

# Transnational Marriage between Vietnamese Women and Foreign Men: Current Trend and Raising Social Issues (Case Study of Thuy Nguyen District, Hai Phong City)

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**Abstract:** *The article explores some characteristics of transnational marriages between Vietnamese women and foreign men, including the analysis of the current prevalence, characteristics, structural and personal motivation of marriage decisions as well as some social issues in place.*

**Keywords:** Transnational Marriage, Transnational Marriage between Vietnamese Women and Foreign Men, Marriage Migration, Social Issues, Hai Phong City

## 1. Context

In the context of increasing international integration and the boom of information and communication currently, marriage migration in Asia unceasingly increased in recent years (Hugo, 2005), in which there were increasing women migrating to husband's country (Bélanger and Linh, 2011), meanwhile these countries didn't encounter the problems of imbalance between men and women (Hugo, 1995). Transnational marriage between Vietnamese women and foreign men was a subject of many studies in the original country of migrants and destination country both from theoretical perspective

and practical research because of an increasing number of Vietnamese brides and increasing social issues related to these marriages.

## 2. Data and method

Using the existing statistical data on international marriage in the period 2007-2016 of Vietnam Ministry of Justice, of Hai Phong Department of Justice and of some recent studies on transnational marriage, this article aims to identify several characteristics of the current marriage of Vietnamese women with foreign men. In addition, the main source of data consists of three focus group discussions (FGD) with fifteen Vietnamese brides, one FGD

with commune officers, one FGD with the provincial officials of Haiphong city who are related to marriage and family issues in their daily activities, and four in-depth interviews with Vietnamese women of Pha Le and Lap Le communes, Thuy Nguyen district, Hai Phong city, who married and/or divorced the foreigners. With the assistance and participation of Central Vietnam Women Union and of Hai Phong Women Union, these FGDs and in-depth interviews were conducted in 2018 in order to analyse the process of mate selection, circumstances of marriage decisions, personal and social motivations of the marriage decisions as well as to understand the trend, prevalence, and social issues related to marriage and family raised in the sending communities.

### 3. Prevalence and trend of transnational marriages in Vietnam

From the mid-1990s, the number of transnational marriages in Vietnam has been increasing. In the period 2005-2010, there were 133,289 Vietnamese married to or registered for marriage to foreigners, among which there were 91,201 marriages and 42,079 persons registered for marriage. In the period 2008-2016, there were about 170,000 Vietnamese citizens married to foreigners, with the average amount of about 20,000 marriages per year. The trend of feminization in transnational marriages of Vietnam was obvious with more than 85% of transnational marriages constitutes Vietnamese women married to foreign citizens and migrated to the receiving countries. However, there

has been a slight increase in the number of Vietnamese men marrying foreign women, from about 7.4% in 2008 to about 15% in 2016 (table 1).

**Table 1: Quantity of Vietnamese citizens married to oversea citizens by years and sex (Person)\***

Year	Number	Male	Female	% of female
2008	21,805	1,624	20,181	92.6
2009	19,795	1,527	18,268	92.3
2010	20,802	1,520	19,282	92.7
2011	18,420	1,730	16,690	90.6
2012	17,891	1,550	16,341	91.3
2013	18,636	2,318	16,318	87.6
2014	17,746	2,572	15,174	85.5
2015	18,726	2,733	15,993	85.4
2016	16,223	2,441	13,782	85.0

\* Data in 2008-2012 not included Nghe An because not available.

Source: Vietnam Ministry of Justice, 2018.

The principal destination countries of transnational marriage are the Republic of Korea, the United States and Taiwan. Since Renovation 1986 (Doi moi), thank to the policies of openness and international integration, more and more cooperation relations in economic, cultural and social affairs have been developed, and subsequently more corporations and organizations of Korea, Taiwan and other countries have come to Vietnam to make business. Due to cultural and social similarities among Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, the number of Taiwanese and Korean businesses in Vietnam constitutes higher in comparison with those of other countries, leading to more opportunities of marriage between Vietnamese citizens to citizens of these two countries (table 2).

**Table 2: Number of Vietnamese citizens married to foreigners by related countries and territories (Person)\***

Year	Total	China	Cambodia	Taiwan	Korea	Malaysia	Europe	United States	Australia	Canada	Others
2008	21,805	222	10	4,055	7,655	30	1,887	4,472	874		2,600
2009	19,795	206	26	3,252	6,623	36	1,763	4,569	901		2,419
2010	20,802	257	17	3,139	8,425	43	1,793	4,198	905		2,025
2011	18,420	210	22	3,019	6,957	61	1,345	3,925	698		2,183
2012	17,891	270	15	2,579	6,343	53	1,246	4,136	771		2,478
2013	18,636	255		2,950	6,066			5,105		737	3,523
2014	17,746	339		3,208	4,374			4,786		533	4,506
2015	18,726	555		3,840	4,158			5,119		599	4,455
2016	16,223	294		4,344	1,492			4,516		557	5,020
	170,044	2,608	90	30,386	52,093	223	8,034	40,826	4,149	2,426	29,209

\* Data in 2008-2012 not included Nghe An because not available

Source: Vietnam Ministry of Justice, 2018

Majority of transnational marriages in Vietnam were from the South, occupying about 80%. For instance, the provinces and cities reporting high number of citizens married to American citizens are Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Thua Thien Hue, Tien Giang, Ba Ria - Vung Tau and other provinces in the South of Vietnam. The provinces and cities that have more transnational marriages with Taiwanese are also in the South, including Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho, Dong Nai, Hau Giang, Tay Ninh, Dong Thap, and Ba Ria - Vung Tau; apart from that there are some provinces and cities in the North of Vietnam like Hai Phong, Hai Duong, Nghe An, and Ha Noi. The provinces and cities that have many citizens married to Korean citizens are Can Tho, Hai Phong, Hau Giang, Quang Ninh, Kien Giang, Hai Duong, Ca Mau (table 3).

**Table 3: 20 provinces/cities that have more persons married to Korean citizens (Person)**

Provinces/cities	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Can Tho	943	658	616	212	2,429
Hai Phong	744	506	641	207	2,098
Hau Giang	594	395	327	51	1,367
Quang Ninh	465	377	366	134	1,342
Kien Giang	431	307	285	45	1,068
Hai Duong	272	472	255	55	1,054
Ca Mau	319	192	161	37	709
Ho Chi Minh city	465	57	122	63	707
Tay Ninh	209	158	135	57	559
Bac Lieu	172	147	99	15	433
Binh Thuan	108	95	180	19	402
An Giang	148	94	93	35	370
Vinh Long	119	74	85	27	305
Ha Noi	78	43	83	59	263
Dong Thap	89	64	49	31	233
Ba Ria - Vung Tau	89	54	49	31	223
Dong Nai	12	53	76	44	185
Nghe An	86	39	21	25	171
Bac Ninh	40	37	32	16	125
Thai Binh	49	38	17	21	125

Source: Vietnam Ministry of Justice, 2018

In recent years, most women who married foreigners are in the rural areas of Cuu Long Delta. In the North, there are fewer women who married foreigners and this phenomenon particularly occurred in certain specific provinces and cities. The group of women who married Chinese citizens essentially live in border provinces like Lang Son, Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Cao Bang, Quang Ninh, or in those provinces and cities that have more economic-commercial relations with China like Hai Phong. Taiwan is a territory that has a great number of Vietnamese brides.

Since 2005, because of the increasing trend to marry husbands in Korea, a richer and more developed country, the number of Vietnamese women who married Taiwanese husbands decreased. Moreover, the phenomenon of marriage with Taiwanese, Korean citizens and other Asian citizens has also tended to slightly decreasing, due to several reasons such as the worry of Vietnamese women about unhappy marriage, about life not as expected at husband's family, and more importantly due to the fact that the economic-social conditions of Vietnam have been better recently. In the past, marriage was a trade-off for young girls with a hope for a better, more civilized life at their destination places.

The phenomenon of the Vietnam and Korea marriages began around 1995, with a group of Vietnamese women worked in Korea and married there. In the early 2000s, many Korean corporations and organizations have invested to Vietnam, and trend of Korean men coming to Vietnam to seek for their brides increased. Subsequently, the number of

Vietnamese brides marrying to Korean men dramatically increased until 2014. One of the reasons is that the Korean government began offering a number of policies to tighten transnational marriages to reduce social problems such as fake marriage, divorce, and so on. By 2015, there are about 52,000 Vietnamese brides in Korea (MOLISA, 2015).

Marriage between Vietnamese women and Chinese citizens is more complicated. In addition to marriages officially registered, there is also a phenomenon of women being trafficked into China to be wives, or following other illegal channels, making the number of marriages difficult to statistically record. Besides, there is currently a phenomenon of cohabitation without official marriage between Vietnamese women and Chinese workers working at Chinese factories in Vietnam, making marriage and family relations tends to be more complicated.

#### **4. Characteristics of transnational marriage of Vietnamese women and oversea men**

##### *\* Role of transnational marriage brokerage "industry"*

In the world, the strength of the transnational marriage brokerage industry, which has branches in many different countries, helps to connect the marriage needs of both two sides of women and men. Previously, transnational marriages of Vietnamese women often have some common features such as flash, simple, mostly arranged through brokers. These arranged marriages often have little mutual understanding of culture, language, personality, family circumstances before marriage.

The first generation of Vietnamese women married to foreigners after the Doi Moi period and international integration were formed through commercial agencies as package deals, a practice that has sometimes been described as the transnational trade in women or the transnational marriage brokerage industry. This process of a complex web of brokers and intermediaries that introduce potential “candidates” on both sides with proactive status of men from more developed countries. This arrangement is a full package offering to men, including female information introduction, coordination of meeting for selection, facilitation of selecting decision and marriage procedure, wedding ceremony, and helping with immigration procedures. These marriages can hardly be called love marriages but the rational choice of the two sides, the bride and groom. These marriages can be possibly lead to the confusion of real marriage with the fake one, illegal labour export and human trafficking sophisticatedly.

It is noting that foreign marriage brokers operate legally in Taiwan and charge high service fees. This service is said to be efficient in finding marriage partners for male citizens who do not have a strong social network and limited capacity of domestic marriage, as well as ensure the simplification and professionalization of these complex administrative procedures of international marriage, which every citizen is often not familiar with. This service also allows men to take the initiative in seeking potential partners with their favorite personal criteria based on a list of candidates provided by the brokerage firms.

However, in Vietnam side, marriage brokers are illegal. Therefore, Vietnamese women do not have an active access to sources of information about their partners in other countries. They depend on brokers, who are paid by men and so tend to serve their “male customers” yet not women. To a certain extent, the brokers consider finding women wishing to marry abroad is to meet their male customers’ needs, so they don’t care about demand, partner criteria and emotions of women. Women can be regarded as a special “goods” for male customers to choose. Gender equality in marriage is no way guaranteed in this situation. On the other hand, for many women, due to lack of information, lack of support from legal marriage services, they come to mate introduction meetings passively and are led by brokers. Therefore, all information about their potential mate, about life in the destination, and about to be chosen by whom is completely out of control and desire of women.

*“I didn’t know previously situation of my husband. I only heard through intermediary when making candidature. I didn’t have love. My husband paid one sum of 20 million VND and I paid 10 million. At that time I have no relatives nor friends beside me, there was only the intermediary corporation for registering the marriage” (indepth interviewed with H, young woman married and divorce a Korean man, now return to Ngu Lao commune, Thuy Nguyen district, Hai Phong city, Vietnam).*

Meanwhile, the need to marry foreigners is a reality in many communities and many social groups. Wang and Chang (2002) have explained how the process of marriage migration between Vietnam and Taiwan

has been commodified. Usually, men who seek for Vietnamese wives contact a local small-scale broker approached in Taiwan or South Korea to “order”. This subagent gathers the needs and inform the larger brokerage firms, which in turns link to a counterpart agency based in Vietnam (Lu, 2005). The brokerage network in Vietnam is not yet recognized by law, so it operates underground with various functional branches such as tourism services, match makers, interpreters, including those of illegal services (such as mate introduction meetings) to legal services such as marriage procedure, wedding ceremony, immigration procedures, and etc.

The commercialization of this marriage migration has created an important transnational intermediary industry connecting Vietnam with Taiwan and China, giving great profits to those belonging to the complicated broker network. In the future, this marriage trend may continue and extend, due to the high number of male citizens entering the marital age in many countries like Taiwan and China, and to the changing gender role of women in these societies. This process has not received appropriate control of both sending and receiving countries, for example, intervention policies to control for fake marriage, migrating marriages for exploitation and human trafficking, or provision of legal and psychological counselling services before, during and after marriage.

*\*Love marriage supported by mass media intermediary and technological services*

Currently, there is a strong community network formed among Vietnamese women married in Taiwan, China or

South Korea who have stable life in the destination. There is also a close network between those who evacuated to the United States after the American War in 1975 to their family and friends in the South and Ho Chi Minh City. There are also networks of Vietnamese communities studying and working oversea while maintaining close relationships with friends and family in Vietnam. These groups play an important role in addressing the needs of mate selection and marriage to foreigners of Vietnamese women because they introduce and guarantee potential partners in their countries to network in Vietnam. By various reasons, this social network tends to increase and gradually replace for illegal marriage brokerage centers that are potentially risky for Vietnamese brides. *First*, this network knows the personal identity of both men and women, so it is possible to introduce and to connect match couples. *Second*, this kind of mate introduction allows usual mate selection such as time to know about each other and to develop emotional affection in the usual way. *Third*, information of the potential partners is often honest and verifiable since it is introduced by acquaintance of both two sides. *Fourth*, both sides, especially women, can receive support from her informal social network during the process of mate selection, marriage decision, and even in the marriage. Besides, the explosion of smart electronic devices and mass media make an important contribution to the formation and development of far-away love.

*“Now, after 10 years, almost every family has Korean citizen as relative; for 10 years, almost every family has Korean*

*citizen as a groom, thereafter attracting acquaintance women. I think this process is more secure and more stable than in past because in the past this process had to pass through an intermediary” (In-depth interview, commune justice official).*

Therefore, the transnational marriage of next generations in recent years has gradually changed into love marriage, with the modality of mate selection and marriage decision familiar with Vietnamese customs and tradition.

*“My mother’s younger sister married and lives in Korea, after 10 years she presented my partner to me. He lives near my aunt’s house, when she returned to the homeland, she took him with her. Thence sometimes he comes to Vietnam to meet me. General speaking, we could understand each other a lot; we meet each other not long, but every day we spoke with each other. He cared much about me; and had a romantic behaviour, for example, when we both went to buy clothes, I chose thing for him first and thereafter he chose for me; when we went out to dinner, he always drew the chair for me first and then for him. If I wish to come to his country, he promises to allow me to go on to school, because I am still young. I am very satisfied. I couldn’t agree without satisfaction, because it is my will. My parents also agreed. Besides, he much respects and loves my family” (FGD, T.H., born in 1998, married in 2018, from Thuy Nguyen district, Hai Phong city).*

The economic cooperation opportunities since Doimoi in Vietnam play an important role. Labor migration flows to neighboring countries have increased rapidly since the early 2000s, and key

destination countries are Taiwan and South Korea. This source of labor migration helps to form a network of social relations in Taiwan among fellows. They also interact with marriage immigrants in public places or workplaces. Therefore, marriage migration is part of the process of cooperation between countries. Since about 2006, marriage with Koreans has become a trend, because the process is less complicated resulted from the multicultural social policy of the country. It can be said that, transitional marriage between Vietnamese and foreigners tends to gradually shift from arranged to love marriages, with knowledge of partners and families; knowledge about customs, culture, and law and with understanding about both opportunities and challenges of marriages of persons from different cultures.

#### **5. Some characteristics of transitional marriage between Vietnamese women and foreign men**

The FGDs and in-depth interviews show that this is often the first marriage of young Vietnamese girls who have many expectations of betterment in the destination while it is the second or third time of remarriage of the grooms. Vietnamese women married abroad constitute mainly girls who have lower secondary education, no stable job, from poor or near poor families and more or less have social networks with women married abroad.

The age difference between the bride and groom is quite large, with the bride’s age usually around 18-25 years old while the groom is usually over 30, even over 60 years old. This result is similar to some

previous studies. For example, the study of Le Nguyen Doan Khoi (2012) showed that the number of women married between the ages of 23-26 is 36.7% and most of them are from poor and near poor families, no much land, and have low education attainment. On average, Vietnamese wife is about 17 years younger than her Korean husbands (Kim, 2007). In countries with many Vietnamese brides, the average age at marriage of men married to foreign women is often higher than that of men married to domestic women (Jone, 2012). Men from more developed countries in Asia marrying foreign women through brokers from lower income countries such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, while women in these countries report a diversified tendency of marriage, not only marrying to Asian men but also to American, European and Australia men (Jone, 2012).

*“My husband was born in 1975, now 44 years old, 12 years older than I am. He works at his brother’s company of manufacturing unoxidized pieces. Like me, my husband married already one time, has a daughter now being 17 years old and going to school. I know him through an intermediary of my cousin. He also came to Vietnam several times, then we made acquaintance and talked through the internet, facebook or KaKao talk. Our feelings gradually developed. Now I always seem like being together with him. I love him very much. My husband also loves me. Every month he gives me about 5 million VND for nurturing my child. My family also agrees and supports much” (in-depth interviewed with D.T.K.O. born in 1987 at Ngu Lao commune, Thuy Nguyen district, Hai Phong city, divorced her Vietnamese*

*husband and recently remarried to a Korean citizen, is preparing for reunion with new husband in Korea).*

This is also a common feature of brides in the sending countries and the groom in the receiving countries. Specifically, about 82.2% of Taiwanese husbands are over 30 years old. A study by Tsay (2004) on data on Taiwanese marriages in 2003 showed that while about half of Chinese brides are over 30, about 90% of brides in the South East Asian is under the age of 30. The average age of a South East Asian bride is 23.6, while her husband’s is 37.9, about 14 years older.

Vietnamese brides often have lower education than Taiwanese husbands, about 60% have just completed primary school, but the husbands themselves are also in lower strata of education in Taiwan. A study by Tsay (2004) stated that Taiwan men marrying to Vietnamese women report the average education achievement not only lower than that of men marrying to domestic women but also with group marrying to Chinese women.

Most Vietnamese brides have no stable job, mainly being housewives, farmers, and short-term workers. The proportion of women doing housework and care work when coming to their husband’s house is about 3 times higher than the rate of doing this job in Vietnam. Their social and economic status is also lower than the average.

Another study of Lianling Su (2009) on transnational marriage between Vietnamese women and Chinese men also assesses that those Chinese men married to Vietnamese women often are in the lower social strata with limited education. They often have difficulties in seeking for

a wife among Chinese women, due to their low socio-economic status in the context that the number of Chinese women is less than that of Chinese men.

### **6. Personal motivation of transnational marriage**

Many studies have evidently indicated that not only poverty but also the expectation for the betterment life in all aspects are pushing factors of marrying foreigners (Lu, 2005). The FGDs and in-depth interviews in this study show that Vietnamese women think that if they would marry Vietnamese men, they could almost foresee clearly their future life and family. If they marry men of a more economically developed country, then most of them would have the trend to accept the risks such as lack of mate understanding, of family circumstances, and of sociocultural of destination rather than accepting their current life. Young girls are well aware of the risks of transnational marriage they can face in their destination including language barriers, cultural differences, far away from home and lack of supportive social networks they are familiar with.

*“We knew each other for 4 years, from the day when we worked in a thermal power plant, then we went to work in Ca Mau province, thereafter to Ninh Binh, Thanh Hoa and Bac Giang provinces. In Bac Giang, I got pregnant and stayed home. I worked as an interpreter, and we knew each other in work. I just retired a half year ago. Foreign men are very painstaking and love much. Now I work at home, my husband works in Binh Thuan province. I don't go there to live with my husband, because my child must go to school here and the climate there*

*is very severe. Our lives are different a lot. First, in eating, his food is very hot, with many oil and garlic, and extremely salty. As for language, he also speaks Vietnamese, I speak Chinese, so we can understand each other. Every month he sends me about 10 or 5 or 7 million VND for nurturing our child. We each still keep our own nationality, my child takes Vietnamese nationality” (in-depth interviewed with H, married to Chinese citizen, having a 4 years old son, now lives separated at Ngu Lao commune, Thuy Nguyen district, Hai Phong city).*

In return, the girls believe in a richer life, more opportunities to compensate for poor parents' economies, and a more civilized living environment. In addition, though Vietnam's long-standing customs of arranged marriages ended many decades ago, but the vestige and remnants of patriarchy, low status and voices of women in society may possibly create positions that let women easy to accept arranged marriages with foreign men for economic and income assurance.

*“Men and women went abroad for several years, some of which returned home and went abroad again and again. They gained much for many years. But there were certain women who did not have luck, so they gave up and went home” (in-depth interviewed with commune justice official).*  
*“As a girl married to a foreigner, if I have a job and gain money, I may send them to help my parents a little. But I must not oblige the husband to send things to my parents, because we have our duty to care for our own family, for our children. Fortunately, I am still young, so I don't need to much concern about making a*

living” (FGD of women getting married to foreigner, Hai Phong city, 2018).

### 7. Concluding and some raising social issues

Marriage between Vietnamese women and foreigners is posing some issues in both sending and destination countries. The rate of Vietnamese women divorced the oversea husbands is rather high, being about 11%, even up to 20% in some localities (In-depth interview, commune justice officer, 2018). With marriages that *know nothing* including not knowing culture, law, or language; not knowing her husband in-person before marriage; not knowing her husband’s family situation before marriage; no love and only aim for economic purposes and expect better life; many women have been shocked when they arrived at their husband’s house because their family conditions as well as their partners are not as expected and many cases lead to conflict and break-up.

*“I was presented by a relative, so the time from acquaintance to marriage was some months short. My husband was born in 1968, 14 years older than I am. After marriage, I went to his country, but I returned home after some months. Because I couldn’t speak his language; we didn’t believe in each other, so it led to conflicts. I went out to live with a friend. His family pursued and caught me, and we divorced right there. I followed the friends living illegally there to make money for some years and came back home. When coming back home I felt somewhat ashamed, but with the time the thing has become normal”* (FGD, Th. married in 2013, divorced and returned to Vietnam, no child).

In the cases of breaking-up or abandoning of their own will and without knowledge of the language, customs and laws, women will encounter difficulties in doing procedures for divorce, for example, they don’t remember personal information of their husbands and families of husbands, don’t bring with them the identity papers, etc. Because they can’t get divorced, they are impossible to remarry legally and can only cohabit with a new partner without marriage. Having children from these unmarried cohabitation relationships even raises more complicated legal issues. The new born child cannot register birth certification with the name of the biological father who is cohabitating yet not get married since the woman is still in marriage relation with the foreign husband though actually breaks up. Some children who returned to Vietnam with their mothers also had difficulties in asking for birth certification due to the lack of identity papers, so it was difficult to access social security and education services in Vietnam. Therefore, bilateral judicial assistance regulations are necessary.

In addition, the position and role of women in the sending communities have changed significantly in the direction that women are highly valued by bringing a better economic life to themselves and their families via direct contribution such as remittances and indirect contribution by invitation family members to visit and thereby allow them to find short-term job opportunities at their destination abroad. Survey results show that, in general, economic conditions, living standards, social and cultural understanding of families with brides married to foreigners

are all better. This is the way these women show their obligations to parents in a culture strongly valuing filial piety. Thereby, the position and role of women, of daughters in families in these localities are significantly increased. Accordingly, flows of women's migration also increased.

Another social consequence is that in those localities of Vietnam which have many women married to foreigners, there is also a phenomenon of a shortage of women for men of these localities to marry. In these localities, men, especially the poor and low educated men, are hard to find partners. The survey shows that, in communes of Hai Phong city which have many women married to Taiwanese and Koreans, there is a fact that men must marry the women from ethnic groups, because when there are thousands of women going abroad to marry foreigners, then local men must seek the chances of marriage in other women group. *“According to many local men, ethnic minority women are more sincere, more good-natured in biological and social aspects. The minority women who work in Hai Phong also want to have a stable residence, so they want to marry local men, therefore in recent years their marriages are held fast and become the common trend” (FGD, provincial officials of Hai Phong city).*

These social issues raise the necessities for policies and social services supporting the process of socio-cultural integration as well as macro interventions on marriage and family policies. It is suggested to conduct comprehensive studies on transnational marriages in order to fully analyze prevalence, socio-structural and personal

motivations, determinants and socio-legal issues of transnational marriages in the context of increasingly international integration in contemporary Vietnam □

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