Beyond the Brokers:
Local Marriage Migration Industries of Rural Vietnam

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Introduction

On January 1, 2013, the Vietnamese press reported on several successful police raids in hotels in Can Tho City where Chinese men were meeting Vietnamese women with the objective of finding a wife.[1] According to these reports, the men were fined and ordered out of the country for activities not allowed under the terms of their visas. A few days earlier, VNExpress published a story on a ring of nine Vietnamese and seven Chinese involved in trafficking Vietnamese girls to China.[2] In another report, a high-ranking official expressed fears for the future of Vietnamese men due to the shortage of women caused by marriage out-migration. Concerns over men's ability to marry are exacerbated by the recent increase in sex ratios at birth due to the practice of sex-selective abortion, which has created a shortage

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of young girls. In 2010, the head of the Department of Population and Family Planning shocked citizens by stating in the mass media that, in the future, Vietnamese men might have to go to Africa to find wives, a very catastrophic scenario for a nation striving for "population quality."[3] Reports also threaten that men's inability to marry could increase the number of sex-related crimes.[4]

Three arguments have been generated by the mass media and government officials through these narratives. First, women, particularly poor and uneducated women, are vulnerable to human trafficking for the purpose of marriage or prostitution and are, therefore, in need of rescue. Second, this alarming situation is fueled by traffickers and brokers with ill intentions who deprive Vietnam of its young women. Third, this situation is skewing the marriage market and creating an alarming situation for men, since women who marry foreigners become immigrants in their husband's country of residence. The demographic imbalance caused by international marriage migration could be further aggravated by the recent spread of sex selection in favor of boys in Vietnam. While the original reporting on international marriage and the industry around it focused on tragic cases of women being deceived, trafficked, abused, and even murdered, recent reports also emphasize the plight of men suffering the consequences of this migration flow.[5] Vietnamese men are the new victims of marriage migration and sex selection.

Against the backdrop of anxieties around gender, marriage, sexuality, nationalism, mobility, and human trafficking, sparked by the out-migration of women for the purpose of marriage, this article examines how the marriage industry is structured and organized at the local level in Vietnamese marriage migrants' communities of origin. The study focuses on marriages between Vietnamese women and Asian men, particularly men from Taiwan, South Korea, and China. First, it documents how the local-level Vietnamese intimate industry of international marriage has evolved since the beginning of the trend in the early to mid-1990s. Second, it examines the parallel development of a local industry catering to single men. I show how these two separate intimate industries are highly gendered, contested, and constantly changing. I argue that the industry is embedded in both formal and informal institutions because local-level industry actors must succeed in

the delicate juggling act of combating international marriage, often framed by the central state apparatus as human trafficking, while participating in the industry that offers international marriage-related services. As in many other sectors of transition economies, such as China and Vietnam, private- and public-sector activities are often embedded, with individuals in powerful positions within the state being well situated to carry on private sideline businesses.

The fine-grain ethnographic approach provides evidence that relationships embedded in the local industry outrun the commodification lens. Village relationships around the marriage industry are imbued with desires, empathy, proximity, and hope, as well as with materialistic rationalities of profit making. The wedding organizer who marries his or her cousin to a South Korean man is both a businessperson and a cousin; the commune cadre with a daughter who marries a Taiwanese man is both a leader attempting to prevent marriage migration and a parent trying to help his or her daughter succeed abroad. Intimacies and the marriage industry overlap in many ways.

This analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in two provinces of Vietnam between March and December of 2012. In total, ninety-nine interviews were conducted with local leaders, members of the local marriage industries, and various community members with the broader objective of shedding light on how the international marriage migration of women impacts their communities of origin.

The International Marriage Industry in the Asian Context

Previous research provides rich narratives of men and women in brokered marriages in different settings. Nicole Constable's pioneering study provides a seminal account of the complexity of motives and power relations in relationships formed through Internet dating agencies.[6] Her work contributes significantly in unsettling the simplistic depictions of men's and women's relationships in these marriages. Hung Cam Thai's inquiry into marriages between Vietnamese-American men and Vietnamese women in Vietnam challenges essentialist views of female hypergamy—the idea that poor women of the developing world marry men from developed countries

mostly for economic reasons—as the central process in these marriages.[7] His examination of couples formed by working-class Vietnamese-American men and well-educated Vietnamese women provides further evidence into the complexity of transnational marriages. Scholars of cross-border unions, such as Constable and Thai, and others like Tomoko Nakamatsu and Melody Lu, categorically reject the association frequently made between "mail-order brides," brokered marriages, and trafficking of third world vulnerable women.[8] All these studies consistently identify agency as being central to these migrations and marriages. Moreover, narratives collected by these scholars all powerfully convey the place of longing, desire, and love in marriages organized through private networks, matchmaking agencies, private brokers, or Internet dating sites. These ethnographies also unsettle stereotypes associated with men in these marriages.

The smaller body of studies inquiring into the role of agencies and brokers in transnational "arranged" marriages within Asia document the process and structure of recruitment, matchmaking, and transit of partners across borders. The research is located within the "migration industry" paradigm and examines how the movement of brides across borders is facilitated and organized by intermediary agencies and private brokers. Hong-zen Wang and Shu-minh Chang provide one of the first accounts of the transnational brokerage process between Taiwan and Vietnam in which they argue that, without the strong role of the migration industry, fewer marriage migrants would have moved within Asia.[9] They emphasize the commodification of the marriage itself and how competition in the marriage industry leads to lower prices and increased commodification of women. On the Taiwanese side, they describe the work of organized Taiwanese agencies that run offices in Vietnam. These representatives in Vietnam deal with Vietnamese agencies called "big matchmakers" who send "small matchmakers" to communities where potential brides live. In Taiwan and Vietnam, some individual agents also act as matchmakers. They are usually already married Taiwanese-Vietnamese couples who can use their networks to match couples. On the Vietnamese side, they observe that big and small matchmakers are often Vietnamese ethnic Chinese who can navigate relations in both Vietnamese and Chinese languages and cultural worlds. Recent accounts of transnational activities among Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples

document how these couples may use their ethnic and language capital to enter the matchmaking business and benefit by making income from their transnational marriage and family.[10] This research lends further support to the criticism of the female hypergamy framework, since these studies indicate how both men and women may benefit from a cross-border marriage.

Lu focuses on the marriage industry between Taiwanese men and women from mainland China.[11] She documents the strong role of Taiwanese matchmakers in defining preference and orienting choices with respect to foreign brides. She also examines how the commercial activities around China-Taiwan marriages go beyond an industry and how the personal networks and relationships in these transactions are embedded. She also argues against the idea that international marriages are a form of human trafficking and underscores women's agency in entering these unions. Dong Hoon Seol studies a one-week marriage tour undertaken by a group of South Korean men and provides a detailed description of the matchmaking process.[12] He documents how the marriage industry operates transnationally between Vietnam and South Korea and how South Korean men and their parents engage with members of the industry.

The research on international marriages and the matchmaking industry situates international marriages between Vietnamese women and East Asian men within the development of networks through investment, manufacturing, and the "export" of Vietnamese labor. Some Taiwanese who owned factories used their pool of young Vietnamese female workers for international matchmaking. Research also indicates that brokers involved in the recruitment of brides had previous experience in the recruitment of migrant workers destined to Taiwan or South Korea.[13] International marriages must be situated, therefore, within Vietnam's insertion into global capitalism and the development of business and diplomatic relations with East Asian countries. Regional inequalities, high unemployment, and poverty rates in Vietnam are also factors in the marriage and labor migration flows from Vietnam to East Asian countries. World system theories, thus, provide a useful lens to understand the flows of brokered marriage migrants within Asia.

Other scholars underscore that there is a blurred line between the recruitment of foreign labor and foreign wives and the categorization of migrant

women as either wives or workers.[14] Along the same line, Sara Friedman conceptualizes marriage migrants as intimate laborers, alongside other migrant women, such as domestic workers and sex workers.[15] When considering reproductive work a form of intimate labor, the industry that facilitates the mobility of this labor fits well with the concept of the intimate industry.[16]

My analysis builds on these previous works, while broadening the discussion in two ways. First, my approach to the intimate industry shifts the gaze from the large transnational processes of matchmaking as the central object of study to the local dynamics in emigrant women's communities of origin. My interest lies in how, at the local level, community-level cadres and community members perceive the marriage industry and participate in it. I expand the notion of the marriage industry to various types of local businesses, such as wedding shop services, private guesthouses for future brides, guesthouses for international couples, language trainers, marriage counselors, and small local brokers. I also include the matchmaking activities that have recently developed to assist single men in finding brides. Second, this approach leads me to examine the contradictory discourses of the state with respect to the marriage industry. Here, I contrast the discourse of the central state apparatus conveyed to the public through the mass media (discussed in a previous analysis[17]) with the local cadres' perception of international marriage and its local industry. I also document the emergence of local services for single men who bring in women from other provinces. To sum up, I examine the local services around the exit, transit, and entry of women. I contrast the dominant state discourse around international marriage and its industry, generally equated with human trafficking, with local actors' discourse and roles in simultaneously reproducing and distancing themselves from this discourse, while being part of the industry.

Marriage Migration from Vietnam

Vietnamese women entered the international marriage markets in the early 1990s. In Taiwan and South Korea, they form the second largest number of immigrant spouses after women from mainland China.[18] The emigration of women who married foreign Asian men began in the south of the country

and after 2000 spread to the north. The two provinces we study in this article, Can Tho and Hai Phong, are believed to be among the most important places of origin of emigrant spouses migrating to Taiwan and South Korea.

While most women married Taiwanese men in the 1990s, unions with South Korean men increased significantly after 2000. For local women, South Korea is primarily seen through the lens of hugely popular soap operas in which South Korean men are glamorized as being gentle, handsome, and responsible, and South Korean society is represented as being advanced, modern, and wealthy. Dramatic reports about women who returned after being brutally abused in Taiwan could have altered the local perception of the desirability of Taiwanese men in the early and mid-2000s. Recently, numerous media accounts and local officials have been reporting on the increase in marriages to Chinese men.

As argued by Lu, matchmaking agencies in Taiwan and South Korea also play a key role in the way foreign brides are marketed. Vietnamese women are portrayed as being young, virginal, docile, and pretty.[19] Importantly, they look East Asian, and their children will not be easily distinguishable from "pure" Taiwanese or South Korean children.[20] For some Vietnamese women, international marriage is an alternative to labor migration, which is too costly for many families. Chain migration plays a key role in sustaining the migration. Once a group of women has migrated, they assist in marrying their sisters, cousins, and friends to foreign men; consequently, chain migration can lead to the development of a local "marriage migration culture." In some localities, the phenomenon becomes so widespread that it is seen as a very desirable option for many young women and their families.[21]

The Vietnamese government expresses its opinions on international marriage migration with Asian men in Vietnamese media. All mass media are state owned, tightly controlled, and censored by the state; they are referred to as "the mouth of the Communist party." A thorough media content analysis based on 643 items published between 2000 and 2010 on international marriages between Vietnamese women and foreign Asian men revealed very negative social constructions of the Vietnamese brides, the men who marry them, and the marriages in general. This analysis revealed four dominant narratives that speak to changes in Vietnamese society: (1) shifts in notions of gender, sexuality, and marriage; (2) emerging discourses around class

making; (3) emerging discourse on human trafficking; and (4) shifting roles of the media. With respect to the parallel between the marriage migration industry and human trafficking, we noted that

> the current "moral crusade" against human trafficking for the purpose of obtaining sex workers has taken under its wing the sub-phenomenon of marriage migration. For the media, marriage migration provides a powerful example of how well-organized, widespread, and terrible human trafficking has become. At the same time, stories of raids, arrests, and convictions convince readers that the government is being pro-active in protecting its weak female citizens who fall victim to traffickers.[22]

In contrast to these very negative and dramatic portrayals, previous research indicates some positive aspects of international marriage migration in the migrant women's communities of origin. In a previous study, we showed how most daughters send significant remittances to their natal families. We also documented how this migration alters the gender system by increasing the status of girls in families.[23] Because they have the option of marrying locally or internationally, girls and their parents can demand more in marriage transactions, for example, a higher bride price, which is a form of reverse dowry. But the ability of women migrants to support their parents stands as the most significant reason that alters the gender preference for sons. While media reports and state discourse tend to equate marriage migration with human trafficking, leaders, families, and other villagers do not make this association. They simply mention that most women do well, and a few are not lucky (*khong may*). Daughters married abroad are not constructed locally in negative terms but rather as responsible daughters who emigrated to help their parents and seek a better life. As transnational daughters, they are expected to send remittances for their own natal family while caring for their new foreign husband and, often, his parents.[24] In this context, villagers regard the marriage industry as being a facilitator for both marriages and international migration and necessary for navigating the complicated legal aspects of marrying a foreigner and then emigrating internationally from Vietnam.

Despite the significant positive dimensions of this migration for young women and their families, most reports continue to be negative. Women are

referred to as "women who marry foreigners," but never migrants. The gendering of migration flows explains, in part, the government's glamorization of labor migration (typically associated with men even though many women become migrant workers) and its demonization of marriage migration (as a threat to the nation, Vietnamese women, and the future of men).[25]

Fieldwork

The fieldwork was conducted in the provinces of Hai Phong (120 kilometers north of Hanoi) and Can Tho (185 kilometers south of Saigon) between March and December of 2012. In each province, two communities (located in the same district) in which large numbers of women were marrying foreign men and emigrating abroad afterward were selected. This analysis is part of a larger project on the impact of female out-migration on marriage, men, family relations, labor market opportunities, and internal migration. In the southern communities, marriage migration was very prevalent in the 1990s. We could obtain complete village marriage registration data only for the 2005–2012 period. Over the past eight years, approximately 10 percent of all marriages registered were between a local woman and foreign man (9 percent in one village and 11 percent in the other one). In the northern locations, where the phenomenon is more recent, the proportions were much higher: 32 percent and 41 percent of all marriages registered between 2005 and 2012 were between a local woman and a foreign man.

A total of ninety-nine interviews were conducted in the four communities studied. Most participants agreed to have their interviews recorded. My assistant and I took detailed notes on our daily conversations with key informants. The study participants included village officials, business owners, families with daughters married abroad, families with single sons, and families with a daughter-in-law from another province. The present analysis draws extensively from key informants who were directly or indirectly involved in the marriage industry and other study participants. Lengthy and frequent discussions were held with one woman who ran a wedding-service business and another who provided language training and counseling to women candidates for international marriage to Taiwanese and Chinese men. Two other informants, a man and a woman, owned guesthouses

that catered to international couples (a local woman and a foreign husband), their children, and the husband's relatives, who may come to Vietnam to visit the wife's family. Families with daughters married to foreign men shared their experience about the marriage industry. The information on the matchmaking services that cater to single village men comes from families who resorted to an interprovincial matchmaking service for their sons and the married sons themselves. The analysis also uses observations and insight from many participants with whom we conversed informally during fieldwork.

Some actors refused to meet with us, especially matchmakers who felt particularly vulnerable, given the tendency to associate their work with human trafficking. To obtain interviews with the two hotel owners, we had to use personal contacts and be persistent. Both refused to be recorded. We had no difficulty collecting data from the parents of men, or men themselves, who used matchmaking services to find a wife from another province.

"It Takes a Village"

While we have no longitudinal data to quantitatively document the rapid expansion of local businesses that have emerged around international marriages and the emigration of female spouses from the village, leaders and villagers alike elaborated at length during interviews on the recent growth of this local line of business.

Some businesses that already existed prior to the international marriage boom began to design services to respond to the needs of international couples and their families; others were created specifically around its growth. Beauty parlors, hair salons, marriage outfit rental, language training, translation services, and tour guide services for prospecting grooms form one part of the local intimate industry and show how the intimate industry goes much beyond matchmaking, the typical focus of existing research. Moreover, this industry does not die after the wedding; it continues through the maintenance of transnational family ties through, for instance, services provided around return visits, remittances received, the sending of children to visit (or live with) maternal grandparents, and the need for travel abroad of

maternal relatives. Services that enable and facilitate transnational intimacies are part of the intimate industry.

The different types of marriage that have developed in the villages we studied involve multiple actors. Those who support and organize the marriages of local women and men to spouses from other countries or other provinces match and introduce future spouses, but they also prepare, transport, train, dress, and beautify them. In these processes, new relationships, alliances, and networks develop; it takes a village for the industry to run smoothly and safely.

Being a successful actor in the local industry effectively required distancing oneself from anything related to human trafficking. Study participants involved in the local industry systematically asserted that they knew nothing about brokers. This tension was particularly obvious with the two hotel owners who catered exclusively to foreign men and their Vietnamese wives. Because police generally target hotels when they organize raids looking for matchmaker-traffickers and men "buying" Vietnamese wives, the owners feared their businesses would appear to be suspicious. Participating in our research provided a way for people to publicly assert that they had "nothing to hide." Participants reiterated that international marriages are perfectly legal when women are in agreement and all bureaucratic procedures followed; but the suspicion around the practice, sparked by negative stereotyping on the part of the state, required a constant negotiation and reassertion of one's legitimacy and legality as a business owner. The common imbrication of legal and less legal practices under one roof is a reality that study participants did not comment on. In this section, I summarize the narratives of four individuals who were active in the local marriage industry.

Em Kim: The Wedding Shop Owner

Em Kim is a young woman who runs a wedding shop where customers can rent wedding attire for the groom, bride, and all other family members. Em Kim also offers a full range of services, including wedding photography (including beautifying Photoshop work) and videotaping, as well as makeup, laser body hair removal, and hairstyling for the brides. The groom

and other wedding attendees (mother of groom, mother of the bride, sisters, close friends, etc.) also come to Em Kim for some of these services. Em Kim's husband is the vice-resident of the commune and is proud of his wife's successful business.

In the early 1990s, Em Kim started taking wedding photos, a skill she learned from her husband who studied photography in his youth. Meeting with numerous international couples, she decided to expand her services and went to the city of Hai Phong to learn additional skills (doing makeup, hairstyles, etc.). In the first half of 2000, her business grew with the large inflow of Taiwanese men marrying into the village. At that time, the matchmaker only introduced the woman to a man, and, once the couple agreed to marry, the family took care of the wedding and called upon Em Kim to organize everything. She coordinated numerous weddings and was busy seven days a week, so she hired an assistant who worked with her full time. Eventually, the assistant also married a foreign man. Gradually, however, the industry changed, and more brokers offered "full packages" to the bride's family. A package included the selection of the groom, the wedding in the city of Hai Phong (often a collective wedding in which many couples were married at once), paperwork, and language training. The package also included all the services Em Kim offered to her customers. As the industry's activities relocated to the city of Hai Phong, she gradually lost her business. A broker offered her work doing makeup, but, since she would be paid by the broker and not the client, she calculated that she would make too little money. Another change that impacted her business was the gradual shift to South Korean grooms instead of Taiwanese grooms. The brokers that facilitated these marriages dealt with another business offering similar services. At some point, Em Kim was invited to become a broker herself, since she knew so many people. After hesitating, she decided that, since her husband was a high-ranking cadre of the People's Committee of the village, it was too risky for her to work in the business. At the same time, it was precisely her husband's powerful position in the local People's Committee that contributed to her good reputation as a wedding shop owner. About her decision not to be involved in matchmaking, Em Kim says:

> To say the truth, I do not find that being a matchmaker is good; I am a sincere person. I know that matchmakers play an important role in helping people, but there are also negative aspects to this job. I am very afraid that people will talk (negative rumors). If the matchmaking succeeds, people will express gratitude. But if there are complications, I would be very worried, especially that my husband is a commune cadre. Recently, a matchmaker was caught and then they talked about her in the newspaper and on TV.[26]

Chi Lan: The Commune Cadre and Chinese-Language Teacher

We first met Chi Lan in her capacity as the president of the local Women's Union in a village in Can Tho Province. She introduced us to study participants because she knew everyone well and could easily identify potential participants. Her house was our main base, and we informally interacted with her every day between interviews. Over the course of the fieldwork, Chi Lan told us that she was responsible for a club called the "Club that aims at reducing the negative consequences of international marriages." We met her and her copresident to discuss the objectives and activities of this club. The group meets every two or three months, and mothers with daughters of marrying age are recruited and encouraged to attend the meeting. The group gathers, and the two organizers provide tea and cake to participants while discussing cases in which women who married foreigners had experienced abuse, failed marriages, and even death. The group leaders gathered their "evidence" of the risks of international marriages from newspaper articles and gossip. According to the two women, their activities were successful and contributed to the reduction in the number of women who married abroad over the previous few years. They also counsel young women who want to marry abroad. This government-funded counseling basically consists of instilling fear and discouraging women from making the choice to marry abroad. Chi Lan also runs a private business that includes several services. First, she offers private Chinese-language lessons to women who marry Taiwanese men and are preparing for their preemigration interview. Chi Lan says:

> I know Chinese because my father was Chinese. I am a Viet Hoa [ethnic Chinese Vietnamese]. I teach the girls two hours a day, five days a week, at a cost of 800,000 VN dong per month per student [approximately US$40]. They come to study in my home. I have three to six per class. I only teach how to speak. I teach them to understand and properly answer a list of two hundred questions that they might be asked during the interview. If they fail the interview the first time, they come back, study more, and try again. I had the list of two hundred interview questions from a friend who works in the Ministry of Justice in the city. In the last twenty years, I have taught so many girls I cannot count how many. I also provide mediating and counseling services over the cell phone. Sometimes the girls call me from Taiwan and ask me to speak to their husband or parents-in-law if they have a problem. Sometimes the girls' parents in the village want to call their daughters and ask me to speak with the husband or in-laws.[27]

The increase in women marrying South Korean men reduced the number of clients in Lan's language-teaching business. This reduction in students led her to develop other services, such as counseling and guiding Taiwanese men who were coming to her village looking for a spouse. During our stay, Chi Lan spent several days helping a Taiwanese man withdraw money in a nearby town and served as a tourist guide for him in the city of Can Tho. At the local level, she was the best-positioned expert in international marriages. In her official capacity, she tries to discourage international marriages by alerting families and girls to the risks involved. Women who still decide to go, however, could obtain her help, assistance, and services.

When we met with Chi Lan's superior, the president of the People's Committee, he told us that the activities of the local club she was running were very important to him and that he followed the matter very closely. He did not designate the club as strictly a Women's Union matter; rather, he, as president, valued it highly and paid a great deal of attention to it. He was very careful in stating that the commune does not want to prevent international marriages because most families who have daughters abroad benefit from the positive economic impact. When asked, he did recognize how the entire local economy was benefiting from the inflow of remittances sent by emigrant spouses. This money stimulates construction, investment in health

and education, and international connections. This positive discourse contrasts sharply with the official stance that continues to equate international marriage with human trafficking. Despite his recognition of the positive aspects, it is his job to prevent the negative consequences of this migration flow. The club is a very effective initiative because it reaches out to mothers who can prevent their daughters from marrying abroad. The president further explained how the idea of the club came from the provincial and national levels of the Women's Union. His commune, along with several others, was chosen as a pilot project. The project was terminated, but his commune decided to continue the activity, since, according to him, the results had been positive.

Chi Van: The Town Guesthouse Owner

Chi Van owns and runs a guesthouse in a town close to villages where many women married abroad. Chi Van describes having entered the business of hosting international couples as "accidental." First, she built a large house in 2000, and some people asked her if she could rent rooms. She then officially started her business. Most of her clients are married couples, along with the husband's relatives (parents, siblings, etc.), who visit the wife's family during holidays. We met a few families with children in the hallway. Chi Van speaks very cautiously about how she manages her guesthouse, obviously worried that we might think she engages in illicit activities. She states several times that foreign men do not come to her hotel to "choose" or "try" a spouse; she hosts only officially registered and married couples. In the course of the interview, she tells us how her two sons are policemen and how her husband is the director of a notary public office. Throughout the interview, she overtly uses these strong connections with the state apparatus to claim the legitimacy of her business. Over the decade she has been running this business, the number of guests has declined. She attributes this trend to the greater tendency for visiting couples to stay with the wife's parents because remittances sent by the couple to the wife's natal family are generally used to improve housing conditions. Once parents-in-law have a better home, they can host their daughter and her foreign husband and the couple no longer needs to stay in a guesthouse or hotel. She also explains how the transfer of

matchmaking activities and weddings from the villages to Saigon has also harmed her local business, since she used to have large groups of guests for local weddings with a foreign groom. Toward the end of the conversation, she reveals that she is Vietnamese of Chinese ethnicity and speaks Chinese. Thus, she specializes in Chinese-speaking guests from Malaysia, Taiwan, and China but also has families with spouses from South Korea.

Anh Thanh: The Village Guesthouse Owner

In one of the villages where we conducted fieldwork, we noted a very affluent guesthouse. The size and style of the building drastically contrasted with most of the other dwellings, which were made of steel sheets and had dirt floors. We asked a local cadre who was helping us identify study participants to take us to this place. The cadre proudly told us how the owner of this beautiful mansion was his relative and close friend. We soon found out that the owner is a good friend of other local cadres as well. After a very long negotiation and waiting time, the owner accepted our request to be interviewed, but he refused to be recorded. He described to us the types of guests he hosts. First, men who have already chosen a spouse and are waiting for the wedding registration stay there, but brides are not allowed, since the wedding is not yet registered (the family wedding is not sufficient). Second, much of his business consists of already married couples who come to visit and prefer not to stay with their families. Third, some foreign men come to the village through the local broker and stay there while "choosing" a local spouse. Lastly, some women from other provinces might be brought there by a broker and introduced to foreign men. Anh Thanh had excellent relationships with the local authorities, while his wife was running the guesthouse and dealing with brokers, interpreters, and other intermediaries.

Anh Thanh talks about his business as a safe place for international matchmaking; he sees himself as providing an important service to the community. During our visit, negotiations were underway between two brokers and Anh Thanh's wife. The guesthouse seemed to be a hub of activities around the local marriage industry. We were told that the guesthouse has had an influx of Chinese men coming to find wives.

These four narratives provide insightful information regarding the local

marriage industry in rural Vietnam in Hai Phong and Can Tho provinces. First, the development and greater organization of the industry entailed the transfer of the wedding process from the realm of the bride's family and village to a commercial and collective process located in a large city and managed by a matchmaker.[28] In this process, local actors involved in the industry may see their benefits vanish. In the case of Em Kim, the relocation of international marriage to the city of Hai Phong meant that she no longer had her customers in the village. The increasing number of marriages to South Korean husbands at the expense of Taiwanese ones is another change in the industry that harmed her. In addition, Chi Lan lost Chinese-language students with the increased migration to South Korea. She, however, managed to expand her services swiftly and used her Chinese ethnic social capital in several new ways. As a language teacher, counselor, interpreter, and guide, she maintained her position in the local industry.

Second, narratives underscore how those involved in the industry must negotiate the state position on international marriage as often being linked to human trafficking. Our study participants were concerned about the perceptions others might have of their businesses. The two owners of guesthouses enthusiastically elaborated on their connections to state actors as a narrative strategy to prove their legitimacy and noninvolvement in illegal matchmaking activities. This concern was not as acute ten years ago, but, as the antitrafficking rhetoric and interventions were gaining momentum, they had to develop new strategies to prove their legitimacy. During our fieldwork, the story of one broker who had recently been arrested and convicted on human trafficking charges circulated and was repeatedly reported to us as an example of the dangers faced by those in the industry. Unlike other individuals, the arrested woman was guilty of not having been careful enough and not having maintained good "relations" (*khong can than, khong co quan he*).

Third, our interviews with village cadres indicate how cadres close to communities where international marriages take place do not buy into the government's negative rhetoric. To the contrary, they discuss the positive economic benefits that come from these unions through the large amounts of remittances. They see how the local economy gains through a boom in the construction of new houses, house renovations, and an investment in

education. In addition, siblings get assistance in getting married, parents' livelihoods are improved, and health-care costs are covered. At the same time, however, cadres must pay attention to the state's negative stance on international marriages by undertaking activities that express a concern for the risks and vulnerability inherent in these marriages. Interestingly, in one village, leaders told us that, when women return to Vietnam after the end of their marriage abroad, they are labeled victims of human trafficking and receive free training. The leaders and administrators, thus, strategically use the category to provide resources to return migrants.

Fourth, the imbrications of public and private, formal and informal institutions suggest that the success of actors in the marriage industry requires a three-party relationship to be sustainable. The case of Chi Lan is particularly telling: despite all the changes in the marriage industry, Chi Lan managed to redefine her niche and protect her business. Her powerful position as president of the Women's Union legitimized her services as "a form of help" rather than "suspicious and trafficking-like activities." As president of the Women's Union, she meets families who are considering international marriage. While officially alerting them to the risks involved, she also forms relationships instrumental in the development of her own business. Her official position gives her legitimacy and social capital, which, when combined with her ethnic social capital, puts her in a unique position to maintain herself in both the public and the private realms. She weaves her activities together in a particularly effective way. Her close connection to the Ministry of Justice is instrumental in providing desirable and marketable language training designed for the very specific needs of the learners.

In Em Kim's case, the connection to the local state first contributes to the success of her business but later contributes to the gradual withdrawal from the international marriage industry. She was offered a part in the new industry relocated in the city of Hai Phong, but she declined. Em Kim's logic for refusing reveals interesting tensions. On the one hand, she feels safe working in the commune under the gaze of her fellow villagers, and, as the wife of a government official, she has legitimacy and a certain degree of "protection" from suspicion. On the other hand, the offer to become a matchmaker is tempting, but the risk is too high. The "matchmaking equals trafficking" discourse looms large over her decision, and she cannot compro-

mise her husband's reputation and position. She accepts the decline in her business and, when we last talked to her, had decided to start selling private health-care insurance to newlywed couples from the village.

Finally, the stories of Em Kim and Chi Van highlight how previously negative (and often hidden) constructions of Chinese origins have become a source of social capital. Speaking the Chinese language is a key asset in today's southern Vietnam, where Taiwanese businesses are established and, also, where Vietnamese-Taiwanese couples come to visit and, in some cases, invest. Wang and Chang note the key role that ethnic Chinese Vietnamese played at the beginning of the marriage industry in the South.[29] In our study, we see how ethnicity and language can, in combination with ties to formal institutions, provide a particularly strong combination for surviving in a contested, unstable, and fragile industry.

New Developments in the Local Industry

Evidence of changes in the local industry surfaced in Hai Phong, where some participants discussed the recent development of activities around the "transit" of women from other provinces. Some local matchmakers have become intermediaries in other locations and moved away from working with local female candidates to international marriage migration. Because they are conveniently situated geographically and South Korean matchmakers are used to going to Hai Phong, they now use the village as a base to bring women from other locations, provide them with training, and have them wait for a few months until the next marriage tour. One informant, Em Hung, provided a rich account of the transit activities that were taking place in a very large residence that served as a transit house and was considered inaccessible by leaders and villagers.

Em Hung was married to a woman who divorced him and went abroad to marry a South Korean man. Her case is often mentioned by men and parents of single sons to show how unreliable women can be: "Even if you marry a local girl, you are not sure things will work out. She could leave the husband and marry a foreign man!" Em Hung is a retired cadre of the commune People's Committee. He is knowledgeable about the marriage industry in his village. His back den, where we sit during the interview,

looks onto the very large house, which he observes daily. This house was built by a woman who married in South Korea and returned to her village to work as a local broker. In the last few years, she developed a new line of business: bringing in women from other provinces for international marriages. Women migrate internally and live in this house while waiting to be chosen to go abroad. According to Em Hung and other villagers, women living there never leave the house and never interact with villagers. He observes them on the balconies and through the windows. He knows exactly how many there are, when they arrive, how long they stay, and when men come to choose a spouse. He knows when they either leave the house to spend time in their home villages before migrating or go abroad directly from there. Em Hung explains that his village has become a transit area for women who marry foreigners because of the expertise the local industry has developed. This locally based business is in response to the monopolization of the industry by big brokers located in the city of Hai Phong. Since local girls marry in Hai Phong and pay their brokers there, local brokers are bringing in women from elsewhere. When asked about this house, community leaders say that they know it exists and that it is a private guesthouse. They all know the two people who run the place and do not interfere, saying it is none of their business. In sum, by developing the village into a transit area for women en route to marriage migration, local actors have found another use for their social capital by creating new types of services and activities. These observations provide further support to the idea that the marriage industry is contested and fluid.

Besides the development of one of the villages of Hai Phong into a transit location for brides to be, an increased array of services for local single men trying to find a spouse is another striking development of the local industry. Our desire to study the situation of single men created a particular embarrassment and discomfort among local male leaders in the villages. In the north, in particular, our request to meet families with single men considered "old to marry" (*ḳho lay vo*) or "too old to marry" (*e roi*) sparked jokes among cadres. Cadres recognized the difficulty for local men who were looking for women to marry in the current context, but they quickly assured us that men do eventually find wives.

The fieldwork shows that internal migration flows are central to provid-

ing other opportunities for young men to meet young women. Young men and women from different provinces met in factories or as internal migrants in Ho Chi Minh City or Hai Phong. Once a marriage takes place, personal networks could lead to other introductions and marriages. Young people could also meet while wandering around the city on fancy motorbikes and through cell phone texting.[30] After young men reach the age of twenty-four or twenty-five years, they become more ashamed of seeking a girlfriend on their own and often give up this strategy. By twenty-eight to thirty years of age, they perceive themselves as the pathetic competitors of younger and more attractive men. The shame of being single often prevents them from actively seeking a spouse.

But opportunities created through internal migration and personal networks are insufficient. A local industry has also developed whereby arranged marriages are organized between local men and women from other provinces or, in some cases, women belonging to ethnic minorities. In the Hai Phong villages, an itinerant woman selling traditional medicines, referred to as an ethnic minority woman, regularly traveled between Hai Phong and mountainous provinces and began making introductions. She brought photos of young women, which she showed to families with single sons. If one family was interested in a woman, they arranged a visit to her home village (usually the man with his parents or another relative). As the demand grew, she became more organized and charged a fee, but all participants stressed how this fee is simply a modest expression of their gratitude for her introduction.[31] This resembles the process of international marriages in the beginning. The groom and his family travel once to the woman's province and meet the bride and her parents. The trip involves significant expenses, since the family will typically rent a car and a driver to undertake the trip. On the first visit, if the families agree, the wedding is planned. During the months that follow, the man might visit his future bride a few times on his own, but this may not be possible if the family is poor and the province is far from the man's village. On the wedding date, the family travels again to the wife's village and a wedding is organized there. The wife is brought back to the husband's village, and most families do not organize another wedding party.[32]

According to men and their parents who chose this option, the bride price

was less than that for a local woman, but the travel and transportation costs were higher. Wives from other provinces we interviewed generally perceived their marriage migration as improving their lives despite being a great distance from their parents and sometimes feeling homesick. This form of marriage existed in the South prior to the surge in international marriages, but it developed as the local women began to emigrate. In the northern location, where endogamy was a more rigid prescription and preferred form of marriage, this pattern is very recent and signifies an important change in the social construction of an acceptable marriage and a desirable spouse. For "older" men who did not bring a spouse from elsewhere, options included marrying divorced women, young widows, or women who had returned from being married abroad.

Conclusion: Beyond the Brokers

This article calls for a broadening of the conceptualization of the marriage industry in the Asian context. A local approach shifts the gaze from transnational brokers and allows us to capture a more hidden part of the infrastructure. This novel approach, illustrated with the case of Vietnam, makes four important points.

First, the evidence provided in this article shows the local marriage industry as constantly evolving. As marriage migration itself reconfigures local demography, local networks, and local businesses, new developments occur and local actors adapt, transform, and redefine the industry in which they are located. Competition between local- and provincial-level actors who want to reap the benefits of this lucrative industry pushed local-level actors to reinvent themselves. In the northern locations, one important shift has been the development of the "import" of women from other provinces, both for the purpose of foreign marriage (women transiting in the village) and marriage to local single men. The industry around the "export" of local women, thus, gave way to a new one that brings in women.

Second, the role of the state emerges from this analysis as ambivalent. Local-level state representatives are sitting between two chairs. On the one hand, it is their own daughters, sisters, and neighbors who deal with the local industry when marrying a foreign man and migrating abroad; it is also

their own sons and nephews who have difficulty finding a wife and must resort to a local broker who will find them an ethnic minority woman from a remote province. It may also be their wives, sisters, brothers, and friends who are reaping the benefits of the numerous transactions involved in such marriages. They might be involved themselves, in fact, by not being able to find a wife or by running a side business within the marriage industry. As local leaders, they also witness firsthand the direct impact—generally positive, but sometimes negative—of the end of village endogamy. They see the enormous economic benefits of remittances. On the other hand, they must endorse the narrative coming from the central state apparatus, which views marriage migration as human trafficking and, therefore, as a phenomenon to be monitored, controlled, and eventually eradicated.

This state-produced ambiguity around marriage migration is highly gendered. The moralistic take on the international marriage migration of village women disseminated in the national media is set in a patriarchal order threatened by women's emancipation from Vietnamese men. In contrast, the emerging local industry that assists men in finding wives is never constructed as threatening and commodified; rather, it is seen as being particularly beneficial for men, their parents, and the entire community. The village patrilineal family lines will be maintained via these "imported" wives belonging to minority ethnic groups. Interestingly, the same patriarchal social constructions exist in the receiving countries of Vietnamese brides that tolerate ethnic others in the name of perpetuating a patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal kinship system in a changing society. In the study locations, ethnic minority women were perceived favorably by men's parents; they are seen as being hardworking, less demanding, and completely available, since they are far from their own families and friends. Among Taiwanese and South Korean families, the same logic justifies marriage to a foreign bride from Vietnam or elsewhere.[33] In more practical terms, the role of local state actors is revealed through the private and public practices of monitoring and criticizing the industry but also through maintaining and developing the local industry in a tense political climate around a phenomenon linked to human trafficking and illicit activities. The fact that our informants working in the industry were all close to local state authorities suggests the importance of co-opting local power to start, strive at, and survive in the business.

Finally, the fine-grain analysis provided here unsettles the notion of this intimate industry as being driven by materialist rationalities. In our field sites, actors in the industry are often also involved in international marriages in various other ways and, in some cases, as direct protagonists. The overlap in roles and experiences draws attention to the multiple layers of intimacies that emerge in village life around marriage and migration.

Notes

1. "Người Trung Quốc 'tuyển' vợ tại khách sạn bị phạt" (Arrest of Chinese Men Selecting Wives at a Hotel), VNExpress, January 1, 2013, www.vnexpress.net/gl/xahoi/2013/01/nguoi-trung-quoc-tuyen-vo-tai-khach-san-bi-phat/.
2. "7 người Trung Quốc 'tuyển' vợ tại khách sạn" (Seven Chinese Select Wives at a Hotel), VNExpress, December 29, 2012, www.vnexpress.net/gl/xa-hoi/2012/12/7-nguoi-trung-quoc-tuyen-vo-tai-khach-san/.
3. "'Đàn ông Việt có thể phải sang châu Phi tìm vợ'" (Vietnamese Men Might Have to Go to Africa to Find Wives), VNExpress, November 27, 2010, www.giadinh.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/to-am/dan-ong-viet-co-the-phai-sang-chau-phi-tim-vo-2274145.html.
4. "The Boy Boom," *Thanh Nien*, September 6 2010. The article states that "the trend will make it difficult for millions of Vietnamese men to find wives . . . experts also warn of increasing sex-related crimes if the highly unnatural gender imbalance is not addressed," www.thanhniennews.com/index/pages/20100808154954.aspx.
5. For a thorough analysis of Vietnamese mass media, see Danièle Bélanger, Khuat Thu Hong, and Tran Giang Linh, "Transnational Marriages between Vietnamese Women and Asian Men in Vietnamese Online Media," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 2 (2013): 81–114.
6. Nicole Constable, *Romance on a Global State: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail Order" Marriages* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003).
7. Hung Cam Thai, *For Better or For Worse: Vietnamese International Marriages in the New Global Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).
8. Tomoko Nakamatsu, "No Love, No Happy Ending?: The Place of Romantic Love in the Marriage Business and Brokered Cross-Cultural Marriages," in *International Marriages in the Time of Globalization*, ed. Elli K. Heikkila and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, 19–34 (New York: Nova Science, 2010); Melody Chia-We Lu, *Gender, Marriage, and Migration: Contemporary Marriages between Mainland China and Taiwan*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Leiden, 2008.
9. Hong-zen Wang and Shu-minh Chang, "The Commodification of International Marriages: Cross-Border Marriage Business in Taiwan and Viet Nam," *International Migration* 40, no. 6 (2002): 93–116.

10. Hong-zen Wang, "Gendered Transnationalism from Below: Capital, Women and Family in Cross-Border Marriages between Taiwan and Vietnam," in Heikkila and Yeoh, *International Marriages*; and Danièle Bélanger and Hong-zen Wang, "Transnationalism from Below: Evidence from Vietnam-Taiwan Cross-Border Marriages," *Asia Pacific Migration Journal* 21, no. 3 (2012): 291–316.
11. Lu, *Gender, Marriage, and Migration*.
12. Dong Hoon Seol, "International Matchmaking Agencies in Korea and Their Regulating Practices." Paper presented at the Meeting on Cross Border Marriages in East and Southeast Asia. Academia Sinica, October 2006.
13. Lu, *Gender, Marriage, and Migration*. Wang and Chang, "Commodification of International Marriages."
14. See Nicolas Piper and Mina Roces, eds., *Wife or Worker? Asian Women and Migration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), for a discussion of the irrelevance of categorizing immigrants as either wives or workers, since most migrant women play both roles. See Danièle Bélanger and Hong-zen Wang, "Becoming a Migrant: Vietnamese Emigration to East Asia, *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 1 (2013): 31–50, for a discussion of how candidates to migration are not sorted a priori as either migrant worker or foreign bride; rather, they navigate a complex and costly migration industry to make choices while dealing with numerous constraints.
15. Sara L. Friedman, "Rethinking Intimate Labor through Inter-Asian Migrations: Insights from the 2011 Bellagio Conference," *Asia and Pacific Migration Journal* 20, no. 2 (2011): 253–61.
16. For a discussion of the concept of "intimate labors," see Ellen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, eds., *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press 2010). Check city: Berkeley or Palo Alto?
17. Danièle Bélanger et al., "Transnational Marriages between Vietnamese Women and Asian Men in Vietnamese Online Media," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2013.
18. Danièle Bélanger, "Marriages with Foreign Women in East Asia: Bride Trafficking or Voluntary Migration?," *Population and Societies*, no. 469 (July–August 2010): 4 pp., www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/19137/population.societies.2010.469.mariages.foreign.women.en.pdf.
19. Chinese women who speak Chinese (or Korean for Chinese of Korean ethnicity) are older and more experienced. Filipino women are "branded" as educated and good English speakers, despite their darker skin and Southeast Asian physical appearance.
20. Danièle Bélanger, "The House and the Classroom: Vietnamese Immigrant Spouses in South Korea and Taiwan," *Population and Societies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 39–59.
21. Danièle Bélanger, Tran Giang Linh, and Le Bach Duong, "Marriage Migrants as Emigrants: Remittances of Marriage Migrant Women from Vietnam to their Natal Families" *Asian Population Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011): 89–105. Our previous research indicates that some parents strongly encourage their daughters to marry abroad, while others are extremely opposed to it.

22. Bélanger et al., "Transnational Marriages between Vietnamese Women and Asian Men in Vietnamese Online Media."
23. Danièle Bélanger and Tran Giang Linh, "The Impact of Transnational Migration on Gender and Marriage in Sending Communities of Vietnam," *Current Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2011): 59–77.
24. Hung Cam Thai, "The Dual Role of Transnational Daughters and Transnational Wives: Monetary Intentions, Expectations and Dilemmas," *Global Networks* 12, no. 2 (2012): 216–32.
25. In fact, one could argue that the economic impact of marriage migration could be more significant, since migrant women have more rights abroad than migrant workers and they do not have to incur a large debt to marry a foreigner and migrate.
26. Em Kim, Hay Tay Province, June 2012.
27. Chi Lan, Can Tho Province, December 2012.
28. Wang and Chang, in "Commodification of International Marriages," documented this trend in the late 1990s, and, for them, this transfer reflected a greater commodification of international marriage.
29. Ibid.
30. In the four communities, we had only one case of Internet dating. The two individuals were more educated than most of our study participants. This marriage was an uxorilocal marriage, and the man justified this choice as a way to maximize his business activities by having networks in two provinces and communes. He and his wife ran a store selling construction material, mostly for building and renovating houses.
31. The fee was between US$150 and $300.
32. This type of marriage also harms local wedding shops, since no wedding is organized in the groom's home village.
33. Another industry that caters to single men is the sex industry. When asked about their sex lives, most men speak openly about the existence of specialized services that are easily available whenever needed. For others, it was a tense topic, and some men revealed painfully and shamefully that they never had sex. Our study did not investigate whether any sex services existed specifically for single men. When we asked local informants, they did not feel it was the case. To be sure, Can Tho City and Hai Phong City, both located relatively close to the villages we studied, offered plenty of commercial sex services to men coming from surrounding villages.