capital, and social embeddedness are very useful in the research on transnationalism (Vertovec, 2003). Taking social embeddedness as an example, Vietnamese women experience prescribed gender roles in Vietnam, which they often discover to be very different from the social expectations of them after their marriages to Taiwanese men. Under such circumstances, they have to develop different tactics in Taiwanese social contexts to fulfil their different roles to meet Vietnamese and Taiwanese expectations simultaneously (Tang et al., 2011). However, as Krissman (2005) criticizes, most migration studies using the concepts of social capital or social networks pay little attention to the risk embedded in the migratory process. These researchers often ignore the unequal power and class relations in the transnational social networks and assume that the social networks are positive. Very few studies explore the negative side of transnational social networks that have great impact on both emigration and immigration societies (Krissman, 2005; Wang and Bélanger, 2011; Wong, 2004). Therefore, when we combine the concepts of social networks and transnationalism to explore cross-border marriages, we should not ignore the power relationships embedded in transnational
social networks, like the commodified transnational marriage networks organized by private marriage agencies between Vietnam and Taiwan (Wang and Chang, 2002).

On the basis of existing research on marriage migration to date, we aim to understand how marriage migrants from Vietnam, living in Taiwan, are influenced by, and influence their sending and receiving societies in different ways. Both the sending and hosting societies are impacted by migrants’ transnational activities that emerge from grassroots communities and from families, not from the state. Put differently, ‘transnationalism from below’ brought about by ‘side-door’ migration is our emphasis.

**Transnationalism in Past Research on the Vietnam-Taiwan Flow of Marriage Migrants**

Taiwanese research on marriage migration prior to 2006 mostly focused on the social adaptation and education of children with immigrant mothers from Southeast Asia, while practically no research examined children with mothers from Mainland China. Lim and Wang (2006) attributed this focus to a ‘racial and class view of marriage migration.’ Chinese spouses are regarded as belonging to the same ethnic group as Taiwanese; therefore, their children should not suffer from any difficulties. Southeast Asian spouses, however, are constructed as being more problematic, since they speak languages other than Chinese and come from different cultural backgrounds. The children of these women are considered by the Taiwanese state as a population of ‘poor quality,’ and, thus, one that should be monitored closely (Wang and Bélanger, 2008).

After 2006, more studies examined the marital and intimate relationships of international couples. Kung (2010) discussed the strategies of some Taiwanese businessmen in Vietnam who married local women to obtain transnational ‘flexible status’ and access Vietnamese networks to accumulate capital. Chao (2008) explored practices of nationalism in the intimate relations of Chinese spouses and their veteran husbands. Tang and Wang (2011) examined how immigrant women negotiate the Taiwanese patriarchal family system, and, in the end, empower themselves to find ways out of the shadow of domestic violence in intimate relations. As they show, domestic violence arises from role conflict between the filial daughters

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5 Spouses from Mainland China, however, suffer greater discrimination than spouses from Southeast Asia in other ways. For instance, the rules for access to citizenship involve a waiting time of eight years for spouses from Mainland China as opposed to four for other foreign spouses.
socialized in Vietnam and in-law’s expectations of a good daughter-in-law. They contend that employment status, together with Taiwan’s state intervention in the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, are important to the changes in their relationships with their husbands’ families. Fung and Liang (2008) write in detail about the socialization process of Vietnamese mothers on their children in Taiwan and find that children are typically socialized primarily by their mothers in their father’s absence.

Vietnamese ethnic food in Taiwan is a recently emerging field of study (Huang, 2010; Lim 2009). Researchers adopted a social capital approach to understand the operation of ethnic food shops in Taiwan because the ability to set up a business is highly correlated with women migrants’ ethnic social networks in Taiwan (Huang, 2010). Lim (2009), in his early work, found that, although Vietnamese immigrant wives are required to cook Taiwanese food for their families, they used different tactics to secretly keep the Vietnamese flavors in the cooking. Chang and Chang (2008) explored the Hakka dietary culture in the transnational families to understand the power relationship between the wife, husband, parents-in-law and other family members.

On the one hand, the above cited studies indirectly relate to transnationalism as a process whereby Vietnamese immigrant spouses contribute in changing Taiwanese families and society. They show that elements of Vietnamese culture become embedded in Taiwanese society with the increasing number of migrant spouses present in the country. On the other hand, most studies do not explicitly use a transnational framework to study marriage migration.

Research on the implications of women emigrating to marry foreign men in Vietnam is rather limited. The phenomenon is essentially treated by the state as international marriage and the emigration that follows these marriages is underplayed. One survey conducted in the south of Vietnam in 2007 was called the “Study of women who married foreign men” and the report barely mentioned the word migration (Nguyen and Hugo, 2007). Our recent work has underscored the significant economic impact of remittances sent by marriage migrants (Bélanger et al., 2011) and the impact on the reconfiguration of gender relations within families (Bélanger and Tran, 2011). A content analysis of Vietnamese media revealed that Vietnamese marriage migrants were portrayed negatively and often viewed as either victims of trafficking or as opportunists who choose marriage as a way to migrate internationally (Bélanger et al., 2007). While the impact of marriage migration shows both positive and negative effects on Vietnam as an originating country of female migrant spouses, results show that the inclusion of marriage migration into mainstream studies of migration are overdue and marriage emigrants should be recognized as migrants in their
own right who can contribute to their natal families, communities, and receiving societies. In these studies, marriage migrant transnational activities are circumscribed to remittances.

**Transnational Activities by Marriage Migrants**

Our evidence indicates that transnational activities in which Vietnamese migrants in Taiwan engage in are circumscribed to economic and social activities. The transnational paradigm posits that religious and political transnationalism may be powerful factors of social transformation, but in the case of the flow we study (Vietnam-Taiwan), we do not find significant evidence of these types of activities, so the following discussion is confined to economic and social transnational activities.

**Transnational Economic Activities**

The maintenance of close contact with their place of origin by migrants following migration has been well documented (Harney and Baldassar, 2007; Vertovec, 2003). One of many motivations for a Vietnamese woman to marry a Taiwanese man and move to Taiwan is to remit to their natal families. In a survey we conducted with families in three communities of origin of Vietnamese women who lived in South Korea or Taiwan as immigrant spouses, the majority (90 percent) of bride-sending households surveyed (n=250) declared receiving remittances from their female members who married abroad (Bélanger et al., 2011). Multivariate analyses on the determinants of remittances showed the likelihood of receiving money depended largely on the characteristics of the emigrant woman and her living conditions in the place of destination. Both emigrant’s age and duration of time abroad showed an inverse U-shaped effect on the propensity to remit. After several years abroad, women send remittances, but the likelihood of sending declines over time. The working status of the emigrant had the strongest significant positive effect on the ability to remit; having children also exerted a positive effect. Emigrant spouses who could communicate fluently in their husband’s language were more likely to send money home. Families who communicated with their emigrant daughters every week and sent non-cash gifts to them tended to receive larger remittances. Overall, these results support the idea that women with greater

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6 The top uses of remittances were for consumption and non-productive activities. In order of importance, they were: daily expenses, purchase of furniture, house repair, health care, building a house, buying a means of transportation (scooter), repaying debts and building savings (see Tran, 2008).
social capital are in a stronger position to negotiate sending money to their natal family in Vietnam.

Remitting money is the most common form of transnational economic activity performed by migrants. Money can be transferred via financial organizations, like Western Union or Citibank, or via personal networks. Migrant workers in Taiwan normally use formal channels to send money. As soon as possible, they send money home to pay back the debt they had to incur to pay their pre-departure costs (Wang and Bélanger, 2011). Because female marriage immigrants enjoy a more secure status in Taiwan than migrant workers, they are able to participate in Taiwan’s social life on their own. They build their own social networks by, for example, going to Vietnamese restaurants to meet friends or by keeping contacts with those from the same hometown after they come to Taiwan. Migrant spouses can resort to various ways of sending money home safely and inexpensively; for instance, they might ask people who are returning to Vietnam to take money back with them. Such people can be friends, a Taiwanese matchmaker who organizes a trip to Vietnam, or the representative of a travel agency who operates in both countries. Securing these channels to remit money constitutes an important part of Vietnamese migrants’ daily lives and network building. Such remitting strategies allow migrants to bypass state monitoring and emerge from transnational grassroots communities in order to remit safely and cheaply.

Economic transnational activities are deployed by Vietnamese women who begin an ethnic business in Taiwan. Ethnic grocery stores and restaurants have mushroomed in Taiwan as shown by the example of the city of Kaohsiung, which had a population of 1.5 million, including 4,240 Vietnamese immigrant spouses as of December 2010. According to our survey done in April 2009, Kaohsiung had 45 Vietnamese ethnic restaurants run by Vietnamese migrant spouses. This figure means that one percent of the Vietnamese immigrant population opened a restaurant of their own. This figure does not account for other shops, like Vietnamese drugstores, night market stands, or other small businesses (nail salons, for instance).

To run their businesses, women must import Vietnamese goods and, therefore, engage in transnational small trade. In the early phase of Vietnamese migration to Taiwan in the mid-1990s, there was almost no such business. After the year 2000 when restaurants and shops began to open, owners brought Vietnamese goods to Taiwan when they returned from visiting relatives in Vietnam. As the market for Vietnamese food grew, some Taiwanese and Vietnamese became wholesalers and imported goods from Vietnam to sell to retailers or directly to Vietnamese restaurants. These restaurants catered initially mostly to other Vietnamese wives, their families, and migrant workers. Over the years, the popularity of Vietnamese
food has gained momentum among the Taiwanese population and an increasing number of customers are non-Vietnamese. In a survey we conducted in April 2009, we noted that the majority of customers of Vietnamese restaurants in Kaohsiung City were Taiwanese.

Some experienced immigrant spouses develop matchmaking businesses and seek spouses from their natal village or province for Taiwanese men. Vietnamese matchmakers living in Taiwan travel to Vietnam to find spouses, complete administrative formalities, organize wedding ceremonies with local matchmakers, and find someone to teach potential brides how to speak Mandarin before they get their temporary visitor visa to Taiwan. This type of business requires the collaboration of officials and intermediaries in Vietnam. Immigrant wives are very effective at connecting Taiwanese and Vietnamese societies because they are familiar with Taiwanese social norms and customs and can maneuver Vietnamese bureaucratic practices and social norms. Upon pecuniary calculation, they plan the distribution of the money paid by future grooms to various players in the matchmaking process in order to secure their income (Wang and Chang, 2002). Without sufficient local knowledge, it is impossible to organize a cross-border marriage and international migration from beginning to end.

For some Taiwanese men who marry Vietnamese women, marriage translates into the opening of new opportunities. If they face difficulties in Taiwan, they can expand their life chances in Vietnam. One study participant interviewed in 2004 said that he often visited the parents-in-law of his first Vietnamese wife in Ho Chi Minh City when he went to see his second Vietnamese wife’s family. He believed that there were excellent business opportunities in Vietnam, and, in the near future, he planned to set up a business there with the assistance of his Vietnamese family network. Another interviewee was planning to open a coffee shop in Vietnam with his Vietnamese wife and planned to hire her relatives to work in the business in Can Tho.

One participant who succeeded in running a business in Vietnam said,

I failed the first time I invested there… I trusted a friend who introduced me to someone, but the Vietnamese just wanted to embezzle my money…. After this, I changed my business from hardware to an entertainment business. Everyone said that I would fail again, but my Vietnamese wife supported me. If one has no close people to trust in a foreign land, it will be very difficult. Now I have six trusted subordinates – one is my wife; one is her younger sister; and there are others. They will not betray me.
Another Taiwanese male study participant who succeeded in his transnational business after his marriage to his Vietnamese wife reflects on the social stratification inherent in international marriages between Taiwanese men and Vietnamese women:

I have a three-year old child. I want him to learn Vietnamese first and then Chinese. My wife’s family lives apart from us. Vietnam has opened its door for more than ten years, and rich people are normally those with political power, all northerners. After liberation, they used their power to become rich. It is not easy for people like me to marry the people of this class. Taiwanese can marry people from the middle strata, who might have a family business background. Taiwanese people who marry Vietnamese through matchmaking agencies normally can choose women from ‘the third class,’ who are rural and poor peasants. These women want to marry Taiwanese, to save some money for their natal families…. I normally speak Vietnamese at home. Not many Taiwanese businesspeople can speak Vietnamese. I am more localized.

As he said, many Taiwanese do not belong to the ‘high class;’ hence, they cannot marry women from wealthy and powerful Vietnamese families. Therefore, when attempting to start a new life or a business in Vietnam, they cannot count on state or bureaucratic power. They must rely on their survival strategies and the help of their wives. From the viewpoint of the state, these people are not among the powerful ones that the state would assist with favorable policies. They often cannot speak English, are not particularly wealthy, and are not highly educated, so they cannot move freely in the global labor market. Their only capital is their social networks in Vietnam acquired through their wives. These Taiwanese men and Vietnamese women are actively bridging Taiwanese and Vietnamese societies; they become more transnational than managers working for transnational corporations.

**Transnational Social Activities: Visits and Childcare**

Migrant transnationalism includes mutual visits of family members. Most migrant spouses return to Vietnam to visit family members, especially after the birth of a child, but family members may come from Vietnam to Taiwan to visit them as well. We studied, for instance, cases of mothers who traveled to Taiwan to help their daughters during the ‘sitting month’ (month-long postpartum rest). According to Wang (2001: 118), it takes an average of six months of stay in Taiwan for Vietnamese migrant wives to become pregnant. Because many Taiwanese families expect their daughters-in-law to
stay home and take care of the children for at least three years, many women cannot work and earn income. As we documented elsewhere, this expectation from the husband and in-laws clashes with the migrant wife’s desire to earn money and send remittances home (Tang et al., 2011; Tang and Wang, 2011). Childcare can, therefore, be a contentious issue in these families. In rare cases, mothers-in-law step in to care for the grandchild, but such a relationship is rarely successful because childrearing styles of the Vietnamese birth mother and the Taiwanese grandmother often conflict. A way to solve this dilemma of work and childcare is to invite the wife’s mother from Vietnam to come to Taiwan.

Such an arrangement entails several benefits. Firstly, the experienced mother provides quality care to her daughter and grandchild during the postpartum period. Secondly, the wife can go out to work without worrying about childcare. Thirdly, the mother can get some work to do at home and earn some money, in addition to the childcare money from her son-in-law. One case in point was Khoa’s mother, who came to Taiwan twice to take care of her daughters’ babies soon after they were born. Each time she stayed for one year. Immigration regulations allowed her to stay in Taiwan as a visitor for three months only. The fine for overstaying her visa was US$330 (National Immigration Agency, 2007). It was more advantageous for her to work as an undocumented migrant in Taiwan and pay the fine for overstaying than to return to Vietnam and work there.7

Another form of transnational family exchanges involves the case of transnational care whereby a Taiwanese-Vietnamese couple sends a child back to Vietnam to be cared for by the maternal grandparents until the child reaches primary school age. Then, the child is brought back to Taiwan to attend Chinese school and live with the parents. This arrangement alleviates the parents from the high cost of childcare in Taiwan and gives them more time to earn income. A couple with a daughter abroad, who took part in one of our studies in Ho Chi Minh City, was proud to explain how they were looking after their grandson in Vietnam and received an income of US$100 per month for childcare from their daughter in Taiwan.8

7 During her stay in Taiwan, she did handicraft at home. She earned an average of US$350 per month while in Vietnam, she would have earned US$50 per month for a similar job (VietnamNetBridge, 2008). If she had come to Taiwan as a migrant worker, she would have had to pay approximately US$6,500 in pre-departure costs (Wang and Bélanger, 2011).

8 A blue-collar worker in a foreign company earns around US$80 in 2007 in Ho Chi Minh City region. One month of childcare, seven to 12 hours a day, in Taiwan would cost the couple US$500 to US$650 (Jinribaomu, 2012).
The types of migrant transnationalism described above exhibit two common features. First, these activities are far from the state’s monitoring realm. They are deployed by people in the periphery who craft survival strategies that link two countries. Second, these transnational activities are all mediated by women. Taiwanese men with little cultural and economic capital rely on their Vietnamese wives to do business in Vietnam. Women who send their children to Vietnam for childcare or bring their mothers to work in their households in Taiwan bring about social and economic activities that benefit the Taiwanese family. These relationships contradict the common understanding of marriage migration as global hypergamy, which is described as a pattern whereby women marry up to benefit from their foreign husband’s social capital.

Contrary to economic forms of transnationalism that can be monitored, particularly through data on remittances, there is no data on the frequency and intensity of social aspects of transnationalism. Indeed, we cannot assess the frequency of patterns, such as the visits of Vietnamese wives’ relatives in Taiwan or the practice of sending children back to Vietnam for care in preschool years. But the identification of these patterns alone is a beginning towards a better understanding of marriage migration that fits the pattern of ‘transnationalism from below.’ Despite the difficulty in measuring the frequency of some transnational activities, their social far-reaching impact leads us to argue that marriage migration is a factor of social change in Asia, at least for the case of the Vietnam-Taiwan migration flow.

Entailing Social Change in Vietnam and Taiwan: The Role of Marriage Migrants’ Transnationalism

According to Held et al. (1999), large-scale patterns of transformation can be analyzed based on (1) ‘the extensiveness of networks and of relations and connections’; (2) the intensity of flows and flows of individuals; and (3) ‘the velocity or speed of interchanges’ of resources and information. Vertovec (2009) argues that these three dimensions of social change are observed in modes of migrant transnationalism. According to these scholars, large-scale social transformations result from the joint impact of several aspects of social life, including enhanced communication, work, family life, and social movement. This complexity of how migrant transnationalism may foster social change results from the co-existence of various migration flows and of other transnational types of activities that also contribute to the three aspects of social transformation discussed above. In the case we study here, transnational ties in foreign investment and business between Taiwan and Vietnam preceded the steep increase in international marriage of the 1990s and 2000s. Business ties were established with the opening of Vietnam’s
economy in the late 1980s. This initial wave of business capital and people from Taiwan to Vietnam was accompanied by a wave of Taiwanese men living and working in Vietnam who married Vietnamese women.

Then, labor migration flows began to intensify in 2000 with Taiwan being the top destination of contract labor migrants from Vietnam in the mid-2000. The presence of labor migrants promoted the formation of ethnic networks within Taiwan between workers from the same families, communities and provinces. These labor migrants also interacted with marriage migrants in public places or sometimes in the workplace. Marriage migration is, therefore, part of a cascade of ties and transnational activities between the two countries.

When are transnational activities sufficient to play a role in social change? Landolt (2001: 220) adds a particularly significant point to this discussion when she says that “a quantitative change results in a qualitative difference in the order of things.” This idea suggests that the cumulative effect of individuals’ transnational activities could reach a threshold whereby a social transformation occurs at a larger scale. Portes also refers to this idea:

Despite its limited numerical character, the combination of a cadre of regular transnational activists with the occasional activities of other migrants adds up to a social process of significant economic and social impact for communities and even nations. While from an individual perspective, the act of sending a remittance, buying a house in the migrant’s hometown, or travelling there on occasion have purely personal consequences, in the aggregate they can modify the fortunes and the culture of these towns and even of the countries of which they are part (Portes, 2003: 877).

From the evidence discussed above, we hypothesize that two qualitatively different types of social change are occurring from marriage migrant transnationalism. First, in Vietnam, the most important change takes place at the local and micro-sociological level. While marriage migration is widely discussed in the national press and on national television, relative to Vietnam’s total population, few individuals are directly affected by the phenomenon. Our previous research cited above documents very important consequences in communities from where emigrant brides originate. Vietnam has a long history of emigration and diaspora formation. The current migration flow of marriage migrants represents a small trend relative to previous outflows to various destinations and through various modes of exits (marriage and political migrants during the colonial period; political refugees and economic migrants after the US-Vietnam war; labor migrants to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance or Comecon countries; and labor migrants to Asian and Middle Eastern countries).
In addition to the significant economic contribution of marriage migrants to their families through the sending of remittances, the main social effect, we would argue, lies in the challenge that these marriages pose to the ideas of traditional family and marriage and to the role and value of daughters. Indeed, newspaper surveys and online questionnaires posted by online media reveal a change in attitudes and the social perception of Vietnamese marriage migrants. Our survey in three marriage migrant-sending communities also indicates a change in how the phenomenon and the women who marry foreigners are perceived. Together, these sources suggest that the stigma associated with marriage migration is gradually being replaced by respect and admiration for the women who are viewed as sacrificing themselves to help their families and who succeed as workers, wives, and mothers abroad. In the villages where we conducted our study, we noted that parents desire daughters more than sons because of their high economic value on the marriage market, including the local one where a shortage of girls boosts the value of those who marry locally. These changes point to interesting dynamics between migration and gender structures.

Social change brought about by two decades of marriage migration in Taiwan, we argue, is altering the fabric of Taiwanese society. First, marriage migration has been critical in the emergence of a discourse about Taiwan as a multi-ethnic society. Under the Kuomintang (KMT) regime, which fled to Taiwan after defeat by Communist China in 1949, Taiwan was claimed as a Han society, with some Aboriginals living in the mountains. However, after the democratization in early 1990s, more and more people claimed ethnic identities other than a Han one (Chi, 2005). The Hakka ethnic movement of the 1990s is the most outstanding one that distinguishes itself from the Holo ethnic group in Taiwan (Wang, 2007). Almost at the same time, more and more female spouses from West Kalimantan in Indonesia married Taiwanese men (Wang and Chang, 2002: 96, Table 1). However, most women from West Kalimantan were ethnic Hakka Chinese, which posed no threat to the imagination of the homogenous Han/Hakka society. Since 1995, more and more Vietnamese women of Kinh ethnicity (they were not Chinese Vietnamese) married Taiwanese. Between 1995 and 2000, about 40,000 Vietnamese women entered Taiwan after tying the knot with Taiwanese men. This trend brought about the questions of “what is Taiwan’s identity” and “who is a ‘true’ Taiwanese.” This discussion was particularly vivid when it came to the public’s attention that these marriages were literally birthing the country’s next generation. Are mixed-blood children Taiwanese or Vietnamese? The boundaries of Taiwan as a society and nation had to be re-imagined. In total, over 400,000 women have migrated to Taiwan as brides (this number includes women from Mainland China) over the past 20 years. To recognize this reality the government coined the
term the ‘fifth ethnic group’ to recognize this new group as distinct from the previously recognized groups (Holo or Taiwanese, Mainlanders, Hakka, and Aboriginals).

Taiwan is no longer considered a homogenous society with only Han people from China, but a society hosting immigrants from different countries. This shift in the way the nation is constructed was evident in a recent discourse pronounced by President Ma Ying-jeou at a reception offered to immigrant female spouses in May 2011 (Ma, 2011). In his address, the president encouraged children to learn their mother’s tongue to promote multiculturalism in Taiwan. He said that Taiwan is a multicultural migration society and all immigrants own the ‘Taiwan’ dream (2011). The demographic significance of marriage migration forced the government to create new governing entities and restructure existing ones to deal with this inflow of foreigners; for example, the National Immigration Agency (under the Ministry of Interior Affairs) was set up in 2007. This agency oversees the work of various government organizations dealing with immigrants and their children (National Immigration Agency, 2011).

Besides the impact on national policy, immigrant spouses contribute by challenging the Taiwanese patriarchal gender culture among the lower socio-economic families, to which they typically belong. As mentioned above, a cause for dispute in these international families relates to the gender division of labor within and outside the households. The clash that we documented in previous research between women’s and men’s expectations is a source of conflict (Tang et al., 2011). When open conflict occurs, it is the very basis of Taiwanese gender relations expected by men and their parents that is questioned. In some families, we note negotiation and adaptation processes that reconfigure power and gender relations. This micro-sociological change is one significant impact of this migration for Taiwanese society.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we make a case for examining marriage migration between Vietnam and Taiwan as a transnational phenomenon with far-reaching implications for both societies. We first describe a number of activities initiated from marriage migrants and their family members in Vietnam and in Taiwan as forms of transnationalism from below. One contribution of this synthesis of our past research is to show how close links and intensive social exchanges between people without high social or economic capital are contributing in changing societies of Asia. Some Taiwanese men set up their businesses and accumulate their capital with the help of their Vietnamese wives. Some Taiwanese families use the wives’ links with their natal
families to cope with childcare. Some Vietnamese rural families changed their economic situations with the help of their daughters in Taiwan. These activities are strategies of survival from grassroots communities and from households, who, without international marriage, would have very limited, if any, opportunities for upper social and economic mobility. With their limited economic and cultural capital, these people, especially women, create a new transnational community linking Taiwan and Vietnam that we often ignore. Such kinds of human and capital flows are not based on modern technology, fast communication or powerful capital, but based on gendered, family-centered and grassroots activities deployed in order to survive in our modern capitalist world.

Globalization brings impact on different local societies. Cross-border marriages, as a stream of global migration, also entail social changes for both sending and hosting societies, which happens in ordinary daily life without the state’s or supranational policy intervention. Like Kerkvliet’s (2005) research on the collapse of collective farming in Vietnam that peasants’ everyday politics made possible, the everyday ordinary activities of these female migrants outside the realm of official recognition may also carry considerable weight to change social structures. Such a power from below should be paid more attention to in future migration studies.

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