

發展學術特色計畫

跨界、國家與性別：以「越南新娘」為研究對象

子計畫：二

「國家疆界」治理或「種族/階級邊界」維持：

台越婚姻移民政策個案

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李美賢

**The Cultural Boundary of “Good Women” in Vietnam
The Case of and “Vietnamese brides”**

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Abstract

Are those “Vietnamese brides”, who marry Taiwanese as a means to help their families to get a better-off future, “good women” or “bad women”? In Vietnam, a girl from a traditional family believes “sacrificing” her own interest or giving up her own dreams in order to help her parents or brothers is a thing that a “good daughter/sister” should do for her family. For this kind of girls, helping their families is their “debt of the soul.” However, in the eyes of Vietnamese elites, these “Vietnamese brides” are “bad women” for they pursue a kind of marriage that is not based on “true love” but on “economic reasons.” They see this kind of cross-border marriage as “nation’s shame” and should be “prohibited” by law. From the perspective of cultural boundary, this paper argues that the border line of “good women” in Vietnam is drawn by upper-class Vietnamese who see “marriage with true love” as human “pride” and is a prior value that should be adopted by “good women”. And this border line excludes those “good girls” who put family’s interest before her own interest, which means sometimes they even have to marry someone they do not love.

Key words: cultural boundaries, cross-border marriage, ““Vietnamese brides””, “good woman”, “good marriage”

A Conflicting Picture of ““Vietnamese brides””: Are they “good girls” or “bad girls”?

“Vietnamese brides”¹ in the eyes of Vietnamese elites: “They all are bad girls!”²

Here is a true story. Two Vietnamese professors paid Taiwan a visit. They were taken to a Vietnamese food chophouse for a lunch. The chophouse was run by a “Vietnamese bride”. In order to show her hospitality, the owner of this shop invited four other “Vietnamese brides” to help her with preparing foods for the expecting guests. These two Vietnamese scholars had their lunch with unpleasant mood and unhappy faces. Throughout the lunch time, there was no dialogue exchanged between the professors and the brides. Why so? We were told that when these two professors approached the entrance of the chophouse, they overheard the conversation among those “Vietnamese brides”. The language used by the brides and the content of the conversation among the brides stroke both professors that those brides were barbarous and not *bon ton*. They both felt shame to be a Vietnamese at that moment; they therefore hesitant to have any talk with them. And those “Vietnamese brides” didn’t know how to socialize with these two unfriendly fellow countrymen from the high society of their country. So, they all kept quiet.

Here is another story. At a conference meeting held at Ho Chi Ming city, many upper-class Vietnamese participants urged Taiwan’s government to come up with some policies to deal with the “problems” of “Vietnamese brides.” They warned that Taiwan’s population quality is going to be damaged in the long run. They believe those brides are “low” or “incompetent” in terms of human quality. Those brides from their country are the ones from the lowest stratus of their society and value money over love. If more and more “barbarous” girls keep going into Taiwanese families and give births for them, Taiwan’s population quality soon will go bad. Consequently, Taiwan’s pride—the internationally recognized economic performance—will soon be gone too.³ Therefore, Taiwanese government should stop this kind the marriage in order to keep Taiwan’s internationally recognized pride alive.

On the other hand, those elites also urged that the Vietnamese government

¹ “Vietnamese brides” is not a homogeneous group. In this paper, “Vietnamese brides” refers to In this paper, ““Vietnamese brides”” refer to those who were raised in a rural traditional society with limited education and low socio-econ status; who feel obligated to help their parents or families to have a better living by means of marrying “off” to Taiwanese men.

² The stories here were narrated from the notes taken at varied encounters by the author. For privacy concern, no names were named. Pseudo names were used in somewhere when it was necessary.

³ Notes taken at the international conference on *Hoat Dong Kinh Te, Van Hoa Giua Viet Nam Va Dai Loan: Thuc Trang Va Trien Vong* Dec. 19-20, 2002, Ho Chi Minh City.

should take action to “prohibit” this kind of marriage because getting involved in this kind of “instant” marriages per se completely violates the virtue of Vietnamese traditional culture.

“Vietnamese women were picked by Taiwanese men totally at men’s own will. Sixty-something old men marry eighteen-year old girls; Some Vietnamese parents encourage their daughters to marry someone they never know for the sake of a few hundred US dollars. Those phenomena are unfitted to the virtues of Vietnamese traditional culture.” (Nguyen Duy Binh 2002)

And it is commonly believed that those girls’

...Their “love” is built on “money.” Their husbands’ character is not taken into consideration when making their marriage decisions; they would never marry someone who is economically disadvantaged. There is no difference between these brides and the prostitutes. (Interview, Thanh, age, 28; cited from Koichiro Toyama 2001: 86)

One of Vietnamese elites even equated those brides’ marriages to “the shame of the nation”. He believed that those brides have put their nation to shame. Therefore, he urged his government to pass laws to “prohibit” Vietnamese girls from marrying “off” to Taiwan in order to stop “exporting nation’s shame.”

“Vietnamese brides” “debt of the soul”: “We are ‘good girls’; we do these for our family!”

This study believes that “Vietnamese brides” are not homogeneous. There are different reasons and motives behind their marriage decisions. Obviously, the differences among them have not been seriously concerned. They are all stigmatized as “bad girls”, “ones who value money over dignity”, “being rude and barbarous”, etc.

However, are they truly that “bad”? Commonly, a girl from a traditional family believes that “sacrificing” her own interest or giving up her own dreams to help her parents or brothers is a thing that a “good daughter/sister” should do for her family at any cost. Therefore, facing the moral accusation of their motive behind their

cross-border marriages, their instinct and common response is

“We are not bad girls; we do these all for our families!”

The statement, “We are not bad girls; we do these all for our families!”, truly a reflection of those “Vietnamese brides” “inner situation.” For this kind of girls, helping their families is their “debt of the soul.” Similar thoughts have been voiced from many interviews talks of “Vietnamese brides”. (For examples, see Chen 2003: 80-211; Tzeng 2000) And their thoughts (or self-defense talks) have been confirmed by other interview talks (e.g., those who run or work for matchmaking agencies).

“I would never think of coming here. I like to be in Vietnam. But, I could not tolerate the bad situation of my family; I have two younger brothers and one younger sister. They all have no work. I think I should just help my family, help just my mother, then I decided to come here (by marrying a Taiwanese man)”

“...I had a boy-friend back in Vietnam before I got married. (laugh)...I think I must help my family, help my mother, then I came here,..., it is just like this,...

“...I have two younger sisters, two younger brothers, my father ran away and never come back. Marrying someone and live here at least could help my mother in a way, so I decided to have myself being married off here, ...”

Without doubt, these women tried to provide tremendous support to their families through cross-border marriages.

Beside “Vietnamese brides” self-defense talks, their thoughts in fact were confirmed by people at matchmaking agencies. In one sense, Vietnamese women’s “debt of the soul” has been taken advantaged of by those matchmaking agencies. They deeply understood the famine of those families. They made profits out of offering economically- better-off men for those economically-disadvantaged girls to marry in order to fulfill those girls filial duties—to help their families have a better living standard. And they did believe that the motive behind those brides’ cross-border marriage decisions is to pay for their “debt of the soul” and to fulfill their filial duties.

“In the villages, there are some professional and/or individual matchmaking agencies looking for girls who are willing to marry off to foreign countries. ...for these girls, marrying a foreign man is a practical thing—a mean to better off their families.”

“...almost all are for bettering their families”; “...to let their families have a better life...” (an interview, a man who runs a matchmaking industry in Taiwan)

“If you give her US\$100, then that 100 dollars could cover the expenses of her family for one month...for her ‘whole’ family’s expenses...Thus, it could be said, 100%... they will send money home, they definitely will do that...”

Those talks about “Vietnamese brides” above in the section reveal a conflicted picture of “Vietnamese brides.” On the one hand, somebody sees them as bad girls, who are material seekers, are barbarous, value money over love or dignity. However, on the other hand, they are in fact good girls to their families; they always put their families’ interest before their own interests even which means sometimes they even have to marry someone they do not love.

The following sections deal with the conflicting views toward “Vietnamese brides” in the context of the “cultural boundary” of so-called “good woman” in Vietnam.

The Cultural Boundary Marker of “Good Woman” in Vietnam

Cultural border and boundary often connote the border and boundary of a nation, a state or a tribal community, which are clearly identifiable markers. (Barth, 1969 ; Erickson, 1997; Lugo, 1997) ◦ The assumption is that as long as two societies remain separate from each other, their boundaries exist and cultural distinctiveness is expected. It is further assumed that if two societies, identified with two distinct cultures, come in contact, a cultural border is expected to form between them. If an individual from Cultural X is to voluntarily or involuntarily become part of Cultural Y, he/she is expected to literally leave his/her own society, cross the border and enter

a new society. (adopted from Chang 2006)

A cultural boundary refers to the presence of some kind of cultural difference; cultural boundaries are characteristic of all human societies, traditional as well as modern. A border is a social construct that is a political in origin. Across a border power is exercised, as in the political border between two nations. (Erickson 1997: 42) And the cultural boundary makers per se become the identified markers among the members of the “in-group”.⁴

Border by no means a neutral line; it is a symbol of power; it could impose “inclusion” and “exclusion” and to decide “who We are” and “who can/can’t become Us”. Normally, the more privileged and dominant force will actively control the border and keep those non-We from crossing the border line into Our territory. At the same time, the dominant force will uphold their value and adopt it to be the “high culture” for the society as a whole. (Gellner 1983: 48-57; Lee 2006)

The cultural boundary marker of “good woman” in Vietnam is changing with the changes of Vietnamese gender culture. In fact, it is widely believed that Vietnamese women enjoyed higher status than those in other Asian societies did; and that “Vietnamese toleration, even support of female property rights of inheritance, was unique in the history of East Asian classical civilizations.”⁵ However, Vietnamese women’s status gradually decayed since 15th century. Then Confucianism was adopted by the nascent ruler and later became the dominant mainstream doctrine for Vietnamese. (Frenier and Mancini 1996:30-34)

The Development of Woman Status in Vietnam

Before fifteenth century, Vietnamese women enjoyed higher status than those in other Asian countries (e.g., Vietnam society even supported of female property rights of inheritance). That was called “...unique in the history of East Asian classical civilization.” However, Vietnamese woman’s status gradually declined since the adoption of Confucianism in Vietnam society in 15th century. Until 19th century, Vietnam society, followed the steps of other Asian countries like Japan, China and Korea, appreciated man more than woman. The spirit of “thinking highly of men and slighting women” became the mainstream gender culture in Vietnam in the 19th

⁴ However, the concept of cultural boundary is often challenged by multiculturalism. Multiculturalism believes the existence of different cultures blur out the line of the boundary. (Chang 2006) ◦

⁵ The second-wave feminist movement’s main argument is that previous gender role differentiation is the product of social construction. See Kerber (1988:9-39)

century (then the Nguyen dynasty) ⁶(Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Hnam Tuyet 1978: 48; Huynh Dinh Te 1962: 97). The adoption of Confucian ideals restricted the hitherto comparatively free life of women, first of the upper classes, and progressively of society in general in Vietnam. (Frenier and Mancini 1996:30) Until 20th century, Vietnamese women's status is still low. "Three submissions" and "four virtues" were still the criteria of defining a good womanhood.

Under the command of socialist ideal, woman status improved rapidly during 1920s and 1940s in Vietnam. In this period, traditional gender culture was under attacked from the Government. The title of Marr's (1981) book *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* closely reflected the reality of woman rights development in Vietnam in that era. In that era, women who had been deeply trapped by traditional values were encouraged to liberate themselves through abandoning outdated beliefs and playing new roles in society. For example, nascent women movement organizations like Women's Labour Study Association (WLSA) urged Vietnamese women "not to spend their time only in the kitchen and on playing cards, but to join the wider struggles." (Jayawardena 1994:204-205) Books and articles were also published to inspire and educate women to liberate themselves. As Marr (1981: 218) noted: "one-sided chastity, arranged marriages and female occupational and educational restrictions would have to be tossed out of the window along with the more obvious "three submissions" and "four virtues"; "in contemporary Vietnamese social conditions, woman must live not only for the family, but also for herself and for society." (1981: 231; quoted from Jayawardena 1994: 205)

However, there was another social force which tried to keep "four virtues" as the key elements in defining Vietnam's good womanhood in the industrializing Vietnam. (Jayawardena 1994: 211)⁷ In fact, this effort of trying to keep Confucian's "four virtues" in the value system of Vietnam society had a profound impact on establishing the criteria for defining the so-called "good" womanhood in Vietnam.

The Cultural Boundary Marker of "Good Woman" in the era of *Doi Moi*: abiding by "four virtues" and "being knowledgeable"

In each period, there is a particular criterion for measuring ideal women. In the

⁶ Confucianism here usually refers to Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucian virtues and values are summarized by Tu Wei-ming as: loyalty to state, filial piety, purity of mind, selflessness, dedication, sacrifice (1991:750), brotherly affection, conjugal harmony, trust in friends, modesty, benevolence, learning (1991:756), moral rectitude (1991:757), political unity, and social harmony (1991:769).

⁷ Goodkind's (1995) study noted that gender inequality in Vietnam has been rising since reunification.

old days, the criteria for an ideal woman were “Three submissions” and “four virtues.” In the time of industrialization-modernization, it is commonly agreed that the qualities of “three submissions” are no longer suitable to today’s Vietnamese women. However, “four virtues” “still constitute the moral standards which should be inherited and developed by Vietnamese women” (Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002: 6) Then the Vietnam National Committee for Women’s Progress promoted a new concept titled “Four virtues in the time of industrialization-modernization” (Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002: 4-5):

1. Industry: Vietnamese women work hard, diligently and dexterously.
2. Appearance: Grace, courtesy and intelligence constitute main elements for female leaders to solve successfully all affairs.
3. Speech: Tact, patience, sweetness and flexibility help female leaders have clear view, increasing their powers of persuasion and the effectiveness of work.
4. Behavior: Vietnamese women are traditionally altruistic, kind-hearted, generous and capable of showing concerns for the welfare of other people.

In response to an interview question of “In the present process of industrialization, modernization, what additional conditions do women need to make a better contribution to society?”, a woman elite⁸, who dedicated to improving Vietnamese women’s welfare, provided the following view:

First of all, the woman should be knowledgeable, i.e., know how to organize the family, and understand conjugal psycho-physiology. Secondly, she should have a good health, should be altruistic. Unselfishness will make her more generous and she will place the community’s interest over the ‘female common feelings.’ The most important thing is that in any circumstances, the four virtues should always remain the standards women strive for.”⁹

In other words, in an era of industrialization and modernization, those traditional values of “four virtues” were still adopted to define a “good womanhood” by Vietnam society. In addition to “four virtues”, “an ideal woman is the one who lives for her family but doesn’t give up social work.” (quoted from Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002:3)

As in other societies, with the development of industrialization, women in Vietnam are not liberated from the “virtues” of traditional values. Even though

⁸ Ms. Nguyen Thi Lap, who in 2002 chaired the Women’s Union in Ho Chi Minh City.

⁹ Nguyen Thi Lap’s interview talk with a correspondent of *Thanh Nien (Youth)*. (see Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 2002: 5-8)

women might no longer be hidden from the public and woman's focus no longer only was her home, this does not necessarily mean that woman has been liberated. In fact, they could further be trapped by higher expectation of them to fulfilled more obligations from the society. (Mohamed and Husna 1999; Stivens 1988; Dube 1997; Jejeebhoy 1995) As Le Thi Nham Tuyet, a leading female elite said, an ideal woman in *doi moi* era "*is the one who lives for her family but doesn't give up social work.*" (Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002: 3)

Accordingly, in the modern time of Vietnam, women are still required to abide by Confucian's "four virtues" and are expected to be "unselfish", "generous", "altruistic" and to "put others interests before her own interest." In addition to abiding by "four virtues", to be an ideal woman, she must also be "knowledgeable." Therefore, "'four virtues' plus 'knowledgeability' is established as the markers of "good woman's" cultural boundary. Whoever could behave within this boundary, she will be recognized by the state as a "good women"; and whoever could not behave within this boundary culture, she will be excluded from the circle of "good" women and be denounced as a "bad women."

"Good Women's Good Marriage": Non-arranged and Based on Romantic True Love

"...To enjoy concord in matrimonial life, marriage must be based on genuine love... The law on Marriage and the Family aims at emancipating women, that is freeing half of society. The emancipation of women must be carried out simultaneously with the extirpation of feudal and bourgeois in men." (Ho Chi Minh's statement on the debate of 1959's Law on Marriage and the Family; adopted from Eisen 1984: 180-181)

In order to eliminate feudal elements from Vietnamese society, to reform marriage and weddings was a prior agenda in the 1950s. The Marriage and Family Law of 1959 ended arranged marriages and polygamy and uphold the value of gender equity. (Wisensale 1999: 603-604) The young socialist and revolutionary state desired to eliminate the feudal marriage regime and to replace it with "a free and progressive marital regime"; and the new regime would produce "happy, democratic, and harmonious families, in which all members were united, loved each other, and helped each other in a progressive manner." (Vietnam, Government Gazette 1960:54; cited from Malarney 2002: 149)

A key component in this reform effort was to eliminate arranged marriage. The rationale behind this reform was that “forced marriage” or “arranged marriage” produced a number of negative social consequences. For examples, it provided parents with arbitrary reasons (i.e., horoscopic inauspiciousness or inadequate brideprice) for preventing the marriages their children desired; it often stuck children into socially desirable but unhappy marriages; “arranged marriage adversely affected the education of children as well as public order and morality.” (Malarney 2002: 151) These statements imply that, a non-arranged marriage is an agreement that's entered into with best intentions and highest hopes, its outcome should be more positive.

In other words, since then “romantic love” (*tin h yeu*) was seen as a prerequisite of a marriage and was the value behind illegalizing arranged marriages. “Love” was upheld as a necessary component of every new marriage. “Couples say that to marry, a couple should love each other (yeu nhau)”¹⁰ (Malarney 2002: 153) As a 1962 government pamphlet (*Struggle Against Bad Practices and Corrupt Customs, Reform Old Habits and Build the New Ways*) declared—“the aim of the marital system was to ‘build happiness on the foundation of love and mutual help’”; when a couple would like marry each other (Vietnam, Government 1962: 14; quoted from Malarney 2002: 153) Thus, Vietnam Government then defined that a “good” marriage is a marriage of a couple who understand each other and love each other and marry each other at his/her own wish. And that marked the boundary line of a “good” marriage.¹¹

The Cultural Boundary of “Good Women” and “Class”

It is commonly agreed that the younger generation of Vietnamese enjoy greater degree of freedom in choosing their marriage partners. However, arranged marriages tended to still be common in the villages, as some studies indicated (Malarney 2002: 151-152) It is noted that “unarranged marriages” were enjoyed only by those who live

¹⁰ A discourse behind this idea of the relationship between love and marriage was that there is but one person in life one can truly love and marry. Many people will claim that their spouse is that person, but this idea is also seen in popular stories of unrequited love, such as the high status woman whose parents forbid her to marry the low status man, or in comments by the unhappily married that it was their “fate” to not marry the one they truly loved. This singular nature and experience of love is particularly focused on women as a good woman should love only one man in her life. (quoted from Malarney 2002: 153)

¹¹ However, the nascent government sometimes provided some mixed signals on nonarranged marriage for their people. For example, in a 1961 government pamphlet declared: “*Those marriages built on the foundations of mutual understanding and passionate love will bring young people immeasurable happiness. Saying that, however, does not mean that children need not come to an agreement with their parents on their marriage. On the contrary, they should and perhaps must reach a consensus with their parents or others before marrying. Still, the final decision is their’s.*” This truly causes some confusion on Government’s real stand on this issue.

in metropolitan areas, those who have higher level of education, those who have highly educated parents, and those who live away from their hometown. (Malarney 2002: ??) For them, “love” was truly the most important thing in marriages. This line of thought on the relationship between love and marriage conformed to the ideal of marriage reform promoted by the nascent revolutionary government.

However, to practice this kind of freedom in the rural agricultural families (people in such a family have limited education and are economically disadvantaged¹²) could mean to arouse a painful family revolution. Like an elderly woman said that there was no way imaginable she would have allowed her children to find their own marriage partners.” (quoted from Malarney 2002: 152) Most parents like her believed that as the children were young, inexperienced, and led by blind love, they were incapable of making decisions for themselves.

“They are still very young and inexperienced. How can a girl of that age be expected to read people’s hearts to see if she is making the right choice? You keep saying she should simply marry whom she loves but you know the saying ‘To love too much is to lose one’s head, then once awakened you see that people are mocking you.’” (translated and quoted in Nguyen Khac Vien and Huu Ngoc, n.d.: 527; adopted from Pham Van Bich 1999: 108)

On the other hand, predicaments of this kind of families put them in a situation of being hard to survive. Under this kind of situation, they are in fact “not qualified”

¹²

Table 1 : The Education Levels of ““Vietnamese brides””

Education Levels	Numbers/person
Illiterate	1
Elementary	4651
Junior high	1486
Senior high	253
College/University	8
Graduate School	0

Source: Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Ho Chi Minh City, 2003

Table : The Occupation of before-married ““Vietnamese brides””, 2003

Occupations	Number/person	%
Intellectual	0	0
Agriculture	37	5
Industry labor	5	1
Business	8	1
Parents’ helper at home	746	94
總計：	796	100

Source: Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Ho Chi Minh City, 2003

to pursue the “genuine love”, (the kind of love that their great founding father, Ho Chi Minh told them every Vietnamese should pursue) given very limited free time and chances they could encounter. (Lee 2005)

The Logic behind Marriage Decisions of Rural/Peripheral/Traditional Women: To Achieve Social Mobility through Marriage

An empirical study on “who decided children’s marriages”, conducted in 1990 in some Vietnam rural provinces, suggested that it was rare that the children made decisions for themselves (only 3-4% of the respondents). In other words, freedom of marriage as a legal stipulation remained a far cry from reality then. (Pham Van Bich 1999: 127) Why so? It is believed that, backed up by traditions, parents have not given up their authority without a fight; on the other hand, filial piety was still the cornerstone of morality and it led logically to an absolute obedience to superiors (parents, seniors). The crucial implication of parent authority and filial piety here is that “children were forbidden to judge parents’ behavior; they should unconditionally accept that parents were always right.” (Pham Van Bich 1999: 109) Whoever did not agree with their parents’ arrangement, they had only a couple of options: either to run away from home or to commit suicide.¹³ (Pham Van Bich 1999: 109) Tragedy did happen sometimes. The popular folk story of “*A wedding without the nuptial night/ Dam cuoi khong dem tan hon*) is one of that.

A wedding without the nuptial night told a sad story of a child who had turned her back on her parents. It narrates that a girl, Yen, rejected her parents arrangement and had to run away from home to protect her love with labeling herself as a “filially impious child” (Nguyen Tuan Mihn 1992).¹⁴

¹³ However, any child doing such a thing was regarded as being “filially impious” according to the traditional Confucian norm, and was renounced by the family (a very severe form of punishment). (Pham Van Bich 1999: 109)

¹⁴ “A wedding without the nuptial night” narrates a story about a girl, Yen. Yen, a beautiful girl, already has a boyfriend who was a former classmate and is in military service now. However, a rich, respectable family in the village asks a go-between to approach her parents, and negotiate about an arranged marriage between Yen and their only son. As a result, Yen’s parents suggest she should marry the son. The reason is as they put it:

“a girl’s youth is short-lived, she cannot wait for her boyfriend indefinitely; moreover, what would her boyfriend bring her materially? Love cannot guarantee any good standard of living. Meanwhile the family that wants to have her is rich and respectable...”

However, Yen shows no interest in the arranged match. But her parents wants her to obey as the traditional norms ask her to. Finally, Yen is forced to go through with the wedding ceremony. However, on the night of the wedding, she suddenly disappears, leaving only a brief message which says that she has to come to terms with the label “filially impious child”: she runs away to protect her love, and asks for her parents’ forgiveness. (Nguyen Tuan Minh 1992)

The conflict between the mother and the daughter in this story in fact reflected the tug of war between “dignity/true love” and “debt of the soul” in the daughter’s inner struggles. For the mother of the poor family, “love cannot guarantee any good standard of living”; she wished her daughter to marry rich man in order to escape the famine that has been looming large over her life. It’s truly a great suffer to let down one’s caring and loving mother.

A wedding without the nuptial night is popular and well known because Yen’s spirit and deed of (passive) resistance is rare to happen in traditional poor Vietnamese families. Girls raised in a poor and traditional family are used to abiding by “three submissions” and “four virtues”, have internalized the value of “the slightness of being a woman”, take “sacrificing her own interest for the betterment of her family/parents” as a natural way of life. (Lee 2003) To better the life of their families, of their parents and of their brothers’ is their natural obligation, like a “debt of the soul”.¹⁵ It seems to be true: “When a great doctrine [Confucianism], even if it be false, lasts for tens and thousands of years it turns into reality itself. And people feel an automatic revulsion when a woman not conforming to the exact wording of the doctrine appears. (Fukuzaw Yukichi (1853-1901) (Kiyooka, trans. & ed. 1988: 26)

Conclusion: “Class” matters

Paying a closer look at those “Vietnamese brides” who shouldering “debt of the soul”, we find that those girls in fact behave within the cultural boundary of “good woman” in Vietnam. Without receiving sufficient education, they may behave or talk gracelessly, they however are altruistic, kind-hearted, generous and capable of showing concerns for the welfare of other people. Those are important markers of the cultural boundary of Vietnam’s “good woman”. Therefore, they no doubt are “good women/daughters” to their families/parents.

However, in the eyes of Vietnamese elites, “Vietnamese brides” graceless appearance and lack of knowledge and education has crossed the border of upper-classes’ cultural boundary of “good woman”. As a Vietnamese woman from upper-class society who married a upper-class Taiwanese said:

“My mother wouldn’t dare tell anybody that I married a Taiwanese. People back in my hometown would think that I marry someone who if not old then

¹⁵ Setsuko notes that Confucian’s value of “filial piety” is changing along with the development of economic renovation in Vietnam. (2002) However, more further and details studies on that are needed in order to approach a real picture of that.

must be crippled...that would make my family/parents 'lose face'”

As a previous statement made by a high-ranked professor at a prestigious University in Ho Chi Minh City, denouncing the Vietnam-Taiwan cross-border marriages phenomena as a “shame” of Vietnam state. Why they call these girls’ marriage a kind of “shame”? For Vietnamese elites, a marriage without true love and especially based on material concern is a marriage without “dignity”—for one sells her own soul to beg for easy money. From the perspective of the elite of Vietnam’s high society, this kind of marriages should be banned.

Are those “Vietnamese brides”, who marry Taiwanese as a means to help their families to get a better-off future, “good women” or “bad women”? In Vietnam, a girl from a traditional family believes “sacrificing” her own interest or giving up her own dreams in order to help her parents or brothers is a thing that a “good daughter/sister” should do for her family. For this kind of girls, helping their families is their “debt of the soul.” However, in the eyes of Vietnamese elites, these ““Vietnamese brides”” are “bad women” for they pursue a kind of marriage that is not based on “true love” but on “economic reasons.” They see this kind of cross-border marriage as “nation’s shame” and should be “prohibited” by law. From the perspective of cultural boundary, this paper argues that the border line of “good women” in Vietnam is drawn by upper-class Vietnamese who see “marriage with true love” as human “pride” and is a prior value that should be adopted by “good women”. And this border line excludes those “good girls” who put family’s interest before her own interest, which means sometimes they even have to marry someone they do not love.

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