

The Commodification of International Marriages: Cross-border Marriage Business in Taiwan and Viet Nam¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we attempt to place the issue of international marriage in an institutionalized profit-oriented social context, which is described as “the commodification process”. The starting point included measuring the scale of the international marriage market in Taiwan.

Socio-demographic change in Taiwan and Viet Nam has created a market for profit-pursuing marriage agents. Agents scattered in different social spheres have gradually linked to form a profitable industry. Two different industrial organization types have emerged in the matchmaking process to meet different market constraints. As the cross-border marriage market matures, more and more people enter the market, and competitive price, good quality and delivery on time become the necessary conditions for success. In this competitive process, female migrant partners become increasingly commodified to conform to the new situation. They are required to accept reduced prices, to be “good enough” to marry and to be married when there is demand. The social networks of individuals are gradually transformed by agents in pursuit of profit.

INTRODUCTION

International labour migration has received significant research attention over the past decade, with the chief focus being on the hiring of workers for specific jobs over set time periods. One aspect of this research has been the migration

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of female workers on the basis of social networks. Interpersonal relations based on family, friendship, and communal ties have supported much of the transnational flow of labour (Lim and Oishi, 1996).

In contrast, family-forming migration has attracted much less attention. For women, migration for the purpose of family reunification still accounts for a large share of movement (ILO, 1999), yet a significant and growing proportion of female migration is spurred by cross-border marriage. In Asia, Japan has had mass immigrant marriage partners coming from the Philippines, Korea, China, Taiwan, and other South-East Asian countries since the 1980s (Sato, 1989). In 1970, only 2,108 female migrant partners arrived in Japan. However, the number increased rapidly in the 1980s, from 4,386 in 1980 to 20,026 in 1990. Since then, about 21,000 female migrant partners have come to Japan every year (MHW, 1995). Similarly, Taiwan has experienced a net immigration of more than 160,000 female migrant partners for Taiwanese men and the annual rate has increased in recent years, reaching 34,291 in 2000. Cross-border marriage migration in Asia, like international labour migration, has become an important part of the globalized migration stream (Cahill, 1990; Penny and Khoo, 1996; Sung, 1990).

Many existing studies view this issue from a Western perspective, discussing questions of assimilation, sociocultural change, and social integration (Johnson and Warren, 1994). Some researchers have analysed the issue in the context of labour migration and gender relations (Piper, 1997), while further studies on migrant partners focuses on the importance of ethnicity in promoting cross-border marriages (Lievens, 1999; Brown, 1996).

As is also the case in the literature on international labour migration, however, the migrant agencies – which link the micro-level participants in the process – have been studied much less. In an earlier study, Fawcett (1989) pointed out that knowledge on topics covered under the migrant agency activities category is weakest among research literature on various linkages in migration systems. And although the term “mail-order bride” has long since become part of Western lexicon, little academic research on this topic has been reported (Glodava and Onizuka, 1994; Cahill, 1990), despite the fact that cross-border marriage migration has meant that:

...groups of recruiters, lawyers, agents, organizers, travel agents and intermediaries of various kinds, often comprising complex networks linking origin and destination, have become important gatekeepers in global immigration processes, both legal and illegal (Hugo, 1996: 109).

The roles of these essential actors have been little studied or understood.

International marriages generally take one of two forms: arranged marriage and marriage brokered through ethnic ties.² Whether mediated by commercial institutions or personal ties, active negotiating channels between female migrant

partners and grooms are indispensable. In this context, this paper looks at the role of mediating agencies in a specific example of cross-border marriages, the process of “recruiting” Vietnamese female migrant partners for migration to Taiwan, and analyses the growing cross-border “immigration industry” involving participants from both countries.

The data for our study came from two sources: two years of fieldwork with the persons involved in the cross-border marriage process from August 1999 to January 2001 in Viet Nam and Taiwan – the fieldwork entailed conducting in-depth interviews with six agencies, five Taiwanese business people in Viet Nam, and six Taiwanese and Vietnamese officials; and one survey using in-depth interviews with Vietnamese female migrant partners in November 1999 in Taiwan. Fifty-five female Vietnamese migrant partners were interviewed in July 1999 in Taipei, using questions modified from “A General Survey of Social Change in Taiwan, 1998”, directed by Professor Ying-hwa Chang (1999).

We argue that the process of international marriage and related activities is gradually being transformed to enhance profits to various intermediaries, which we call the process of commodification.³ Once cross-border marriage has begun, the mediating agencies arise to satisfy the demands from Taiwanese grooms. Structural factors in Taiwan and Viet Nam create a lucrative economic niche for agencies dedicated to promoting international migration for profit, which, over time, institutionalizes channels to promote international migration (Massey et al., 1993: 450-451). In the first part of the paper we will describe the scale of the international marriage market in Taiwan, paying attention to the socio-demographic factors stimulating the formation of this market. We then discuss the industrial structures of the migration market. Finally, we consider the social impacts of the increasing competition within the cross-border marriage market, and explore possible future scenarios.

SCALE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE MARKET IN TAIWAN

The number of migrant partners entering Taiwan from China and South-East Asia increased steadily from the 1990s (see Table 1). Although the numbers in Table 1 include male migrant partners, they make up less than 10 per cent of the total. This development goes hand-in-hand with Taiwan’s mass economic investment in China and South-East Asia since the late 1980s (Wang and Hsiao, 2002: 347-353). We contend that globalized capital investment from Taiwan indirectly catalysed the development of the international marriage market.

Taiwan’s mass capital investment in Viet Nam began in the early 1990s. The Taiwan Business Organization Viet Nam has around 2,000 members, mostly small- and medium-sized enterprises. Such mass investment inevitably brings

social influences to hosting countries, and cross-border marriage is one such impact. Table 1 shows that female migrant partners from Viet Nam have become the single largest group among source countries in South-East Asia.

TABLE 1
RESIDENCE VISAS ISSUED FOR MIGRANT PARTNERS

Year	Country							Subtotal
	Thailand and Myanmar	Malaysia	Philippines	Indonesia	Singapore	China*	Viet Nam	
1994	870	55	1,183	2,247	14	7,885	530	12,784
1995	1,301	86	1,757	2,409	52	9,180	1,969	16,754
1996	1,973	73	2,085	2,950	18	9,349	4,113	20,561
1997	2,211	96	2,128	2,464	50	8,951	9,060	24,960
1998	1,173	102	544	2,331	85	10,528	4,644	19,407
1999	1,184	106	603	3,643	12	13,046	6,790	25,384
2000	1,259	65	487	4,381	3	15,769	12,327	34,291
Total	9,971	583	8,787	20,425	234	74,708	39,433	154,141

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bureau of Consular Affairs, various years; for 1994-1998 data, see Wang 2001; for 1999-2000 data see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.boca.gov.tw/announce/index.html>.

*The total number of Chinese migrant partners from November 1988 to February 2001 was 88,411. See MAC, http://www.mac.gov.tw/statistic/ass_ip/appm2t1.htm, accessed 16 April, 2001.

Table 2 presents the cross-border marriage statistics from 1998 to 2001. During that time, the number of household-registered cross-border marriages doubled, and the number of female migrant partners increased more than 120 per cent.⁴ Most of these international marriages are between Taiwanese men and female migrant partners. In 2000, the ratio of female migrant partners to total marriages in Taiwan was 9.5 per cent; that is, almost one out of every ten marriages involved cross-border female migrant partners marrying Taiwanese men. This figure does not include female migrant partners from the People's Republic of China. If Chinese female migrant partners are included, the ratio could be as high as 19 per cent.⁵

Cross-border marriages may be the result of an introduction arranged through friends or relatives, or through matchmaker agencies. In our interviews, 23 per cent of cross-border marriages were brokered through agents, and 62 per cent of couples were introduced by friends or relatives. In other words, one out of every five Vietnamese female migrant partners from our sample was channelled

to Taiwan via mediating agencies. However, this may be an underestimate. A Taiwanese diplomat working on female migrant partners' entry visa interviews said that most of them were "trained" to reply to questions correctly by the agents before the interview. When we were in the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Ho Chi Minh City, the office was crowded with female migrant partners waiting to be interviewed; Vietnamese agents shuttled between them teaching them how to reply.

TABLE 2
CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES IN TAIWAN

Year	1998	1999	2000
Number of total marriage couples	140,010	175,905	183,028
Number of marriages with a foreigner	10,413	14,670	21,339
Growth rate (yearly based)	-	40.88%	45.46%
Female migrant partners	8,625	12,717	19,062
Ratio of migrant partners to total marriage couples	1:14	1:12	1:8.5
Ratio of female migrant partners to total marriage couples	1:16	1:14	1:9.5

Source: Ministry of the Interior (MOI), Republic of China, 1999b, 2000, 2001a.

In addition, the category of "relatives and friends" must be carefully interpreted because an important mechanism to recruit female migrant partners to marry overseas is through the female migrant partners' "friends and relatives", who may be employed by migratory agencies.

In 2000, the price paid by a Taiwanese for a successfully arranged marriage was about NT\$300,000 (at that time, about US\$9,100). If agency-brokered marriages represent one-fifth of the total, the cross-border marriage market that year was potentially worth US\$46 million. International marriage has created a booming immigration industry in Taiwan and Viet Nam.

Because family-forming migration occurs when socio-demographic factors in the emigrant and immigrant countries are changing, we need to examine the supply and demand dimensions of this market.

SUPPLY OF FEMALE VIETNAMESE MIGRANT PARTNERS

In 1999, the Associated Press reported that in Viet Nam's Tien Giang province, the number of female migrant partners marrying foreigners had increased

steadily. Between 1995 and 1999, 1,464 women married foreigners. About 38 per cent of the grooms were ethnic Vietnamese-American, while 27 per cent were Taiwanese. Another report in a Vietnamese newspaper (*Sai Gon Giay Phong Nhat Bao*, 1999) showed that about half of the women marrying foreigners went to Taiwan from Ho Chi Minh City (Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh – TP HCM hereafter). These reports are indicative of the Vietnamese double marriage squeeze: young women in Viet Nam face a deficit of male partners, and overseas Vietnamese men face a shortage of Vietnamese women (Goodkind, 1997: 108).

The socio-demographic background of these Vietnamese female migrant partners and Taiwanese men is shown in Table 3. Vietnamese female migrant partners are about twelve years younger than the Taiwanese grooms, and have had little education beyond six-year elementary school. About half the women come from rural areas, and a quarter are ethnic Chinese (Wang, 2001a: 110).

Population growth, war, and excess male migration left young Vietnamese women in the 1970s and 1980s with a severe deficit of male partners (Goodkind, 1997: 108). The 1989 census showed that the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) was 24.5 for men and 23.2 for women. Goodkind suggests that if there were no gender imbalance, the SMAM differential would be 1.8 years (1997: 113). The average age of married females was 23.9 (General Statistical Office, 2000: 16).

If we look at the gender ratios at peak marrying ages in 1999, the 25- to 29-year-old group had a 0.99 ratio, but the 20- to 24-year-old group had a 0.94 ratio. To get a better indication of marriage opportunities, one can use the ratio of the number of men aged 25-34 and women aged 20-29; in Viet Nam this was only 0.92 in 1999 (General Statistical Office, 2000: 14). In demographic terms, this is commonly known as a “marriage squeeze”. Before the *doi moi* policy,⁶ the gender in surplus had been forced to delay or forego marriage, but in the 1990s marriage to overseas Vietnamese men and foreigners provided an alternative path for Vietnamese women.

In addition to demographic causes, economic differences between the two countries provide another important reason for Vietnamese women to marry Taiwanese. A survey by the Vietnamese Female Association, Ho Chi Minh City found that 67.5 per cent of young women marrying foreigners have economic motivations (*Sai Gon Giay Phong Nhat Bao*, 1999). It is probable that young women from rural areas are more likely to marry for economic reasons. When asked where the young women he manages are from, one Vietnamese agent said “almost all of them are from the countryside”. Another Vietnamese agent said that their young women are brought from rural areas by their parents. Economic motivations seem very important in their decision to marry overseas. A Taiwanese agent now permanently residing in Viet Nam reported that “most

young women are from Can Tho, a poor area. Their family members are either poor or unemployed. They want to marry a good husband to improve their living conditions, or through this channel to work in Taiwan.”

Viet Nam is one of the poorest countries in the world: its GNP per capita in 1998 was only US\$300 (EIU, 2000). Because economic issues at least partially drive their enthusiasm for cross-border marriage, once their decision to marry “out” is taken, Vietnamese women want to do it as soon as possible. One Vietnamese agent observed that “the girls are getting clever. They will register as a candidate for arranged marriage at different agencies, and within one month they will find someone to marry. Maximum three months.” To cater to this enthusiasm, profit-pursuing agencies play a more active role in matchmaking these women, including offering accommodations to those from rural areas.⁷

After women are accommodated in TPHCM, they are prepared for “the market”, including learning how to present themselves and being provided with better meals. As one agent told us “the newly arrived girls from the country will not attract you at all because they are too black and too slim. I have to dress them up before they meet the future grooms.” An agent believed that if a woman is not chosen by a Taiwanese man within three months, it will be almost impossible for her to find a marriage partner. According to a Taiwanese magazine report, if a woman living in accommodations provided by the agency is not able to marry out within three months, she will be sent back to her home and asked to reimburse all costs incurred (*China Times Weekly*, 1999: 52).

DEMAND FOR VIETNAMESE MIGRANT PARTNERS IN TAIWAN

After 1995, the number of Vietnamese female migrant partners migrating to Taiwan surpassed the number from other countries. The number of female migrant partners from Viet Nam has since increased steadily every year, with the exception of 1998, which was viewed in folk religion as a bad year to marry. This was also reflected in the total number of marriages recorded in Taiwan for that year – 140,010 – a 17 per cent decline from the previous year (MOI, 1999a). In 2000, according to statistics from the TECO in Ho Chi Minh City, nearly 14,000 couples registered for residence visa interviews. The growing demand for Vietnamese female migrant partners forced TECO to change its visa-issuing interview process. Before March 2000 all applicants were interviewed by TECO officials couple by couple, and could expect to wait three months for the interview. Complaints of long waits began to surface and people in Taiwan lobbied legislators to press the administrative offices to quicken the process. TECO decided to change the interview procedure. Now they interview married couples group by group, with about 50 couples sitting together in a hall to answer standardized questions; fifty couples may now be processed in about three hours. This change clearly demonstrates Taiwan’s urgent demand for Vietnamese female migrant partners.

TABLE 3
 SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF FEMALE VIETNAMESE
 MIGRANT PARTNERS AND TAIWANESE MEN

	1996		1997		1998		1999 (Jan-May)		2000 (Jan-May)		Subtotal	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Education	7.9	6.3	8.2	6.4	8.6	6.6	8.8	6.6	9.0	6.3	8.5	6.3
Age	35.7	25.0	36.0	24.6	35.9	23.9	36.3	23.8	36.6	23.2	36.1	23.9
Number	3,351	3,351	4,432	4,432	5,037	5,037	2,408	2,408	3,207	3,207	18,435	18,435

Source: Compiled from TECO, various years.

Before 1995, most female migrant partners in Taiwan were from Indonesia, and most of these female migrant partners were ethnic Hakka Chinese who married Hakka males in Taiwan. Chinese (People's Republic of China) female migrant partners mostly married "mainlander" Taiwanese, while Vietnamese female migrant partners married ethnic Minnan Taiwanese.⁸ The percentage of "mainlanders" marrying Vietnamese female migrant partners is only 2.4 per cent, significantly lower than its population share, while the Minnan share is about 10 per cent higher than its population distribution, about 81 per cent (Wang, 2001a: 113).

The average age of a groom is 36 years, and their educational attainment is not high, with an average of less than the nine years of compulsory education. The occupational distribution of grooms is centred in manual work, cab driving, self-employment, and farming. Further, most of the respondents are from low-income areas. The socio-economic status of these grooms, then, in terms of education, occupational prestige, and place of residence is comparatively low. In Taiwan, this disadvantaged social background makes finding domestic partners difficult. In terms of demographic structure, Ministry of the Interior Statistics (MOI, 1999c) indicate that an unmarried male between age 30 and 39 has only a 50 per cent probability of marrying a girl from the same cohort in 1998.

Another factor influencing Taiwanese males' marriage probability is their relative economic power in the labour market. Cai constructed an index to show that the relative marriage status of Taiwanese males in the marriage market from 1971 to 1991 was declining, which resulted from the increased participation of the female labour force in the labour market (1996: 132-133). This declining relative economic power, along with lower social status, further decreases the chance of marriage. For this group in particular, finding an overseas bride may be a reasonable option. Globalization provides the opportunity.⁹

INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATION OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES

In their role as intermediaries between overseas female migrant partners and Taiwanese grooms, agencies have increasingly dominated the cross-border marriage market in the past decade. With the prospect of high earnings from arranged marriage activities, the number of agents has grown, creating a vast industry.

Figure 1, derived from our fieldwork observations, shows the cross-border marriage industrial organization. The arrows in the figure represent the relationships between players at different layers in the hierarchy. Single-headed arrows indicate a relationship in which only the player higher in the hierarchy is able to choose business partners but not vice versa; double-headed arrows signify that both players have equal freedom to choose partners.

The figure shows that the Governments in Taiwan and Viet Nam monitor all activities of the players in the migration process. Unlike their response to international labour migration, however, the two Governments do not play an active role in promoting or inhibiting cross-border marriages. The officials interviewed from both sides all claimed that people must be free to choose whom to marry, and that government should not interfere in the process.

Governments do, however, continue to pay attention to the problems of illegal trafficking. Viet Nam's representative in Taipei, Chu Cong Phung, told us "the Vietnamese Government does not encourage nor discourage Vietnamese girls marrying Taiwanese, but we firmly fight against any women trafficking". To date, neither Government has recognized the legal status of cross-border marriage agencies. Since the state's role in this process is limited, our discussion will focus on the intermediaries in the market.

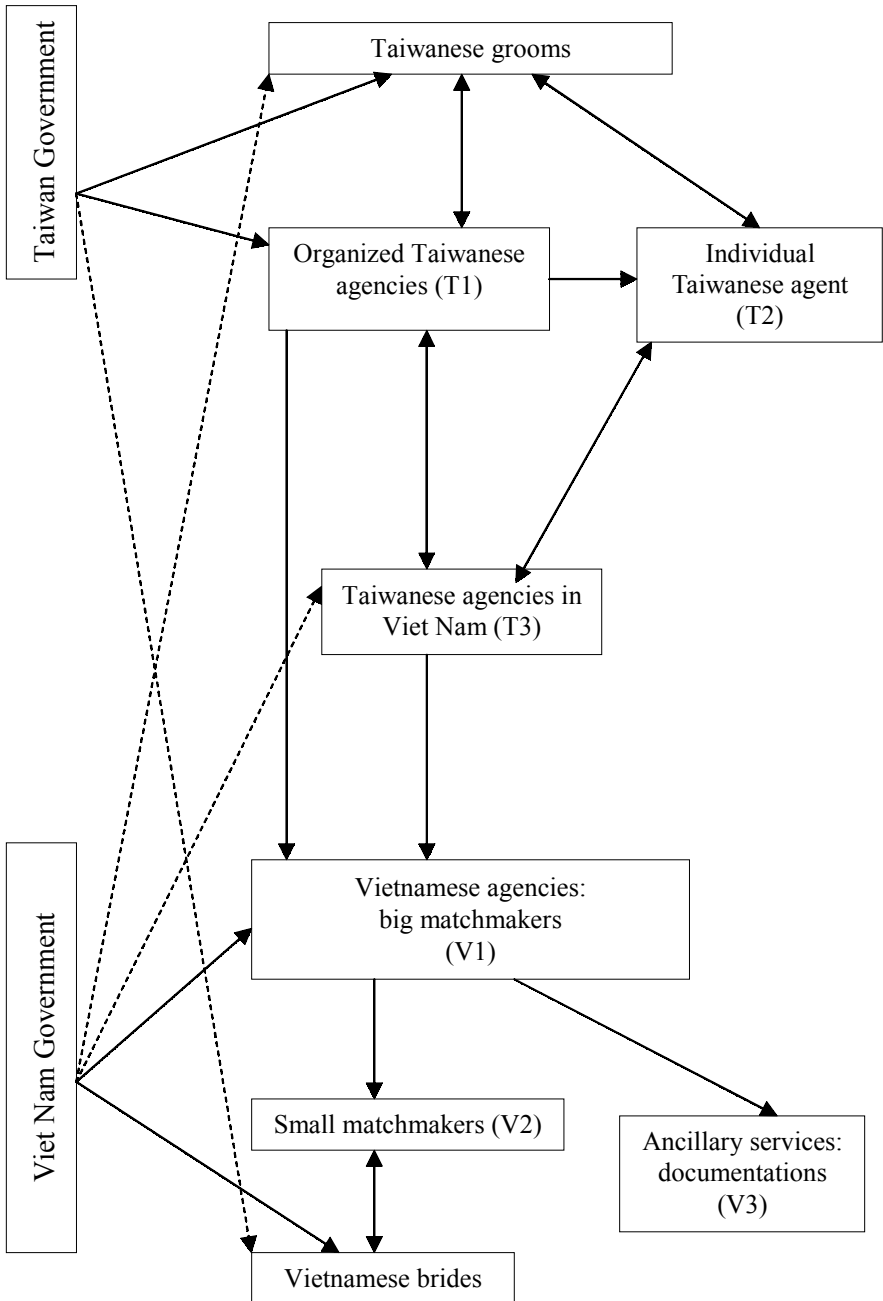
Many different kinds of intermediaries provide international migration services to prospective female migrant partners and grooms. It involves agencies geographically located in Taiwan (T1, T2 in Figure 1) and Viet Nam (T3, V1, V2, V3). In Taiwan there are two types of matchmaking agencies: the organized agency (T1) and the individual agent (T2). Organized agencies arrange marriages for Taiwanese men with young women from Viet Nam. These agencies normally have branches overseas (T3). Some organized agencies actually specialize in the business of international labour recruitment but, in order to more fully utilize agency personnel, they also undertake cross-border arranged marriage business.

Individual agents (T2) are mostly Taiwanese married to Vietnamese, and understand the cross-border marriage procedures. They seek potential customers in the countryside, and then approach organized agencies in Taiwan (T1) or in Viet Nam (T3) to complete the contract.

In Viet Nam, the Government officially bans matchmaking agencies, and from time to time the newspapers report crackdowns on Taiwanese operators (Ngan, 2001). However, without the help of Vietnamese agents scattered throughout the country, the whole industry would have been unable to develop; actors in this industry need to maintain secrecy in order to avoid legal problems.

In Viet Nam, three layers of agencies work to reach the final potential "seller" – the future female migrant partners. The first layer comprises Taiwanese agencies in Viet Nam (T3), of which there are two types: branches set up by Taiwanese organized agencies, or Taiwanese agents who have married Vietnamese and lived in Viet Nam for a long time. The latter type normally has other jobs and, with the help of their social networks, assists organized agencies in introducing women for arranged marriages. In return, they receive a portion of the profit, fixed by contract.

FIGURE 1
INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATION OF CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGES



Both types of agents have to cooperate with local Vietnamese partners – often called “big matchmakers” (V1) – the second layer of industry organization.

Because of language affinity with Taiwanese, most big matchmakers are ethnic Chinese. Researchers have found that common language communication is very important for Taiwanese overseas investment in South-East Asia (Hsiao and Kung, 1998). These big matchmakers play a strategic role in cross-border marriages. Their language advantage enables them to convey important information to Taiwanese agencies, and interpret for Taiwanese males if necessary. In addition, big matchmakers are in charge of many miscellaneous details, including the arrangement of meetings, wedding banquets, and accommodations. These big matchmakers typically have many “small matchmakers” to help them.

Big matchmakers normally do not have direct contact with future brides. Instead, small matchmakers (V2) can be seen as acting as sales representatives for the big matchmakers. They go to the countryside to search for women who might wish to marry foreigners. Table 3 shows that only one-quarter of these women are ethnic Chinese, raising the question why the matchmakers do not like to introduce ethnic Chinese women. One informant explained this, saying that if a girl can speak Mandarin, she might demand too much money or property from her future partner, thus scaring away customers and spoiling deals. In addition, the lack of a language barrier may impinge upon the profits of intermediaries because the prospective couples might avoid the agents and make their own arrangements.

Once selected, rural women are brought to TPHCM to meet their future partners. Vietnamese Government prohibitions on these activities mean that meetings are kept low profile. When the prospective grooms arrive in Viet Nam, the big matchmakers let the small matchmakers know where and when to meet, and the future brides are then brought, group by group, to the meetings. To avoid any difficulties from the police, meeting times and places are varied.

Big matchmakers also oversee a group of people who prepare the requisite bureaucratic documentation (V3). This is a difficult job, requiring reading and writing skills in both Vietnamese and Chinese, the ability to understand and manage the process of obtaining and completing the relevant documents, and dealing with bureaucrats in TECO as well as those in the judicial, police, and health departments. This work is delegated to professionals because Taiwanese grooms do not have the ability, and big matchmakers do not have the time.

Two organizational structures predominate in the arranged marriage business – vertically integrated and horizontally coordinated. In gathering data, we found that if the business is a vertically integrated agency, future brides generally all come from one place; in horizontally coordinated businesses, women are from different places of origin.

The first of these business types, the vertically integrated agency, typically involves Taiwanese organized agencies establishing branches in Viet Nam. Each agency tends to have their own big matchmaker who acts exclusively for them. In turn, the small matchmakers and documentation professionals work exclusively for their larger counterparts. To keep profits within the company, the agencies cooperate with their exclusive matchmakers and effectively internalize the operation. This organizational structure is maintained to generate greater profit, to ensure that the work is uninterrupted, and to achieve economies of scale.

The second business structure seen, the horizontally coordinated structure, is more complicated, as the relationships between different actors are not unidirectional. In Taiwan, individual agents can work with either organized agencies, or with individual agents in Viet Nam. If success is achieved through the Taiwanese organized agency, an agent need only present the future groom to the organized agency to receive a commission. If cooperating with other individual agents in Viet Nam, the Taiwanese agent must bring the future grooms to Viet Nam, and then leave them with the Vietnamese agent.

In Viet Nam, the individual agents, like individual agents in Taiwan, can cooperate with any agency or matchmaker without forming an exclusive relationship. In other words, all of the actors cooperate on an equal basis.

The formation of a coordinated structure relies on the skills, capital, and ability of the participants in the industry. The profit-sharing between these parties is based on a piece wage. In this structure, downstream actors must compete with each other to get “orders”. The more future brides a small matchmaker can offer, the greater the likelihood of successful coordination with big matchmakers. For individual agents unable to afford to internalize all the procedural tasks, cooperation with others can provide the necessary skills without requiring investment capital.

COMPETITION IN THE CROSS-BORDER MARRIAGE MARKET

According to neoclassical economics theory, if an industry has excess profit, it will attract firms to enter the market, and gradually the excess profit will be taken up until none remains. This description aptly describes the Viet Nam-Taiwan marriage market.

There are no statistics recording the number of cross-border matchmaking agencies in Taiwan. In Viet Nam, the Government’s opposition to “commodified matchmaking” means that agencies are not legally registered. However, TECO had required all agents to wear a license badge when entering the TECO office. The office has compiled information on these agents. We received a badge

numbered B246, indicating that there may be more than 246 agents registered at TECO.¹⁰

Since most cross-border female migrant partners are from southern Viet Nam, most agencies are also located there. In Hanoi there are only a few prospective brides, and, according to one Taiwanese official in Hanoi, there are only two agents who visit the office to prepare interview documents for Vietnamese women. At present there is no agency in central Viet Nam.

Degrees of competition will affect the market price of cross-border marriage. The usual price charged to a customer in Taiwan is between US\$7,580 and US\$10,600 depending on the services provided. To avoid any future dispute, all service items are listed on a contract. These items include two return airfare tickets to Taiwan, two weeks accommodation, transportation in Viet Nam, all documents necessary for marriage and migration, as well as all costs incurred as part of the ceremony – the wedding banquet, filming, cars, wedding dress, and money presented to the bride's family.

Table 4 lists the cost breakdown of an arranged marriage. The costs we list in the table were identified during our fieldwork, and are the maximum costs associated with an arranged marriage. A successful operation will bring an agency from US\$1,780 to US\$4,800 in profit. Given the often very low Vietnamese incomes, such a high profit industry is attracting more and more people.¹¹

With an increasing number of businesses entering the market, individual profit share will fall, and eventually no new businesses will be established. We have already seen the result of this competitive environment. A Vietnamese big matchmaker complained (January 2001) that the price for their service has dropped to US\$4,500, excluding airfare of bride and groom and accommodation and jewelry for the future bride. Two years ago, the price was as high as US\$6,000. At the same time, the price in Taiwan was about US\$13,600; it is now US\$10,000.

Since the entry-level skills for matchmaking are not high, anyone with sufficient social networks to link prospective brides and grooms is able to enter the market. One TECO official said that in the future only two types of agencies are likely to survive. One is organized agencies sufficiently large enough to benefit from economy of scale, and the other is individual agents married Vietnamese. This latter type has experienced the whole cross-border marriage process and can, with the help of the social networks of his Vietnamese wife, mediate both the Taiwanese and Vietnamese sides.

In addition to the effect of price reduction, competition also produces many market rumours. We heard a number of negative rumours about Vietnamese female migrant partners. For example, on one occasion while dining with a large

group of matchmakers, we were told that some women introduced by other agencies are not virgins, or had been prostitutes, or that agents had forced them to marry. Such statements are hard to verify. As one agent suggested “that’s all rumours that the other agencies use to attack us”. This kind of rumour seems to have become a weapon of market competition.

TABLE 4
COST BREAKDOWN OF ARRANGED MARRIAGE

Item	Fee	
	US\$	NT\$
Money presented to bride’s family, banquet	2,500	80,000
Small hotel accommodation	750	24,000
Marriage certificate (fee charged by Vietnamese Government)	150	4,800
Passport (fee charged by Vietnamese Government)	15	480
Proof of birth and single status of Taiwanese client (fee charged by Foreign Affairs Department, TPHCM)	24	768
Translation of documents into Chinese	60	1,920
Documents issues by Foreign Affairs Department, TPHCM	4	128
Health inspection	52	1,664
Interview and visa application (fee charged by TECO)	50	1,600
Subtotal	3,605	115,360
Return airfare to Viet Nam	900	30,000
Bride’s one-way airfare to Taiwan	300	10,000
Miscellaneous	1,000	32,000
Total	5,805	187,360

Source: TECO, 1998.

COMPLETE COMMODIFICATION OF MARRIAGE

The competitive market has led to price reductions, thus driving agencies to develop new strategies to accommodate the new environment, which in turn further commodifies arranged marriage.

One such strategy is to broaden one’s social networks to attract more potential customers. Such social transformations are undertaken to generate greater profits. A number of researchers have shown that social networks play a vital role in mediating between agencies and rural males in Taiwan (Tsai, 2001; Wang, 2001a). Our own fieldwork data concurs.

Most organized agencies have an office in the area where most of their customers live. In the case of individual agents, the home doubles as an office, and the customers live in the neighbourhood. To win the trust of customers agencies have to build their reputation. They guarantee that they are able to find “good girls” for their clients, and that (as one agency advertised) “if the future bride regrets to marry or escapes from the marriage, we guarantee to arrange another free trip to Viet Nam and pay all wedding costs”. For customers, finding a trustworthy agent who has done business with acquaintances, relatives, or friends can reduce uncertainties associated with the transaction. As one customer replied when asked why he chose a particular agent, “I heard someone mediate Vietnamese female migrant partners to my friends, so I went to him. I did not want to find unknown agent because I often heard some people were cheated, and they lost a lot of money without marrying a girl” (Tsai, 2001: 44).

Social networks are equally important in Viet Nam. Recruiting different kinds of future brides is necessary for the success of businesses. Having more prospective brides means offering more “goods” to choose from. When a Taiwanese groom is hesitant in making a decision within the short time available, being able to present a diversity of possible brides is advantageous for the agency. In addition, a number of relatives or friends – with differing opinions – may accompany the groom, so a wide range of choices is required. If an agency cannot offer a customer sufficient choice in one week, it will lose the customer. So, to survive in this competitive market, agencies need more women with more diversified backgrounds and different physical attributes. To achieve this diversity, small matchmakers make an effort to build as wide a network as possible. They search rural areas for potential brides, gradually centralizing all future migrant partners in TPHCM.

A second important skill in this market is “know-who”. We might even say that it’s not what you know, but who you know. This skill is very basic in a bureaucratic country. To obtain legal documents, a professional has to understand the regulations thoroughly, be able to translate the documents, and most crucially, keep an eye on the efficiency of the bureaucrats. For instance, the main purpose of a groom’s second visit to Viet Nam is to sign the marriage documents in the judicial department of the future bride’s place of household registration. After this visit, the groom returns to Taiwan and awaits the bride’s arrival. However, one Vietnamese small matchmaker told us that “if a groom pays more to hasten the application, he does not have to come [back] here to sign the marriage documents”. Another big matchmaker boasted that “we have no problem doing it in A and B province” if the grooms pay. In other words, bribes may hasten the bureaucratic process, or help supersede legalities. This money is referred to as “coffee money” (*tien cafe*). In some cases the cooperating bureaucrats falsified documents in order to pass the necessary health inspection. According to TECO TPHCM statistics (to the end of 1998), about 8 per cent of Taiwanese grooms were physically handicapped and 0.7 per cent were mentally handicapped. One

matchmaker acted for two mentally handicapped Taiwanese, bribing the doctors to get a certificate of health. As he said, “first, I have to know the [bureaucrats] well, and then catch the right time to give coffee money”. During the intermittent political campaigns against corruption, he would not operate in this way. In general, the more connections with government officials a professional has, the faster the application process and the shorter the waiting time for Taiwanese grooms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND PROSPECTS

Most Taiwanese intermarriage with foreign female migrant partners can be regarded as a kind of ethnic marriage, as most of the female migrant partners are ethnic Chinese either from China or Indonesia. However, Vietnamese female migrant partners do not seem to belong to the category of ethnic marriage. The institutional theory of international migration suggests that the established institutions aimed at facilitating migration constitutes an important part of social infrastructure that lasts over time and increases the movements of population (Massey et al., 1993: 450-451). The case we studied here shows clearly that without a mediating mechanism offered by a profit-oriented agency, there would be no such mass personal movement. Even in the situation of ethnic marriages, without the help of mediating agency, the scale of intermarriage would not be as big as the present one. The analysis of the cross-border mediating agency improves our understanding of the mechanism of “commodified” international marriages.

In this article, we have attempted to place the issue of international marriage in an institutionalized profit-oriented social context, which is described as “the commodification process”. The starting point was to measure the scale of the international marriage market in Taiwan. Socio-demographic change in Taiwan and Viet Nam has created a market for profit-pursuing marriage agents. Agents scattered in different social spheres have gradually linked to form an immense industry. Two different industrial organization types have emerged in the matchmaking process to meet different market constraints. As the cross-border marriage market matures, more and more people enter the market, and competitive price, good quality, and delivery on time become the necessary conditions for success. In this competitive process, female migrant partners become more and more commodified to conform to the new situation. They are required to accept reduced prices, to be “good enough” to marry, and to be married out when there is demand. The social networks of individuals are gradually transformed by agents in pursuit of profit.

If cross-border migration is still dominated by agencies and resembles a commodity transaction process, it is inevitably subject to market supply and demand factors. Taiwan’s demographic and socio-economic stratification is

unlikely to change dramatically in the future so the trend to marry female migrant partners will continue, giving intermediaries a niche to make money from matchmaking. The human rights of the women in Viet Nam and in Taiwan, however, are being ignored by both government and society. About 16.5 per cent of our in-depth interview respondents acknowledged that they were not satisfied with their marriage, and 10 per cent of these respondents had even seriously considered divorce. The figure might not seem high, but if the percentage is converted into absolute numbers, more than 15,000 families might have problems. In addition, trafficking women to Taiwan is utilizing the marriage channel to import women to sell into prostitution, which is a main concern in Taiwan now. A report on 5 May 2001 said that three Vietnamese women had been imprisoned in a hut by a trafficking organization which intended to sell them into prostitution. Taiwanese men masquerading as grooms had been used to get these women into Taiwan (*China Times Daily*, 2001). The intermediary institutions seem have led the family union migration to commodification, or even worse, women trafficking.

NOTES

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2. In Japan, so-called "entertainers' marriages" are also an important channel enabling Japanese to marry foreign women. Some women go to Japan to work as entertainers – in many cases as hostesses or prostitutes. They then meet and marry their partners there (see Ishii, 1996).
3. Yen-Fen Tseng has shown that emigration through business migration programmes has been the most obvious type of capital-linked migration. She calls this "commodification of residency" (see Tseng, 2000). Using a similar concept, we use the term "commodification" to refer to all profit-oriented activities in the migration flow.
4. The number here is different from the number of visas issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as we see in Table 1, because household registration is required for married couples.
5. Chinese from the People's Republic of China are officially considered citizens of Taiwan, the Republic of China. Immigration affairs relating to them are therefore processed by the Mainland Affairs Commission (MAC). The one-fifth ratio is derived by using the marriage couples registered by MAC, i.e., 15,769, as an approximate number.
6. It means "renovation" policy, which was an economic reform policy started in 1986 and has brought Viet Nam from a command economy to a "socialist-based market economy".

7. The accommodation offered is a three-story house owned or rented by an agency, with a barrack-like interior design. The female manager lives with the women.
8. Hakka speakers represent about 12 per cent of Taiwan's total population. Another major dialect group is the Minnan, who speak Hokkien and comprise about 72 per cent of the population. "Mainlander" refers to people who came to Taiwan from China after 1945, and their descendants, and they comprise about 15 per cent of the population. The aboriginal minority makes up less than 1 per cent of the population. For the class structuring process in Taiwan, see Wang, 2001b, 2002.
9. One may wonder why Taiwanese men do not seek partners exclusively from China. Table 1 shows that Chinese partners are still the biggest group to marry Taiwanese, which can be regarded as a kind of ethnic marriage due to historical and cultural backgrounds. However, political tensions between Taiwan and China cause the Taiwan Government to strictly control the inflow of Chinese migrant partners. Quota for Chinese migrant partners every year is 3,600, only one-fourth of total applicants (MAC, 2001). It is said that a newly married Chinese bride will have to wait until 2010 to get the permanent residence visa in 2000. This restrictive entry control is the main reason why Taiwanese men do not seek Chinese partners exclusively.
10. The rule was later called off, and the interviewed official was not prepared to tell us why it had been cancelled.
11. One informant, a big matchmaker, is only 28 years old. Within a few years, she has successfully introduced more than 200 couples, and now owns two houses and an imported car – a Toyota Camry.

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LA MARCHANDISATION DES MARIAGES INTERNATIONAUX:
LE COMMERCE DES MARIAGES TRANSFRONTIERES
A TAIWAN ET AU VIET NAM

Dans cet article, nous nous efforçons de situer la question des mariages internationaux dans un contexte social institutionnalisé et tourné vers le profit, qui est décrit comme le “processus de marchandisation”. Le point de départ est une tentative de mesure de l’ampleur prise par le phénomène des mariages internationaux à Taiwan.

Les mutations sociodémographiques à Taiwan et au Viet Nam ont créé un marché pour les agences matrimoniales à but lucratif. Ces intermédiaires, éparpillés dans différents milieux sociaux, se sont progressivement constitués en un réseau commercial profitable. Pour répondre aux différentes contraintes du marché, deux types de structures ont vu le jour dans cette industrie dont l’activité est centrée sur la recherche de profils concordants entre individus de sexe opposé. Au fur et à mesure que ce marché des mariages transfrontières mûrit, de plus en plus de gens s’y intéressent, et les conditions du succès sont désormais connues: prix compétitifs, qualité et fourniture dans les temps impartis. Dans ce processus concurrentiel, les partenaires féminines des migrants sont de plus en plus marchandisées pour s’adapter à cette nouvelle situation. Elles doivent accepter la baisse des prix, se montrer “suffisamment bonnes” pour êtres mariées et contracter mariage au moment où survient la demande. Les réseaux sociaux des personnes physiques subissent progressivement les transformations induites par ces agences en quête de profit.

LA COMPRA Y VENTA DE MATRIMONIOS INTERNACIONALES:
EL NEGOCIO DE LOS MATRIMONIOS TRANSFRONTERIZOS
EN TAIWAN Y VIET NAM

En este artículo el matrimonio internacional se sitúa en un contexto social institucionalizado, encaminado hacia el lucro, que se describe como el “proceso de compra y venta”. El punto de partida consistió en evaluar la magnitud del mercado de matrimonios internacionales en Taiwan.

Los cambios sociodemográficos en Taiwan y Viet Nam han dado lugar a un mercado lucrativo para los agentes matrimoniales. Los agentes dispersos en distintas esferas sociales se han ido vinculando gradualmente para constituir una industria que genera pingües beneficios. Ello ha dado lugar a dos tipos de organizaciones industriales en el proceso matrimonial para satisfacer distintas necesidades mercantiles. A medida que evoluciona el mercado del matrimonio transfronterizo, entran más personas en el mercado, que imponen como condiciones para su éxito un precio competitivo, buena calidad y el suministro

puntual. En este proceso competitivo, las asociadas migrantes femeninas se convierten en bienes de “compra y venta” para conformar la nueva situación. Se les exige que acepten precios reducidos, que sean “suficientemente buenas” para poder casarse y para que las casen cuando hay una demanda. Las redes sociales están siendo reemplazadas, gradualmente, por agentes que sólo buscan el lucro.