

Invisible Partner: The Immobile Husband in the Cross-Border Marriage

看不見的另一半：跨界婚姻中停駐的丈夫

Isabelle Cheng

**Senior Lecturer in East Asian and International Development Studies,
School of Languages and Area Studies, University of Portsmouth, U.K.**

isabelle.cheng@port.ac.uk

“Where are you now? I’m on my way!” My eyes were searching for a figure in plain T-shirt and baggy trousers, so I was not sure, until she waved at me, if the woman appearing in a fitting dress and high heels was indeed Hồ Minh Mai.¹ I had lost count of our meetings since our first, in 2009, at Minh Mai’s second-hand bookshop in this narrow alley in southern Taiwan. I could not tell, either, how many times I visited Ngô Xuân Phương at her Vietnamese restaurant, and how many bowls of *phở*, Vietnamese soup noodle, Nguyễn Thị Minh Thu has treated me to whenever I came to see her. What I do know is that after my first meeting with Nguyễn Kim Hồng in 2015, Kim Hồng had completed, together with her husband, filming four undocumented Vietnamese migrant workers who “ran away” from their contract and found agricultural jobs in the mountainous area in central Taiwan. Entitled “See You, Lovable Strangers,” their documentary is now screened at non-commercial venues in Taiwan.

I have been following the evolution of their life course since I first met them eight years ago. Gifted in languages, having a big heart for their fellow migrants, and being critical about how migrant workers and spouses from Southeast Asia are being marginalised by the state and society of Taiwan, they became activists in their own right and had influenced people surrounding them, Taiwanese and Vietnamese alike, in their own way. Pursuing a Ph.D., both Minh Mai and Minh Thu are highly sought after Vietnamese language teachers in an expanding market of rising interest in learning the Vietnamese language. Being a chartered interpreter for law enforcement agencies and a successful businesswoman, Xuân Phương runs

¹ Except for Nguyễn Kim Hồng, all three names are pseudonyms.

a grass-root organization for improving migrants' wellbeing whereby she has established her networking with local politicians. Talented in storytelling, Kim Hồng is an award-winning documentary maker who believes in civic journalism. Adopting a hands-on approach as a down-to-earth activist, she has organized an array of cultural events and social campaigns at which she wore *áo dài* (Vietnamese national costume) to demonstrate her identity.

However "elite"-like they seem to have become, their migration, which has crossed state borders between Taiwan and Vietnam, and their efforts of negotiating with the exclusionary and discriminatory host society for their self-identity is not too different from that of their fellow immigrants. After graduating from university in Vietnam, Minh Mai came to Taiwan as a migrant worker at an electronics factory where there was an ethnic hierarchy stratified by Taiwanese managers at the top, Filipino group leaders in the middle, and Vietnamese assemblers at the bottom. Being a mother of two children, Ming Thu's son is now a university student and her daughter is about to enter university. Yet, when they were at school age, to her great surprise, Minh Thu received notices from their school informing her that the children's entitlement to special assistance to their academic study, because children born to migrant mothers were seen as prone to slow or late development. Xuân Phuong failed a suicide attempt after she was bitterly scolded by her brother-in-law for her alleged negligence towards her mother-in-law's need. Her matchmaker, who became part of this showdown, threatened to confiscate her passport and promised to "deliver" her back to Vietnam should her brother-in-law decide to get rid of her. Kim Hồng was a divorcee whose bitter experiences were shared by the four protagonists featured in her first documentary.

Marginalization and denunciation as experienced by them and other migrant spouses in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, the major destinations for transnational marriage in East Asia, has been substantially studied by researchers across disciplines. It has been argued that victimhood not only prevails in the popular discourse about migrant spouses but also dominates the agenda of academic research. Migrant wives are said to be "pathologised" under the gaze of the *powerful* others, whose discrimination is constituted by ethnicity, class and gender. However, such intensive interest is a strong contrast to the near absence of their Taiwanese husbands in academic studies. The stereotype of their husbands is that they have a low socio-economic standing due to their older ages, having limited education and low incomes, engaging in laborious or agricultural jobs, enduring mental or physical disabilities, or residing in rural areas. As a result, these husbands are said to suffer a "marriage squeeze" where there is a dim prospect for them to get married and this is why they resort to an overseas

supply of potential wives. The stereotype is further reinforced by their use of commercial matchmaking services. Commercial brokering is perceived by the husbands, as well as the society, as a channel for “purchasing” wives, although the majority of the payment goes to matchmakers’ pockets, with a small portion given to the parents of their wives-to-be as a bride price. If popular discourses and beliefs about the husbands as such do reflect truth, then their marriages with foreign women, as well as their lives of maintaining a culturally mixed household, warrants a deep look into our understanding of how people of different class backgrounds react to global mobility.

It is believed that, depending on their socio-economic background, how people react to migration is polarized, a social reality that has been reconciled with since Brexit. The middle-upper class are said to embrace migration for its material and cultural benefits. In contrast, the working class tend to be nationalistic in their political orientation and hostile to migration for its associated job losses, rising crime rates, abuse of benefits and weakening of national identity. Allegedly, the latter do not participate in global migration owing to the lack of global employability and socio-cultural capital and thus do not benefit from its consequential advantages. However, in the case of transnational marriages, it is the underclass men who put themselves right in the centre of global mobility as a consequence of their wives’ migration. Their first meeting with their wives-to-be is often the first overseas trip they undertake on their first passport and arrive in a country where they do not speak the local language and are excited by the exoticness of the sights. Their marriage brings foreign cultures and unfamiliar values into their spousal intimacy and familial relationships. Comprising of a foreign wife, mixed children, and extended local family members, an inter-ethnic household of cultural diversity is thus established. Yet, the majority of the husbands do not seem to be prepared to deal with this intimate diversity in their marriage and family life.

Theories about ethnic relations inform that inter-ethnic marriage is a positive outcome resulting from growing contact, increased mutual understanding, and infusion of different cultures and practices amongst ethnic groups. However, according to our understanding of the relationship between class and globalisation, these husbands are unlikely to embrace, have access, or be exposed to foreign cultures. They have nearly no personal contact with foreign cultures before they set foot in the countries of their future wives. Take Xuân Phuong’s social matchmaking experience for example. Failing to turn down a Taiwanese father’s persistent request of her help with matchmaking, Xuân Phuong took his son to Vietnam for “wife hunting.” “Even when waiting for boarding the plane, I still wasn’t sure if this was a right

thing to do when I saw this country bumpkin – why on earth didn't he try to make himself a bit more presentable!" she lamented. This very uncouth "country bumpkin" appearance speaks volumes of how they fall out of the conventional imagination of people who engage with globalisation. Yet, their transnational marriage, partly facilitated by Taiwan's better-off economy, situates them in the contact zone between two languages and two different sets of norms, cultures, and practices.

Scholarship on transnational marriage has been saturated by studies of the wives' success in, or struggling of, integration. In comparison, there is relatively less knowledge about how the husbands conceive of their inter-ethnic intimacy and how they manage their bi-cultural household. Stereotypes hold that they are alcoholic wife beaters and that they become heavily in debt because of their addiction to gambling. They are said to lack motivations or make no efforts in learning about their wives' cultures. It is believed that their inaction in mediating the testing relationship between the wives and their mothers contributes to the deterioration of their family relationship. However, beyond these stereotypes, little is known about how these men consider themselves in this complex intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity. They are the unintentional participants in globalisation. Yet, we do not know what their strategy is to live with foreign cultures *embodied* by their wives, whether and how they will cross the boundary between the two ethnic categories of themselves and their wives, and how they will engage in the upbringing of their bi-cultural children. It is now time to add this missing piece to the overall picture of globalisation which accommodates those who are conscious actors as well as those who are involved without realizing their participation. Their subjective understanding of their action and inaction will render fresh insights to the operation of the intersectionality of gender, class and ethnicity in the global economy, transnational community, national polity and personal intimacy.