Between two families: the social meaning of remittances for Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore

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Abstract *Scholars who have applied transnational perspectives to studies of migration and remittances have called for a move beyond the developmentalist approach to accommodate an expanded understanding of the social meanings of remittances. Researchers working in Asia have begun to view the remittances of money, gifts and services that labour migrants send to their families as transnational 'acts of recognition', as an enactment of gendered roles and identities, and as a component of the social practices that create the ties that bind migrants to their 'home' countries. In this article, we depart from the more common focus on remittance behaviour among labour migrants and turn instead to examine how, as marriage migrants, Vietnamese women generate and confer meaning on the remittances they send. First, from the women's viewpoint, we discuss the extent to which expectations vested in being able to generate remittances for the natal family by marrying a Singaporean man not only translate into motivation for marriage migration but also shape the parameters of the marriage. Second, we show how sending remittances are significant to the women as 'acts of recognition' in the construction of gendered identities as filial daughters, and, through the 'connecting' and 'disconnecting' power of remittances, in the reimagining of the transnational family. Third, we discuss the strategies that women devise in negotiating between the conflicting demands and expectations of their natal and marital families and in securing their 'place' between two families. We base our findings on an analysis of interviews and ethnographic work with Vietnamese women and their Singaporean husbands through commercial matchmaking agencies.*

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With the continuing rise of international marriages in Singapore and throughout Southeast Asia (Toyota 2008), there is a need for more studies on the phenomenon. Some scholars, however, have addressed marriage migrants' intercultural encounters with the host society at different levels of interaction (Burgess 2004; Lomsky-Feder and Leibovitz 2010). Others who adopt a 'gender' approach conceptualize the phenomenon through the expanding spaces of marital intimacies within frameworks informed by political economy considerations and by the cultural politics of gender (Constable 2003, 2005; Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Piper and Roces 2003). Yet, the emergence of transnational family formations across geographical borders as a corollary of marriage migration has received little attention. Nonetheless, a growing recognition of the sociality of remittances has directed some scholars to interrogate the role of money in shaping transnational marriage projects (Thai 2008), as well as the gendered politics of managing money and allocating remittances across transnational families (Wong 2006). Indeed, by understanding the process of generating, sending and contesting remittances we can consider more fully the complex gender and generational power dynamics at work in transnational marriage migration.

Researchers often inspect the nexus between migrants and remittances through a labour migration lens. In this article, we move the focus to *marriage migrants* who have to negotiate multiple social roles and positions across transnational topographies as wives (and potential mothers), workers (see Piper and Roces 2003), dutiful daughters and sacrificial sisters. Indeed, the gendering of intergenerational and familial ties is still pervasive in Asian societies. Studies on migration and remittance-sending show women as more reliable remitters than men because they tend to invest more emotion in and feel greater responsible for maintaining and reproducing transnational linkages at the family or household level (Gamburd 2000; see Semyonov and Gorodzeisky 2005 for an opposing finding). King et al. (2006: 430) rightfully warn that such a bifurcated view 'is predicated on a simple sexual division of remittance flow management'. Stivens (1998), however, argues that throughout the world, but especially in Asia, the ideology of familism – positioning women as the upholders of family values and traditions – still underlines most transnational relationships between women as migrants and their families in the sending communities. We extend this argument to include marriage migrants and examine how gender dynamics and cultural politics across transnational spaces often complicate expectations of being able to generate remittances through cross-border marriage, as well as the act of sending remittances to their natal families. At the same time, we view remittances as both symbolic and performative in 'connecting' and 'disconnecting' cross-border relations 'at different moments of a continuum of ship maintenance' (Muller 2008: 390).[1]

By deploying the narratives of 30 Vietnamese marriage migrants who were commercially matched to Singaporean men,[2] in this article we highlight the significance

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of social meanings ascribed to monetary and non-monetary remittances as they play an important role in shaping the reimagining of the transnational family. Drawing on the perspectives of Vietnamese women, we examine the complex topographies of remittances as a site of contestation and reconciliation in which the positions of marriage migrants are constantly negotiated *vis-à-vis* different actors located across the transnational terrains. We begin with a selected review of the literature on remittances and transnational migration, focusing on the works of scholars who argue for a gender-sensitive approach in thinking about the nexus between marriage, transnational families and the social roles of remittances.

Remittances as acts of recognition

The subject of remittances has attracted considerable attention in transnational migration studies. However, the spotlight has tended to be on the argument that the money migrants remit is crucial to sustaining livelihoods and households in the sending community. Numerous scholars are now moving away from this developmentalist approach to stress the importance of examining the social meanings of remittances (Levitt 2001) and the gender dynamics associated with sending, receiving and deploying them (King et al. 2006). While men and women negotiate remittances in multiple ways, there is general agreement that women tend to hold more firmly onto the role of remittance sender. This is because remittances provide a means of securing the ties that bind them to their families and children left in the communities of origin (Jones and Kittisuksathit 2003; Parreñas 2001, 2005; Singh 2007; Tacoli 1999; Yeoh and Huang 2000). Female labour migrants not only face social pressures to play the roles of 'dutiful daughters' and bear the brunt of maintaining familial relations and household well-being, but they also forge pathways of care and concern with their families of origin through remittances as a conduit to 'maintain emotional bonds on the basis of material dependency' (Lan 2003: 195). In a review of transnational families in Southeast Asia, Asis (2000) argues that the dominant gender ideology that privileges men often means that female migrants channel the remittances they send back to male family members, for example to facilitate a brother's education or migration project. On the other hand, Ramirez et al. (2005: 15) argue that remittances become 'agile transactions' that not only enable migrant women to improve the lives of their relatives, by enhancing their social status, but that they also serve as sites of resistance against uneven gender relations back home. Suksomboon (2008) shows how, through their improved financial position, Thai marriage migrants in the Netherlands were able to accumulate social capital and that this feeling of social superiority extended to the women's parents, children and other relatives. Such narratives emphasize women's agency, despite the persistence of uneven gender and intergenerational power relations.

With marriage migration an increasingly common form of social and geographical mobility in Asia, transnational migration provides a range of opportunities for migrants to reconstruct their positions across transnational topographies, albeit with

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differing degrees of success in altering their roles and identities. The question of 'whether remittances have the effect of reaffirming or reconfiguring gender ideologies and relations across transnational space' (King et al. 2006: 429) remains complex. Much of the literature on how strategies are continuously negotiated *vis-à-vis* broader structural constraints within migration regimes demonstrates that the answer to this question is at best ambivalent and contextual. For many cross-border migrants seeking to advance their own socio-economic positions, the 'topographies of hope' are often inflected through multiple imaginaries of the uneven economic geographies between sending and receiving communities (Mar 2005: 361).

In the context of Asia, scholars are beginning to document the flows of remittances that male and female labour migrants send in the form of money, gifts and services (Asis et al. 2004; Parreñas 2001). Thomas's (1999) work demonstrates how the transnational flow of gifts between members of the Vietnamese diaspora and their families in Vietnam establishes and strengthens social ties. Similarly, in documenting the lives of men in the Vietnamese diaspora, with a focus on the former's relationship with money, Thai (2009: 250) suggests that the 'convertibility of money' enables Vietnamese male migrants to convert their 'low-income' status into a comparatively 'higher-income' one when they return to Vietnam, thus raising their social standing and marriageability back 'home'. He argues that this convertibility is 'anchored in a tangible transnational relation that people usually recognize as having differential purchasing power' (Thai 2009: 246).

Thai stresses that money creates social relationships based on affective bonds such as gratitude and obligation, and that international marriage has emerged as a strategy that both men and women use to enhance their social status at the family, community or even national level. Whether the focus is on sending gifts (Cliggett 2005), what Baldassar (2008: 257) calls 'special transnational objects', or on monetary remittances, which Singh et al. (2010: 249) refer to as 'a currency of care', all such studies highlight the importance of viewing remitting practices as 'transnational acts of recognition'. The act of remitting itself involves the performance of gendered roles and identities and constitutes one of the many social practices that create 'pathways' or ties that bind migrants to their 'home' countries. Such acts, however, can be contested, especially when migrants set up families of their own. Under such circumstances, female migrants have to negotiate their multiple roles as 'wives', 'daughters' or 'sisters' to maintain transnational family ties across considerable distances.

Remitting in transnational familial spaces

While discussions about migrants' strategies for managing their money and sending remittances to their families are well developed, the question of '*how* remittances are generated' (Datta 2009: 117) remains unanswered. This is of particular interest in the context of marriage migration because, unlike a migrant worker, a marriage migrant may lack direct access to financial resources in the host country, or, by virtue of her subject position as a 'wife' and not 'worker', is unlikely to have financial autonomy.

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In Singapore, husbands play a key role in providing *and* controlling a wide range of monetary expenses involved in cross-border marriages, ranging from sponsoring a migrant wife's application for an entry permit to intra-household arrangements for remittances. The fact that it is illegal for migrant wives without permanent residency to seek employment in Singapore[3] further strengthens the man's control of the family finances because it denies his wife the opportunity to earn an independent living. This can become a source of conflict and husbands often express their resentment at having to send remittances to their wives' families. Tensions over money appear to be more pronounced among men in low-paid jobs and with limited financial means – under such circumstances, the husband tends to view the act of sending remittances as an 'extra' marital expense (Wong 2006).

At the same time, migrant wives may face considerable pressure to remit. On this issue, the scholarship on marriage migrants is still underdeveloped and much of what shapes our understanding of the pressures women face derives from work on labour migrants. In the context of female Latina labour migrants, Raijman et al. (2003) show that migrant women feel compelled to perform 'transnational mothering' through remittances to secure a future for their 'left-behind' children. Likewise, in her study of Filipino female labour migrants in Canada, Barber (2000: 402) argues that these women carry with them ingrained expectations to be 'mindful of the well-being of [their families]' back in the Philippines. These expectations are rooted in the idea that women have a duty to home at both family and national levels. In a different portrayal of the lives of Filipino migrant workers, Aguilar (1999) emphasizes that remittances enable many women to increase their statuses within their families and communities. Yet, it is also the 'power' of remittances to reconfigure material circumstances and social lives of the family members and communities left behind that raises expectations for migrants to remit. The increasing pressures that female migrants feel – either because they are bound by cultural and familial expectations to provide their natal families with financial support or because they wish to signal their 'success' abroad – provide a crucial background to any consideration of the position of marriage migrants in the topographies of remitting. However, we know little about how *migrant wives* negotiate the conflicting demands of remitting. Negotiations between husbands and wives also often take place at this disjuncture between expectations and the significance ascribed to money. Thai (2008: 166), for example, notes that 'international marriages present complex social expectations and imbalanced reciprocity among couples, especially in confronting issues of allocation of wages to family left behind in the community of origin.'

Bélanger and Tran's (2011) study of Vietnamese women who, as foreign brides in Asian countries, send remittances to their natal families, provides a starting point to address this gap in the literature. They establish that these marriage migrants remit substantial amounts in both monetary and non-monetary forms and that the women's specific circumstances in the destination country play a major part in influencing remittance sending. This finding contrasts with those on *labour migrants*, which show that a sending household's level of poverty has a stronger bearing on remittance behaviour. Bélanger and Tran also suggest that while marriage migrants

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who are able to engage in paid work can negotiate what disposable income to send to their natal families, the majority who do not work have to depend on their husbands and family members if they wish to send a remittance. One of their interesting findings is that women with children tend to be better able to remit, suggesting that childbearing improves a marriage migrant's status within her marital family, which in turn confers greater bargaining power on them in carving out funds to send home to their natal families.

In this article, we pay special attention to the geographically specific relationships between migrant wives and their natal families. We recognize that foreign brides in Singapore are often in a dependent position and have to rely on their husbands to secure funds for remittances. In transnational marriages and families, migrant wives face a challenge in having to negotiate their positions between 'here' and 'there' across transnational terrains in a largely patriarchal context, for Confucian ideologies underpin state and family structures in both Singapore and Vietnam. We pay particular attention to how transnational marriage migrants respond to changing and at times conflicting expectations from both sides of the 'transnational family'.

Three themes feature in our focus on how Vietnamese women (commercially matched to Singaporean men and living in their marital households in Singapore) manage to generate and confer meaning on the remittances sent to their natal families in Vietnam. First, we look at the extent to which expectations vested in being able to generate remittances for the natal family through marriage with a Singaporean man not only provide a motive for marriage migration but also shape the expectations of the marriage. Second, we show the ways in which practices of remitting become as significant 'acts of recognition' in the construction of gendered identities as filial daughters and in the reimagining of the transnational family through the 'connecting' and 'disconnecting' power of remittances (Muller 2008). Third, we draw out the tactics and strategies that women devise in negotiating between the conflicting demands and expectations of their natal and marital families and in securing their 'place' between two families. Before discussing each theme, we pause to outline the study methods used in the research process.

Research methods

For this article, we draw on the findings of a three-year study entitled 'State boundaries, cultural politics and gender negotiations in international marriages in Malaysia and Singapore'. A major focus of the study was on Vietnamese women who married Singaporean men through commercial matchmaking agencies. We identified the study participants in various ways. We met some couples through commercial matchmaking agencies, the owners of which had granted us interviews and were amenable to us meeting some of their clients, but attempts to snowball from these initial leads were mostly unsuccessful. We found that the social stigma attached to commercial matchmaking contributed greatly to the difficulties we had with snowballing.

The primary route by which we were able to get to know Vietnamese marriage migrants was through the thrice-weekly English classes we held for 11 months, from

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December 2008 through October 2009. We specifically designed the English classes for Vietnamese women with only primary education and very little prior exposure to the language. We recruited the women through word of mouth from among various social networks of Vietnamese marriage migrants, but because the lessons were in the afternoons, they excluded all those who could not attend because of work, childcare or other commitments. Individual attendance was generally irregular; some who had afternoon commitments managed to attend on the odd day when they were relieved of their duties. The classes offered the Vietnamese marriage migrants an opportunity to meet and socialize and we reached out to a wider network of Vietnamese marriage migrants through the picnics, barbecues and other social events that the class organized.

We informed the women who attended the class of our research project, but made it clear that coming to the class did not necessarily mean having to participate in the project; indeed, many who came to the class did not participate in the project. We took detailed records of the interviews or prolonged chats (conducted in Vietnamese) with those who consented to participate in the research project and jotted down general observational notes about the classes and various social interactions we had with the women. Using NVivo software, we systematized and coded all pieces of information – whether interview transcripts, notes from different encounters with the same individual or observational field notes. For the analysis, we not only drew on the NVivo database but also read through and made notes of selected cases in their entirety. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Marrying and migrating ‘for the sake of the family’

While a few women stated that their disillusionment with previous relationships with Vietnamese men had triggered their decision to marry a foreigner, almost all of them saw marriage migration in terms of ‘searching for a better life’, ‘escaping poverty’, ‘helping’ their families, or ‘supporting’ their parents and other family members. Du (aged 26), for example, was the youngest of three siblings from a very poor family of farm labourers. She said that, even though she had local suitors, the idea of marrying a Vietnamese man ‘never seriously’ crossed her mind because she knew that a local man could ‘never make enough money’ to sustain a family. Consequently, she set her mind on marrying a foreigner who could at least ‘take care of her’ and allow her to ‘help’ her natal family. Tran (aged 23) likewise saw marriage migration as a route to working in Singapore; she ‘realized that the Singapore currency had more value when converted to VND [Vietnamese dongs] and spent in Vietnam’ and that this would allow her to cover the school fees of her four younger siblings.

Indeed, the notion of marrying a foreigner who can provide them with a more comfortable living and enable them to give material help to their natal families circulates widely among women living in rural villages. Nhi (aged 20), who comes from a family that is financially better-off than many others, explained why she went ahead with a commercially arranged marriage to a Singaporean man despite strong opposition from her father:

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> I actually had a boyfriend in Vietnam, but I know that if I marry a Vietnamese guy, the maximum he can do for me is to take care of me and me only. He won't be able to take care of my family. … I saw many girls who marry Singaporeans and have a good life. Not all of them can support their families in Vietnam, but at least they are well taken care of and have an easy life for themselves.

When, after several months of marriage, her husband asked her why she had not chosen to marry a Vietnamese man, Nhi was candid. 'You know, I am not stupid to leave my country and marry you in Singapore without any purposeful consideration, particularly in terms of securing some advantages for my family', to which he jokingly replied, 'So I must be the one who is stupid!'

While the women certainly drew on the 'dutiful daughter' or 'sacrificial sister' discourse to explain their motive behind marriage migration, they interwove this narrative with the explanation that marrying a Singaporean man would also improve their lives and pave the way to a brighter future for themselves. Tho (aged 22) put the accent on self-sacrifice. She said 'I went to Singapore to marry in order to help my family' pay off debts and hospitalization bills and that 'I was quite prepared to sacrifice myself'. Most of the other women, however, made it clear that they were only willing to enter into such marriages if they liked their prospective husbands. They wanted to ensure that they would be 'loved' or even 'pampered' and that their men were of 'good character'. In fact, they needed to be sufficiently convinced that marriage migration would offer them enough to make it worth the gamble. Sen (aged 27) approached it with a typical mix of pragmatism, sense of adventure and consciousness of the risk involved:

> Marrying a foreigner can help my family overcome financial trouble and, besides, a foreigner might yell at his wife but would not beat her. … I wanted to test my fortune and, at worst, if I had not found a suitable husband [in Singapore], I would go back and there would be no harm.

While the women often worked expectations of being able to generate remittances for their natal families into their accounts of why they decided to marry Singaporean men, they usually only acted on them if these expectations were compatible with the women's aspirations for themselves. In short, while the women appeared to be conforming to social ideals of daughterly sacrifice 'for the sake of the family', they were not doing so as passive victims. In effect, they were actively enacting these roles in tandem with their aspirations for their own future, while at the same time reshaping the discursive contours of the meanings of filial daughterhood.

Gifts, remittances, generous husbands and a daughter's worth

A financially strong match with a husband overseas was important to the women's self-esteem and sense of respect. As seen in this account (from field notes) of an

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informal chat among several women after their English language class, it provided them with a means of presenting themselves differently to their natal families and communities:

> Giang (aged 23) was interested in how much money the other women got from their husbands. Shirley, a new student, started talking about how rich women who have married South Koreans and Taiwanese were. The whole group agreed that those women had a much happier life [than they did], and a lot better 'face'. 'Face' was demonstrated by the fact that whenever these wives of Taiwanese and Korean men went home to Vietnam, they bought expensive things and furniture for their families, enough to fill a 'long truck'. The whole village would be overwhelmed by such wealth, someone chipped in, and this [display] would be a measure not only of the worth of their marriages but [also of] their own dignity. The women started commenting on the 'luck' of others, and someone added that because these women in Taiwan and South Korea could not visit home regularly, given that they were 'further away', they had to 'accumulate their wealth to show off' on their infrequent visits home. The women in the group seemed to concur with the view that their own value and 'face' were held in the balance by the goods and money they were able to send home. This, they said, is an important reason why they tried to send back home 'as much money as possible, despite their poor living conditions in Singapore'.

Thach (aged 20) felt that her husband, a 55-year-old widowed truck driver, was tight-fisted and incessant in his complaints that she was giving too much money to her family in Vietnam, but she was determined to ensure that her marriage improved her family's standing in her hometown. In the past, 'everyone looking at her family felt sorry for them' because they had taken out so many loans. When Thach made her first trip home during the Chinese New Year, the loan sharks, who knew that Thach had married a foreign man, so presumably had money, came around to the house where they insulted and threatened her family. This galvanized Thach into action. She changed all her savings into Vietnamese dongs and not only cleared the loans but also made a show of giving each of her sisters 200 Singapore dollars (S$), her grandmother S$ 100, and her aunts and other relatives amounts ranging from between S$ 50 and S$ 300. To add to the effect, she used all the money her husband had given her for the trip to purchase an electric cooker, a new fridge and some other furniture for her family. There were also other, more sustained, signs that the family's fortunes were turning a corner. Thach's mother now runs a small but profitable coffee shop in the neighbourhood and she is now 'respected by others'. Her second brother has converted the family's rice field, which used to be unproductive, into a chilli and sesame plantation and now takes care of it. Although Thach felt trapped in a marriage to a man for whom 'she had no feelings' who constantly insulted and sexually abused her, she was grateful to him for making it possible for her to fulfil her responsibilities as a daughter and to reverse her natal family's fortunes.[4]

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Several other women found that their newfound ability to access their husbands' resources to provide material help to their families in Vietnam enhanced their status as filial daughters who had made successful matches. Hoang (aged 24) was visibly proud of her property-agent husband's 'generosity' when she told us that, in addition to giving her pocket money, he sends S$ 500 a month to her family in Vietnam. Since her marriage to a Singaporean man, Diep (aged 29), who came from a very poor family, has now become the 'pride' of her family and village. This is because her husband, who 'travels back and forth' with her to Vietnam, not only spends 'lots of money' on travel and gifts for her immediate family but also shows considerable goodwill towards her extended family. Bich (aged 23) said that her husband Bill, a 48 year-old taxi driver, 'treated her like a teenager'. This was something she saw in a positive light because it meant that he took it upon himself to 'take care of the most important things in the family', including reserving a monthly sum of S$ 500 to send to Bich's mother in Vietnam. In addition, Bill had paid off her family's S$ 20,000 debt, contributed 300 million dong towards building a new house for Bich's parents, bought household appliances and motorbikes for various members of her family, sponsored Bich's parents and sister for a month's visit to Singapore, and expressed willingness to buy anything the family needs. Indeed, Bill has played the role of generous husband and son-in-law very well, earning high esteem for both Bich and himself in the eyes of her family and friends.

The remittance pipeline constructed through marriage migration and the figure of the 'generous husband', however, may turn out to be a mirage. Before her marriage and migration to Singapore, Nhan (aged 32) lived with her twice-divorced mother, an older sister and a younger stepsister in a rural area that was a two-hour journey away from Ho Chi Minh City. She ran her own hair salon and was the main breadwinner, supporting not only her mother but also her younger stepsister who aspired to a college education because she was 'good at studying and her glasses are really thick'. She also gave money to her older sister, who is married with a 15-year-old son, to help her build a house. While many women in her neighbourhood had married Taiwanese men, Nhan was among the first to marry a Singaporean. One of her customers had married a Singaporean two years earlier and she introduced her to Michael, a sales representative working for a food and beverage firm. Nhan agreed to marry him in the hope of 'a better life'. Indeed, at that point, the future seemed bright – Singapore was 'a rich country' and Nhan had gained the impression that Michael earned about S$ 3000 a month and had his own apartment. Immediately after her marriage, she was also able to buy a piece of land (which she placed under her mother's management without her husband's knowledge) from the proceeds of selling her hair salon, plus the 130 million Vietnamese dongs that Michael gave to the bride's family. However, the reality turned out very differently for Nhan.

On her arrival in Singapore, Nhan realized that Michael was in financial difficulties. The firm for which he was working was doing badly and had cut his commission drastically; this reduced his monthly salary to a mere S$ 1170. It also transpired that Michael had recently divorced and had 'lost everything' in the divorce settlement. His savings of S$ 10,000 went into lawyers' fees; he was 'kicked out' of

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his apartment, which now belonged to his ex-wife, and he had to pay S$ 400 a month to support his eight-year-old son for whom his ex-wife had been awarded custody. Then, after deducting the money that Michael paid to his mother each month (between S$ 100 and S$ 200), there was little to spare. Nhan was unhappy with the meagre S$ 150 that Michael gave her each month for pocket money. After spending a year in Singapore, she was keen to apply for permanent residency. However, given Michael's low salary, she felt that the application was unlikely to succeed. Michael's refusal to rent a shop space that would enable her to open a hair salon was what most frustrated Nhan. She had gone to great pains to identify the 'perfect location' for her shop and had done 'rough calculations' to ensure that she could sustain the business, but Michael had baulked because he was 'afraid that the shop would fail'. To add salt to Nhan's wound, another hair salon that had opened in the same location was doing a thriving business. With that 'dream' shattered, Nhan's expectations for her marriage also plummeted. She felt 'angry' because Michael was not 'quick and smart', but 'kind and stupid'. It 'depressed' her that her living circumstances were 'poor', and she 'often blamed herself' for her 'decision to come to Singapore'. She had to put her wish to remit money to her mother to build a house in Vietnam on hold and she felt frustrated that she was unable to help her extended family in Vietnam.

Sending remittances and displaying the material benefits of having married a generous husband serve as significant 'acts of recognition' in constructing the gendered identity of a woman as a filial daughter and in reimagining the transnational family. This, however, does not mean that sending remittances is a straightforward 'transnational route' to achieving the desired identities and roles a woman wishes to portray. It is necessary to note that, because she is dependent on her husband's cooperation, so hence on the politics of the marital home, the husband can thwart the woman's gesture. Cheng (2011) argues that, although Singaporean husbands are generally willing to channel some of their hard-earned money into remittances for their wives' families, this is because they are actively assembling a range of viable masculine styles to reinvent their present identities and to develop future life projects.

Politics and priorities in living between two families

The difficulties the Vietnamese–Singaporean couple confronted in negotiating their expectations of each other and desires for the marriage were brought home to us when Dao (aged 22) and her husband Foo (a 42-year-old freelance cameraman) approached one of us (Vu) to act as a translator for them. The couple had recently met through an agency, registered their marriage after five days of courtship and were experiencing difficulty communicating with one another. Foo had been using Google translator to converse with Dao, but found it limited, difficult and unsatisfactory. Dao admitted that it was only through talking to Vu that she learnt about her husband's job. Among many things, Foo wanted Vu to find out for him if Dao had any special hobbies. The following is an excerpt of the 'conversation' that Vu facilitated between husband and wife on the issue of Dao's marital expectations:

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> Foo wanted Dao to share with him her expectations and wishes so that he could help her fulfil them. Dao said that her 'biggest desire' was to help her family out. Her parents were very poor, and they did not own any rice fields but bought and sold coconuts for a living. She had decided to come to Singapore for marriage because she really wanted to help her family out. [Dao became very emotional when talking about this subject.] She wanted to change her family's life for the better. She wanted to build them a sturdier house than their current house made of clay. To rebuild the house, they would need around S$ 20,000. Foo said that this was 'big money' but he would try. Then Dao shared that she did not expect anything for herself as long as she has a good husband. Foo replied that he would try his best. Dao added that she did not know what jobs would be available for her but was sure that she could do almost anything, such as working in a restaurant or a food stall. She assured Foo that she would be a good wife.

For women in the early stages of marriage, like Dao, the lack of a common language often hampered a couple's attempts to negotiate how best to meet both the needs of the wife's natal family and her marital family's expectations of her. With the help of a willing translator (Vu), Dao was able to express her strong wish that her husband would help alleviate her parents' impoverished circumstances, while softening what might appear to be an outright demand for money. She did this by assuring her husband that she had no financial expectations for herself and that she would be a 'good wife' who would contribute as much as she could to the marital home.

Learning to earn her husband's trust is a crucial step towards gradually taking control of the household finances. When Giang first married, her husband Ben was 'very strict' about money, her allowances and the remittances she could send to Vietnam. Within six months, however, she had managed to win his trust and now has 'total control'. She has her own personal bank account and withdraws money freely from her husband's account. In fact, not only does she send remittances to Vietnam from her own bank account, but also she is able to persuade Ben to send substantial sums intermittently – a few thousand dongs a time – to her family in Vietnam.

Giang's 'absolute power' over her husband's finances is unusual. A more typical scenario is for women to moderate the amounts they remit as they gradually assume responsibility for the marital home. Sen heeded her father-in-law's advice not to 'send too much money home', but to save a portion of her salary (she had begun to work after obtaining permanent residency) for the future when she had children. She realized that her husband's job as an assistant in a shoe shop would be insufficient to support the family once children came along, but she was glad that she could now 'help her two families earn a living'. After the birth of her two children, Diep could no longer save as much as before, so had to modify the remittances she sent home, but, as she put it, it was 'still enough to show her love and care to her family'.

The pragmatism the women exhibited in prioritizing and balancing the needs of their natal *versus* marital families is most evident in their decisions about having children. Tran's husband provided her with some money ('but not too much') to remit

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home to Vietnam each month. Apart from funding her siblings' education, she wanted to build a more permanent house for her parents. She therefore told her husband that she would help her parents with the house before having a baby, explaining that she 'could not take on the responsibilities of a mother' if she 'had not yet fulfilled her responsibilities as a daughter'. At the same time, she appreciated that her husband was working 'real hard to bring home the money' and, given that they had postponed their plans to have a baby, she managed to persuade him to allow her to go out to work. Like Sen, Tran was anxious to earn an income to support the families in both Vietnam and Singapore. Echoing the same logic, Sang did not want children yet, even though her husband was anxious to start a family, because she felt she had to 'take care of her mother [who is unwell] first' and concentrate her resources on covering her mother's medical bills. Already disillusioned about her marriage and its diminished prospects, Nhan took more drastic measures to conserve the meagre resources she was putting aside for her natal family: when she became pregnant, she persuaded Michael (who was extremely reluctant) to allow her to have an abortion because she did not think they could afford to raise the child.

Resource constraints in the marital home (as in the case of Nhan above, or of Du whose husband exercised tight control over the purse strings) may unsettle or disrupt the balancing act that women have to negotiate, as will unexpected and sometimes unreasonable demands from natal family members. Phien (aged 31), who is from a poor family in Ho Chi Minh City, has two older brothers who not only fail to support their parents but also gamble. Her younger sister, who married a Taiwanese man, used to provide financial assistance to their parents, can no longer do so because she has two children of her own. The responsibility then fell on Phien's shoulders and she was grateful that her husband was generous and supportive of her contributions to her parents. However, Phien soon found out that her brothers were harassing her parents for money. Apparently, whenever they suffered gambling losses they would sell their parents' belongings to feed their gambling habit. The remittances she sent back soon ended up in her brothers' hands; when she refused to send them more money, they became 'angry' and 'accused her of being a bad sister'. Phien was miserable about the situation in her natal family but could do nothing to improve it. Her husband and in-laws have been sympathetic and in fact have continued to give her money to send to her parents. Phien now resignedly accepts that the world is unfair and that women can never be truly happy because they can either have a good family or good in-laws, but never both.

This last observation is symptomatic of the desire among many of our interviewees to carve out a meaningful place for themselves in *both* their natal and marital families – only then, as Phien says, can they be 'fully happy'. In an article on Malayali migrant women in Italy, Gallo (2005: 245) states that 'marriage ideologies and practices' may force migrants into 'conflicting and ambiguous' negotiations between meeting the expectations of natal families for 'prestigious alliances and bigger dowries' on the one hand, and consolidating the conjugal bond between husband and wife abroad on the other. In similar vein, we find that Vietnamese women actively resist either/or options and instead strive to maintain a balance in the way they channel limited funds between the competing needs of their two families.[5]

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Conclusion

The relocation of family members across borders does not automatically produce a transnational family. The morphologies of transnational families are highly fluid and contingent on the imagination and practices of both the migrants and the 'left-behind' members of the sending communities. We also recognize that a lack of spatial proximity makes efforts to create a familial space across borders more challenging (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). At the same time, transnationally split family members may also actively seek to 'do family', often by leveraging on possibilities present in the more liberal immigration regulatory regimes – see Treas (2008), for example, on how transnational family members navigate US immigration laws. Moments of stability and instability often underpin the connections and relationships forged between natal and marital families. This is because the '"transnational family" as a formation derives its lived reality not only from material bonds of collective welfare among physically dispersed members but also [from] a shared imaginary of "belonging", which transcends particular periods and places to encompass past trajectories and future continuities' (Yeoh et al. 2005: 308). To sustain cross-border familial ties, migrants often devise strategies to establish 'contact points' with family members back home. Remitting provides an important vehicle through which marriage migrants can perform this juggling act whereby the emergence of 'a special kind of transnational family money … is equated with or measured against filial care' (Singh 2006: 375). Indeed, the act of sending remittances back home is an integral part of the mobility project and not simply a 'random product' of migration (Sofranko and Idris 1999: 468). Remittances are hence a means of 'doing family' transnationally, which is particularly significant in the context of the immigration regimes prevalent in Asia where migration policies generally exclude family reunification for all but the highly skilled. However, to contrast the dominant emphasis in the literature on their 'connecting' power, remittances are not devoid of emotional contestations and may create dissonance and conflict in the receiving households, particularly if there is disagreement about which recipients are worthy of them (Gardner and Ahmed 2006). In recognizing that 'remittances do trigger changes in social relations within families, which become a site of struggle and negotiation' (King et al. 2006: 430), here we focused on the complex role they play as 'transnational acts of recognition'.

In the context of maintaining cross-border familial ties, the act of remitting not only takes on the multiple social meanings that individuals ascribe to it, but it is also often framed within a transnational topography of expectations cutting across geographical, economic and socio-cultural differences. Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore navigate these expectations by performing their roles and identities as 'wives', 'daughters' and 'sisters'; and they do so through negotiating practices of remitting according to different contexts and (sometimes unexpected) demands. Although there is a sense in which the strategies and tactics they deploy reproduce social ideals of 'Asian femininity', the discursive contours of the meanings of 'good wife', 'filial daughter' or 'dutiful sister' are shaped alongside an active pursuit of their

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own aspirations and attempts to improve their future lives. Despite the multiple roles that come with marriage in a foreign land, these women exhibit a clear knowledge of the responsibilities and constraints they face, and are sufficiently astute to deploy bargaining power in the realms of their own marriage as well as between the marital and natal families. Marriage migrants' efforts to connect to their natal families often simultaneously intertwine with the reality of living in the spaces of their marital families. As the narratives of Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore demonstrated, it is clear that for women negotiating the dynamics of transnational family situations, neither spatial embeddedness in the 'here and now' of their marital homes nor physical distance across international borders from their natal families has reduced the emotional and financial pressures they face in living between two families. Through marriage migration, these women have built hitherto unexpected connecting threads between the intimate and privatized spaces in two very different social and economic worlds. In securing their 'place' between two families, much depends on their ability to balance the different roles, conflicting demands and uneven expectations that emanate from both the natal and marital families.

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Notes

1. Another 'act of recognition' besides sending remittances, and one that holds 'symbolic and practical significance in the maintenance of transnational kin relationships', is the home visit, a key moment of co-presence that may either strengthen or introduce conflict and tensions into long-distance relationships (Mason 2004: 421). Although we recognize the productive parallels that may be reaped by comparing the meanings of 'remittances' and 'visits', we have chosen to focus our article on the former.
2. We also supplement our core dataset with interviews with eight other Vietnamese women for whom the commercial element in the matchmaking process was more ambiguous.
3. Marrying a Singaporean citizen does not automatically qualify a foreign wife for permanent residency, let alone Singaporean citizenship. Foreign wives first enter Singapore on securing a long-term social visit (LTSV) pass that needs renewal every six to twelve months. Renewal is dependent on the Singaporean husband's willingness to support his wife's application. During the period in which the research was conducted, foreign wives might not seek employment under the LTSV visa category, and this became a strong incentive for them to apply for Singaporean permanent residency (PR) as a means of opening the door to employment. However, the PR application process is complicated and difficult to negotiate. The process depends on the husband's sponsorship and it is impossible to discern quite how the state evaluates the applications. Most people believe that the main criteria for success are the husband's education, employment status, history,

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income level, Central Provident Fund (CPF) balance and tax record. However, migrant spouses may now seek employment through a new category of visa – Long Term Visit Pass-Plus (LTVP+) – since changes made to the visa regulations in April 2012.

4. Unfortunately, a few months later, Thach's oldest brother, who is 'often violent' and 'always drunk', destroyed her mother's coffee shop, forcing her to close it down, beat up her second brother and smashed the two motorbikes she had bought for her second brother and oldest sister.
5. Vietnamese wives get some relief from this balancing act once they become permanent residents and can seek legal employment. Generating an income of their own gives them much more discretion over how the money is channelled, but as we showed in a follow-up paper on how Vietnamese marriage migrants negotiate their citizenship rights (Yeoh et al. 2010), fraught negotiations do not end with obtaining permanent residency and work.

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