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Women as Fish: Physical Movement and Social Mobility in Contemporary Vietnam

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the changing rurality and the profound social stratification in contemporary Vietnam through the lens of rural-to-rural female migration. It is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research in a rural offshore fishing community in northern Vietnam called Hà Thành. I study the migration of two groups of women: 1) transnational women, who are young Hà Thành girls that marry Taiwanese and South Korean men, and migrate to mostly rural areas in East Asia, and 2) translocal women, who are women from other rural Vietnamese communities who migrate to Hà Thành to marry local men. My dissertation analyzes the relationship between movement and social class. It shows how female migration both sustains and transforms social hierarchies and binaries in unexpected ways via the embodiment of ethnicity, class, gender, age, and rurality, and practices of beauty, migration, education and morality. The double rural-to-rural female migration pattern in Hà Thành indicates that movement and social stratification are indicative of a complex rural landscape, and productive of modern and gendered rural subjectivities in Vietnam, which are produced through multiple political, cultural, historical and economic forces.
WOMEN AS FISH: PHYSICAL MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

by

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It takes a village to raise a child. In the long journey from my hometown in Vietnam across the Pacific Ocean and back that culminates in this dissertation, I have been sheltered and nurtured in countless ways to grow intellectually, socially, and personally. Words seem inadequate to acknowledge my gratitude toward the kindness, patience, encouragement, and inspiration I have received along the way. I research how Vietnamese people move, yet it is I who is moved by the people who cross or share the path with me.

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Part I

ON THE MOVE: INTRODUCTION
Introduction

Social Class in Motion

“Back in the 1980s, almost all people from this place crossed the border (vượt biên)\(^1\) and sailed to Hong Kong. Oh, they all left. It was so easy for them because they were fishermen. I was told that many of them even went back and forth between home and the refugee camps in Hong Kong. They would go home during harvest time to reap the crop and return to the camp after it was done. Then they lived in the West and sent so much money home. That place was very wealthy; we call it the village of Vietnamese transnationals (làng Kiều).”

I was greatly puzzled by the story that was told to me by my aunt in 2010 about the Vietnamese boatpeople, or the people who famously escaped extreme poverty and the communist regime. It reflected deeply shared and historically informed yet idealized ideas about place, movement, gender and consequential upward mobility. I wondered whether people’s journeys to change life (đổi đời) from poor rural Vietnamese to rich transnationals thanks to movement was indeed as straightforward and fairy-like as the tale being told. My desire to make sense of the story and my personal concern with the profound rise in social stratification in Vietnam have motivated me to conduct long-term research in Hải Thành commune, “the village of transnationals,” to study if, and how, social mobility in contemporary rural Vietnam can be achieved via movement and in what way an unusual place like Hải Thành can further our understanding of the constantly transforming rurality in a global order.

\(^1\) This is another term for boatpeople; it literally means ‘crossing borders.’
Hải Thành is a rural fishing commune (xã), belonging to the rural district (huyện) Thủy Nguyên of Hải Phòng municipality in northern Vietnam, where I grew up. It was once a major site of departure for Vietnamese boatpeople in the north who fled by sea for economic reasons in the 1980s and 1990s. Recently, it has become known for sending the largest percentage, nationwide, of its young women abroad in transnational marriages. Hải Thành definitely deserves its title as the village of transnationals. I was curious about this rich but rural commune in my own city—how did it come to be both rural and modern, a seeming contradiction in contemporary Vietnam? How come, when all literature and media described the journey of boatpeople as deadly dangerous and poignantly irrevocable, the transnational migration of Hải Thành people was painted, surprisingly, as its opposite: trouble free, smooth, and repeatable? Thinking about Hải Thành and its embodiment of contradictions as well as Hải Thành people’s unusual mobility made me wonder: How is its unique status as a modern rurality produced largely by movement emblematic of larger forces converging and producing new ways of being in the world? As a result, I conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hải Thành in order to explore an intimate relationship between physical movement and social mobility, or,  

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2 According to the Vietnamese official definition of rural and urban zones in Government Decree Number 72/2001, dated October 5, 2001, an urban zone must meet three criteria at the same time: the off-farm labor force accounts for more than 65% of the total labor force; the commune’s total population is more than 4,000; and the density is higher than 2,000 people/km². Rural zones are those that do not meet all three criteria. Hải Thành is a rural area because most of Hải Thành laborers are still farmers and fishermen. In terms of administration, Vietnam generally has rural and urban categories at each level: the province level includes Province (rural) and Municipality (urban), the district level includes rural district and urban district, and the commune level includes commune (rural) and ward (urban). Hải Thành is a rural commune (xã) in a rural district (huyện) of Hải Phòng municipality (thành phố trực thuộc trung ương). Here, I am using the term “commune” in its sense of a small administrative unit to describe Hải Thành.  

3 I argue that Hải Thành is modern due to several popular indicators of modernity in Vietnam such as fashion (what people, especially women, wear), the high number of transnationals, the appearance of expensive houses, and the frequent use of technology such as Facebook. The modernity of Hải Thành is elaborated more clearly in the next chapter.
more specifically, between migration on the one side, and class, status, and money on the other. This research shows how movement enriches our understanding of rurality in globalization and urbanization and highlights the role of movement as a powerful maker of difference in how people craft their lives and community in the contemporary world.

When I got to Hải Thành, the boatpeople were long gone, having settled down across the ocean and the sea. What I found was a rural commune of fancy houses, significant wealth, and a younger generation that continues to circulate the globe in different ways. Most of the men in this community are still fishermen but the industry has become 20 times bigger and more profitable. While the majority of men venture further than before into the sea, it is the young women who, through transnational marriages, have been fueling migration abroad for the last 15 years, mostly to East Asia but also parts of the Western world. Filling in the place of spouses of local men is now a new group of young women from other rural communes in Thụy Nguyên district and other provinces, from the north of Vietnam and all the way to the south. As a result of these processes, Hải Thành has been in a constant flux with the movement of people and along with it the movement of ideas, values, and money. I captured some of the visible effects of these movements in the photographs below:4

4 All photos in this dissertation, unless otherwise credited, were taken by me.
Figure 1.1 A local man prepared for a cockfight

Figure 1.2 Men gathered for an elaborate and expensive linage ritual
Figure 1.3 A big house with a fenced in garden and front gate

Figure 1.4 Houses in Hải Thành
Figure 1.5 Boats docking in the local port

Figure 1.6 Children and teens gambled during a New Year festival
These photos paint a general impression of the commune: a mixture of lavishness and rurality, modernity and tradition. Local people were wealthy enough to build sumptuous houses, engage in costly rituals, and organize an annual three-day new-year festival. While they maintain the tradition, they also aspire to modernity, reflected, for example, by the Western clothes that youth wear and the birthday celebration with cake and torches. Hải Thành looked rosy from the outside and was famous within the city for its wealth and Việt Kiều (Vietnamese transnationals). My uncle always made sure to ask if I attended special occasions in Hải Thành because these events would be among the gossip even in Hải Phòng due to their extravagance. I realized that I also had this “outsider, urban” perception of Hải Thành until I met my host family.
On the surface, the family checked all the general boxes of a typical Hải Thành family: it had a boatperson in the family, a daughter who married a foreign man, and a son whose wife was from another commune. However, the family did not have a big house, it received little in remittance, it was tight with their day-to-day expenses, and it coped with their financial insecurity by sending more daughters and granddaughters abroad for marriage or for work. While trying to make sense of their predicament, I noticed how the two migrations—the transnational marriage migration of the daughter and the translocal marriage migration of the daughter-in-law—were different. While the former was celebrated, the latter was treated as inconsequential. The discrepancy between my struggling host family and the general stereotype of a well-off “migrating” family in Hải Thành, and the distinction between international migration and internal migration have made me realize that the relationship between physical movement and social class is extremely complicated. Furthermore, any evaluation of movement and its effect on social class must be considered within the social structures of class, gender, ethnicity, age, neoliberalism, post-colonialism and the rural/urban/global hierarchy that continue to frame aspirations, values, negotiations, and struggles in Hải Thành.

This dissertation aims to examine these nonlinear and complicated relationships between rural movement and social class and how they help further our understanding of rurality. I do not attempt to paint a complete picture of the social life in Hải Thành or rural Vietnam in general. Rather, by studying and comparing the similar yet also distinct rural migrations of two specific groups – local women marrying foreign men and women from other, even more rural places marrying local men – I want to illuminate how movement shapes class formation and, along the way, restructures rural life, especially with regard to morality, such as ways of morally living in a rural place, being a moral rural person, and contesting/negotiating a rural identity.
I refer to the first group as transnational women and the second group as translocal women. My research explores the structural elements of these two kinds of movement and focuses on how different kinds of movement become coded with specific kinds of class status, and how these kinds of movement are themselves entwined with specific culturally, politically, economically, and historically conditioned meanings. For instance, both transnational and translocal movements include rural-to-rural female marriage migration, and they therefore cannot be separated from cultural notions of femininity, gender hierarchy, age order, beauty and body, morality, and social devaluation of rurality in Vietnam. Indeed, the intersection of these social markers and scripts constitute the core of my analysis on movement and social class in Hải Thành.

In what follows, I examine closely the process of migration, from the desires for migration and the waiting period before migration, to the aftereffects of migration, including praise, backlash, and displacement in Hải Thành. I conclude that social citizenship, what Castel (1996) defines as a recognized position in society, is indeed movement-motivated. Movement, along with money and lifestyle, has become a register of class hierarchy and self-worth. However, movement is also highly differentiated. The opportunity to migrate, in a context of a highly stratified Vietnamese society, has allowed the women in Hải Thành to claim their sense of worth as they strive to overcome their marginal status of rural and female Vietnamese. Ironically, class aspiration and the differentiation of movement have essentially further divided the country, community, and family, deepened the issue of social inequalities, and presented many layers of

5 These are my own terms for easier comparison. Locally, transnational women are called Taiwanese and Korean Kiều (Kiều Đại Loan, Hàn Quốc) (see chapter I), while there exists no term to identify translocal women (see chapter VI).

6 A large number of transnational women move from Hải Thành, a rural place, to rural areas in Taiwan and South Korea. There are transnational Hải Thành women in Taiwanese and Korean cities but the number is small and more recent.
rural life that are as complicated, changing, and stratified as those of urban and cosmopolitan centers.

The specific interactions of rural-to-rural movement, age, gender, class, and ethnicity in a rural place like Hải Thành reveal many social contradictions and thus, allow us to examine and question the dualisms centering on issues of gender and agency, gender and identity, and many aspects of mobility. By focusing on relationships between victimhood and agency, morality and immorality, modern and tradition, stasis and motion, international and internal movement, experiences and imaginaries of movement, my work questions those conceptual orientations that are based on binaries in mobility and gender studies. Moreover, mobility and globalization are often associated with urban metropolitan centers. My research on a highly mobile population in a small rural community in Vietnam illuminates this bias in the existing scholarship on migration and underscores the diversity and livelihood of rurality. Centering on rural-to-rural migration, the research aims to provide a different way to conceptualize migration, as distinct from commonly studied rural to urban migration, and a more robust insight into how to understand rurality in the context of a globalized Vietnam and beyond.

Of Theory and Movement

My study is deeply rooted in the rich body of literature on mobility. Within the last two decades, there has been an increasing interest and focus on mobility and globalization, leading to a vibrant and stimulating literature on mobility across disciplines. This vast literature starts with the emergence of a mobility paradigm in social sciences.
The mobility turn

In the increasingly globalized world, mobility is viewed as a key component of globalization and scholars have called for a new mobility “paradigm” (Sheller and Urry 2006) or a mobility “turn” (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). They have argued that mobility is “constitutive of the structures of social life” (Urry 2000, 49) and that it affects other aspects of life. Thus, according to these scholars, the study of mobility is crucial to the understanding of human evolutionary and social changes (Kelly 1992). They further argue that the mobility paradigm/turn must address issues of globalization, the deterritorialization of nation-states, identities, and belonging as well as the subjects and objects of social inquiry (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). In other words, scholars believe the mobility “turn” refashions not only how we think about society and culture but also how we conceptualize social science.

In anthropology, mobility has been a popular topic as the notion of mobility is central to understanding some processes of change that are of great anthropological interest, including tourism, migration, diaspora, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, etc. The scholarship on mobility has developed new concepts that attempt to theorize the spatial and temporal movements of not only people but also cultures, objects, images, ideologies, and capitals. Concepts such as deterritorialization, reterritorialization, scapes (Appadurai 1996), time-space compression (Harvey 1990), nomadology (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and the replacement of roots by routes (Clifford 1997, Gilroy 1993) are just some among numerous attempts of using mobility to study and explain processes in contemporary society. As a result, mobility scholars tend to reject the longstanding anthropological framework that implicitly makes sedentarist assumptions (Malkki 1992) and that privilege spatially-bounded units of analysis (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Instead, they question the assumed relationships between peoples, places, and
cultures and focus on multiple, diverse mobilities. Anthropologists therefore move from regarding border-crossing movements as deviations from the normative place-bound communities to seeing mobility as normative (Salazar and Smart 2012).

There has been much optimism in mobility, especially its association with freedom, liberation and resistance. The romanticization of mobility in the image of the nomad is evident from the works of Mackinders, Deleuze and Guattari, and Bachelard, all of which connect mobility with power and thus perceive in the nomad the ability to evade power and link mobility with freedom and liberty (Adey 2009). Pels (1999) and Wolff (1993) point out that this scholarship seamlessly merges with postcolonial, cultural, and feminist studies that hail black, subaltern, and female experience as exilic, diasporic, and producing double consciousness, hybridity, creolization, inappropriated others, and marginality (Young 1995, Trinh 1995, Bhabha 1994, Braidotti 1994, Davies 1994, Kristeva 1994, West 1994, Gilroy 1993, Hall 1992, Harding 1991, Haraway 1990, Hill Collins 1990, Spivak 1990, Anzaldúa 1987, hooks 1984, Lorde 1984). In their writings, strangerhood and distance make for better vision, deeper reflexivity, increased objectivity, and better access to truth (Pels 1999). Moreover, as mobility has become essential to the understanding of contemporary social phenomena (Sheller and Urry 2006, Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006), it is pivotal as well to the rearticulation of people’s contemporary sense of self from fixed to uprooted (Clifford 1997), nomadic (Braidotti 1994) and cosmopolitan forms (Beck 2006). Cresswell also sees “the longstanding history of positive valuation of mobility as progress, as freedom, and as change” (Cresswell 2006, 43) because of ideas about mobility as a progressive force, a freedom, and a break from earlier and more confused spaces and times (Cresswell 2006). In globalization, mobility is usually given positive values as it is assumed that mobility increases in globalization (Friedman 2002) and that mobility generates changes for
people (especially migrants and their families). People often link spatial and physical mobility with social (status), economic (financial), and cosmopolitan climbing (Salazar and Smart 2012, Ong 1999).

Despite the optimism, mobility scholars have critically examined the phenomenon of movement. Similar to theorists of globalization, mobility scholars have argued that mobility is not new. The celebration of the “newness” of the late modern condition of displacement, hybridity, and mobility is criticized as Eurocentric and class-blind as it refers to the elite’s experience and Europe’s greater awareness of its receding central position rather than a new reality (Wilding 2007, Friedman 2002, Pels 1999, Morley and Robins 1995). However, what is different about the contemporary state of mobility is how mobility is interconnected with the system of nation-states that control and promote certain kinds of mobility. Indeed, in a world of constant flux, controlling people’s mobility has become an important project of governance (Salazar and Smart 2012, Salazar 2010, Nyiri 2010).

At the same time, mobility does not necessarily bring freedom, better truth or better social capital either. The experiences of forced migrants (the environmentally displaced, the political refugees, the sans-papier, etc.) show that there is as much unfreedom and undesirability in mobility as there is in dwelling (Gill, Caletrio, and Mason 2011, Kibreab 1999). Forced migration complicates the relationship between states, freedom, and mobility, particularly since the states can no longer be considered as blockage to mobility and as freedom because mobility does not equate with freedom (Gill, Caletrio, and Mason 2011). Kaplan (1996) argues that the bias in associating mobility with freedom comes from the intellectuals’ tendency to favor the more elite and singular “exiled” rather than the migrant or refugee, while Cresswell (2006) indicates that the romanticization of the nomad is infected with the discourse of Orientalism.
There is also a danger with what Pels (1999) calls the nomadic narcissism among intellectuals. He writes that

Construing the migrant, exile, or nomad as alter ego of the modern intellectual, or beyond this, as a privileged metaphor for modern subjectivity, often leads towards an intellectualist domestication and appropriation of the experiences of ‘real-life’ migrants or exiles, while it simultaneously euphemizes the comparatively settled, sedentary and privileged situation of academics, who are invited to indulge in fictions of social ‘weightlessness’ and dreams of perpetual transcendence in boundary-breaking journeys of the critical mind (Pels 1999, 72).

In other words, Pels is critical of the representation of mobility that takes away the difference between the representer and the represented by precisely representing the representer as a generic stranger: the represented. In so doing, Pels argues, scholars hide their elite marginality while benefiting from the profit of marginality.

While Pels is critical of the intellectuality of mobility and strangeness, Friedman is cautious about the belief that “before we were local but now we are global” (Friedman 2002, 33). Since less than two per cent of the world’s population is on the international move, Friedman reasons that the titillating focus on movement and mobility in scholarship is obscuring serious facts about the world. More importantly, he believes that this transnational trend and the obsession with the closure of locality and boundedness in anthropology and other disciplines is more than intellectually flawed. It represents a top down, elitist view that equates the elites’ cosmopolitan experiences with the rest of the world while not acknowledging that the world is becoming increasingly more divided, more stratified where potentially deadly rigid boundaries are being created and maintained everywhere (Friedman 2002). In a similar vein, Ho (2005),
Graeber (2002), and Rockefeller (2011) notice the similarities between the language of flows and decenteredness in intellectual writing with the way the business/managerial people talk and represent themselves. They raise the concern of how the managerial, bird’s-eye view of global mobility could potentially marginalize the already marginal.

Anthropologists are also scrutinizing the discipline’s popular concepts employed to describe and celebrate mobility and globalization since they allow for such misrepresentations like flow, transnational, multi-sited, and imagined communities. Rockefeller (2011) traces the genealogies of the term “flow” and concludes that the term is currently used for talking about large-scale, even global, cultural, and economic phenomena; it was a heterogeneous word that allowed writers to highlight formal commonalities in the movement of people, ideas, money, images, goods, and more; it was a way of talking about social relations and culture while emphasizing process rather than stasis; accordingly, it was antagonistic to traditional conceptions of place (Rockefeller 2011, 560).

However, Rockefeller points out that this term puts more emphasis on the flowing rather than the materials that are flowing, on form rather than on content. Therefore, the term flow usually evokes the kind of pure mobility and tends to erase the specificities of action, agency, materiality, and place while abstracting them into a single category. It enables the analysis at a large, systemic scale without saying anything particular about how the flow is generated at a local level. Flow, argues Rockefeller, is the view from above that erases its own construction (Rockefeller 2011). Thus, Tsing calls for attention to what she considers “zones of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2005, xi), rather than assuming a smooth movement of flow. Favero (2011) agrees that flow, used as pure movement, deletes the agencies and processes at smaller scales and ends up
dehumanizing the phenomena it aims to describe. For example, the flow of human migrants involves a lot more serious stakes than that of ideas or money; the term flow, because of its abstraction, blinds us to the embodied and individual sufferings of migration (Hart 2011).

In a similar vein, Wilding (2007), Hage (2005), and Hannerz (2003) are cautious about uncritical usage of concepts like transnational, imagined community, and multi-sited ethnography. Wilding, for example, questions the extent to which the focus on transnational migrancy and practices reflects the concerns and experiences of the migrants as opposed to reflecting the particular conditions under which the researcher lives and conducts the research (Wilding 2007). Multi-sited research has become the popular method for studying migration, but both Wilding and Hage question the feasibility and purpose of multi-sited research. If a concept of a site means one has to spend a great deal of time and labor to become familiar, Hage (2005) argues that it is impossible to be involved in more than two sites, at the most. Moreover, he believes it is more appropriate to understand that one is studying one site, the site occupied by transnational families rather than a multi-sited reality. It is one site even if it is a globally spread and geographically noncontiguous site (Hage 2005). Likewise, Wilding (2007) notices that multi-sited research tends to privilege following the idea or relationship, resulting in place being de-emphasized in favor of processes despite the researcher’s claim of being there. That is why Hannerz (2003) says that “being there” for anthropologists has become “being there, and there, and there,” but such a research method is not so much multi-local as much as “translocal” because “being there” is less about emplacement than about the relationships that link these various sites together. To these critics, the uncritical claim of multi-sited research and the emphasis on multiple places bring certain value to the researcher because the capacity to move across borders has not only been assumed but also privileged (Wilding 2007). Therefore, is it
possible, asks Wilding, that the research’s focus is influenced by the researcher’s global experience as such a global experience is beneficial to the researcher’s identity and privilege?

Both Hage and Wilding argue that in reality transnational mobility is not always the most impactful event for migrants. Reflecting on his research on international Lebanese migrants, Ghassan Hage states, “it is a mistake to think that if people move across national borders, this movement is necessarily the most significant and defining element in their lives” (Hage 2005, 459). Critical of migration literature’s tendency to overemphasize the importance of “imagined communities” and mobility as the defining aspects of migration, he argues for more careful ethnographic attention to what is symbolically significant in people’s actual lives. Similarly, Wilding argues that by focusing on transnational movement, the researcher might overlook other important processes and practices because “nation” is not always the appropriate and significant unit of analysis. In many cases, it is the non-national local and regional cultural values and social ties that matter (2007). Thus, we need to be critical and reflexive about using these concepts as analytical tools because they might be blinding rather than illuminating. The focus on mobility, while significant in many cases, might also lead researchers to lose sight of the continued importance of place-based practices that (re)produce cultures and societies (Salazar and Smart 2012). Instead of celebrating “pure” mobility and the growth of mobility, the focus should be on examining how mobility is formed, experienced, imagined, regulated, and distributed differently, as well as how such formation, imagination, regulation, and distribution is (re)shaped culturally, politically, economically, etc. In other words, we need to question and study the politics of mobility.
The politics of mobility

Mobility, as a social practice, is infused with meanings and not all forms of mobility are valued equally. The very processes and systems that allow one form of mobility could weaken other forms of mobility (Urry 2007, Massey 1993). As such, scholars of mobility have called for attention to the politics of mobility, questioning how mobility is experienced, represented, and evaluated and what the relationship is between mobility and power (Cresswell 2010, Frello 2008, Adey 2006, Massey 1993).

As scholars reject the notion of absolute stasis, they are also aware that unimpeded movement is impossible (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, Tsing 2002, Pels 1999, Kaplan 1996, Wolff 1993). Mobility has always been embedded in unequal power relations, and the tendency to “romanticize mobility as a free-floating alternative to the rooted traditions of place” is just as dangerous as the mythologizations of place (Kaplan 2006, 395). Massey (1993), using the concepts of power-geometry and differentiated mobility, suggests that different social groups and individuals are placed in different positions with regards to global movements and interconnections. It is not simply about the unequal distribution of power; more importantly, the mobility of some groups can weaken others. Differentiated mobility can weaken the already weak (Massey 1993). Thus, as Tesfahuney claims, “differential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age, and class, ranging from the local to the global” (Tesfahuney 1998, 501).

Feminist theorists, for example, argue that women have never had the same access to the road as men. Discourses, ideologies, and practices of mobility have often excluded or pathologized women as being feminine. Femininity, in many cultures, is associated with being at home, while masculinity means a passport for travel (Wolff 1993). Moreover, the notion of
travel often rests on a Western, middle-class idea of a leisure journey; thus, a black maid going
with a white family is usually not given the status of a traveler (Ahmed 1999, Wolff 1993).
Racially speaking, in the post-Wall Berlin where travel is a form of liberty (because white East
German subjects can visit non-socialist, non-European countries with legality), travel becomes
what defines the nature of social membership and citizenship. Black Germans and black bodies
living in Germany face what Partridge calls “technologies of exclusion,” including legal regimes
and popular fantasies of travel that make white bodies more mobile and limit the mobility of
black bodies, delegitimizing their attempts to travel (Partridge 2009, 347). The ability as well as
the conditions, regulations, and imaginations of mobility reveal what it means for black bodies in
Germany to become noncitizens (Partridge 2009). In terms of class, Skeggs (2004) illustrates
how mobility has displaced and subsumed the category of class as a key dimension of social
stratification and critiques how the mobility paradigm is linked to a “bourgeois masculine
subjectivity” that privileges cosmopolitan mobility.

This mobile form of subjectivity that is highly gendered, classed, and raced depends on
the exclusion of others who do not have the same resource of mobility and who are already
positioned as immobile (Ahmed 2004, Skeggs 2004, Tsing 2002). Differentiated mobility has
been a central theme in studies about migration (for example, Chu 2010, Khosravi 2008,
Hyndman 2000), the movements of tramps, hobos, and the homeless (Brennan 2008, Cloke,
Milbourne, and Widdowfield 2003, Cresswell 2001), women (Faier 2009, Silvey 2004, Gamburd
Lilley 2004, Law 2002), and urban infrastructure networks (Graham and Marvin 2001). Thus,
Mai and King conclude that “if late modern subjects are allowed to enjoy a plurality of lifestyles
and contradictory identities, these possibilities are very unequally distributed at a local, national, and globalized level” (Mai and King 2009, 305). Therefore, the question is not simply who travels but how, when, and under what conditions.

The relationship between power and movement, cosmopolitanism and movement, as well as the differentiated nature of movement naturally lead mobility scholars to explore the role of movement as a marker of differences and modernity in society. In the following section, I discuss how my research on movement to and from a modern rural place like Hải Thành contributes to the conceptualization of rurality and the growing body of works on movement and social class.

**Differentiated Movement as Social Distinction**

Physical movement and social mobility are often assumed to be interrelated. In the popular culture, the often-cited immigrant stories of transformation from rags to riches reinforce such an assumption. In academic research, movement, especially migration, is linked with accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital. Movement, in a global world, has become an important resource. Not surprisingly, mobility scholars have made a call for studies on how movement can help us understand social class better, particularly to explore how movement is a resource that has differential access. For example, the ability and right to travel are one of the criteria by which class is defined and class privilege is upheld (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, Urry 2007). Building on this framework with the literature on the differentiated movement, my research asks how class formation in Vietnam can be seen through physical movement. I examine the migration of two different groups of women in Hải Thành, Vietnam and their different class standings. I focus on not only how movement is differentiated (by exploring who,
why, where one moves) but also how the differentiation is particularly shaped by the rural context in which it happens. I argue that specific meanings and dimensions of rurality, while encouraging movement in search of upward mobility, also reinforce and transform social hierarchies in surprising ways.

Where – The politics of destinations

The question of where one travels is not new. This question is often asked in diaspora studies and linked with the politics of return (Chu 2010, Jansen and Löfving 2009, Jansen 2007). However, in an unequal global field, a large number of people from underdeveloped countries move away from home for better economic prospects (Chu 2010, Jansen 2009, Gamburd 2000). In Hải Thành, the population is set on the moving mindset because as one of my main informants said, “there is nothing here to develop” (không có gì để phát triển ở đây). The increasing gap between the rural and the urban in Vietnam and the lack of sustainable agricultural work have pushed people out of the rural in search of life opportunities elsewhere, to cities or to foreign countries.

In a context of post-colonial Vietnam, different destinations are differently evaluated and translated into the formation of social inequalities and subjectivities. We see a clear hierarchy between international migration and internal migration, and consequently, between transnational women and translocal women in Hải Thành. While the former are praised, desired, and expected, the latter are minimized and made invisible. The difference between the two kinds of migration lies in both economic capital (remittances) and social capital (by moving to foreign countries,
transnational women have transformed from rural to cosmopolitan women, while translocal women, moving to Hải Thành, remain rural). Moreover, not all foreign destinations are equally attractive. Imagination and experience of movement play a significant role in people’s desires and evaluation of destinations.

Studying the politics of destinations sheds light on the importance of imagination for movement as well as the need to connect experiences and imaginaries of movements. Culturally and historically laden imaginaries are at the root of movement as they produce the motivation and desire to move. Such imaginaries, enmeshed in global circuits of mediated images and narratives, inform how people envision the world and their mobilities in it. Moreover, imaginaries of other places are highly molded by colonialism, reflected in both horizontal (geographical) and vertical (economic-financial, social-status, cultural-cosmopolitan) values (Salazar 2011). In Vietnam, there is a hierarchy in how people imagine their destinations and this hierarchy is often shaped by colonial legacy, as well as other arrangements of power such as capitalism, nationalism, and modernities.

People in Hải Thành formulated clear binaries that reflect the postcolonial way of thinking about development and modernity. Like in many other postcolonial societies, the former colonial power becomes the standard against which those living in the former colony are measured (Gupta 1998). Thus, to the local residents, Europe and the United States are “ahead” and the Vietnamese need to catch up. These Western societies are associated with cosmopolitanism, cleanliness, movement, rights (particularly women’s rights) and welfare, opportunity to make money and support families while home in Vietnam is rural, polluted,

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7 This upgrade in social status is highly desirable for rural women because it even bypasses the middle level, the urban, in the rural/urban/global hierarchy.
absent of the ability to travel, full of domestic violence, deprived of welfare benefits, and lacks opportunity to make a living and support a family.

However, the evaluation of places in terms of being “behind” or “ahead” is only one side of the story. Jansen (2009) shows that places are often ranked by their movement through time. That is, for a place to become home, the place must bring a sense that it is going somewhere. Arguably, most Hải Thành people felt that Hải Thành was not going anywhere. But more importantly, Hải Thành people often rank the destinations in terms of how “far” they imagine a place could go, or in other words, how much hope they can pin on that place. South Korea, even though not a Western country, has become much more attractive than Canada or the United Kingdom to the locals thanks to the abundant job opportunities for both transnational women and their parents. The perceived movement of the place itself in this case has challenged the assumed hierarchy between the East and the West. Many transnational women in Hải Thành have surprised even their families and neighbors by choosing Korea over Canada as their migration destinations.

*Who – Beauty, education, and age*

The movement in Hải Thành that I am interested in is female marriage migration from one rural place to another. As I learned, this relatively novel phenomenon cannot be separated from issues of beauty, education, and age.

Rural Vietnamese have often been discursively described as uneducated, and implicitly this language of education works as a register of social class in Vietnam. More specifically, it separates the allegedly educated urban middle class from allegedly uneducated rural working class (Harms 2011, Taylor 2004b). In the case of transnational marriages, the media and popular
opinions in both Vietnam and other Asian countries view poverty and the lack of education as two main reasons for marriages between Vietnamese women and East Asian men (Bélanger, Khuat, and Tran 2013). In Taiwan, their unions are referred to as marriages of the inferiors, blatantly suggesting that both Vietnamese women and their foreign spouses are uneducated low-class people and that is why they marry each other. In these discourses Vietnamese women, in particular, are often portrayed as naïve and uneducated, thus entering transnational marriages out of greed.

However, the phenomenon of transnational marriages in Hải Thành challenges this stereotype. The young girls of Hải Thành are not poor but the majority of them have still chosen to marry foreign men. They are not the victims of poverty and the commodification of women; rather they assert their agency, whenever possible within structural constraints, in selecting their spouses and migration destinations. Moreover, they largely decline to pursue education even when they have the finances. I argue that their rejection of education is a critique of the view of education as life changing (Sen 1999) and reflects the rising educated unemployment among youth across the world due to the mobile and flexible nature of neoliberalism (Lukacs 2015a, Jeffrey 2010). The girls in Hải Thành, seeing no future for their investment in education, have turned instead to beauty. Thanks to Facebook, K-pop culture, and connections with families and friends living in East Asia, the young girls keep up with Korean fashion, don their Korean-style dresses, put on makeup, and transform themselves into what the local call ‘pretty girls.’ My research shows that beauty, rather than being a symptom of narcissism or vanity, is a way for the girls to self-fashion themselves into modern subjects, elevate their social status locally over boys and other girls, and attract foreign men in future marital arrangements. Beauty is thus both a form of social capital (Edmonds 2010) and investment in the future which are often denied to
rural Vietnamese women. Contrary to how certain feminists view beauty as oppressive to women, beauty is an important issue that should not be dismissed. Studying Hải Thành girls’ beauty practices and translocal women’s lack thereof is key to understand rural Vietnamese women’s strategies for social advancement and ranking.

Beauty, moreover, is generally associated with youth (Twigg 2013). Most local women who married Taiwanese and Korean men are young. However, studies on transnational marriages have not considered the crucial role of age in facilitating marriages. In fact, this absence is quite common across social sciences disciplines. Twigg (2013) states that even though age is one of the master identities and a key dimension of difference, age is often left out of the intersectionality of gender, class, race, and sexuality. Age is highly significant to apprehend how society is divided and structured and to study questions of power, subjectivity, and inequalities. The importance of age for Hải Thành girls is displayed in the achievement of youthful beauty, the possibility of transnational marriages, and the choice of potential spouses. Age, naturalized in the body and treated as obvious that we cannot see its power, indeed can shape people’s experience, determine how people are evaluated and judged, and limit or enable their development.

Taken together, the intersectionality of education, beauty, and age influences who gets to marry transnationally, who is praised, admired or criticized locally, and is highly relevant to the formation of class distinction in rural Vietnam.

Why – The morality of migration

Morality is a crucial aspect of rural and gendered migration because in Vietnam, both women, as a group, and the rural, as a place, are seen as the keepers of tradition and morality

Morality is always inclusive in the experiences of migration because the transnational and translocal social fields are often bound together by different value systems (Carling 2008, Gowricharn 2004, Hage 2002). On the other hand, morality studies have illustrated how local moralities can provide insights into local notions of sexuality, gender relations, and kinship (Mahmood 2005, Alter 1997, Stoler 1989, Herzfeld 1985). It is thus unfortunate that most migration studies have not theorized how morality beyond a male/female binary shape gendered movement. While there exist studies on the interconnection between morality and gendered movement, they mostly rest on how assumptions about appropriate gender roles and gender-specific ideologies (such as meanings of “good girls,” “obedient daughters,” “virtuous women,” and “respectable places”) enable and limit gendered (mostly female) movement (Sun 2009, Yan 2008, Silvey 2007, 2000, Ong 1991). I am not interested in this functionalist and cause-
consequence approach to gendered movement. Instead, following Strathern (1997), I want to focus on moral reasonings in contextual relationships beyond the simple male/female divide. I explore moral discourses because discourses provide a range of possibilities for negotiating the nature of moral interactions in everyday life (Zigon 2008). Zigon explains that “through such everyday, language-utilizing practices ... speaking individuals negotiate, construct, and come to agree on their moral ways of being” (Zigon 2008, 136). I want to stress that my focus on the negotiation over moral discourses is not to find out what are the shared assumptions of a moral woman/man in Hả Thành and how these assumptions affect gendered movement. Rather, I explore how people interact with each other in everyday life in order to live through the moral conflicts, especially between transnational and translocal women with regards to being “good” women. In other words, I am more interested in considering how relationships form not on the basis of mutual and shared understanding (about morality), but in spite of identified differences.

In Hả Thành, the marriage migration of transnational and translocal women was immersed in moral discourse. The discourse often framed the issue of morality on binaries: love vs. money, self vs. nation/family, and modernity vs. tradition, rural vs. urban. These dichotomies created conflicting and shifting moral discourses, depending on who is conversing with whom. For instance, to a parent, a transnational woman might be a dutiful loving child while to many men in Hả Thành, she was seen as a selfish gold digger. Similarly, local girls tended to view transnational women as a symbol of beauty and modernity while translocal girls regarded transnational women as indecent and lacking traditional values that are associated with rural people. I argue that these examples demonstrate morality is relational and situational, and reducing morality to totalizing binaries (such as good vs. bad, selfish vs. altruistic, modern vs.
traditional) removes its complexity, including how morality is often classed and gendered, and obscures personal struggles and feelings.

More importantly, through moral discourse, Hải Thành people make sense of their differences in terms of class, gender, age, ethnicity, and movement. To deny or confirm one group of women the righteousness due to their marriage migration was also a way to assert superior social standings in Hải Thành. However, Zigon (2012) argued that what is important about narratives is not its meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacity but the very act of speaking with another so as to charitably live through moral conflicts with the other. My study shows the ways the morally charged and conflicting narratives about the migration of two groups of women in Hải Thành reveal their grappling to morally accept themselves as good rural women and to be comfortable with one another in spite of social differences between the two. By looking at how moralities are negotiated, reevaluated, and enacted through everyday discourses and narratives, we can see the moral reasonings and better understand the dynamics of gendered movements beyond the push-pull and determining approaches based on gender binaries.

*Differentiated movement: Displacement, class within the family, and the pride illness*

Not all movements are the same. In Hải Thành, the differences in terms of who, where, and why one moves often lead to unequal results. My research shows that transnational marriage migration, despite the moral backlash, is still regarded by local people as desirable and life changing. However, in reality, not all transnational women achieve their dreams of life transformation for both themselves and their families in Hải Thành. For those who experience disappointment in transnational migration, they and their families consequently suffer from the pride illness (*bệnh sỹ diện*): painfully trying to save face and hide the fact that they do not live up
to the expectations of rich Việt Kiều and families with Kiều. Translocal women, on the other hand, face a much harsher outcome of their migration compared to transnational women. Contrary to the romanticization of movement as freedom and upward mobility, their migration results in being made invisible and displaced in Hà Thành. As a result, translocal women usually obtain different economic and social status from their in-law parents, sisters and brothers, demonstrating a crucial but often neglected aspect of social class: stratification runs deep, from a global and national level to the intimate relationships within the family.

In Vietnam, it is not a new phenomenon that social distinction is related to movement. During the high socialist period between 1954 and 1986, people who were associated with the state (those with a good class background) had significantly more opportunities to move for work and education both internally and internationally than those who did not (those with a bad class background) (Hardy 2003b). Currently, the case of migration in Hà Thành shows that as movements differentiated, movement has become a clearer index for social stratification, putting those who are mobile ahead of those who are immobile and those who move transnationally over those who do so locally. More crucially, this stratification not only distinguishes different groups within society based on gender, generation, occupation, and movement but also creates differences within nuclear families whose members are often assumed to occupy the same social status.

Reconceptualizing Rurality

The rural in Vietnam, as an ideal, conjures up ambivalent meanings. On the one hand, it represents the tradition, the root of the country, and a stable immobile foundation as observed by Nguyen-Vo: “the rural, that clump of earth with the nation’s metaphorical roots attached, a
source and resting place, a depository of a national soul” (Nguyen-Vo 2008, 55). It is romantically viewed as a moral place insulated from the ills of capitalism and modernity (Harms 2011, Nguyen-Vo 2008). On the other hand, that same traditional foundation of the rural is associated with ‘backwardness,’ lacking ‘civilization and modernity.’ In both instances, the rural represents the past: it is either traditional or backward, even though the interpretation of the past (positively as traditional or negatively as backward) depends on the context and what people want to do with the representations of the past. Moreover, because the city is supposedly neither traditional nor backward, the rural is seen as fundamentally different from the urban (Harms 2011, Taylor 2001).

As the rural is contrasted with its counterpart, the urban, both function as cultural ideals that provide meanings and legitimize hierarchies in Vietnam. However, while there has been much attention on the diversities and dynamics of cities thanks to their identification with movement and changes, the rural receives much less consideration and is often treated as a homogeneous category. Focusing on rural migration in Hải Thành and its rapid transformation, I want to show that the rural is just as active, complicated, modern, and stratified. In fact, movement is an effective lens to study the rural and its many layers because movement disrupts the cultural ideal of the rural as immobile and traditional.

The phenomenon of movement in Hải Thành is constituted largely by the need of rural people to move away from the past and look for a better future somewhere else, physically and figuratively. Coupled with the fact that differentiated movements produce differentiated subjects, we have a complex picture of rurality in Hải Thành. On the surface, transnational migration turns Hải Thành into a modern rurality. 8 Hải Thành has extravagant houses, modern young girls in

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8 The success of the fishing industry also contributes to the wealth and modernity of Hải Thành.
their flashy Korean fashion, a large number of residents who no longer have to do agricultural work thanks to remittances, and transnational marriage agencies that do the matchmaking via Facebook and the internet. Staying alongside the modern rural Hải Thành is another rurality that is not so modern yet not so traditional, generated by the translocal marriage migration. Translocal women in Hải Thành constantly face moral struggles over dualisms. For example, they have to balance between modernity and backwardness, carefully choosing what to wear so as to maintain the modern modesty while not slipping into ‘rural dressing.’ Or they weigh up the pros and cons of acting as good women, wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law (in contrast to transnational women) while dealing with the social exclusion due to their gendered migration.

There are also two other kinds of rurality that exist outside of Hải Thành: a backward rurality, the hometown of translocal women, where it is so poor and ‘undeveloped’ that it must be ethnic areas and a capitalist rural, the migration destination of transnational women, where it is rural but desirable because it is overseas. Together, these four different kinds of rurality are stacked in a hierarchical order shaped by the interaction of movement, class, and rurality.

In Hải Thành, the significant hierarchy between transnational and internal migration heightens the difference between these two kinds of rurality. There are expectations of upward mobility and modernity associated with (transnational) migration, such as beauty and remittances, that translocal women cannot meet. Therefore, we see the stratification of ruralities right within the family: a family with a transnational daughter is modern rural while a translocal daughter-in-law is not. Consequently, family members feel the need to both distance themselves from and support translocal women. The contrast between and coexistence of different kinds rurality in Hải Thành enable us to see how rurality is fluid, diverse, continually changing, challenged, and renegotiated.
The coexistence of different ruralities also demonstrates the importance of the connection between movement and emplacement. While (transnational) movement tends to be highly prized, the situation in Hải Thành proves the crucial role of emplacement in maintaining and building locality, allowing for a diverse rural life. The transnational marriages of young Hải Thành girls have substantially affected the community (for example, the shortage of local women for local marriages, changing gender and familial relations, and issues of remittances that create many dependent receivers who have chosen beauty over education, leisure over work). However, translocal women have quietly come and stayed in Hải Thành to sustain families and the community. They have married local men, given birth to the next generation, and taken the responsibility for keeping moral values. They are the hidden force that is holding the social structure together amid affluent changes. Thanks to the not-so-modern rurality created by translocal women, the modern rurality in Hải Thành can continue. Unfortunately, similar to the dynamics between movement and emplacement in which the former is more visible and the latter is trivialized, the flashy modern transnational women are noticed while translocal women remain invisible in Hải Thành.

**Beyond binaries**

My research, focusing on two kinds of movement in Hải Thành, aims to see the interrelationships that link differences. I have argued previously that generalizations based on dichotomies such as victimhood and agency, morality and immorality, modernity and tradition, and the East and the West fail to describe the constant transformation in Hải Thành. The critiques of dualisms are extended also to mobility studies. Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013)
have noted that theorists of movement often fixate on binaries of fixity-motion, self-other, same-difference, and rootedness and cosmopolitanism. For example, among classic social theorists, Ferdinand Tönnies postulated the gemeinschaft-gesellschaft distinction; Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Robert Redfield distinguished between the rural and urban; and Emile Durkheim theorized the population as a fixed territorialized social fact. More recent migration and mobility scholarship has unintentionally further concretized the binary by focusing either on the experiences of immigrant settlement or the global flows of migration and tourism (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). These “covert dualisms” (Rockefeller 2011) between movement and non-movement conceal the fact that movement and stasis have been both relative and constructive to social life in interrelated processes. Indeed, my research shows that distinction between motion and stasis is very fluid. For example, translocal women have moved to Hải Thành yet their movement mostly results in their displacement and confinement at their new homes. Or local girls are stuck in Hải Thành waiting for foreign men to arrive; yet their waiting period is a crucial preparation for their future migration. Indeed, movement and non-movement are interconnected to create a constant changing dynamics of everyday life.

Not only do we need to move away from seeing movement as oppositional to fixed territorialized relationships, we also need to see the interconnection among different kinds of movement. King and Skeldon (2010) have shown that migration studies retain a division between internal and international migration and that since the 1990s internal migration has been largely ignored (see also Kalir 2013). They observed that there exist two almost entirely separate literatures from different conceptual, theoretical, and methodological standpoints, which rarely talk to each other. And since the emergence of the “migration-development nexus” in the 1990s, both scholars and policy-makers have tended to focus almost exclusively on the relationship
between development and international migration, overlooking the fact that in most developing countries, internal migration is equally important (King and Skeldon 2010). This separation between internal and international migration probably occurs due to the fact that nation-state remains as the unit of analysis for most migration studies (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003, Beck 2000). This methodological nationalism led scholars to study only movement that crosses borders and to view only those who cross borders as mobile (Glick Schiller 2010). My research focuses on the parallel relationships between transnational and translocal marriage migration to highlight not only how the two kinds of migration are related (the internal migration happens to compensate for the transnational migration) but also how they define each other (the identities and social rankings of transnational and translocal women are formed in dialogue with one another). I demonstrate the often-ignored similarities in the migration processes between the two, and provide more robust insights into the complex livelihoods of migrants and their communities (see also Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, Cohen 2011, King and Skeldon 2010).

Similar to the internal-international dichotomy is the tendency of scholars to focus on rural to urban migration and mostly ignore the rural to rural migration. Migration scholars often study rural migration to urban areas, both internally and internationally. Vertovec (2011) claims that the city is the foremost setting for the anthropology of migration because of its everyday multiculturalism and its large scale (Caglar 2010, Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, Brettell 2003, Bommes and Radtke 1996). As such, the most recent research on migration and movement is based in big cities such as New York, Miami, Barcelona, Frankfurt, Manchester, and London (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011, Foner 2010, Però 2007, Römhold and Bergmann 2003, Stepick et al. 2003, Zhang 2002). This lack of rural to rural migration studies creates the biased assumption that only cities, and not rural places, are diverse, resulting in an unbalanced
interpretation of migration. Hải Thành has proven that a rural place can be diverse and global as well as attractive and sustainable enough for many other rural Vietnamese to make it a new home.

Why Hải Thành?

Hải Thành is a truly unique site: it is a place that is simultaneously rural and modern, local and global. Its residents are sandwiched between the space of desirable cosmopolitan Việt Kiều and the rural working-class fishing people. It is famous for sending the largest number nationwide of its young women to foreign countries through transnational marriages, despite its rural location and small population. It is also one of the few rural locations in Vietnam that is a migrant destination. Yet it is precisely the uniqueness of Hải Thành that provides us with insights about the social conditions in contemporary Vietnam and beyond. In particular, Hải Thành allows us to understand the relationships between place, movement/mobility, identity (gender, age, education, ethnicity, and class) and morality through this uneasy, constantly negotiated encounter of difference (rural/urban, modern/traditional, old/young). Hải Thành reveals the nature and interplay of these processes that are happening globally and locally (almost) everywhere else. In other words, this extraordinary village is actually an important site to study and understand these different social, political, historical and economic forces at play.

Field Research and Ethnography of Encounters

Over the course of four years, from 2011 to 2014, I spent 18 months doing field research in Hải Thành, including an eleven-month period of ethnographic fieldwork in 2013-2014. During my long stay in Hải Thành, I daily ate and interacted with my host family. The father of the
family, whom I fondly call Uncle Tú, is an old friend of my uncle’s. Because their house was small and noisy with young children, Uncle Tú arranged for me to live on the second floor of the house owned by his sister, now in Japan. His other sister, Ms. Hy, lived on the first floor with her grandson to look after the house.

Twice a day, I went to have lunch and dinner with Uncle Tú’s family and stayed for hours. They welcomed and considered me as part of the family and I participated in all familial events and gatherings, significant or otherwise. My time with the family allowed me glimpses into their intimate life, from personal desires to interpersonal struggles and mending, from jealousy to kindness and acceptance, and from frustration to hope and resilience.

Thanks to Uncle Tú’s introduction, I got to know his neighbors and relatives and from there, I built my own network of connections. I spent the mornings and evenings visiting people at their houses and interviewing. Sometimes I went to cafés, karaoke bars, and restaurants with them at night. In the afternoon, I went to Korean classes where I met many of the local girls before they married East Asian men and migrated. My relationships with the girls in my classes remain even though all of them have gone to Korea. We have been keeping in touch via Facebook. I also hung out with fishermen, frequented their boats and homes, interacted with their wives and children, went to Cát Bà Island to observe their occupation in action. Through both Uncle Tú and the fishermen I knew, I met translocal women who are wives of local men. Altogether, I tried to build relationships with diverse groups of people in Hải Thành to develop a better sense of how people in the commune interacted, built relationships, and made sense of their own identities.

I changed the names of the commune and all people in this dissertation because of the possibility of risks that my work might cause. Due to the highly charged morality surrounding
transnational marriages and women who engage in them as well as the sensitive nature of being daughters-in-law in a strange place, I have chosen not to expose my informants to such a risk of being judged for what they said and did. Therefore, I use pseudonyms when referring to individuals in this dissertation and I also changed some minor details of people’s background to prevent possible identification.

The politics of knowledge engagement and production remain important and central throughout the process of fieldwork and writing. I went into the field as a middle-class, urban and cosmopolitan, single woman in my 30s. I grew up in the center of Hải Phòng municipality, lived in the capital of Vietnam for a few years, and have been studying in the United States for the last 12 years. My background made me very different from the people whom I studied and with whom I worked. I was not unaware of “the politics of solidarity” (Nelson 1999, 57) with the people I studied and I have found that asserting solidarity in my case was highly inappropriate. I could not claim to speak for the people of Hải Thành because this research, in the end, reflected my own intention and bias (see Spivak 1988). Moreover, such a claim would erase the glaring differences between us as well as glossing over our complicated relationships. Hải Thành people noticed my differences and constantly pointed them out to me. Similar to the women in Hải Thành, I was confronted with questions about my appearance (Why I did not wear makeup? Why didn’t I dress in what the local viewed as modern?) and my single status. The decision to stick to my personal choices, especially with regards to my appearance, was made easier for me because I had other forms of social capital to draw from that most people in the commune did not have (such as education, urban dweller, middle class). That earned me respect locally. But as I faced and made sense of the critiques of me, I also strived to understand people who held very

9 See more in chapter VI about local women
different values and practices. For example, there were many moments during the writing process when I slipped into being judgmental, and I am thankful to my advisor for making me realize my own biases. I struggled to write about Hải Thành people.

Taking a cue from Lieba Faier (2009) and following the tradition of ethnographic writing, I chose to focus on personal narratives, to retain the contradictory ways Hải Thành residents represented themselves in our interaction, and to portray them as complex persons with both admirable and ‘ugly’ sides. I agree with Faier that “I am less interested in presenting people as consistent and coherent subjects than asking why, at certain moments and for certain contingent historical, cultural, political-economic, and ethnographic reasons, they presented themselves as they did” (Faier 2009, 28). Therefore, in my research people helped and praised each other in some circumstances, judged, lied and took advantage of one another in other circumstances. Acts of kindness and practices of discrimination, including racism, classism, sexism, and ageism, coexisted as people struggled to live in an unequal world.

The feminist literature on third world women has a tendency to assume their victimhood or overemphasize their agency in resisting marginalization (Narayan 1997, Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991). However, Avery Gordon (2008) reminds us that people have “the right to complex personhood” and that they “possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents” (Gordon 2008, 4). She goes on to clarify that “[c]omplex personhood means that all people … remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others … that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves” (Gordon 2008, 4). Keeping this theoretical statement in mind, I tried to understand how people became entangled and
maneuvered in their lives and relationships and to present the larger contexts in which contradicting behaviors, beliefs, and characteristics occurred. I often did not agree with the choices people made but I could not always claim my own innocence either (see Haraway 1988). In the end, I believed in the importance of doing long-term fieldwork and writing in ways that show our mutual interacting, enriching, and learning from each other.

Interaction is a key word for me. First, it reflects an accepted dictum of partial, fragmented, and incomplete truth (hooks 2015, Stewart 1996, Trinh 1989, Haraway 1988, Clifford 1986). My research findings make no claim for a complete understanding of movement or social class or people in Hảï Thành. They only reflect my own interpretation of our interaction and encounters in the commune, structured by our specific differences in terms of gender, class, age, and ethnicity. Second, it is the foundation of what Faier (2009) calls “the ethnography of encounters.” This method presents a distinct way to study transnationalism and movement. Studies of movement often explore how people, ideas, and capital transgress and transform national boundaries or how ideologies and the political economy inform the ways people move. Scholars also tend to research how a certain population negotiates mobile flows or how the global processes of capitalism or new regimes of citizenship and sovereignty reshape their lives. While focusing on how people’s lives relate to large-scale formations of power, this approach leaves little space for the dynamics of everyday cultural crossings or the in-between space where relationships form on the basis of differences (Faier 2009). Similar to Rockefeller’s (2011) criticism of the term “flow” that erases the specificities of action, people, and place and Tsing’s advocacy of “zones of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2005, xi), the ethnography of encounters takes into account the messy and surprising way that people create cultural meanings and identities through everyday encounters and relationships (Faier 2009).
Choosing to focus on cultural encounters and mutual relationships helps me understand the crucial interconnection between transnational women and translocal women, and by extension, between transnational and translocal migration, which is often neglected in migration literature. On the surface, they appeared locally as two distinctly separate groups, but their subjectivities are mutually formed through dialogic processes where desires, gender, class, age, and ethnicity all play a role in creating and sustaining the dynamics. It is important to explore not only how the transnational, national, and local cultures influence the migration of transnational and/or translocal women but how their identities, desires, and transformation come into being through relationships and encounters with one another, oftentimes intimately and sometimes unexpectedly.

Furthermore, examining the crossings between transnational and translocal women illuminates what both Hage (2005) and Wilding (2007) cautioned against the inclination to see the “transnational” aspect of migration as the most impactful for migrants, mobility as the defining characteristic of migration, and “nation” as the most significant unit of analysis. In fact, the waiting period in Hải Thành before transnational women migrated to East Asian was very important in producing the modern girl identity for young local women and enabling their eventual migration. For translocal women, their migration was often not acknowledged but instead minimized. Coupled with their difficulties in Hải Thành, their migration was better defined by immobility rather than mobility. Both of these interesting issues were only revealed through the women’s encounters and relationships in the local context even though they were tied with and demonstrated global and national values. Through the ethnography of encounters, extending from the relationships between the two groups of women to include other relationships in the commune, I aim to map out the dynamics of movement and class in the intimate
relationships (where stakes and desires are revealed) and the larger structures in which these relationships are positioned.

**Chapter outline**

This dissertation has four main parts. The first part, *On the Move: Introduction*, discusses theories on movement, the methodology of the research and introduces my main field site: an offshore fishing community called Hải Thành in northern Vietnam. Chapter I explores the movement of the local population in the context of profound social inequalities in Vietnam. It focuses on the extraordinary culture of movement in Hải Thành by detailing the historical, social, political, and spatial conditions that enable and sustain movement in Hải Thành. Here I describe the patterns and characteristics of the different kinds of movement: those of boatpeople in the 1980s and 1990s, and currently of offshore fishermen, translocal women and transnational women. I argue that the desires for movement in this commune stems from their status of being in-between: they are well-to-do but feel discriminated against because they are rural people with a working-class profession – fishing. As such, movement makes a crucial resource to overcome their liminality and gain economic and social distinction.

The next two parts of the dissertation center on the close relationship between gendered movement and social class. Here I discuss the internal and international migration of women – a double rural-to-rural migration pattern in which women from rural Hải Thành marry East Asian men and migrate to Korea while women from other rural places marry Hải Thành men and migrate to Hải Thành. By comparing different kinds of movement and their social values, I aim to challenge the often assumed simple and causal connection between physical movement and social mobility as well as to complicate the uncritical celebration of movement in a global era.
The five chapters on the migration of women in Hải Thành explore how female migration is intimately tied to cultural ideas of beauty, age, class, and morality. In chapters II and III, I argue that youthful beauty is both the motivator and product of the un/successful marriage between migration and class. Rather than being seen as a site of vanity and narcissism, beauty can be viewed as another form of capital that enables poor women to migrate transnationally and transform their lives and social statuses. Yet, on the other hand, the perceived lack of beauty with regards to translocal women, closely examined in chapter VI, proves that not all kinds of migration are the same and that there exists a big gap in social and economic capital between international and internal migration. Since both beauty and marriage are highly moralized, in chapters V and VI, I also investigate the morality of movement, especially how transnational and translocal women navigate the discourses and practices of morality to combat their marginalization, and, in the process, to illustrate the complicated relationship of class, movement, and gender.

In the last part of the dissertation, I introduce my host family and their struggle in the search of upward mobility. Unlike many other families in Hải Thành, the migration of their daughters and granddaughters did not sufficiently elevate their social and economic status. To make it worse, the family had to live with what my informants referred to as a pride illness in order to hide their failure to achieve the expectations of migration. Their unique experiences highlight the differentiation of movement and illustrate how the politics of movement play out concretely in everyday lives of ordinary Vietnamese.

By focusing on gendered movement in Hải Thành and stories of aspirations and hopes, broken dreams and struggles, my dissertation reveals the disjunctures in the mobility regime in Vietnam: the normalization and valorization of the mobility regime that promises class climbing
does not necessarily produce subjects that perfectly fit into it. The specific chapters focusing on
my host family, their daughter and daughter-in-law (chapters VII, VIII, and IX) examine this
tension and serve as a powerful example of the desires for movement and the feelings of
displacement when such desires fail to actualize. I conclude this dissertation by reminding the
readers of the diverse rural life with continual changes. In this place, we see the achieved dreams
as well as a harsh reality of disappointment and marginalization as people wait, move, and
interact to confront, produce, and rework understandings of belonging, self-worth, and their
place in the shifting global order.
Chapter I

Population Movements and Social Mobility in Hải Thành and Contemporary Vietnam

Introduction

The (extra)ordinary lives in contemporary Vietnam are largely shaped by two intersecting and intimately connected processes – physical movement and class mobility. Scholars involved in Vietnamese studies have noted that new forms of social stratification have been emerging in modern Vietnam as a result of the country’s tremendous socio-economic changes in the last twenty years. After the implementation of the free market in 1986, the notion of class in Vietnam has moved from a Maoist ideology of “good” and “bad” classes (that valorized the rural, the farmers, and the workers and criticized the urban, the entrepreneurs, and the middle-class) to a capitalist notion that reversed the hierarchy (Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012, Taylor 2004b, Luong 2003). Along with class, physical movement has become an important marker of distinction in modern Vietnam (Hardy 2003a). Movement is seen as the break from the high-socialist past that is often perceived as restricting. This sense of restriction stems from the teleological narrative of progress that contrasts the presumed socialist immobility to capitalist mobility (Schwenkel 2007).\textsuperscript{10} In actual fact, population movement in Vietnam is not a new phenomenon, but what is different now is how it has become relatively accessible. This accessibility is crucial since the discourse and practices of movement articulate larger, historically-informed and transforming relations of social, economic and cultural capital. More specifically, Vietnamese today can move more freely outside of the state’s directions as non-state

\textsuperscript{10} For the opposite process in Serbia, see Greenberg (2011).
jobs are available and the system of household registration is loosened (Hardy 2003b). Additionally, the normalization of diplomatic relationships between Vietnam and capitalist countries in the early 1990s also made it much easier for Vietnamese citizens to cross national borders (Thai 2011). These larger transformations in the political economy have led to new stratifications of Vietnamese society into different social groupings: overseas Vietnamese, internal and seasonal migrants, mobile urban dwellers, and immobile farmers.

In order to capture and map out the converging processes of movement and class, this chapter introduces a Vietnamese commune called Hải Thành at the particular nexus of history, geography and political economy. I especially focus on different forms of movement from and to Hải Thành as well as Hải Thành people’s class positioning in contemporary Vietnam.

Hải Thành – A Rural Commune in Global Motion

Located near the Tonkin Gulf, Hải Thành is a small rural fishing commune (xã) belonging to Thùy Nguyên district (huyện) of Hải Phòng City in northern Vietnam with a population of around 12,000 people. Located near the Bạch Đằng river, the community lives in an area that is slightly larger than 4 square miles (12 square km). Historically, Hải Thành was part of Hải Thái village (làng). Ancestor (thuỷ tổ) Đinh Huyền Thông originally from Hà Tây (now part of the capital Hà Nội) migrated to this locale in the early 15th century, seeing it as a better area for fishing than Hà Tây. His siblings and family members gradually followed him, over time making the Đinh lineage the majority in Hải Thái (70-80%). Hải Thái fishermen started to move further from Hải Thái towards the water for better catch and till the end of the 19th century, more than 200 households lived in the area that is Hải Thành today. In 1891 Hải Thành separated from Hải Thái as another village while maintaining strong lineage ties with Hải
Thái people. Till this day, the Đinh people in Hải Thành still go to Hải Thái to attend the annual ancestor worship ceremony (giỗ tổ) held on January 8th of the lunar calendar (the date of Đinh Huyễn Thông’s death in 1461). While the Đinh lineage makes up around 70% of the population in Hải Thành, other lineages such as Nguyên, Lê, and Vũ also have a relatively large population (Thành 1999). The importance of patrilineal kinship and lineage here is similar to many rural communes in Vietnam, but in Hải Thành it paves the way for the out-migration of local women, puts pressure on male behaviors, and complicates gender relations.11

Naturally people in the community have always been fishers and for a century they were as poor as many other fishing villages scattered along the coast of Vietnam. But in a twist of dramatic social changes in the country following the American War12 that ended in 1975, the unique combination of a fishing occupation and nearshore location of Hải Thành has changed the fate of the commune and transformed it into an unusually mobile and financially comfortable rural community.

*Vietnam in Turmoil: Political and Economic Reforms*

During the last century, Vietnam has experienced lengthy wars with the French, Japanese, and Americans that devastated the country. In contrast to the significant aid that was directed to the postwar reconstruction of many war-torn Asian countries, including Japan and Korea, Vietnam had little help from its allies to rebuild from decades of ruinous wars from 1975 to the early 1990s. The 1979 border war with China put an end to Chinese aid to its neighbor. The decline and final disintegration of Communism in Eastern Europe at around the same time significantly reduced the Soviet and East European aid to Vietnam. Vietnam was also suffered

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11 The local gender tensions will be discussed in the following chapters.
12 The Vietnam War is called the American War in Vietnam.
from the U.S.-led trade embargo from 1975 to 1994 (Luong 2003). These external factors seriously slowed down Vietnam's economic recovery process.

The Communist state's implementation of the command-economy model in 1954 only further deteriorated the situation, resulting in many years of poverty for the Vietnamese, including the Hải Thành people. The victory of the Communist force at the end of the American war in 1975 reinforced the Vietnamese Communist leaders' confidence in their ideology and command-economy model of development, which had been applied to the northern half of Vietnam from 1954 to 1975. This model sought to achieve rapid industrialization and economic development through state control of key resources (raw materials, labor, and capital) and marketing of output (through the state's trading network) (de Vylde and Fforde 1988). The economy had three main sectors: state, cooperative, and household. In the state's ideological vision, the state sector played the leading role in the economy (mainly in industries and services), while the cooperative sector dominated agriculture, making most households belong to the cooperatives.

However, this command-economy model encountered many difficulties, especially in agriculture. Cooperatives faced problems of increasing membership due to population growth and lower returns on labor input as members paid greater attention to their own household garden plots. The result was declining and stagnating agricultural productivity from cooperative land (Luong 1992, 204). Moreover, in both the agricultural and industrial sectors, an increasing percentage of products ended up in the open market as state procurement prices were kept artificially low. The resulting shortage of foods and industrial goods in the state commercial system and their availability on the open market at considerably higher prices eroded the
purchasing power of state workers' salaries on the one hand and inflated the economy on the other (Fforde and Paine 1987, 93-95).

By the end of the 1980s, the Vietnamese command economy was in a state of major crisis. Many local households and individuals survived by breaking the laws and relying on the informal market, further undermining the state and cooperative sectors of the economy. The urban practice of raising pigs and chicken, for example, illustrates people’s struggle to face economic difficulties. It was not uncommon for better-off families in the cities to raise pigs in their living rooms, feeding them with chicken scraps and then selling the pigs to private traders. This practice was illegal because private ownership in a Communist economy was not allowed. Yet it reflected the poverty of Vietnam to such an extent that agricultural production in urban houses became a sign of affluence (Hardy 2003b). In 1988, Vietnam experienced acute food shortages and had to appeal for international food aid (Kolko 1997).

Hải Thành people described the time after the American War as extremely difficult in which most people were starving. Farming did not provide enough food because the cooperatives were facing the same problem of low labor input. Each household had less than one kilogram (four cups) of rice and nothing else to survive on per day (The People Committee of Hải Thành 2005). Moreover, fishing was not productive because no one could afford to buy boats and gear. The whole community of 2450 households only had 260 fishing boats, the majority of which had deteriorated over the years and had very small-capacity engines (from 6 CV to 15 CV13) that limited fishing to nearshore areas. At the same time, trading was banned and Hải Thành people had no choice but to sell their products cheaply to state-owned seafood export companies (The People Committee of Hải Thành 2005). Mr. Tòng, a local man, frustratingly wrote a poem about

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13 CV means chevaux vapeur and is a measuring unit of engine power (horsepower).
the hardship of people and the problems with the command economy. The older generation in Hải Thành that survived the difficult period still remembers the poem by heart:

Con cua con càng cử hàng quản lý
Cà to cá tí quản trị liên hoan
Hòn gạch hòn than cừ hàng phân phối
Cà uốn cả thói phân phối xã viên
Thịt lớn ưu tiên để phân cán bộ
Con dê ăn bó cán bó chum chăn
Xã viên đói nhân xin ra họp tác.

Crabmeat is controlled by the (state) stores
Big fish, small fish are consumed at managers’ parties
Bricks and coals the stores distribute
Stale fish, rotten fish are given to collective members
Pork is saved for cadres
Goat is devoured, cadres sleep well under their blankets
Starving, members ask to get out of collectives.

During this straitened economic time, the border war with China in 1979 particularly affected Hải Thành residents and subsequently changed the course of their lives. The mass deportation of Chinese Vietnamese by the Vietnamese government left behind a big void in the fishing industry of Hải Phòng city. Chinese Vietnamese had traditionally taken charge of offshore fishing in Hải Phòng and contributed the majority of seafood yield. Following their
forced departure, Hải Thành fishermen were assigned to take over offshore fishing. However, the city only gave them two offshore boats left by Chinese Vietnamese. Their own boats were old and small, the state provided a limited amount of oil, and seafood prices were too low. These difficulties were coupled with their significant lack of experience with offshore fishing. The consequence was major losses for many years for Hải Thành fishing, further worsening their poverty (Đặng Uỷ Xã Hải Thành 1999).

Many border areas also became vacant with the flight of Chinese Vietnamese. Hải Thành was among Northern rural communes tasked with sending their residents to populate the border. In 1979, 495 Hải Thành households (around 30% of the commune population) were relocated to a commune in Quảng Ninh province. Yet, their lives in the new place were unstable and difficult and soon after a quarter of them came back to Hải Thành. Unfortunately, their houses and agricultural land in Hải Thành had already been reallocated to others. They ended up camping out in the field, arguing with authorities, and harrassing neighbors. Crime, theft, and social chaos in Hải Thành surged while destitution spreaded (Thành 1999).

The poverty in Hải Thành and Vietnam, in general, after the wars resulted in an exodus of northern Vietnamese “boatpeople,” as they were commonly referred to, seeking refuge in capitalist societies. The early migrants leaving Hải Thành in the 80s and 90s belonged to this group.

**Hải Thành and the Boatpeople**

Boatpeople is the name given to a large group of Vietnamese who left the country as refugees after the American War. The fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the dismantlement of the capitalist economy in the south, and the brief border war with China in 1979 resulted in the
departure, by boat and by land, of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese, southerners associated with the South Vietnam regime, and marginalized returnees from the new economic zones (Hardy 2003a, b, Duiker 1983). They were political refugees that marked the postwar refugee crisis of Vietnam in the late 1970s. While most boatpeople were often political refugees from the south, little is known of those who left from the north as economic refugees due to widespread poverty in the late 1980s and 1990s. As Chan (2011) explains, for those northern boatpeople, boarding a boat was not a consequence of political fear of or exclusion by the Communist regime. Rather, it reflected the frustration with the political and economic system that could not provide for even basic human needs. Even the Vietnamese Ministry of Interior admitted the economic hardships in 1988:

the majority left because they could not deal with or adapt to our new society, sympathize with the country’s difficult conjuncture, or recognize their responsibilities to society and their fatherland at a time when it faced hardship in many areas, especially economics and society, etc. (Vietnam, Ministry of Interior quoted in Hardy 2003b: 118).

In response to the deep economic crisis, a large number of Vietnamese in the north left for Hong Kong (because of its close physical distance) as economic refugees. They largely boarded boats at northern parts of Vietnam, especially Hải Phòng and Quảng Ninh, two provinces at the northeastern coast of Vietnam (Chan 2011). Hải Thành was an important point of departure during this migration due to its coastal location and its new offshore fishing industry. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hải Thành fishermen were hired to transport Hải Phòng and Hà Nội refugees from Vietnam to Hong Kong. Gradually, a large number of Hải Thành people started taking their families with them to Hong Kong to escape the poverty at home. As the economy
kept getting worse, Hải Thành people went on illegal, dangerous, and uncertain journeys that lasted months to reach Hong Kong. It was estimated that starting from 1988, more than 2000 Vietnamese boatpeople arrived in Hong Kong each month (Chan 2011). The surge of boatpeople arrivals created widespread fear of a Vietnamese invasion in Hong Kong, forcing the government to adopt a new screening policy that aimed to distinguish refugees from non-refugees (i.e., economic refugees) in 1988. As a result, more than 80% of economic the boatpeople who arrived after the 16 June 1988 cutoff date were deemed non-refugees and were repatriated to Vietnam (Chan 2011, Hardy 2003b). Many Hải Thành people were repatriated in the 1990s, but those who were lucky enough to flee before 1988 were resettled in third countries after Hong Kong, including America, Canada, Australia, Japan, and most countries in Europe (Mignot 1995). They became Hải Thành’s first wave of Việt Kiều (Kiều for short). Việt Kiều is a Vietnamese term to indicate overseas Vietnamese; it literally means Vietnamese sojourners. This first wave of Kiều is referred to locally as third-country Kiều (kiều nước thứ ba) to differentiate it from the community’s second wave of Kiều – transnational women.

While the earlier boatpeople left the country for political reasons, the later boatpeople left because they could not tolerate the hardships of a socio-economic system that had not worked for decades, and they were exhausted with the effort of believing in it. As Hardy (2003b) puts it, the boatpeople exodus was both the symptom and result of the social, political, and economic changes taking place since 1975. It was only after the Vietnamese state implemented a series of reform policies known as Renovation (Đổi Mới) in 1986 that real economic gains were experienced in people’s everyday life. The reform, along with compassion fatigue of the countries of asylum and the repatriation program created in 1989, put an end to the boatpeople phenomenon.
Đổi Mới reform was implemented in 1986 in an attempt to get the country out of the economic—and, thus, political--crisis. At the center of Đổi Mới were the development of a free market, the dissolution of land collectivization, and the removal of restrictions on private business (Hardy 2003b). Politically speaking, the Vietnamese state also began to normalize its relations with former enemies. Within 20 years after Đổi Mới, the Vietnamese economy was growing at an annual rate of 7%, and poverty was nearly halved (Federal Research Division 2005). Hải Thành benefited tremendously from these reform policies. Before Đổi Mới, Hải Thành was one of the poorest communities in an already poor country, but the remittances from Việt Kiều sent after Đổi Mới have helped the local economy to boom. Even though the number of third-country Kiều (former boatpeople) in Hải Thành was not high, they contributed substantially to the socio-economic development of the community. In the 90s, they started paying return visits to Hải Thành. Thai (2011) observed that these return visits have been a relatively new opportunity made possible by recent changes in Vietnamese diplomatic policies that reopened its door to the global economy (Đổi Mới reform in 1986, ASEAN membership in 1993, and the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. in 1995). When boatpeople left Vietnam, they were considered criminals and traitors and subsequently lost their Vietnamese citizenship. However, the normalization of economic and political relations has gradually stimulated the increasing return visits by Việt Kiều.

The Vietnamese government was also quick to realize the importance of remittances and a growing Việt Kiều economy. The originally hostile discourse towards Việt Kiều was transformed into a welcoming rhetoric of patriotism where perceptions of Việt Kiều transitioned from traitors (phan quốc) to compatriots (Kiều Bào). The recent decree of the Vietnamese government calls for favorable policies for all non-resident Vietnamese citizens to facilitate the
return of Việt Kiều for investment and nation building. It allows Việt Kiều to return home without entry visas, opening up legal channels for reintegration into Vietnamese society (Dang, Tacoli, and Hoang 2003). Within 15 years, remittances from Việt Kiều rose from $35 million in 1991 to $5 billion in 2006, accounting for 8% of Vietnam’s GDP (Thai 2011). In Hải Thành, remittances from third-country Kiều has led to the development of an offshore fishing industry and motivated the migration of women, bringing wealth to a once poor community.

_The Fishermen, the Brides, and the Migrants: Movement as Normalcy_

Until the early 1990s, local fishing was in a poor condition. Local people fished with small nets on boats with small engines (6-15 CV) that could only operate nearshore. Hải Thành households that had always been dependent on fishing could barely survive (The People Committee of Hải Thành 2005). In 1994, two local fishermen (Nguyễn Đức Sông and Nguyễn Đức Nhẫn) who traded seafood with Chinese fishermen from Guangdong learned from them the techniques of harvesting squid by light attraction. This technique brought much higher yields, yet it required high investment. In order to fish for squid, fishermen needed to purchase bigger vessels (around 15 yards long), a high number of halogen 1000W bulbs (40-150 bulbs per boat), and expensive engines (100 to 300 CV). These boats cost from $50,000 to $150,000, a sum that was hard for most fishermen to obtain. Thanks to the remittances from boatpeople in the 1990s and early 2000s, a large portion of Hải Thành fishermen had been able to switch to squid fishing within 10 years, making squid fishing an important source of income for the local economy. The number of fishing boats increased from 260 in 1996 to 700 in 2014, the amount of seafood caught increased from 4,800 tons in 2001 (worth $3.3 million) to 11,000 tons in 2008 (worth

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14 For more detailed research on the Vietnamese state’s policies towards Việt Kiều, see Small (2012a).
$8.2 million) to 30,000 tons in 2014. Nowadays, the fishing industry makes up more than 70% of the local economy (The People Committee of Hải Thành 2014).\textsuperscript{15} The success of squid fishing has helped change the face of Hải Thành. The Hải Phòng government is investing in building a new port in the community to accommodate the growing number of vessels and new roads to better connect Hải Thành with the center of Hải Phòng. It was the remittances from third-country Việt Kiều spent on building boats and buying gears (or used as loans for these investments) that helped the transition to squid fishing transpire much faster and more smoothly.

While men in Hải Thành engage in offshore fishing, a large number of Hải Thành women have been migrating to Taiwan and South Korea in the last ten years for marriages. Transnational marriages between young rural Vietnamese women and Taiwanese and South Korean men have become very common. Statistics from the National Statistics Offices show that Vietnamese women are the second largest group of transnationals, after Chinese women, to marry Taiwanese and South Korean men (Bélanger 2010). In Hải Thành, transnational marriages between local women and East Asian men started in the early 2000s and as of now, it is the rural community that has the highest number of transnational brides nationwide, estimated to be around 2500 (21% of the population) (Duong 2013). The statistics from the Hải Thành Youth Union in 2013 shows that Hải Thành only had 50 transnational marriages in 2011 and the number decreased to 20 in 2012 because there were hardly any single eligible women left (Duong 2013). I will discuss Hải Thành’s transnational marriages in depth in chapters II and III.

The high number of transnational brides in Hải Thành is, in part, influenced by Hải Thành boatpeople migration. Third-country Kiều and their remittances have created a desire

\textsuperscript{15} Even though most Hải Thành fishermen catch squid, there are a small number of local seafood traders that sell the harvest to seafood companies in Hải Phòng city and China or to local markets.
among Hải Thành people for a better life elsewhere overseas. Combined with the local residents’ familiarity with traveling (fishing movement, boatpeople’s migration, and transnational marriages) and extensive social networks, the local women have developed a mental confidence in surviving migration. This mentality and the political economy that enables it played a significant part in encouraging a second wave of Việt Kiều in Hải Thành: transnational women who married East Asian men (Taiwanese and South Korean men). Locally, they are referred to as Taiwanese/Korean Kiều (Kiều Đài Loan, Hàn Quốc).

Even though Taiwan and Korea are two main destinations of transnational marriages in Hải Thành, young local women also marry, through matchmakers, men from other Asian countries such as Hong Kong, China, Singapore, and Japan. Third-country Kiều also arrange fake and real marriages to enable Hải Thành residents to migrate to “third countries,” including Sweden, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. In addition to marriages, Kiều help Hải Thành residents to go abroad through other routes such as assistance in getting labor contracts and studying abroad.

Since most Hải Thành women opt to marry foreigners, Hải Thành men have no choice but to marry women from other places, usually remote places far from the community. Some local men who do not want to be fishermen have gone to big cities (like Hồ Chí Minh city, Đồng Nai, or Hải Phòng city) to work in factories and have met their wives there. The division between the rural and the urban in Vietnam is clearly manifested in the fact that almost all of these women who marry Hải Thành men in big cities are themselves from rural places and also migrated to the cities for work. Once Hải Thành men get married and have children, most of them decide to return to Hải Thành because the fishing industry there pays more and because they have an extended family to care for them and who will help take care of their own children.
For the majority of Hải Thành men who are fishermen, their profession cripples their ability to find potential spouses. The long monthly trips away from home hinder their capability to court non-local women and maintain the relationship. Many of them also have to resort to matchmakers. Ironically, their translocal marriages become very similar to the transnational marriages that they often criticize: there is often a matchmaker (an acquaintance of both sides), the bride and the groom meet briefly, and if they like each other, a wedding will be held soon after. These women are often from rural areas poorer than Hải Thành and some are ethnic minorities (Thái, Nùng, Tày and Hmong). The community at large and the women themselves consider translocal marriages as ‘marrying up’ for the women. Hải Thành, while still a rural place, is significantly wealthier than other rural localities thanks to foreign remittances and the profitable fishing industry. One can argue that like in transnational marriage, money also plays a role in translocal marriage. Additionally, once they get married, both the local and foreign husbands want their wives to stay home out of fear that they may become runaway wives.

The ‘very mobile people’ of Hải Thành, including boatpeople, fishermen, transnational brides, translocal brides, and migrants constantly draw people in and out of Hải Thành. They have established a global and translocal network that people can utilize to move to Hải Thành or to go abroad, either through citizenship sponsorship, labor contracts, fake marriages, real marriages or studying abroad. Movement has become so normalized in Hải Thành that their residents frequently say: “Everyone runs like a horse here” (ở đây ai cũng chạy như ngựa). As a result, the flow of people, capital, and remittances has transformed Hải Thành from a poor rural commune to a place priding itself for its modernity and prosperity.
Hải Thành is well known in Hải Phòng as ‘làng Kiều’ (village of Kiều), implying prosperity thanks to the high number of people overseas. Yet, in addition to remittances, the fishing industry also contributes significantly to the commune’s financial well-being (75% of the commune economy) (Thành 2014). Statistically speaking, the poverty rate in Hải Thành is only 2.63% in 2014 (75 households) (Thành 2014) compared to a national rate of 17.2% in 2012 (World Bank 2012). The poverty rate of Hải Thành is even lower than the urban poverty rate (6%) and much lower than the rural poverty rate (27%) (World Bank 2012). Hải Thành stands out among other rural communes, which are a lot poorer and mostly rely on agricultural work, in the rural district of Thụy Nguyên thanks to its wealth from the fishing industry and foreign remittances.

Visually, Hải Thành does not look like a regular Vietnamese rural commune. For example, almost all the roads, even those connecting inner hamlets, are paved. The two main roads winding through the commune are filled with stores. Motorbikes, cars, and small tractors (xe công nông) hauling construction materials and fishing gears scuttle back and forth noisily. Here one also finds an abundance of cafes, bars, and restaurants. Moreover, Hải Thành has other businesses that rarely appear in rural Vietnam: a Vietnam Airlines ticket agency, a legal consulting firm for going abroad, fancy salons, fitness centers, and two discotheques. Hải Thành residents are proud that their commune is very similar to urban places thanks to the many social activities happening here. The amount of stores and shops exemplify their spending power.

Cuồng, a fisherman my age who spent a few years living in Hải Phòng city, explained to me how Hải Thành is more like an urban than a rural place:
“Now we want to buy beautiful stuff. We can throw out clothes worn only a few times. Then we spend more money on buying good food, like seafood has to be fresh and big. And we go out at night, to cafes or bars. We know how to play and spend. Other rural places are completely dark at 7; they are not crowded and fun as here. We party like city folks.”

Cường is not alone in being particularly proud of Hải Thành’s nightlife. Streams of people, young and old, couple and single, make their ways into cafes, music shows, festivals, and discotheques till late every night in Hải Thành. They are particularly crowded during the ten days when fishermen are home. Despite being at the very edge of the Bạch Đằng River, Hải Thành has gained a luster of being the commercial and social center for the four neighboring communes. On the other hand, it also attracts thieves and robbers from outside who keep a close eye on big houses without male presence at home.
Figure 1.8 Social Life in Hải Thành

A hair salon in Hải Thành

People dancing in a bar in Hải Thành

Photo credits: www.facebook.com/HaiThanhQueHuongToi
What is especially striking about Hải Thành, however, is its fancy, newly built houses in the last ten years. Were it not for patches of farmland here and there in Hải Thành, it is hard to tell that this is a rural commune because of the huge houses. These houses stand out for being typically enormous with two or three floors and flashy decorations on the outside. They are painted with popping colors such as green, yellow, pink. Many have marble pillars, tiled exteriors, giant wooden doors, and high brass gates. The aesthetic features are intentional and reflect the competitive spirits of owners who try to outdo each other. They admit it is “roosters competing with their cock-a-doodle-doos” (con gà tức nhau tiếng gày). Thus, a newly built house has to be a little taller than its neighboring houses, a bit more excessive with flashier exteriors.

Interestingly, it is all about the façade. The houses are often bigger than needed and I was surprised to find out many rooms are left unfurnished and unused. Hải Thành people do not spend much money on furniture and amenities and the houses often look very bare inside. Most will invest in buying a good set of wooden table and chairs and a flat screen TV in the living room. Other than that, most appliances and furniture are old and cheap and very few houses have a washing machine or an air conditioner even though it is burning hot in the summer. The importance of a house’s appearance fits well with the Vietnamese face-saving culture and marks the heightened awareness of social distinction in Vietnam today.
Figure 1.9 Houses in Hải Thành
The mansion-like houses in Hải Thành are a clear indicator of the residents’ physical movement and social mobility, linking dwelling with movement. Generally, migrants often build houses like mansions in the homeland to display their social statuses. For example, Chu (2010) and Taylor (2015) describe that Longyan and Punjabi migrants have houses in their villages that are mainly unoccupied. Paradoxically, it is precisely the emptiness of these houses that marks the distinction of abundance and wealth because only those who are rich can afford to have vacant houses. Similarly, most of the remittances in Hải Thành are spent on building houses for their parents. Their houses have become a statement—depending on how modern, how big, and how expensive they are—testifying to whether the family has any Kiều and how well the Kiều are doing overseas. But Kiều are not the only people who are competing with one another. Fishermen also invest in building mansion-like houses for rather similar reasons: the bigger houses indicate more successful fishermen and make it easier to borrow loans from the banks.

Houses and social status in Hải Thành are so intertwined that when I came back to the commune in 2013, people could not help talking about a new mansion of a fisherman. This new house, unlike any other houses before, is five floors high, immediately visible from almost any location in the commune. This house raises the silent debate and gossip about distinction and prosperity in Hải Thành to a new level because it looks like a castle.
Most people only see this house from the outside because the owners are rarely home, choosing to live on Cát Bà Island nearby for the convenience of fishing and seafood farming. Its mystery and luxury causes rumors about the house to spread wildly. It is said to have cost 12 billion VND (around six million USD), half of which might have been borrowed. The owners supposedly went into the city to ask for an architect who would design ‘a French mansion’ for them. It looks almost identical to a huge mansion of a billionaire in the city. It is also rumored to have an elevator inside, which fits perfectly with the imagination of superiority at a new level.

When I asked Cương about the house, he said the male owner once told him that they built the house “for posterity.” In other words, houses have become the most visible and lasting evidence of bona fide successes in Hải Thành. Houses, as a form of dwelling, connect with movement in Hải Thành in financially and symbolically meaningful ways. They act as a powerful, tangible marker of conspicuous consumption, demonstrating hierarchical travel relations—that is, they socially mark who moves and who does not and how well/far they move.
The connection between materiality (such as houses) made possible by movement and social distinction reveals the relationship of physical movement and social mobility in Vietnam. It also illustrates how social class has become a crucial social organizing aspect of Vietnamese society. The commonality of movement in Hải Thành is related to its history of migration, offshore fishing, and global networks that enable and motivate local people towards, supposedly, upward mobility. Yet, the movement patterns must be understood in a context of an increasingly stratified and neoliberal Vietnam that separates the rural from the urban, the ethnic minority from the Kinh majority, the working-class from the emerging middle-class and upper-middle-class. In the following section, I will discuss how class emerges as a very important aspect of contemporary Vietnam and why mobility matters for Hải Thành people in such a political economy.

**Social Classes and Stratification in Vietnam**

Social stratification has always been commonplace in Vietnam. In the feudal period, the society was divided, in accordance with Confucian values, between the peasants, merchants and the literati class who succeeded in the madarinal examinations or participated in military service (Woodside 1998). With the beginning of the French colonial rule in 1883, a modern Vietnamese middle class emerged for the first time. This group usually consisted of businesspeople and entrepreneurs as well as Western-educated and professionally trained Vietnamese such as journalists, physicians, lawyers, clerks, and teachers (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012). However, until 1986, after the Vietnamese Communist Party took over the country (first North Vietnam in 1954 and later South Vietnam in 1975) the Vietnamese middle-class was actively punished and eradicated as a result of the pervasive socialist social
reorganization. Similar to the Cultural Revolution in China, individuals and families identified as businesspeople, landowners or bourgeois had their properties confiscated, themselves sent to re-education camps or jailed. Scholars often describe the Vietnamese society during this period as a fairly egalitarian society since the whole country suffered from a state of “common poverty,” a result of more than a hundred years of wars (Taylor 2004b). However, there were still class distinctions based on good- and bad-class background. Those who participated in the wars on the Communist side, those who were party members, and those who were peasants or workers belonged to the good-class background. Depending on occupation and rank, different individuals had different rations of daily and monthly necessities from the state such as rice, meat, oil, sugar, clothes, etc. (MacLean 2008).

The persistent poverty and famines after the American War led to the implementation of Đổi Mới reform in 1986 that moved Vietnam from a command economy to a market economy officially referred to as market socialism. Like in many Eastern European countries, the Vietnamese citizens moved from worker-citizens to consumer-citizens (Dunn (Vann 2012, Dunn 2004, Verdery 1996). The consequences of Đổi Mới reform can easily be seen in terms of social classes with the reemergence of the Vietnamese middle-class and the sharp increase of social inequalities. The reemerged Vietnamese middle-class is often identified by certain consumption practices and lifestyles such as shopping, using ATM machines, going to fitness clubs, living in high-rise apartments, having second or “weekend” houses in the countryside, etc. (Drummond 2012, Leshkowich 2012a, To 2012, Truitt 2012). Even though the Vietnamese state avoids the term middle-class, it often describes consumption practices and its practitioners as “modern,” “urban,” and “normal” (Vann 2012). This points to how social differences are mapped onto physical spaces, especially between the rural and the urban.
Social inequality has increased substantially in the last 25 years since Đổi Mới, motivating the widening gap not only between urban and rural areas and but also along class, gender, and ethnic axes. Statistics from the government and research in Vietnam have indicated that social inequalities are indeed growing. According to Nguyen Manh Hung (2003), in the 2000s, Vietnamese families in the richest five percent of the population earned an average of 20 times more than those in the poorest five percent. A child born in a poor household was 7.5 times more likely to be severely stunted due to malnutrition than a child born in a rich family (Koch and Linh 2001). More than 40 percent of children from poor households dropped out of secondary schools (Vo, Truong, and Nguyen 2001). Women are half as likely as men to be in salaried employment and are paid only 78 percent of the amount earned by men. Ethnic minorities are faced with problems of lower incomes, higher rates of poverty, poorer health, and lower school attendance (Taylor 2004b).

The gap in standards of living and poverty between rural and urban areas stands out as the most observable. People living in rural areas earn less than half of what is earned by those living in urban areas (General Statistical Office 2003). More than 90 percent of those living in poverty dwell in rural areas (Fan et al. 2004). This gap is largely the result of major socio-economic changes since Đổi Mới. After 1986, the unit of the economy moved away from the state and collectives to households. This policy shift was accompanied by the dismantling of the state subsidy system. In the 1990s, the Vietnamese state introduced a policy called “Socialization” (Xã hội hoá), a user-paying policy requiring individuals and households to contribute to funding social services that were formerly provided by the state, including education, healthcare, and agricultural and cultural activities. For most Vietnamese, the “socialization” of state services was basically a form of privatization and life became about the survival of the fittest (Luong 2003).
The rural poor in Vietnam have become socially and economically excluded. For example, declines in the price of rice, dependence on commodity markets, the rising cost of inputs (e.g., fertilizer, pesticide, machines, hired labor), and the ending of state subsidies have made farming unprofitable, “a guaranteed way to become poor” (Taylor 2007). Moreover, mounting fees for health and schooling coupled with insufficient incomes have led to rising debt and many farmers, consequently, have to sell their land and become hired laborers (Taylor 2004b).

While the rural areas are struggling, the urban areas in Vietnam are growing rapidly. Processes of industrialization, capitalism and heavy investment have created high-paying jobs, a heightened sense of consumerism, and changed urban landscapes. According to Taylor (2004), professionals working in urban corporate sectors can earn more than $1000 a month. More than just economic differences, it is significant that in Vietnam, as in many places around the world, the urban has replaced the rural as the national cultural center that sets social values. The ethics of individualism, market values, prosperity, and privatism have replaced those of sacrifice to the collective. The pursuit of prosperity has become the standard of what it means to be a modern Vietnamese (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall 2012, Vann 2012). Also, while in the pre-Đôi Mới period, the Communist state praised the ethics of farmers and their rural-based values, now rural people are seen as backward and irrational. Official development reports often describe rural people as poor, unaware, unconnected, and dependent on the state for their uplift, which reflects the paternalistic attitude of the Vietnamese state towards the poor. In contrast, city (middle- and upper-class) people are regarded as agents of change, bringing a new ethos of modernity to Vietnam (To 2012, Higgins 2008, Taylor 2007). What is important is that rural people have started to internalize these discourses, often calling themselves poor, describing
farming as an occupation for the poor, and characterizing their lifestyles (religious beliefs, housing styles) as signs of deprivation (Taylor 2007, 2004b).

**Being In-Between and the Desires to Move**

Within this context of the increasingly stratified gap between the rural and the urban, Hải Thành is a rare well-to-do rural community. However, the wealth of people in Hải Thành has put them in an awkward liminal position between the “backward” rural working-class Vietnamese and the new modern urban middle-class Vietnamese. Hải Thành people are still rural, yet their incomes rival those of urbanites, and they constantly remind me of that fact by showing that they have **nhà tầng** (houses of multiple floors), **xe xfn** (expensive scooters), **quán đêm** (a night life), etc. But to most Vietnamese, Hải Thành people are still second-class citizens: rural folks with a working-class profession as fishermen. Despite their wealth, Hải Thành residents believe that they are not respected. While Hải Thành people are proud of their on-par-with-the-city living standards, they also bitterly complain about being looked down on by city folk. Cưông, my fisherman friend, felt it deeply.
I first met Cường through another fisherman and seeing that he seemed so friendly, I asked if he could show me around the newly built local port. Cường said he would be working on a boat the next day and I could come if I wanted. When I arrived, nobody was seen on deck but Cường emerged from below 15 minutes later after fixing the engine; his shirt torn and his hands were covered in black oil. He apologized for the delay of our tour. I asked if Cường owned the boat and as I commented on how talented and young he was to be the owner, he looked at me and said, “You don’t understand; nobody believes I am a boat owner. Look at my sun-tanned skin, covered in oil. Look at my fishing clothes. People do not believe I have money. A rural rich is
less than a city peddler (giàu nhà quên không bằng ngôi lề Thành phố). Even a beggar or a rickshaw driver is proud because they are city people. They don’t have money like me but they still say to me ‘Fuck those rural folks. I’m urban and you are still rural’

This is an example of how the Vietnamese are experiencing a high form of social stratification, especially between the rural and the urban areas. Erik Harms notes that the opposition between rural and urban in Vietnam acts as indexes of social differences, from social lifestyles, differential access to health care and education to poverty and living standards (Harms 2011). Moreover, the spatial binary of the rural/urban is often mapped onto the temporal binary of the modern/backward. Urban people generally look down on rural people as uneducated, uncivilized, uncultured, and crude (Harms 2011, Taylor 2001). The Vietnamese government has launched campaigns to “civilize” the rural in order to meet the goals of urbanization, development, and progress. This public denigration of the rural diverges sharply from the communist idealization of peasants and workers during the Vietnamese revolution and high socialism from 1945 to 1986 (Harms 2011).

Although the hierarchy between the rural and urban is long-standing (from the French colonial discourse of civilizing the fringe to the modern day discourse of urbanization), Vietnamese studies scholars have shown that the meanings of such difference can be shifting. The rural Vietnam, while being deprecated as backward, is also at times celebrated as the true guardian of Vietnamese tradition and purity, not yet polluted by capitalism (Harms 2011, Nguyen-Vo 2008, Taylor 2001). In fact, “the rural” and “the urban” work mostly as idealizations as the meaning of the rural and the urban depends on what people in the present politically want

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16 The belief that the rural is moral matters much in Hải Thành. In later chapters, I will discuss how the Hải Thành youngsters are morally judged because they have embodied “modern” behaviors.
to do with the representation of the past (backward vs. tradition) and the future (modern vs. corrupted) (Harms 2011, Nguyen-Vo 2008, Taylor 2001).

Such shifting meanings enable people living in the border between the rural and the urban to develop what Erik Harms calls social edginess that cuts both ways. For some, the edge represents being pushed to social and economic exclusion while for others, it enables creative social actions to manipulate the idealizations of the rural/urban binary and create opportunities in their lives (Harms 2011). The edginess becomes empowering when people can transcend the binaries themselves. On the other hand, it becomes limiting when people are bound by the binaries (Harms 2011). This sense of edginess can be observed in Hải Thành itself where the feeling of liminality between the rural and urban intensifies local people’s aspiration to move out of it both physically and socially. However, as I will demonstrate in my research, while some are successful in their efforts (such as transnational women), others often feel trapped and resentful (such as fishermen).

In Vietnam, there exists a strong connection between rural people and the supposed lack of education. The Vietnamese use the terms uncultured and uncivilized (không có văn hoá, văn minh) interchangeably with uneducated (vô học) to describe impolite behaviors and “funny” dressing, both of which are often associated with rural people. In other words, rural people are presumed to be lowly educated, thus they do not know how to act and dress properly (in Bourdieu’s term, they belong to the lower class and lack the class sophistication). Hải Thành residents themselves internalize this link between education, rurality, and class. They believe that they are looked down on not only because they are rural but also because they are not well educated. As we shall see later in the dissertation, the lack of education comes up frequently as
explanations for the commonplace of ‘unacceptable’ behaviors of Hải Thành youth (chapter II), and the bad reputation of transnational marriages (chapter V).

Being in this liminal place, rural and low level of education yet financially comfortable, creates in most Hải Thành residents a feeling of being ignored. They have strongly demonstrated this sentiment through expressing several types of bitter complaints. They complain about not being rich enough to compete with the city people in getting loans from the state-owned banks, having enough money for bribery when their children apply for jobs in cities, or educated enough to deal with local authorities. Yet, they are wealthier than most other fishing villages so they do not receive enough financial support from the state to be able to be successful in fishing despite all the talk on TV about the growing importance of the fishing industry. “On my own” (tự mình) has been the most common local statement of pride as well as resentment.

The liminal position of local people makes them very aware of the boundaries between which they are sandwiched. This awareness is further sharpened by their interaction with a large number of family members and neighbors who have become the privileged Việt Kiều. Not only are Hải Thành people stuck between the urban middle-class and the rural working-class, they are also the in-between of the international/national dichotomy. They remain at home but have unusually strong ties to foreign countries, lifestyles, and currencies since so many family members and neighbors reside abroad. Their awareness of being stuck and being ignored fuels their desire to transcend these boundaries, especially given their perception of the lives of Việt Kiều being desirable and how their own lives are so much better through remittances from Việt Kiều who have successfully crossed the boundaries. This acute awareness of class, as we shall see in the next chapters, might explain why, unlike the stereotypical poor community, a well-to-do Hải Thành continues sending so many women overseas through transnational marriages. This
is why movement and its expected social mobility are such crucial aspects in this community and why there is so much movement in a small rural place. Movement has become key to understanding how Hải Thành people organize their lives, make sense of their standing within society, and hope to transcend class boundaries.

The desires for physical and social mobility in Hải Thành are reflected in the following story. Six months into living in the commune, I accompanied Cường’s aunt to a wedding between her relative – a man named Kiệt – and a Vietnamese Canadian woman, Tracy Nguyễn. Kiệt’s extended family in Canada had arranged this marriage so that Kiệt could later apply for a spousal visa to migrate to Canada. Cường’s aunt told me that the family had to pay Tracy 40,000 Canadian dollars. However, when Tracy met Kiệt, she liked him enough to agree to make this fake marriage real and later returned all the money. Kiệt, on the other hand, was not happy with his soon-to-be real wife.

Tracy’s family was originally from southern Vietnam and she spoke with a southern accent. Moreover, she was a big woman. In the wedding, I heard people gossiping about Tracy. They said that southern women were lazy and not as hardworking as northern women; they implied that Tracy would be more interested in spending money than taking care of her husband. They even criticized her weight and remarked that she was so big that she would need to sit on two chairs, not one. Later when we were dining at the wedding, Kiệt’s father and mother stopped to greet us at the table. Cường’s aunt asked them how Kiệt felt about the wedding, the father responded that Kiệt was not very thrilled now that the marriage was real, not fake anymore. However, Kiệt’s father added, “I told him – if you don’t marry her, you want to marry an angel?” (Mày không lấy nó thì mày đổi lấy tiền à). Essentially, Kiệt’s father conveyed that this
opportunity to migrate to Canada was so great that any complaint (even a complaint of marrying a woman one did not like) was ridiculous, just like wanting to marry an angel.

The desires for transnational migration are so strong because of the assumed status and capital that it brings forth. Following normal Vietnamese customs, I gave the couple an envelope with money inside as a wedding present. However, other Hải Thành residents told me later that I did not need to give money to those who marry people from abroad because they already have a lot of money. It is well known in Hải Thành, even though I was unaware, that weddings between locals and overseas Vietnamese or foreign men require no monetary presents. These norms speak to the perceived causal connection between movement and social mobility and the aspirations for leaving in Hải Thành. They also explain the very high number of locals leaving this small rural commune.

The situation of movement in Hải Thành is unique but not surprising as the two emerging social processes of movement and class are increasingly intertwining at the particular nexus of history, geography and political economy in Vietnam. The relationship between movement and class is mutual: movement supposedly results in certain upward mobility and class is thus reflected in movement. For example, the rural are usually internal migrants considered to be uprooted, backward, problematic and in need of catching up. The Việt Kiều are transnational migrants, thus upward and ahead (Harms 2013, Huynh and Nonneman 2012, Small 2012b, Dang, Tacoli, and Hoang 2003, Hardy 2003b). In other words, not all movements are equal. The intimately interconnected relationship between social mobility and physical movement will be explored through the stories of people who move and who do not move in Hải Thành, those who have achieved their class aspirations and those who have not. These stories will reveal that the
relationship between physical movement and social mobility is not simply linear, but rather that movement, just like social class, is differentiated.
Part II

GENDERING MARRIAGE MIGRATION: YOUTHFUL BEAUTY, EDUCATION, AND CLASS IN RURAL VIETNAM
Chapter II

The Pretty Modern: ‘Outer’ vs. ‘Inner’ Beauty

My dear, unfortunately I don’t have the beauty and charm

Making you upset when you had to marry me

When spring comes, the grapefruit flowers blossom

Who knows that a wind has dried them out?

…

Please don’t berate or complain

I know it’s my fault you are ridiculed

I will keep this young child

Waiting for the day he grows up
He will be a grownup tomorrow
And will look for his happiness in a beautiful woman.

During the American War, Mạn departed his home in Hài Thành to join the army. He left behind a newly married wife and a young son. His regiment marched to the South and no one heard from him for the longest time. Many months after, his letter finally arrived. It was addressed to his wife who had been worriedly waiting. His words to her, first in a very long time, were expressions of his disappointment in her and her appearance. Embarrassed and saddened, his wife composed a poem, quoted above, to acknowledge how her appearance made him ridiculed and failed to bring him happiness, and to hope that her son would not repeat the mistake his father had made. Her son should “look for happiness in a beautiful woman.”

This story highlights the importance of beauty\(^\text{17}\) for women and their marriages in Vietnam. It makes an interesting antidote to the usual undermining of appearance as trivial and emphasis on inner virtues as essential in Vietnamese culture. Even though appearance is one of the four qualities, along with usefulness, articulation, and morality (công, dung, ngôn, hành), that an ideal traditional Vietnamese woman possesses, too much focus on appearance is often judged as being vain and shallow. However, beauty for many rural women, including Mạn’s wife, is no inconsequential matter. My study in Hài Thành demonstrates that beauty, in close relationship with age, plays an important role in “elevating” the social status of girls, enabling them to get married transnationally and thus, significantly change their lives. Second, beauty is a site of investment in the future of transnational marriage and life abroad but requires maintenance in the present. And third, beauty practice is how the local girls exercise what Fiske (1993) calls “weak

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\(^{17}\) I analyze (outer) beauty as both physical features as well as acquired fashion styles that include clothes, cosmetics, and accessories.
power”: a localizing form of power that enables the girls to change their lives without changing the larger and oppressive gender structure. Before I get to the stories of Hải Thành women and their beauty practices, I first discuss the construction of Vietnamese femininity and its alignment with morality.

**Between Sacrifice And Desire: Femininity and Morality in Vietnam**

Ashley Pettus, in her book “Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam,” documents how Vietnamese women have been the symbols and tools for the national quest of sovereignty and modernity. For centuries before Western colonialism, folk heroines, whose military triumphs marked the tradition of Vietnamese resistance against the Chinese, were among the Vietnamese pantheon of historical figures. Under French colonialism in the 20th century, the Communist Party saw women as the vehicle for anti-imperialist struggle, proclaiming that women were the “slaves of the slaves” and thereby linking women’s emancipation to the Vietnamese people’s freedom from feudal and capitalist rule (Pettus 2003, Marr 1984). Ho Chi Minh regarded women as embodying the values and aspirations of the new socialist society that ensured equality and sovereignty.18 The result was a double burden for Vietnamese women: on the one hand, Vietnamese women, similar to women in many other Asian countries, were assigned by nationalist movements to the spiritual domain where their practices and behaviors signified the cultural “essence” and “authenticity” against the influence of the West. On the other hand, they also needed to transform from being the most “backward” members (because of such assumed cultural attributes as greed, superstition, ignorance, dishonesty, and pettiness) to being skilled socialist workers as evidence of

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18 The Communists were not the only ones that embraced gender equality. The intellectuals of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn and Thơ Mới movements shared a similar ideology about gender.
Vietnamese society transforming from a feudal agrarian to a modern, industrial country. Egalitarian relationships at home and work, equal inheritance between sons and daughters, and making polygamy illegal were affirmed in the laws.

However, the government and its institutions produced patriarchal structures, thereby undermining their own gender ideologies (Wiegersma 1988). For example, the agricultural point system in collectives gave more value to men’s labor than women’s labor. In the political system, patriarchy was reinforced as the organizing principle of society as kinship membership determined access to leadership positions. Ironically, while the Communist Party was committed to the socialist discourse of gender equality, in reality it replaced one form of patriarchy with another. As women were encouraged to have educational and professional advancement, their femininity was also redefined in Confucian terms. The dutiful daughters, devoted wives, and sacrificing mothers were the foundation of a national morality because women’s virtues such as faithfulness, endurance, compassion, and self-sacrifice were hailed as invaluable to the national cause of building a socialist nation (Pettus 2003).¹⁹

Yet, as the collective economy collapsed and the market reform, Renovation (Đổi Mới), began in 1986, Vietnamese women again found themselves to be the terrain on which the government and the wider public have sought to define what should constitute “national traditions” in the face of global capitalist integration. With the market reform, the nuclear family suddenly became fundamentally important to national wealth and development. Local collectives no longer existed, free trade was allowed, and household-based production turned to be the norm (Luong 2003). But as the important role of household has increased, the threats to its stability

¹⁹ Despite evidence that patriarchy persisted, the Communist Party did succeed in partly improving women’s status and position in the society during the post-war socialist period (Bélanger and Liu 2004, Knodel and Jones 1996, Eisen 1984, Werner 1981).
have also become a more major concern. The Vietnamese state decried gambling, drug use, prostitution as social evils that jeopardized “civilized” families. It once again sought women to provide the buffer against the corrupting influences of the market and to protect as well as foster self-sufficient households. It promoted a vision of modernity based on the “civilized” and middle-class family that harmonized the contradiction between economic policy and political ideology. This was done by combining Confucian values of filial piety, devotion, and faithfulness with scientific standards of modern households (hygiene, proper nutrition, good parenting, birth control) and economic comfort. Vietnamese women were again relegated to keeping traditional roles as nurturing mothers, devoted wives, and skilled housekeepers (that implied cooking, hygiene practices, dress style, etc.) at the expense of the socialist ideals of gender equality (Pettus 2003, Werner and Bélanger 2002, Gammeltoft 1999). The tensions between the market economy and socialist ideals, between aspirations for modernity and fear of cultural loss are reflected in conflicting representations of Vietnamese women: as evidence of the human cost of market transition as well as the symbol of modernity (Pettus 2003).

As Gammeltoft observes, the emphasis on family is not new (it is in line with Confucian ideology), but the way it is approached by the Vietnamese state is systematic. It is introduced by law (the 1987 Law on Marriage and Family and the 1992 Constitution describe the family as the cell of the society), which is then disseminated in the media and reinforced by government bodies such as the Women’s Union and the Youth Union. Women are taught by the media how to bring up children, how to treat their husbands and parents-in-law, how to preserve and protect the family’s happiness through one’s self-sacrifice. Then they participate in the competition organized by the Women’s Union where their knowledge is tested (Gammeltoft 1999). The construction of women as being responsible for the happiness and health of the family results in
the representation of women as belonging to the domestic domain ((Nguyen-Vo 2008, 2002, Pettus 2003). Yet, it is also necessary for women to venture out of the domestic sphere to participate in the workforce so as to increase their families’ well-being. Vietnamese women are faced with the increasing tension and conflicting social pressure of juggling the demands of work and family. As women in Khuat, Bui, and Le’s studies declare, “[t]o be good at public and domestic work, I need three heads and six hands” (2012, 191).

Vietnamese women have always been crucial in conditioning the population in a post-war period of ideological uncertainty and economic collapse. They are the morality bearers of authentic Vietnamese culture against Western influence as well as the symbol of a modern Vietnam. In the Đổi Mới era, the Vietnamese ideal types of self-sacrificing woman, faithful wife, dutiful daughter, and devoted mother are both challenged and reproduced (Truong 2009, Drummond and Rydstrom 2004, Pettus 2003). Their double standards are summarized by Pettus:

The questions of female character, duty, and behavior that have become central to the current dilemmas of national identity in Vietnam are rooted in earlier struggles for national independence and modernity, which established women’s deep cultural responsibility to uphold the shifting ideals of the nation (Pettus 2003, 7).

With such heavy responsibilities, what is it like for women who do not meet the ideals? To answer this question, I turn to young women of Hải Thành, who, on the surface, seem to blatantly defy the moral standards of Vietnamese women.

**The Modern Beautiful Rural Girls**

In Vietnam, as in many other parts of the globe, the phrase “modern rural” seems like an oxymoron because it violates the cultural mapping of rural/backward and urban/modern. Yet Hải
Thành proves to be a place of surprises. When I first came to the commune, I was amused at the transformation of the streets from day to night. During the day, the residents look like regular rural people with working, non-fancy clothes. I often spot women wearing conical hats (nón) typically associated with rurality. The night, however, brings forth a different Hải Thành. All of a sudden, Hải Thành residents dress up to go out to cafes, restaurants, karaoke bars, street shops, or to each other’s houses. Men wear shoes instead of flip flops, pants instead of shorts, and change into clean shirts. Women put on make-up and wear jeans, skirts or dresses. Hải Thành’s night life was lively and vibrant for a rural commune with lights, shops, and activities. But it is the young women who caught my attention because they dress even better than many city girls. As we shall see, the young women of Hải Thành broke the rural women’s stereotypes as they strived for a global/Korean ideal of modernity and fashion.

From this part on, I will consciously use the term “girls” to describe the young women in Hải Thành (usually from 16 years old to 21 years old) because that is how they are addressed in Hải Thành (gái Hải). Furthermore, in Vietnam, a female is a girl (con gái) until she gets married; therefore only a married female becomes a woman (đàn bà). Girl, in Vietnamese culture, signals a liminal stage of no longer a child but not yet a (married) woman. It is a contested space, and similar to many other cultures, being a girl indicates “unstable and sometimes subversive relationships to social norms relating to heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood” (The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2008, 9). This contested and potentially disruptive status of a “girl” manifests in a wide range of practices and behaviors of the girls in Hải Thành, from consuming to partying, from beauty practices to sexual activities. The girls in Hải Thành both reinforce and challenge gender and social norms and, for this, they are both tolerated and criticized.
I got to know some of the girls in Hải Thành by taking Korean language classes with them. My classmates learned Korean because they had already married Korean men (and wished to pass their language tests) or they wanted to marry Korean men in the future. In Hải Thành, Nga is the only Korean teacher and everyday except for the weekends we gathered at her house for two hours of Korean. Nga, 32, learned Korean at a university in Hải Phòng city and has been teaching in Hải Thành since the phenomenon of transnational marriages began in the mid 2000s. She has gained a reputation of being a good teacher and has taught all groups of people in Hải Thành wanting to learn Korean: parents preparing to visit their daughters in Korea, children soon to be united with their mothers in Korea, men going to Korea on labor contracts, or young women who marry Korean men. Nga herself has a sister who married a Korean and her mother, at the time I was taking classes, had gone to Korea to visit Nga’s sister. Being personally and professionally involved, Nga knows all the details about the transnational marriages and the girls that married and how well they have been doing. Nga has a sharp sense of humor and easy-going personality, making her classes a safe place for her students to talk and gossip about life desires, marriages, and other girls. It is in Nga’s classes that I learned not only Korean but also how the local young girls discussed and performed gendered modernity as well as how they were evaluated.

I met Hoa, then 21 years old, in one of my Korean classes. Unlike most other girls in Hải Thành, Hoa went to Hải Phòng to attend college for a year before she dropped out and returned home to learn Korean, determined to marry a Korean man soon. By Vietnamese standards, Hoa is very pretty with a slender body, big eyes, a sharp nose, and fair, smooth skin.²⁰ When she put

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²⁰ As I will discuss in more details in chapter VI, fair skin is a major indicator of beauty in Vietnamese culture. Many of the young girls in Hải Thành have fair skin because they are often
on her nice clothes, she looked very much like the Korean girls she admires. Sometimes, when the summer heat became unbearable in my teacher’s bedroom, which also functioned as a classroom, we stopped learning. Instead, we lay on our teacher’s bed and talked about hot local girls and fashion. One day, as we were discussing the current Korean trend of skirts, Hoa pulled out her phone and showed the class photos of how she imitated the Korean fashion with her miniskirt:  

![Figure 2.1 – Facebook photos](image)

In this picture, Hoa looked very different from most rural Vietnamese girls. She wore make-up, heels, a mini skirt, pantyhose, sunglasses, and a purse. She had her nails done and she did the popular duckface. What made her particularly trendy and fashionable was the style of

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21 I mainly used photographs posted publicly on Facebook by the girls themselves rather than the photos I took of them in this chapter because I want to show how they choose to represent themselves.
sunglasses (aviator) and sweater (perforated, which, according to my fashion expert friend, Annie, “screams the Kardashians”). My friend also complimented Hoa on her choice of color: the sweater was nicely contrasted with the cobalt blue purse. Hoa also chose to wear the skirt and pantyhoses in one black color, making her look taller and skinnier. What is striking to me in the first photo is that Hoa was standing in front of a Buddhist pagoda. Generally speaking, when a Vietnamese goes to a pagoda, he/she should dress conservatively; wearing a short bottom is considered as disrespectful. Thus, the first photo appears to represent Hoa’s disregard for tradition, emphasizing even more her “modernity.”

My teacher, Nga, and classmates immediately complimented Hoa’s photos. Two classmates said they were jealous that she looked so beautiful and wondered if she had photoshopped the pictures. Another exclaimed that Hoa was even prettier with her fashionable outfit, how could men resist her? My teacher concluded that Hoa was “delicious, nutritious (for the eyes), and cheap (because her outfit does not cost much money)” (ngon, bỗ, và rè), using a common Vietnamese phrase of describing food to comment on Hoa. Implicitly, they implied that Hoa is like great food waiting to be eaten by men, linking the role of beauty and marriages for Hải Thành girls, a topic I will later elaborate.

Hoa’s style, however, is not unique in Hải Thành. Rather, it is quite typical. Most of the Hải Thành girls, whom I know and have seen, cultivate a similar look. This look can be summarized as follows: heavy make-up, well-done hair, fashionable dress or skirt, high-heel shoes, and sunglasses (but usually cheap copies of the original22). This style is so widely adopted that it has become a dress code for young girls in Hải Thành. The Facebook pages of my

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22 This is an important marker of the girls’ social class as well as their attempts to cross the class boundary. I will explain the class issues later in this chapter.
classmates are full of photos (posted publicly) with the same look and they usually attract lengthy compliments and garner 70 or more “likes”:

Figure 2.2 – Facebook Selfie Photos
The girls in Hải Thành resonate well with the descriptions of the modern girls that appeared in the early 20th century around the world:

“The Modern Girl emerged quite literally around the world in the first half of the twentieth century. In cities from Beijing to Bombay, Tokyo to Berlin, Johannesburg to New York, the Modern Girl made her sometimes flashy, always fashionable appearance. What identified Modern Girls was their use of specific commodities and their explicit eroticism. … Adorned in provocative fashions, in pursuit of romantic love, Modern Girls appeared to disregard roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother. Contemporary journalists, politicians, social scientists, and the
general public debated whether Modern Girls were looking for sexual, economic, or political emancipation” (The Modern Girl around the World Research Group 2008, 1).

Similar to these modern girls around the world, the young girls in Hải Thành are considered to be modern and stylish (sành điệu) by local people and neighboring communes. They are identified with their Korean-styled fashion and, as we shall see later, eroticism. However, what makes them different from the modern girls described in the aforementioned book is that they are from a rural place. The wealth of Hải Thành as well as the easy prospect of transnational migration make Korean fashion desirable and affordable and certain “risqué” lifestyles possible for girls growing up in this rural community. In that sense, Hải Thành girls are distinctive from both other rural Vietnamese women and urban Vietnamese women, thus occupying a liminal space between rural and urban while bridging the local and the global through their bodies and lifeways.

**Femininity and Modernity**

This modern girl’s look in Hải Thành, surprising as it might be, does not just come out of nowhere but reflects convergences of femininity and modernity. Major socio-economic and political changes in Vietnamese society in the last 70 years have put women and their look in the spotlight. The establishment of the nuclear family as the norm, the socialist policies that allowed both men and women to receive education and join the work force in integrated public spaces, and the emergence of an urban culture targeting the young (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009, Pettus 2003) have enabled young women to play new roles in public spaces. These public roles for women resulted in unprecedented visibility and a shift in representation. Vietnamese women,
like women in many other societies, were often called on to maintain the image of the nation (Pettus 2003).

This modernist aesthetics now adopted in Hải Thành takes root from the Party’s effort to project a socialist national image on Vietnamese women’s attire in the 1970s. Vietnamese women, while warned against the immodesty of Western beauty, were encouraged to refashion Western styles for a modern life. By 1990s, women in Hanoi had abandoned “poor peasant clothes” in favor of Western dresses and skirts (Pettus 2003). Beauty knowledge and practices such as how to make up, how to dress, and how to choose accessories are widely distributed in books, newspapers, and online websites targeting women. For example, the book titled Modern Women of the 21st Century (Phụ nữ hiện đại thế kỷ XXI) spends almost 200 pages teaching women beauty tips. VNExpress, the most popular online newspaper in Vietnam, publishes daily on fashion.

In the case of Hải Thành girls, not only do they put on modernity markers such as clothes, sunglasses, and make-up, they also carefully craft their appearance not according to urban Vietnamese women’s standards or Western standards, but to Taiwanese and Korean fashion. Facebook has become an informal market place where Hải Thành girls who have migrated to Taiwan and Korea sell cheaply-made Korean style clothes, beauty products, and accessories to those still at home. While adhering to the modern look that promotes youthful femininity with foreign aesthetics and commodities, the modern girl ideals in Hải Thành are locally recognized as embodiments of an East Asian style thanks to the huge number of marriages between Hải Thành women and East Asian men. Therefore, there are not as many varieties in the modern girl looks in Hải Thành as there are in major Vietnamese cities.
The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group (2008) argues that the modern girl needs to be examined as a style and performance that can be appropriated by women. They identify key features of the modern girls’ representations that I find very similar in the case of Hải Thành girls, including visual representations, desire for commodities, conspicuous consumption, and eroticism.

Regarding visual representations, the research group argues that being seen is quintessential to women and men who consider themselves “modern.” Their research shows that women had used photography, painting, drawing, and literary representation to stage the self since the 19th century (Weinbaum et al. 2008). Likewise, Vu Trong Phung depicted the modern Vietnamese in the 1930s as they frequented public places such as city streets, offices, department stores, beaches, ballrooms, tennis courts, and café clubs (Zinoman 2002). Hải Thành girls also make sure that they are being seen publicly. They dress up and ride scooters along the main street of the commune every night before going into night clubs, cafes, and street shops. Hoa explained to me that there is a significant difference between staying home and going out: once she goes out, she has to put on her best look because she is seen. Local girls often go out at night so that they can wear dresses and skirts without worrying that the hot sun during the day makes them tanned. Having a light complexion is an important component of Vietnamese beauty.  

Besides public appearances, selfies and photos are taken and posted everyday (sometimes several times a day) on Facebook with sentimental, self-focused titles, often with grammar mistakes, and are almost always posted with a public setting.

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23 The importance of light skin and the social hierarchy it creates is especially poignant for those who do not have light skin. I will discuss the conflation of race and ethnicity with social class in chapter VI on translocal women.
24 Examples of their titles include: this place is unusually peaceful (nơi này bình yên đến lạ thường), hi beautiful September (chào tháng 9 sinh tuổi), selfie of me today (em của ngày hôm
More than simply being seen, it is important for the girls in Hải Thành to be seen *beautifully* as mentioned in Hoa’s explanation to me. The girls dress up when going out. Their pictures are usually photoshopped using photo-editing apps such as Photo Wonder before they are uploaded on Facebook. This practice is not simply individualistic but also follows the dominant ideology promoted by the Vietnamese state: *dep khoe, xấu che* (show the beautiful/good, hide the ugly/bad) (Hien 2012). Hien’s study of the beauty regime and photo studios in Vietnam demonstrates that beauty is regarded as something that must be manufactured, through acts of edition that remove the ugliness. The digital photo businesses has been booming in Vietnam thanks to the mission of making beautiful (*làm đẹp*) or turning the impossible into the possible (*biến cái không thể thành có thể*) (Hien 2012). Their service used to be exclusive to affluent urban consumers, but with the availability of smart phones, rural girls in Hải Thành can possess self-enhancement tools (like the Photo Wonder app) to create their desirable look.

Barbara Sato, in her writing on the Japanese Modern Girl, asserts that visual representations of modern girls in popular women’s magazines made it possible for less privileged and rural women to partake in their appeal (Sato 2008). I believe that Facebook plays the same role in allowing Hải Thành girls to participate and transform themselves into modern girls. Pictures of Hải Thành girls dressing fashionably in Korea and Taiwan after their marriages are posted daily, proudly, and abundantly. Moreover, the advertisements that sell clothes and commodities in Korean styles on Facebook enable Hải Thành girls to learn, buy, and dress like

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*nay, tự xướng*, cold, tired but why still feeling happy (*lạnh, mệt nhưng sao lại thấy vui*), feelings that can’t be expressed into words (*cảm xúc không thể gienheim ta bằng lời*), post a picture to remember the sweater torn apart by the dog (*đăng cái ảnh để tưởng nhớ cái áo bị chó cắn*), look at me and (can’t) say you don’t need me :’) – feeling cute (*nhìn em và nói không cần dỗ :’*) – feeling cute. 

Korean women despite their rural location. Facebook has become a place to teach them the cultural practices of modernity. In these Facebook advertisements, English terms are used to describe the clothes (set, vest, cardigan, crop top), yet they are often spelled incorrectly (cagygan, hôt, ctoptop). They indicate the extent to which Hải Thành girls have been integrated into the Western/modern fashion world. The spelling mistakes in both English and Vietnamese, however, reveal their limited formal education and might be interpreted by other Vietnamese as indicators of their social class. A gap, unfortunately, still seems to exist between the girls’ global aspiration and their local reality.

![Facebook advertisement for clothes](image)

**Figure 2.4** – Facebook advertisement for clothes

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25 Of course, Hải Thành girls also learn from observing and interacting with transnational women who are back in Hải Thành for a short time visiting their families.  
26 This fact is unsurprising because most of the girls in Hải Thành only finish high school before they marry foreign men and migrate.
These advertisements also show the importance of commodities to the creation of the modern girl look. Besides clothes, there are lipstick, nail polish, face cream and powder, skin lighteners, hair styling products, perfume, and high-heel shoes. As the Modern Girl Research Group notices, these commodities are corporeal, thus able to work on the bodies to transform them. Being technologies of the self, they allow women to change into modern figures as they join together novelty, modernity, bodily autonomy, and sexual desire (Peiss 1998). The identity of a modern girl is crafted by the clothes she wears, the cosmetics she puts on, and what she buys and does not buy. It is impossible to imagine the modern girl without these commodities and consumption (Burke 2008). Here lies the crucial difference between the modern girl (for whom appearance is emphasized) and the traditional one (for whom virtues are underlined). This is true in Hải Thành, in Vietnam, and in many other societies in the world.

**Beauty and Identity: From Narcissism to Self-Fashioning**

The material culture of clothes and cosmetics is an important factor in women’s life and identity. Indeed, Dyhouse observes that “much of women’s social history is embedded in clothes, cosmetics, and material culture” (Dyhouse 2010, 7). However, this aspect of women’s culture has usually been obscured and denigrated. Interests, even academic interests, in clothes and fashion raise the risks of narcissism and triviality, two qualities traditionally assigned to women (Twigg 2013).

In Hải Thành, the girls’ focus on appearance has drawn similar criticisms. The girls are often mocked by many groups of local people as vain, shallow, or fearsome. One young translocal woman who married Uncle Tú’s neighbor complained to me that rural women are the

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27 Besides criticisms, there are also admiration of and appreciation for beautiful girls locally (see chapters III and V)
most proper (chân chính) but these Hải Thành girls are more fashionable than even city girls. She implied that by being so fashionable, Hải Thành girls fail to live up to the moral standards of decency.\textsuperscript{28} Some older people think that the girls are young and uneducated, that is why they are only interested in beauty and themselves: “The girls do not know how to use their brain; they only want to indulge themselves. They like to make themselves beautiful rather than do housework.” Because the girls are seen as narcissistic and improper, their perceived vanity “terrifies” people. One day, right before our dinner at Uncle Tú’s house, the power went out. As soon as the fans stopped running, mosquitoes buzzed around us. I told everyone that I was bitten by mosquitoes and Uncle Tú said the same. Mơ, on the other hand, claimed that she did not see any mosquitoes and was not bitten. Uncle Tú immediately lampooned her: “You wear such heavy makeup that even the mosquitoes are afraid of you.” Mơ did not say anything in response even though she was singled out as being different and “scary.” Notably, the critiques of beauty in Hải Thành are not necessarily about beauty per se but about what many see as the sole focus on beauty at the expense of the other three qualities in the four virtues: usefulness (công) because they do not like to do housework, articulation (ngôn) because they lack education, and morality (hạnh) because they are not decent. Viewed that way, the girls in Hải Thành have failed to live up to the ideal construction of Vietnamese womanhood.

While many Hải Thành residents regard the exclusive focus on beauty as vain and narcissistic, feminism in the past regarded fashion as oppressive to women. They were very critical of fashion and beauty and how they affect women:

\begin{quote}
It distorted the natural body through subordinating practices like high heels and corsets, reducing women to objects of a sexualizing gaze, rendering them unable to act effectively in the world. It
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} The issue of morality will be further explored in the next chapters.
diverted women’s energies into trivial questions of appearance and reinforced negative stereotypes of women as ever-changing, inconstant, and narcissistic (Twigg 2013, 17)

However, the latest shift towards postmodernism and its emphasis on identity and agency as well as the rise of cultural, material and visual studies have brought new perspectives on beauty and fashion. Fashion and beauty are not simply areas where patriarchy and capitalism are produced but also where self-creativity and joy are expressed (Entwistle 2000). The Marxist approaches used to perceive consumption (including clothes and commodities) as manipulation of capitalism because consumption was assumed to rest on false needs and unauthentic desires. Not surprisingly, feminism viewed fashion as inauthentic and distorting (Twigg 2013). However, new studies on materiality show that objects, besides having use values, possess cultural values. Therefore, customers, rather than being victims of capitalism, are recognized as active agents who fashion their selves and identities through material objects (Miller 1998b). Clothes, in particular, offer a possibility of constant self-renewal and this is where personal creativity and excitement arise. It explains why people shop to enhance themselves and their mood (Twigg 2013).

More importantly, clothes and cosmetics are now seen to have performative aspects that are essential for self-(re)fashioning. Inspired by Judith Butler’s (1993) work on the performativity of gender, clothes are theorized as a tool for self-realizing and self-presenting identities. No culture leaves the body unclothed and consequently, clothes are one way where bodies are made social and given identity (Hansen 2004, Entwistle 2000). For example, military uniforms represent embodied masculinity and heels and skirts signify sexualized femininity (Twigg 2013). Clothes allow people to engage with crafting their identities in a concrete and material fashion. Dressing has an almost Hegelian quality, according to Miller, as the self is
discovered and created in ongoing processes of self-actualization. When the identity is successfully created by clothes, the process of ‘objectification’ is accomplished (Miller 1998b).

The focus on clothes and beauty reveals that the (self) presentation of the body is never ‘natural’ but naturalized by dress in ways that are political, cultural, and material. For example, dress remains a major way in which gender is reproduced. Clothes reproduce gender differences through styles and materials and play a critical role in the interplay between sexed bodies and gendered identities. Through clothes, norms of femininity and masculinity are created, played out, contested, and understood (Twigg 2013). Tomboy, sexualized, flamboyant, militarized, lumbersexual, or conservative dressing indicates different notions and practices of femininity and masculinity. Therefore, a focus on dressing allows us to understand how gender operates at an embodied level (Twigg 2013). Fashion has long been considered the domain of women and men and women are judged very differently when it comes to dressing. Men usually are not called “sluts” because of the way they dress. Women, on the other hand, face a much harsher moral judgment and scrutiny over their dressing. This is more evident with regards to women who do not fit with the normalized beauty standards of youthful femininity (Twigg 2013), as we shall see in chapter VIII in the case of Mơ, Uncle Tú’s second daughter, who passed the youthful age and in chapter VI in the case of translocal women in Hải Thành who generally belong to a different social class. In this sense, clothes have the power of naturalizing as well as challenging social differences, including gender, age, and social class, an important topic to which I will return in later chapters.

Since clothes are central to how we present ourselves at the individual and social levels, especially for females, it is important to look past the notion of narcissism and ask what kind of gendered identity Hải Thành girls re/produce with the way they dress. Their modern look reflects
sexualized youthfulness, which is what feminists have long argued to be the norm of contemporary femininity (Twigg 2013). From the exposure of the body with short dresses to the sexual and fashionable claims with heels and Korean-styled clothes, the girls in Hải Thành have become a terrain where modernity, femininity, youth, and social class (represented by consumption) merge.

Additionally, the act of crafting a modern girl look and taking many selfie photos that are posted on Facebook indicates the increasingly common expression of individualism in Vietnam. Arguably, this expression of individualism is not necessarily narcissism but reflects neoliberal notions of self-governance (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012, Hien 2012, Ong 2008). Regarded as governance from afar (Zhang and Ong 2008), the ‘free’ consumer-citizens internalize certain desires and longings (Rofel 2007) and cultivate strategies of self-fashioning. In the case of Vietnam, the Vietnamese state’s management of aesthetic practices through the mass media (including soap operas, television shows, magazines, newspapers, and Facebook) constitutes a system of expert knowledge that encourages expressions of self and pursuits of self-beautification (Hien 2012). Such a system of expert knowledge communicates to Vietnamese females, including Hải Thành girls, proper and desirable ways of self-representation that centers on middle-class practices of consumption and modern, youthful ideals of beauty. Through the practices of beauty, the girls express their hopes and dreams and construct themselves as beautiful, and thus desirable, Vietnamese subjects. In other words, Hải Thành girls’ beauty practices can be seen as techniques of self-fashioning.
The Lack of ‘Inner Beauty’: Self-Indulgence, Education, and Futureless Youth

The difference of Hải Thành girls from other rural girls comes not only in their looks but also, supposedly, their lifestyles and particularly, their sexual behaviors. All the criticism that I heard during my fieldwork can be summarized as: they like to make themselves beautiful more than they like to study, they like to play more than to do housework, and they are too uninhibited with their sexuality. At first glance, it is true that many Hải Thành girls spend a lot of time and money on becoming beautiful and most of them finish only high school (or even lower levels of education). And it is true that the streets at night are dominated by youngsters frequenting loud bars, cafes, and discotheques and that many relationships between the local girls and boys are broken up before the girls marry foreign men. However, these critiques of the girls’ behaviors, lifestyles, and characters that are seen as unacceptable for rural girls cannot be divorced from the unusual historical and social conditions in Hải Thành that make those practices and choices possible in the first place.

Hải Thành, compared to most rural communes in Vietnam, is quite prosperous. Its prosperity also arrived recently, resulting in a significant difference in finance between the older/parents generation and the younger/children generation. For the first time, many parents in Hải Thành feel that they can sufficiently provide for their children so that their children will not have to suffer in poverty like they did, growing up. This mentality often results in overcatering and overcompensating for children. Many of the girls I know do not know how to cook, which is very uncommon for Vietnamese women. Hoa’s mother, for example, shoos her away when she goes into the kitchen and her mother’s philosophy is: when Hoa gets married to a Korean man, she will pay for Hoa to take a cooking class on Korean cuisine and Hoa will be all set. One of uncle Tú’s distant cousins used to call her mother everyday when she first got to Taiwan to ask
how to cook and what to cook for dinner. Many girls grow up with few expectations of them, especially with regard to household chores, because their parents hope that they will have more time to focus on their education.

As I discussed in chapter I, there exists in Vietnam an assumed association of rurality with low level of education, and lower class. Many Hải Thành people understand the important role of education as they constantly compare themselves with the people of Hải Đức, a neighboring commune which is much poorer yet is respectably recognized as an educated commune. In fact, all but three of 50 teachers at Hải Thành schools are Hải Đức people. Hải Thành residents, especially the older generation, think that if they were educated like Hải Đức residents they would be respected more as they would be able to stand up to local authorities and would have a more ‘civilized’ lifestyle. At the same time, they hope that education would help their children get good and stable jobs, preferably in the cities, so that sons would not have to work hard as fishermen and daughters would not need to marry foreign men.

Bourdieu (1984) distinguished between different kinds of cultural capital: institutionalized cultural capital (education), objectified cultural capital (ownership of consumer goods), and embodied cultural capital (manner). Hải Thành people are aware that they do not have institutionalized and embodied capital. In their forays into the cities, they often speak of feeling embarrassed for not knowing how to speak and comport themselves, comparing this experience to a countryside crab going to the city (cua động ra tỉnh). Chung, a translocal woman who is a mother of a twenty-year-old son in Hải Thành, explained to me the social respect education brings. When I asked Chung how she would describe her vision of an ideal woman, Chung made a detour and talked to me about Ngọc, the most famous and successful businesswoman in Hải Thành:
An ideal woman to me has to be educated and knows how to articulate eloquently. Besides having a good husband, she has to have well-behaved children who have stable jobs in state-owned companies. Doing business well like Mrs. Ngọc only makes her rich, but education is more important. In the cities, educated people might make as much as a fifth of what Mrs. Ngọc does but they are still better. Education brings brighter futures, generates steady incomes, enables traveling, and garners respect. They are educated so they get to go to meetings, discussing matters of political and social importance. When will Mrs. Ngọc get to do that? Plus, doing business has an element of luck and there is always a risk of loss and debt. Education makes your future a lot more secure.

Chung’s opinion resonates with many Hải Thành residents that I know. Education is presumed to bring everything that a person wants: steady income, traveling, respect, and a bright future. The imagined security and steadiness created through getting education is understandably significant for most rural people who usually do not have pensions when they become old (because they do not work for the state) and whose occupations (agriculture, fishing, and business) have a strong element of luck. Hải Thành people also view education as one element that separates the ‘backward’ rural people from their ‘better’ urban counterparts. In a sense, Chung, like many other Hải Thành residents, idealizes education as a way to jump the social class barrier between the rural and the urban, the working class and the middle-class.

This respect for education is perhaps a residue of Confucian ideology that regards education as enlightenment and an important instrument for social advancement. It indicates that education still plays a significant role in creating social value and hierarchy in Vietnamese society. The emphasis on education also aligns with Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) and what Gary Becker termed ‘a human capital theory’ which claims that
people can increase their human capital through education and training (Becker 1964). This theory works really well when heavy industries drive economic growth, which was the model of the post-war Vietnamese economic system until the emergence of the neoliberal economy in the 2000s (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). Until then, job and status, especially in Vietnamese state-owned sectors, were generally commensurate with education and experience.

A neoliberal economy, however, operates very differently with regards to labor, especially for youth. Characteristics of a Vietnamese neoliberal economy include “market economic and free trade discourses proffered as a means to achieve a higher quality of life; discourses of privatization and self-regulation for optimization; and the moralization of logics of efficiency, quality, and accountability as models for correct, modern, or civilized personhood” (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012, 382). Lukacs (2015a) argues that youth are particularly susceptible to exploitation by the neoliberal market. Neoliberalism operates on the principle of flexibility and requires workers to be able to adapt to mobile and precarious working conditions. Not only are young people flexible, they are also a cheap source of labor, mobility, creativity, and innovation. According to Lukacs (2015a), youth are a segment of the population that is uniquely capable of cheaply accommodating the neoliberal demands of flexibility and mobility. This phenomenon can be seen across East Asia. In Japan and South Korea, employment has become nonstandard and young people are forced (or should be ready) to move from one short-term job to another. In China, like Vietnam, the state promotes urban development and rural youth are compelled to migrate to cities and industrial zones in search of employment opportunities (Lukacs 2015a, Earl 2014, Taylor 2004b). Arguably, “[i]n the processes of capitalizing on the structural flexibility of youth, East Asian governments are effectively locking young people into a state of perpetual mobility” (Lukacs 2015a, 388).
The perpetual state of mobility and the lack of steady employment produces growing anxiety and despair for young people, a situation that Anne Allison calls futureless youth (Allison 2009, 90). Neoliberal economies, by excluding youth from job security in increasing numbers, have also denied them what Castel calls ‘social citizenship,’ that is, a recognized and useful position in society (Castel 1996). Castel explains that socially recognized work still largely means wage employment with a stable career, rights, and benefits (Castel 1996). In this regard, it makes sense that Hải Thành residents admire Hải Đức people because their children have an easier time getting salaried jobs in the cities and towns. Hải Thành people believe the difference between the two communes lies in education. However, while education is still idealized in Hải Thành, many residents recognized the structural changes in the economic system in which education does not always deliver the promise of socially upward mobility. A small number of them experience the disappointment in education when their children, after graduating from college, have an extremely hard time finding employment. And the Hải Thành youngsters who are directly affected understand their precarious future in the Vietnamese job market well enough that many have given up trying to follow the path of education.

Hoa told me that she had wanted to become a policewoman. But her hope was stamped on relatively soon:

_When I brought my application materials to a Community College that trains Vietnamese police, I was asked if I had any relative who was “in the system.” When I answered no, they told_

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29 The anxiety and despair are amplified more for young men than women because of gender expectations. Educated unemployment often results in difficulties of leaving home, getting married, fulfilling the role of male providers, achieving ‘masculine’ success. Public discourses often portray unemployed young men as ‘louts’ or a violent ‘threat’ to society (Jeffrey 2010).

30 The problem of educated unemployment is, by no means, limited to Vietnam. Studies in Papua New Guinea, Ethiopia, Morocco, Peru, East Africa, and Asia have shown the steady rise in underemployment and educated unemployment among youth (Lukacs 2015a, Jeffrey 2010).
me to withdraw my application. I was told it cost 300 million VND to get into the Police Community College and 500 million VND for the Police University, but those prices were only for those who had insiders. People like me are simply rejected. Worse, even if I had been admitted, I still had to bribe the teachers for every course I would take. Then if I graduated, I would have had to bribe even more so that I would not be assigned to mountain posts. Very cruel. So much money.

Hoa voiced the biggest concern that most rural people have about education and employment opportunities in Vietnam: the lack of insiders or social connections. This lack is amplified in Hải Thành because people’s main occupation, fishing, takes many parents out to sea and reduces their capacity to make social connections on land. Therefore, it is doubly difficult for Hải Thành people to cultivate social connections: they are not only rural but also fishing people. Moreover, Hoa’s comment shows, even if she got into the education system, how costly it can be in Vietnam to graduate from an attractive school and get a decent job. This cost is often out of reach for most rural students and still for some in Hải Thành. The Vietnamese saying that it takes money to make money (tiền để ra tiền) is apt in this case to describe how difficult it is for rural (and also poor) Vietnamese to break into an urban, middle-class life with stable jobs through education. Consequently, many Hải Thành children are discouraged enough to not even try. Hoa was not the only exception. A number of girls I know made an effort to learn foreign languages (Chinese or Japanese) after high school to apply for tour guide or secretary positions but could not find any job. After a year or two, they worried that they had become too “old” (for marriage) and abandoned their learning to marry Korean and Taiwanese men. The lack of job opportunities for Hải Thành youth means that most boys will end up being fishermen and most
girls will marry foreigners if they want to have financially comfortable lives. Neither requires a high school diploma.31

There are other reasons besides employment precariousness that contribute to the disinterest in education among the youth in Hải Thành. For example, the absence of parents at home due to their fishing occupations leaves many children in the care of their grandparents who are unable to provide supervision and guidance. But according to what many Hải Thành residents told me, wealth is the other main factor. They believe that wealth correlates directly with the lack of education among the youngsters. Unlike the stereotypes of many rural children unable to pursue education because of poverty, Hải Thành children do not care for education, mostly because they see no need for education. For example, Mr. Cường, the owner of a popular cafe in Hải Thành, explained to me:

“Because many families here have good finances, the youngsters do not want to be in school. Let me ask you this: if my parents have a two-storey house, if my aunts and uncles were boatpeople and now live in Canada, why should I go to school from morning to evening? Then I have homework to do till midnight. Outside, my friends are waiting for me to go out, to go to a bar or cafe, to relax and have fun. Why should I bother with school? It’s like that here. In the city, even rich kids have to go to school.”

Mr. Cường’s argument is that Hải Thành children can rely on the finances of their parents and overseas relatives and therefore are not motivated to learn. However, he also said that there is a difference between rural and urban people with regard to education because rich urban

31 The fact that most of these girls just stay at home idly waiting to marry foreign husbands contributes to the local criticism of them as being lazy. For example, Ngoc, a classmate of mine, told me her daily schedule: “My mom is home so I don’t have to do anything. I wake up at nine or ten in the morning then I have breakfast. After breakfast, I can do whatever I want, even go back to sleep. Then lunch. After that, I will take a nap. Then I play games on the computer or surf Facebook.”
children still have to go to school. He implied that rural people are myopic compared to urban people. This implication was clearer when he continued:

“City people who have monthly salaries, five million or 10 million ($250 or $500), have to calculate every month what to spend. Their children will not have much to go out with friends. Their spending is very sensible. Hải Thành people who have foreign remittances spend differently. Here, parents do not have to work; their daughters send them monthly stipends. Or if they need anything, their daughters will send them $1000. All of a sudden, they have a huge amount of money; of course they will give to their son or daughter at home one or two million VND (around $50 to $100) to spend. Of course they will go to bars, buy drugs, go shopping for nice clothes but clothes with little fabric (quần áo ít vải), put on make-up, get to a hotel room and do it! Parents spoil their kids because they don’t think about the consequences, unlike city people.”

Mr. Cương claimed that rural people, unlike urban people, do not understand the repercussions of their parenting practices. In the context of the stereotype that urban people are supposedly educated and rural people are not, we can infer that Mr. Cương indicated a vicious circle that rural parents are uneducated so their children are spoiled and uneducated and the cycle, as well as the stereotype, continues. What is more interesting in Mr. Cương’s explanation is his observation of the nature of wealth in Hải Thành and how it is different from other places. Hải Thành’s wealth mostly comes from people who move away (fishermen’s earnings and overseas Vietnameses’ remittances). The absence of people and presence of money, unfortunately, results in the perception, especially among the youth, of money as desirable and easily made. When money is seen as easily made, it also becomes easily spent in self-indulgence.
The devaluing of education is often blamed for everything that is wrong with the local youth because, simply, “they don’t know any better.” During a Nguyễn lineage’s annual ancestry dinner, I asked the parents what they thought of young women in Hải Thành and immediately they focused on how problematic they are:

- **Girls in the city are well educated. Here, most of them are uneducated (vô học). They only finish grades 6th or 7th; that’s quite unusual already. They don’t know anything about the society. So when they see that other people dress nicely, they imitate.**

- **Women and girls now, even having slept with men like spouses today, are ready to say goodbye tomorrow to marry foreign men. Romeo and Juliet do not exist anymore.**

- **They want money enough to be willing to marry men as old as their parents. There is no love in these marriages. But if they want to follow the call of cash, they have to sacrifice.**

The older generations believed that the problems of youth lie in the lack of education. They are poorly educated and that is why they marry so young. They are corrupted in debauchery because they do not spend time studying. They do not cultivate good values because they are not educated. All in all, Hải Thành people reason that a commune of rural people who are poorly educated but suddenly wealthy and mostly absent will produce a new spoiled generation that enjoys self-indulgence, consumerism, and sexuality. Even though the criticism applies to both boys\(^\text{32}\) and girls, I noticed that the condemnation on girls is a lot harsher and more pronounced in Hải Thành. That is understandable because Vietnamese females are considered to be the symbol and moral keeper of the nation. Their appearances and behaviors are always heavily scrutinized, as reflected in the above critiques.

\(^{32}\) The young men in Hải Thành face disapproval on their drinking, gambling, and overspending.
The young girls themselves internalize and reinforce the rural-urban hierarchy based on education. For example, my classmates often said they might be prettier than city girls but “city (girl) is still urban, and by comparison, better than rural (girl).” Hoa explained to me that city girls have the city label while she has the rural label. Rural women, according to Hoa, cannot speak and articulate as eloquently as city women. Hải Thành girls are tart and sharp-tongued (chanh chua, danh dâ) while city girls are sweet and wise (ngọt ngào, khôn ngoan). Vietnamese people often stereotypically use the phrase “chanh chua, danh dâ” to describe female small traders whom they perceive as uneducated and thus, behaving and speaking in ways that are unpleasant. Hoa applied that same phrase to herself and other rural women in contrast to the wisdom and pleasantness (sweetness) of urban women. It indicates once again how education is seen to shape behavior, distinguish between social classes, and separate the urban from the rural.

The importance of education means an emphasis on the mind over body, quality over appearance. Therefore, the critiques of Hải Thành girls on their obsession with beauty is more than skin deep. While Vietnamese women are encouraged and taught in the media to make themselves beautiful, they are also told the main reason for their beauty is to attract men and become their capable wives. As such, even though the book Modern Women of the 21st Century (Phụ nữ hiện đại thế kỷ XXI) spends 200 pages on beauty tips, it devotes as many pages telling women how to please their partners. Similarly, the book on four virtues of Vietnamese women titled Four Virtues of Vietnamese Women Now and in the Past reminds readers that the goal of keeping up female appearance is to charm men, but women have to work on their behavior to keep their men and make them happy (Le, Nguyen, and Hoang 2012). The Readers’ letters column (Tâm sự) on VNExpress is full of women’s stories of not being able to create a happy family or the guilt of breaking a happy family by being the third person. It can be concluded that
marriage is still considered the destiny for women who are then responsible for making it work. Therefore, when Hải Thành girls are viewed as caring only for their beauty and not for virtues (such as diligence, faithfulness, chastity, and self-sacrifice), their behaviors are heavily criticized and morality questioned by local people.

However, Hải Thành youth’s repudiation of education is a critique of the popular view of development institutions and certain scholars such as the Nobel Prize winner Sen (1999) that education is an unproblematic social good that improves people’s life opportunities. In fact, the uneducated unemployment in Hải Thành and around the world (see Jeffrey 2010) shows that education can increase the inequality gap for those, typically the poorer population, who invest in education but lack social connections to achieve employment. Hải Thành girls have chosen not to pursue education but focus more on beauty because, as I explain in the following chapter, beauty, unlike education, elevates their social status that is often denied and enables them to get married transnationally. The importance of beauty for Hải Thành girls with regards to class and life chances is the focus of my next chapter.
Chapter III

The Desire to be Pretty: Youthful Beauty, Gender Power, and Social Class

Beauty, Sexual Capital, and Hope

Beauty as Sexual Capital

Scholars studying beauty have noted that for women who work in government offices institutions, schools, companies, and stores, the modern look is a necessity (Edmonds 2010, Dong 2008). Therefore, when the young women of Hải Thành who do not hold any public job become preoccupied with their appearance, they are deemed to be vain and narcissistic. They are also seen as superficial, focusing on the surface at the expense of “deeper” self-development.

Such moral charges, deeply rooted in many cultures across the world, do not explain the appeals of beauty. To confound us even more, early feminists, focusing largely on Western societies, simply rejected beauty as they argue that beauty practices are a patriarchal tool to discipline and control the female bodies (Jeffreys 2005, Bordo 1993, Wolf 1991, Chernin 1981). This framework was based on white, middle-class, and heterosexual women. Recent scholarship on beauty has shown that women of different race, class, and sexuality have very different relationships to beauty and bodies rather than just oppression (Kang 2010, Burke 2008, Dong 2008, Edmonds 2007, Hill Collins 2005, Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002). How such relationships are interpreted and evaluated depends much on sexual and gender norms and ideals for women (The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2008, Pettus 2003, Farrer 2002). Finally, studies on beauty, including those from anthropology, tend to emphasize the political aspects rather than its aesthetic values (Edmonds 2010). These three factors (morality,
patriarchy charge, and focus on politics) have made it difficult to develop a more nuanced understanding of the multiple roles and effects of beauty.

Alexander Edmonds, in his study on plastic surgeries in Brazil, argues that attractiveness is an “objective form of value” (2010, 20) and the appeal of beauty lies in its function as a distinct form of power. As such, it can have a valuable democratic value in redistributing social power and affecting social hierarchy (2010, 2007). Terming it “sexual capital,” Edmonds adds to the Bourdieu’s framework of how economic, cultural, and social capitals inter-convert and naturalize the class system. Bourdieu did notice the special power of physical beauty as he wrote in *Distinction*, “[Physical beauty is] sometimes fatally attractive, because it threatens the other hierarchies, and . . . denies the high and mighty the bodily attributes of their position, such as height or beauty” (Bourdieu 1984, 190).

According to Edmonds, more than threatening other hierarchies, beauty can minimize or cancel class and racial stratification. In a free market economy, beauty is a form of sexual capital that can be exchanged for other kinds of social and economic capital in marriages, romances, and sex-for-money encounters:

> “The normal symbolic and material markers of status (speech, fashion, education, and so on) can be partially suppressed in situations where sexual exchange is based primarily on physical qualities.” (Edmonds 2010, 247).

In Edmonds’s study, beauty, youth, or exotic differences can be converted into material gains in sexual relations, or function as a promise of fame and life possibilities for aspiring artistas in Brazil. The appeal of beauty, especially for the poor, is understandably significant
because sexual capital can be an important resource to attain better lives in situations of poverty, hardship, and scarcity (Edmonds 2010).

The power of beauty speaks to the often neglected biological aspects of human beings. More than being social creatures immersed in political constructions, humans also have needs and desires. As such, sexual capital has the potential to override the socio-political structure such as when a beautiful person exerts power, however rarely, against class or racial privileges:

“There is always the possibility that the attractive person will not return the love of the powerful and unattractive social superior, providing a moral lesson about the limits of privileges” (Edmonds 2010, 251).

Thanks to the booming of technology, medicalization of beauty, and consumer culture, physical beauty, if not possessed already by individuals, has become more attainable for the masses. Consequently, beauty can function as a form of egalitarian capital that opens the door for social mobility yet is less dependent on birth, education, or social connections (Edmonds 2010). The connection between beauty and social mobility is particularly revealing when we consider how many beauty pageant contestants have successfully developed political careers afterwards. In the United States alone, nearly 12 percent of female governors elected since 2000 participated in pageants. Examples of beauty queens entering politics are available worldwide. Angelina Sondakh (Indonesia), Eunice Olsen (Singapore), Tanja Saarela (Finland), Mara Carfagna (Italy), Gemma Garrett (Great Britain), Maria Kalaw Katigbak (Philippines), and Yolanda Pulecio (Colombia) are a few well-known examples of this phenomenon (Hinojosa and Carle 2016).

Viewing beauty as sexual capital and a crucial resource for the unentitled provides a different and more understanding perspective on the “vain” and “superficial” young women of
Hải Thành. Their preoccupation with the modern look reveals both their privileges compared to other rural Vietnamese girls and the obstacles for social mobility still faced by rural women.

Their beauty power certainly has brought forth more equalities in their relations with local men, yet here lies an irony: the global capitalist market that allows them to exchange beauty for power in transnational marriages also takes them out of Hải Thành to another country, leaving the local gender hierarchy largely intact.

*Beauty, Sexuality, and Social Class in Vietnam*

In order to understand the unique way in which local girls desire to be beautiful, we first need to contextualize the burgeoning visual economy\(^{33}\) in Vietnam to examine how Hải Thành girls’ social positions are highly shaped by the dichotomies of urban/modern/mobility and rural/backward/immobility. In her study on photo restoration in Vietnam, Nina Hien (2012) shows that visual representation used to be highly controlled by the Vietnamese state. During the high socialism period before Đổi Mới, the state censored all public visuality in order to create visions of a new socialist state. The totalizing control was exerted over the visual (film, television, visual arts), audio (radio, loudspeakers), and text (newspaper, books).

With Đổi Mới and the opening of the market, foreign ideas, images, goods, and values are now competing with the state in the public domain. The shrinkage of the state and the prominence of a free market economy have also given rise to a consumer culture in which social class and citizenship are increasingly defined by consumption (Earl 2014, Leshkowich 2012a, Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012, Higgins 2008). Combined together, new

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\(^{33}\) I use Deborah Poole’s definition of the visual economy as a comprehensive system of the production of images, their meanings and uses, their circulation and exchange as “goods,” and the cultural and discursive values through which they are appraised and interpreted (Poole 1997).
visions of modernity in Vietnam are now conveyed through images of glamor, materiality, and upward lifestyles, linking consumption with status and mobility. These glamor visions reign over national media and public spectacles, from foreign soap operas and movies that craft images of First World modernity, daily coverage and photos of celebrities and hot girls in newspapers, fashion columns that update and guide readers on the latest international trends, to numerous beauty contests on television and uncountable beauty pageants happening year round. They help prescribe visions of a good life and modern desirable subjects, nicely packaged and sold to millions of viewers. In this new visual economy defined by a celebration of modernity and beauty, cosmetic and beauty techniques become tools of self-governance (Hien 2012) and class identifications are translated as differences in beauty and life styles (Edmonds 2010).

It is no wonder that people in Hải Thành differentiate between themselves and those who live abroad and in cities in terms of beauty. Hoa expressed her desire to become beautiful by going away: “I just hope that if I go abroad, I will be lighter (in skin color) and no longer have acnes. The water here does not suit me. When I go to Hải Phòng, I don’t need to put anything on my face or drink any juices, my face is still pretty.” Similar to Hoa, many Hải Thành residents consider transnational women to be as beautiful as angels (đẹp như tiên). In fact, every person in Hải Thành who migrates overseas has been said to transform into a figure of beauty: lighter complexion with pinkish cheeks, long and shiny hair (tóc dài thướt tha), and fashionable clothes that are very different from Vietnamese clothes. The stories of transformation from commoner-looking to angel-looking are predominant and widespread in Hải Thành. People reason that transnationals are beautiful because they have good lives. The gap in basic living needs (such as clean water as Hoa remarked, or as implied by people who have “good lives”) between a rural place like Hải Thành and cities or foreign countries is conceptualized and romanticized here as
differences in beauty. The connection between appearance and social status is so strong in Hải Thành that most people did not believe me when I told them I had been living in the United States for about ten years. How could I have when I did not have light skin, shiny hair or stylish clothes? Beauty, while being a form of social capital, also indicates the socio-economic gap between the rural and the urban, the domestic and the foreign.

Beauty practices and performances have proven their potentiality to bridge or embody the social gap in a country that is increasingly stratified. It is precisely this desired promise that allows the visual economy to thrive by producing myths of leaping over the gap, both geographically and economically. For example, through those numerous beauty contests, such as the popular Vietnam-based Next Top Model television show, viewers are presented with stories of contestants from humble backgrounds transforming from rural modest women to beautiful models and shooting to fame in Vietnam and globally. The images and stories of glamorous women from modest upbringing on television and in the public sphere act as hope of a beauty myth where women can imagine themselves and their life aspirations through such images. Viewers are also taught the necessity of consumption in crafting beauty, which can lead to life possibilities and transformation. As Burke (2008) remarks, consumption has considerable symbolic authority in everyday life because of its capacity to create social relations and statuses.

In other words, unlike the ideological construction of the Vietnamese state, a modern Vietnamese woman is shaped by the market as one that has the ability for transformation, aspirations for social mobility, and possession of beauty and sexual power.

The embrace of glamorous beauty is refashioned as much by the consumer culture as the broad changes in sexuality and gender relations in Vietnam. The dismissal of arranged marriages, the ending of the Vietnamese state’s approval of life partners, and the socialist
ideologies of equality have reopened the door in intimate encounters for free choice and romantic love (Phinney 2008). However, the withdrawal of the state also subjects love and sexuality to the logic of the market. While the older generation in Hải Thành laments that Romeo and Juliet do not exist any more, the youngsters refuse to accept the premise of “one poor cottage with two golden hearts” (một tụp lều tranh hai trái tim vàng). The mingling of sexuality, love and the market is seen as well in the marketization of sexual pleasure and how common it is for Vietnamese men to form social and economic connections through the consumption of female bodies (Nguyen-Vo 2008). Most notably, VietJet Air, Vietnam’s only privately owned airline, has created a buzz globally for its young, attractive, bikini-clad flight attendants. This marketing strategy has earned the company huge profits and VietJet Air, dubbed the bikini airline, is expected to surpass the national Vietnam Airlines as the biggest domestic carrier in Vietnam this year. Its CEO, after the company holds its IPO this year, will become the first Vietnamese female billionaire (Nguyen, Ha, and Wong 2016). Female bodies and beauty have an increasing value in the Vietnamese free market economy.
The visual economy also pushes the public domain towards more emphasis on appearance, which is often framed as the contrast between rural/ugly/uncivilized and urban/beautiful/civilized. A recent etiquette video clip shown in Megastars Cineplex theaters in Vietnam depicts an urban man talking on his cell phone during a movie as “uncivilized” as a rural man. The underlying message is rural people do not fit in with the urban, “civilized” space. “Rural” is also an adjective to express how badly one looks (trong quê quá). Rural people, assigned with stigmas of backwardness, are now excluded from the national visions of glamor.

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34 https://youtu.be/qg7nX0HfvL0
and modernity. Yet, the myth of self-metamorphosis is nurtured by the promise of beauty and consumption practices. It is a myth because consumption, while increasingly crucial, is also beyond the reach of the majority of the Vietnamese. Consumption, undeniably, has a tremendous political power of producing social exclusion and inclusion (Miller 1998a).

Hải Thành girls, unlike most rural Vietnamese girls, have more material resources to participate in not only the consumer culture but also the medicalization of beauty. They are lucky. Besides buying clothes and cosmetics, the girls also go to salons for whole body whitening or bleaching that my teacher Nga told me cost eight million VND (around 400 USD) for two hours. My classmates openly admired Ngọc Trinh, a famous Vietnamese celebrity who is said to be more afraid of the sun than the ghosts (sọ năng hồn sọ mà) (Đức Tri 2016), for what they called her “angel-like fair skin” (trắng như thiên thần). Also, it has also become more common for Hải Thành girls to have nose surgeries if they think their noses are flat. One time, during our discussion of beauty in class, Nga complimented how sharp Hoa’s nose is and how important a sharp nose is for beauty by telling a story of her former students going to Hanoi for nose jobs:

*The three of them [students], their noses were so flat that if you looked at them from the side, there was nothing sticking up. The noses made them ugly. Thus they went to Hanoi; they told me that, “[w]e go looking for beauty now” (đi tìm sắc đẹp). They came home the next day, moaning and and groaning “[o]h mother, it was so painful. We lay in bed for five days.” It took them ten days to start feeling a bit better. One of them has a girl and everytime the girl touched her mother’s nose, she exclaimed in worry: “[o]h my goodness, you’ll flatten my nose.” Ha ha. But painful as it might be, it was worth it. Because on a face, the nose is the most crucial. If you don’t have nice eyebrows, you can draw them. If you have small eyes, you can wear enlarging*
circle lenses. But a beautiful nose will enhance your whole face. Like Hoa here, all she needs to do is to put on some lipstick and she’s pretty.

Nga is reiterating one of Vietnamese prevalent physical beauty standards for women: fair skin, big eyes, sharp nose, and V-line chin (kenh14.vn 2016). Thanks to the popularity of cosmetics surgeries, more Vietnamese women, including the girls in Hải Thành, can go through the procedures to lighten the skin, fix the flat nose, and create double eyelids and dimples. It is clear that beauty practices are works (such as putting up with the pain of surgeries as well as learning about what to wear). For many Hải Thành girls, they include both work on the physical body as well as enhancement by clothes and commodities. However, it does not simply mean that Hải Thành girls are vain or superficial victims of consumerism. Beauty practices speak to a desire to create an identity that is included in the modern world. As Edmonds argues, when education is limited, the body, relative to the mind, turns to be a more important foundation for identity and a source of power. Being the only part of self-definition that the girls have control over, beauty, with its sexual capital, has become “a popular form of hope” (Edmonds 2007, 378) for those socially excluded.\footnote{Beauty, of course, works differently for women and men. While it allows local women to cross the class boundary for upward mobility, it has the opposite effect on men. The physical appearance and clothes of fishermen ironically marks them as working class despite their economic capital.}

\textit{Beauty as Self-Maintenance and Hope}

Rural people, assigned with stigmas of backwardness, are now excluded from the national visions of glamour and modernity. Yet, the myth of self-metamorphosis is nurtured by the promise of beauty by migration to the city or abroad and consumption practices. Rural people, particularly women, are not pretty yet but they will transform once they get to the city or abroad.
abroad and buy clothes, makeup, accessories, etc. For example, I went out for drinks with a group of local girls at a cafe when one girl pointed out to me a transnational woman who was sitting at the nearby table. When the transnational woman left, the girls immediately delved into a discussion about her appearance and how going away can turn someone as hideous as a devil into one as beautiful as an angel:

- Oh my goodness, she is so beautiful; how can I bear that? Like a Korean actress.
- They all come back looking like angels with fairer skin and wearing beautiful clothes.
- My friends used to be uglier than me, but now they have gone to Korea, they are beautiful like angels while I am in Vietnam, as hideous as a devil.

Beauty for Hải Thành girls helps facilitate their transnational marriages. It can be seen as an investment in the future that is located geographically somewhere else. Ironically, even though they are regarded locally as pretty, the belief in self-transformation once they marry abroad means that the girls do not think they are pretty enough for here and now and they are preparing with their beauty practices so that they can truly blossom in Korea in the future. I argue that beauty in the case of transnational marriages in Hải Thành is what Lauren Berlant (2007) calls an act of self-maintenance and self-preservation in order to invest in the future. Berlant claims that people who are worn out by the socio-economic structure (slow death) engage in acts of self-maintenance, that is activity toward reproducing life not to make it better but to get through the day, the week, and the month. Hải Thành girls, similarly, face the hostile social structure that oppresses rural. As discussed above, being rural is synonymous with lower class (see also Nguyen-Marshall, Drummond, and Bélanger 2012, Harms 2011). Moreover, there are almost no job opportunities that provide social mobility. Since the cutback of subsidies for farmers, agricultural work has barely been sustainable (Taylor 2007, 2004b, Luong 2003). A
small number of Hải Thành girls who have a college degree struggle to find jobs in the city because they lack the social connections. The majority of Hải Thành girls, most only with a high school diploma, end up staying at home, unemployed. They have, therefore, chosen to practice beauty as a form of self-preservation in the present, amid all the criticism, to get through the present while cultivating the hope of transnational marriages and transformation in the near future.

Beauty fulfills the aspirations to become a modern glamorous subject as well as being the sexual capital to help Hải Thành girls participate in the market economy although being on the margin. Beauty and fashion hide their rural background, turn them into the sexy, pretty ones who are admired and envied. The modern girl look helps blur the class boundaries that are defined along the rural/backward and urban/modern binary. Moreover, their beauty power is used to attract East Asian men, paving the way for transnational marriages and migration. The girls dress up very nicely when they go to the matchmaker’s place for selection. Similarly, they refuse to say yes to those who, according to their words, dress like rural men. Unlike marriages with Vietnamese men, transnational marriages promise not only economic capital, but also the allure of First World modernity and glamour. That way, the rural girls of Hải Thành have even bypassed the city girls to join the rank of the global cosmopolitan. Beauty and youth,36 in this case, have subverted the class structure and the rural/urban/cosmopolitan hierarchy.

There are, of course, limits to their beauty power in crossing the class boundary. Hải Thành girls, while having more material resources from their families than most Vietnamese rural girls, are not rich. Especially when they are unemployed, they do not have much money to spend on clothes or cosmetics. They end up buying cheap imitations of brand names, which are

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36 The close relationship between beauty and age will be discussed later in this chapter.
difficult to discern. Only if one is fashion savvy can one recognize the fake goods. When I showed my fashionista friend Annie those photos of Hoa (figure 4.1) and asked what she thought the social class of Hoa was, based on her outfit, my friend responded, “middle class at most.” “Why?” “Because the purse looks cheap and the sunglasses are not real aviator.” My friend was able to tell Hoa’s economic capital based on the imitations she wore. However, Vann (2006) and Earl (2014) show that mimic goods are common in Vietnam and offer the aspiring middle-class the opportunity to employ cultural literacy and taste to make up for their weaker economic power. Therefore, despite her imitated purse and sunglasses, Hoa was still able to project a sophisticated look of a modern girl.

The cultural sophistication also enables many Hải Thành girls to become trendsetters. They do not simply imitate the behavior of city girls but generate new trends (Korean style) that are recognized for their symbolic value in the local context. The Korean style, with its association with glamor and beauty populated by K-Pop culture, is seen as highly attractive and desirable in Hải Thành. Similar to how young Japanese women in the 1990s drew on the cute culture to express their growing power as trendsetters (Lukacs 2015b), Hải Thành girls used the Korean style to exercise their power and cultural capital, however limited.

**Beauty Talks: Social Status and Recognition**

The girls understand very well from a young age the power of beauty, thanks to the admiration and preferential treatment they receive in their lives from teachers, peers, and boys. One of my classmates, Ngọc, said boys “stood up in a line” for her since high school. They all offered her, “[y]ou must be tired going back and forth from home to school; let me give you a ride on my bike.” Ngọc told me only pretty girls were treated that way because “[b]eauty means
prominent, prominence means special.” Hoa added that, being as pretty as Ngọc, even teachers fell for her, let alone students because she was like a rose that everyone wanted to pick. Ngọc’s high school (female) teacher publicly complimented Ngọc in class for her beauty and gentleness: “A (male) teacher told me that Ngọc is really beautiful, unbelievably beautiful, probably the most beautiful of the class. I am very proud that I have a student who is both beautiful and gentle that receives praise from other teachers. I hope all other female students will be like Ngọc.” In fact, male teachers often offered to pay for Ngọc’s phone account so that she could respond to their texts. Ngọc’s beauty has earned her both social recognition and special treatment. In the teacher’s compliment for Ngọc, beauty is singled out here as worthy of commendations and a goal for others to follow. Of course, it is important to note that the kind of desirable beauty, according to Ngọc’s high school teacher, is gentle beauty, a safe, feminine, and innocent kind, not the sexy kind of beauty. As long as Ngọc was seen as a “good, beautiful girl,” she should be admired. The compliment happened in a classroom setting where the supposed purpose was to develop inner beauty: knowledge and virtues. It indicates how beauty has become an important social value and capital that the girls in Hải Thành are told to cultivate.

Stories of how pretty girls in Hải Thành were treated by foreign men further cement the impression that beauty can bring one social status and free stuff. Both students and the teacher circulate these stories quite frequently in my Korean classes. For example, Quyên, a classmate of mine, said her friend was so pretty that the Korean husband of her friend did not allow his wife to breastfeed for fear of ruining her breasts. Our teacher Nga once told us the tale of a pretty girl named Nhung:

37 Ngọc said she did not take any of the offers from either her teachers or male peers.
I used to have a student named Nhíng. She is incredibly pretty. Her friend already married a Singaporean man. The friend of the Singaporean guy saw Nhíng’s photos on Facebook and had a crush on her. He told Nhíng’s friend that he would pay for Nhíng’s trip to Singapore to meet with him. When Nhíng came, he told Nhíng he had a house and a car and many things else. But I am not sure why, maybe fate, she did not agree to marry him and returned to Vietnam. He still loved her. She ended up marrying a Korean man a few months later but the Singaporean guy still texted her. Nhíng told him she had hepatitis B. In Singapore, if they know you have hepatitis B, they won’t marry you. Yet this guy said no problem; he would pay for her to have the disease treated in Singapore. See, he loved her that much. Because her photos on Facebook are so beautiful. How lucky for her. Her beauty is incredible. She is tall (5.3 ft.), her skin is white, her face is pretty; she is like a doll. Then she dresses so well. He looked at her photos and he loved her, paid for her whole trip to Singapore. How many men on earth are like him? Yet, she still did not marry him.

In this story, beauty alone was romanticized as being able to give a woman total admiration from a man, from love at first sight to generosity and devotion. This Singaporean man was said to go above and beyond to get Nhíng to marry him just because she was beautiful. Yet, by turning down such an exceptional man (“How many men on earth are like him?”), Nhíng, a poor Vietnamese girl, exerted her power over a richer man who is a Singaporean with a house and a car and proved that she was even more exceptional herself. Like Ngọc’s high school teacher, my Korean teacher reinforced the message that beauty gives the girls power, a special form of power that is available to women and should be aspired to by other women. Nga then opened her Facebook account to show us photos of Nhíng and my classmates were in awe. They praised Nhíng’s cheeks, her full lips, her dimples, and her beautiful clothes that made her look
like a queen even when she was pregnant. After a while, Hoa pleaded to Nga to stop showing Nhụng’s photos because she got too jealous and swore that when she migrated to Korea, she would never wear Vietnamese clothes anymore.

This kind of beauty talk or stories where the girls discussed, complimented, and evaluated other girls or gave tips on beauty practices is very common whenever the girls met with one another. These talks reinforce beauty as a form of capital and as a salient criterion for social ranking and recognition in Hải Thanh. They often include praise for those who have migrated to East Asia and transformed themselves (like Hoa’s admiration for Nhụng), rating the beauty of their peers, and contempt for translocal women (see chapter VI). This kind of evaluation came up frequently in my Korean classes.

*Nga:* Three years ago I had a student called Như and she was so pretty. I could not help looking at her while teaching. She was very famous; people called her Nhất Như. All pretty girls leave for Korea.

*Ngọc:* Thùy from hamlet Three also studied with you?

*Nga:* She is not that pretty.

*Quyên:* Without makeup, no one wants to look at her. Very mediocre, not even average. I often wondered why she was said to be hot, hot, hot. Then one day I saw her with makeup on. Wow, her eyelashes were curved, her lips were red, then her clothes were like loose and sexy (hụng hờ đười chở), and she looked pretty. With makeup, she is pretty. Then there’s Văn.

*Hoa:* Văn is fat. She is not that good-looking. She looks decent lately but in the past she is ugly.

*Ngọc:* Have you seen Hùng’s wife?
Nga: Oh my god, her face is as dark as steel (mặt saúde đen si). He has money; how come his wife is so ugly and fat?

Quyên: she is as fat as an urn (bù lù quai lai). She accompanies him everywhere; I would be ashamed if I were him. She looks disgusting.

In this conversation, my teacher and classmates reaffirmed the importance of beauty for many girls in Hải Thành. With beauty, one can become famous like Như, or with beauty enhancement and style (makeup and clothes) one can move from being mediocre to being hot and noticed like Thuý. On the other hand, if one does not fit with the beauty standards (such as a thin body and fair skin) like Văn or Hùng’s wife, the judgment is harsh. Not only is Hùng’s wife judged to be “disgusting,” she is also said to bring shame to her husband. This sense of shame is similar to how Mạnh’s wife felt, described in the poem at the beginning of this chapter, because her physical appearance subjected him to being ridiculed. More importantly, the sense of shame is not just personal (that one should feel ashamed if one does not measure up) but interpersonal (that one makes the spouse disgraced for being ugly). Perhaps the shame comes partly from what Jimmy Soul sang in his famous 1963 song that “[i]f you want to be happy for the rest of your life, ... get an ugly girl to marry you. Don’t let your friends say you have no taste, go ahead and marry anyway.” In other words, an ugly wife indicates that the man has no taste, thus reflects poorly on him. There is also an assumption of the relationship between money and beauty when Nga questioned why a wealthy man like Hùng has such an ugly wife. Nga linked beauty with social class, suggesting that with money one should beautify oneself (such as through clothes, accessories, facials, or plastic surgeries). She treated beauty as an indicator of social class: being beautiful makes one belong to the middle or upper class and being ugly signals lower class. Therefore, an ugly wife will, presumably, lower the social status of the husband and shame him.
The connection between money, status, and beauty is further revealed in how Hải Thành girls evaluate their potential foreign spouses. For example, Ngọc and Hoa described a couple of Korean men they met: “Some of them look like duck farmers (chăn vịt). Unbelievably ugly. Some dressed so ugly. The pants have faded and were way too long while that particular man was short and petite. His pants were flared like the fashion in the old day and long; the hems were torn. He also wore a shirt, an ugly shirt, not a nice one. Old pants, old shirt. We wonder how much money he makes to dress so ugly like that. If he dressed so badly, how could he find a spouse? Some men have a face as round as a (round) cake; we wanted to vomit.” In this description the girls repeat the same perception that those who dress ugly are rural (duck farmers) and probably do not make much money. These men are seen as not attractive both financially and physically and sure to have difficulties finding spouses.

The beauty talk while establishing the importance of beauty for many young girls in Hải Thành also shows how they demonstrate their values and superiority. By judging how ugly others look, some girls imply that they are better-looking and thus socially worthier. The “ugly” other becomes a yardstick to show the betterness of beautiful girls. Toni Morrison summed up this gender and class prejudice as follows: “All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness ... We honed our egos on her, padded out characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength” (Morrison 1970, 205).

There are, of course, young girls in Hải Thành who question the beauty culture or refuse to participate in it. A small number of girls have chosen to pursue education and marry Vietnamese men. They go to college in the cities and do not engage much with the beauty culture. Among those who stay, some voiced that beauty does not necessarily translate into a
better life. For example, Quyên asked everyone in class one day “Can you make a living out of being beautiful?” (xinh có đào ra ăn được không?). I also knew girls who are not very beautiful according to Vietnamese standards but married kind and handsome foreign husbands. There exists a counter narrative in Hải Thành that “ugly” girls can still marry foreign men and that many mediocre-looking girls end up with good-looking men while plenty of pretty girls marry “ugly” husbands. Beauty, in other words, might be an investment in the future for some girls but it does not necessarily always pay off. Yet, the value of beauty is still significant. First, beauty can be seen as a form of capital, shown especially in the Vietnamese language in which beauty is sometimes referred to as a commodity (hàng) and showing beauty equals showing a commodity (khoe hàng). Second, beauty is appreciated and admired for its own aesthetic quality. Indeed, Nga, our teacher, answered Quyên’s question by saying: “Can’t make a living but you can admire/look at beauty till your eyes wear out; it’s nutritious for the eyes” (không ăn được nhưng ngắm nó mòn mắt; nó bổ mắt). Together, they give those who possess beauty sexual capital and admiration, lifting up their social statuses even though that does not always translate to a better life in the future.

Too Old to Compete: The Aging of Beauty

The girls in Hải Thành can engage in beauty practices as well as harsh judgment partly because they are youthful. Age plays a crucial role in shaping and understanding not only beauty but also power and social hierarchy. Twigg (2013) argues that age is often omitted from the debate on intersectionality and yet, like gender, race, class, and sexuality, age functions as an ordering principle in society and indicates power and status. For example, individuals and groups are accorded identity and status based on their age. Age groups (such as youth, teenagers, the
elderly, etc.) also prescribe obligations and behaviors. Age allows people to embody relations of power and domination in which groups gain identity and power in and through their relations with others (Twigg 2013). In Vietnam, the age hierarchy is embedded in social practices of respecting those older than you, reflected in the saying “kính lão đặc thọ” (if you honor the elderly, you will live longer) and in the language itself. Vietnamese, like other Eastern Asian languages such as Korean, Japanese, and Chinese, has words and pronouns that distinguish based on age. While the senior members in Vietnamese society are often given social dominance, it is youthfulness that is desired when it comes to beauty. As with class, gender, and race, worth is hierarchically distributed. Regarding beauty, youth is prized so that we are not judged by how old we are but how young we are not (Woodward 1991).

The intimate relationship between youth and beauty is seen across cultures in fashion, art, and modern media. Pollock (2003) examines the female nude in Western art which represents an ideal of timeless beauty. Pollock argues that the female nude is timeless in both senses: first, that the ideal does not change in time and second, that the ideal denies time – the idealization of women in terms of perpetual youthfulness. In modern media, we are intensely surrounded by images and representations of youthful beauty and perfection. Advertisements send women messages of combating ageing through beauty work. Feminists such as Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf have long criticized the damages done to women by making them dissatisfied with their bodies (Twigg 2013). Fashion further reinforces the importance of youthful beauty by placing its design and ideals in the hands of the young, enabling more direct expression of sexuality.

Industrial fashion today is oriented primarily towards the young, as remarked by Diana Crane: “Instead of the upper class seeking to differentiate itself from other social classes, the young seek to differentiate themselves from the middle-aged and the elderly. As trends diffuse to older age
groups, younger age groups adopt new styles” (Crane 2000, 198). All of these factors (fashion, art, and media) feed into the cultural understanding of female bodies, shaping the ideal of youthful beauty. It is no different in Vietnam. Images like those VietJet Air photos above entrench beauty standards: women have to be young, thin, fashionable, and sexy.

The girls in Hải Thành clearly felt the importance of youth for beauty in their race to get married before becoming “old.” I once asked Hoa, then 21, why she dropped out of college to go back to Hải Thành, learn Korean, and aim to get married to a Korean man.

Linh: *Why do you have to marry this year instead of waiting till you are 22, 23, or 24?*

Hoa: *Then I will be old. Marrying a Korean man at my age is already old. Now, if I go to a selection place, all I see are younger girls like Ngọc (18 years old). If I get old, I will end up marrying an old man. If I don’t marry now, one or two years later, I will be really old.*

Linh: *But I thought that Korean men, most of them in their late 30s, would prefer potential spouses closer to their age than eighteen year olds?*

Hoa: *Korean men, many of them think that if they have to cough money to find spouses, why not marry young women, beautiful women. Lots of them think that way. I am two years older than Ngọc. Her age is a beautiful age. My age now is already an old age (tuổi đặng bỗng). In short, I feel really old.*

Quyên added to our conversation: *A few years ago, I waited for my cousin in Korea to find a man for me so I did not go to the selection place. But now, at this age (then 22), I have aged and have to close my eyes in choosing my husband (nhắm mắt bò qua lấy thời). At my age, I don’t have the right to be choosy anymore.*

Hoa: *Yes. Like you and me now, we are old already.*
Our teacher, who is the same age as mine, then joked: *Like Linh and I, if we get to the selection place, they probably would say: I am begging you old ladies, please go home (lạy bà đi về cho con nhà).*

In our exchange, everyone basically confirmed that “old age” is fluid and relative. Twenty years old, among Hải Thành girls who want to get married to Korean men, is already considered old. When the bar for “old age” is so low like this, it often indicates that the stakes for and values of youth are very high.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, as Hoa and Quyên explain, older girls have to marry older men, which are of course regarded as unattractive. Moreover, being young means being beautiful because (Ngọc’s) young age is the beautiful age. Therefore, thirty-something-year-old women like Nga and me are so old that we have no values, should not even try to marry Korean men, and should hide at home to avoid embarrassment. We will see even more clearly the grip of age on older women in Hải Thành in chapter VIII in which I discuss the struggle of Uncle Tú’s thirty-nine-year-old daughter to remarry to a foreign man. The message, essentially, is that youthfulness is vital to women’s beauty, social visibility, and cultural worth. Moreover, youthfulness also enables the girls to have power, materialized as the right to be choosy when selecting their future spouses. Quyên had to marry an “old, ugly, and poor” (her word) husband because she was already old then. Youthfulness then contributes to social hierarchy by providing certain groups of younger women with opportunities for better marriages and life transformation.

Age, in its partnership with beauty in Hải Thành, operates as a structuring principle in the society that ranks women, limits or enables their development and experience, and shapes how they are evaluated and judged. This is highly significant for the complex ways in which gender and class interact in the issue of power.

\textsuperscript{38} For more research on youth and anxieties about time, see Jeffrey (2010), Ralph (2008), and Mains (2007).
The power of the girls in Hải Thành is reflected not only in their beauty and youthfulness but also in their relations with boys and men in town. The last part of this chapter turns to discuss this topic and the gendered tension between desiring subjects and objects of desire.

**Beauty and Gender Relations**

There exists a tension between the girls and boys in Hải Thành. The girls’ sexuality makes a particularly hot topic in Hải Thành. On the surface, Hải Thành girls, with their modern look, eroticism, consumerism, and prospective transnational marriages, blatantly defy the ideal Vietnamese femininity and loyalty to patriarchy. In 2012, Hải Thành was swept by the sudden popularity of karaoke songs about local girls. As the commune became more prosperous, many people were able to buy karaoke sets to sing at home or go to karaoke bars to sing and relax. A handful of local young men had the ingenious idea of rewriting the lyrics of popular songs to reflect the social situation in Hải Thành. That idea took off quickly and for months I could hear these songs in public places from morning to evening. The popularity of these songs proves that their lyrics, even though written by a few men, reflect widely shared sentiments about local girls. The songs, as men’s interpretations of gender relations, shed light on how the local girls are perceived and how they affect local gender relations. For example, one song goes like this:

Too many young men in my rural community are still single, unable to marry.

The girls are greedy, quit school, and migrate to Taiwan.

You (the girl) love for fun but never talk of marriage.

…

No more spending on (your) food or clothes. I save money by not going into cafés and restaurants
I swear to have nothing to do with women.

Quá nhiều thanh niên quê giò vẫn é, vẫn chưa lấy vợ

Gái quê tham tiền, thôi học em đã bước sang Đài Loan

Em yêu chờ vui chứ đừng nói chuyện về đâm cười

....

Không ăn không quần áo, cùng chẳng tiền vào quán xã

Thè không định vào đàn bà

In this song and many others that I have heard, in addition to critiques of consumerism and greediness, the girls’ intention is depicted as only having fun with Vietnamese men and not becoming their wives. Local men claim that they are now the victims of changing gender relations in Hải Thành, such as now becoming women’s playthings. Consequently, the girls are accused of violating the social rules for women and becoming a threat to the patrilineal households. Their behaviors, lifestyles, and transnational marriages seem to challenge both the constructions of gender (masculinity and femininity) in Vietnam and the patriarchal system that sustains such constructions. Interestingly, transnational marriages between Hải Thành girls and East Asian men are compared, locally, to the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong and Taiwan that affected Vietnam significantly. They liken women wanting to marry East Asian men to women infected with the SARS syndrome (con gái mắc dịch cúm gà Đài Loan/dịch cúm lấy chồng Đài Loan). Local girls are equated with an animal (a chicken) and their actions (of marrying foreigners) are like a disease that harms the country. In other words, the girls are regarded as indecent, shallow, lazy, and stupid like an animal as well as dangerous and contagious and are doing harm to the community and the country at large.
However, this kind of criticism implies that females are objects of desire and when Hải Thành girls refuse to follow that standard they become depraved. In Lukacs’s study of net idols and the culture of cuteness in Japan, Toyomi stands out as a sexual net idol. Many of her photos show her naked or wearing flirty lingerie. Toyomi argues that self-exploration (and, by extension, self-improvement) should have no limits. She does not construct herself as an object of desire; instead she presents herself as a desiring subject (Lukacs 2015b). I suggest that the same phenomenon is happening in Hải Thành. Many Hải Thành girls I know see themselves as desiring subjects but the males see them as objects of desire, which is the source of the men’s frustration. On the one hand, the boys claim that the local girls use their sexual capital to seduce Hải Thành boys, turn them into sexual playthings, and have the boys lavish money on them without having any intention of marrying them. On the other hand, the girls themselves do not seem to be much preoccupied with these accusations. Instead, many of them seem to pay more attention to beauty practices and hanging out. The following story illustrates this clash:

One night in June, I came home after having dinner, deciding to call it a day because it was too hot. That night the sky was so clear that the stars blanketed the sky. As I quietly pushed my motorbike into the dark house, I could hear my landlady asking from her bedroom, “Linh, are you home?” She was always worried when I got home after she went to bed at 9:00 p.m. because the front door had to be left open for me (it could only be locked from the inside). I thought I could give her a good night sleep today by coming home early. All of a sudden, my phone rang, echoing through the whole dead quiet house. I looked at the number and wondered why Mai, a local girl I knew, would call me at this hour. “Can you come pick me up at the Hương Dương motel?” she asked. “Sure, but what happened?” “Can you please come now?” “Of course.” She hung up the phone on me and I was quite confused, unable to figure out what she
was doing there. I opened the door again to walk the motorbike out, and I could hear my
landlady’s question in surprise, “Are you leaving again?” I apologetically said yes and quietly
walked my motorbike for five minutes before turning on the engine. Nine P.M. in rural Hải
Thành and many people were already in bed. When I got to the motel, Mai was sitting outside on
a back seat of a Honda scooter, arms folded in front of her chest. She was wearing a cute white
dress with makeup on. I knew that she must have been with friends because she usually dressed
up when going out. Not far from her was a young man, standing next to the scooter. The moment
Mai saw me, she got off the scooter and onto the back of my motorbike, telling me, “Let’s go,
sis.” “What happened?” I asked when we were well on our way. “I went out to have a drink with
a group of friends, including this boy. At 8.30, I asked him if he could take me home because it
was getting late. Instead, he took me to the motel. When we got there, he told me to get off the
bike. I said no. I told him: either you take me home or I will call my friend to come pick me up.
Then I called you. Can you get me home? My parents might be worried.” Mai remained so calm
and nonchalant about the whole affair that it surprised me. Her voice did not change. She did not
express any anxiety, nervousness, or fear. Later on, I found out that it was neither the first time
this happened to her nor was she the only girl in Hải Thành to be harassed by local boys. Hoa
and Ngọc had told me similar stories.

These stories reveal different expectations when it comes to gender interactions among
the youth in Hải Thành. The girls claimed that they dressed up because they wanted to be pretty
and they went out with friends, including boys, because it was fun. The boys, on the other hand,
interpreted it as sexual attraction and believed that if they spent money on girls, they could
expect something sexual in return. There are indeed girls in Hải Thành who have premarital sex,
which is still a taboo in rural Vietnam, with boys in Hải Thành before getting married to Korean
men. However, assuming that local girls’ beauty practices serve only the purpose of getting attention and favors from local boys and men (and turning themselves into sexual objects) misses the significance of beauty towards self-worth and social status for local girls. Being pretty, as I discussed earlier, also reflects aspirations for social recognition and praise.

When writing about modern Shanghai girls at the turn of the 20th century, Dong indicated that the modern Chinese girls cultivated new behaviors, undermined the patrilineal household, changed gender relations in interactions with men, and established new expectations for marital relations. The modern Chinese girls, even though unable to revolutionize or abolish marriage, could negotiate a better marriage and hold promise for transforming women’s social positions (Dong 2008). On the surface, similar claims can be made that Hải Thành girls are democratizing local gender relations to the extent that the local boys now believe they are victims. Most men in this community believe that girls now act like boys because they have the privileges generally only entitled to men: freedom in having sex, self-indulgence, and power over the other sex. Local men have declared to me that they have to treat their wives better now for fear of them leaving for Korean men. Some bemoan that life in Hải Thành is chaotically upside down.

In reality, Hải Thành girls’ power comes and goes like their own physical movement. They can act like boys and exert their power over boys because no matter what the consequences are, they will marry transnationally. Yet, once they have migrated to other countries, their power at home is also gone and leaves behind a worse situation for their fellow women in the community. Hải Thành men look at the transnational girls as a cautionary tale and tighten their control over their wives. As we shall see in chapter VI, translocal women are closely restrained and prevented from being like transnational women. The relation between the two groups of
women, transnational and translocal, is another example of how the liberty of one group of
women is at the expense of another group.

Hải Thành girls’ beauty practices are best understood as a form of weak power (Fiske
1993). It is a localizing form of power where the weak can exert their control without necessarily
transforming the larger structure. Hải Thành girls, through beauty practices, navigate the system
of gender and class inequalities to assert their agency and achieve their individual life
transformation thanks to transnational marriages. Yet, when they leave the country to marry
foreign men, they also leave intact the cultural and gender scripts in which they are caught.

It can be concluded that the beauty backlash against the young girls in Hải Thành ignores
the drastic social changes, including economic and cultural disparities, that impact rural women’s
choices and practices. These girls are not simply vain, mindless, and lazy. They are also desiring,
disappointed, judgmental, and confident. Critics of the local girls tend to overlook their agency
and strategy through beauty practices for defining themselves and for gaining self-worth,
financial stability, and hope in a society that is increasingly stratified and structurally hostile to
rural women.
Part III

MARRIAGE, SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, AND MORAL CONTOURS OF RURAL TO RURAL MIGRATION
Chapter IV

Why Not?: Transnational Class and the Normalization of Transnational Marriages

Introduction

This chapter focuses on young girls in Hải Thành and their marriages to East Asian men, especially as they navigate the plurality of moral norms and transnational social classes. I explore the lives of local girls in Hải Thành before most of them migrate to Taiwan or South Korea after marrying East Asian men. By carefully unpacking the girls’ journey of transnational marriage that marks them as Việt Kiều, I show how physical movement is profoundly shaped by gendered ideologies as well as imagination and experience of migration. Moreover, I argue that the normalization of their marriages to foreign men highlights the need to conceive social class beyond the confine of the nation-state.

The Phenomenon of Transnational Marriages in Hải Thành

Hải Thành is well known nationwide as the commune that sends a remarkably high number of its local women to marry Taiwanese and Korean men. The phenomenon of transnational marriages in this commune has been covered in many Vietnamese newspapers. One of them even called it “the place where men cannot find spouse,” implying the lack of local women for marriages. In Hải Phòng city, Hải Thành has earned the reputation of “a village of overseas Vietnamese” (làng Kiều). The high number of marriages between women and foreign men, exemplified in Hải Thành, however, is not entirely unusual both within and outside of Vietnam.
In Vietnam, marriages between young rural Vietnamese women and Taiwanese and South Korean men are quite common. Transnational marriages, despite popular opinion, are not a new experience. Historically, mail-order brides were sent from Europe to male-dominant migrant communities in the United States in the 20th century. East European brides were introduced to men in Western Europe and North America in the last few decades (Kawaguchi and Lee 2011). What is different in more recent cases of Asian transnational marriage is its unprecedented size and level of geographical diversity. The more recent Asian transnational marriage phenomenon occurs across the continent and marriage migration from mainland China and Southeast Asia to more developed East Asian countries has risen dramatically since the early 90s (Hugo and Nguyen 2007). In Vietnam, statistics from National Statistics Offices show that Vietnamese women are the second largest group of transnationals, after Chinese women, to marry Taiwanese and South Korean men (Bélanger 2010). The Vietnamese Ministry of Justice estimated that from 1995 to 2010, there were 300,000 Vietnamese women marrying foreigners, most of whom were Taiwanese and South Korean (Mai 2011). Transnational marriages have become a significant social trend (*phong trào*) in Vietnam. They happened in two waves: the first wave began in the mid-1990s and includes mostly transnational marriages between Vietnamese women and Taiwanese men. The second wave occurred a few years later in the early 2000s and is marked by the predominant marriages between Vietnamese women and South Korean men. Even though the two waves are almost ten years apart, there are striking similarities between them.

Scholars have pointed out similar socio-economic changes in Taiwan and South Korea that have affected demographic and marriage patterns. In both countries, there are more males than females, but this marriage squeeze factor plays only a minor role (Bélanger, Lee, and Wang
2010). The main push for transnational marriages is how contemporary young Taiwanese and South Korean women are less willing than their mothers to enter marriages that require more traditional female roles (e.g., staying at home and looking after their in-laws). This is especially true in rural communities where heavy outmigration of young women to the cities has exacerbated the shortage of females (Bélanger 2010, Hugo and Nguyen 2007). Consequently, working-class males, many from rural Taiwan and South Korea, with unattractive jobs (farming, construction, etc.) and conservative views on marriage have had to look to Southeast Asia and China for their prospective spouses. They resort to match-making services or interpersonal connections to facilitate transnational marriages.

The similarities between Vietnamese culture and Taiwanese/Korean culture also encourage transnational marriages. Equally important is how marriage migration is embedded in the transnational network of business that links Taiwan and South Korea with Vietnam through expanded investment and interchanging flows of people, finance, media, and ideology. Taiwan and South Korea were the top two FDI investors in Vietnam from 1990 to 2010 (IntellAsia 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of transnational brides are from the rural south, particularly the Mekong Delta Region, because 1) it is very close to Ho Chi Minh City, the economic capital of Vietnam, and 2) it is home to some of the poorest communities and poverty may provide incentives for transnational marriages. As these young rural women approach legal marriageable age with no job prospect in sight, they opt for transnational marriages in hopes of better lives. Most of the transnational brides are very young (under 20 years old) while their husbands are much older, creating an age gap of 15 years or more (Bélanger 2010, Hsia 2008, Sheu 2007).
The number of transnational marriages with Taiwanese men peaked in 2002 and has been declining ever since. The Taiwanese government passed laws limiting transnational marriages in the early 2000s because Taiwanese public opinion decried that transnational marriages were out of control (Bélanger 2010). As the number of transnational marriages with Taiwanese men started to drop, transnational marriages with South Korean men multiplied, largely due to simpler legal paperwork and low-cost marriage fees (Tien 2006). Transnational marriages with Korean men increased by 28% per year since 2002 but began to decline gradually since 2007 after a series of Korean government’s regulations and restrictions on marriage visas and matchmaking agencies (Kim 2015a). Nevertheless, marrying a Korean man is still an option that many rural Vietnamese women have. The popularity of marriages with Korean men in rural Vietnam is captured in the following picture taken by Người Dưa Tin newspaper in 2014: it was a marriage advertisement hand written on a wall by the road:

Figure 4.1 (want to) marry Korean man (?). Call: 01676755344
Hải Thành stands out as the rural commune that has the highest number of transnational women nationwide, estimated to be around 2500 (Duong 2013). In a community of only 12,000 people, 2500 women is a significantly high number. Transnational marriages between local women and East Asian men started in Hải Thành in the early 2000s with only 12 marriages. Since 2005, the number of transnational marriages has escalated yearly, peaking in 2008 when 600 local women migrated to Taiwan and South Korea, according to Ms. Ngọt, the chairman of the local Women’s Union. The statistics from the Hải Thành Youth Union in 2013 show that the number of Hải Thành single women over 18 (thus legally marriageable) who remain in the community is fewer than 20 (Duong 2013). In fact the number of transnational marriages is so high that since September 2012, the city of Hải Phòng has decided to ban transnational marriages in several communes, including Hải Thành, after facing increasing complaints that local men could not find prospective wives. This ban, however, has not succeeded in limiting transnational marriages in Hải Thành as Hải Thành people just pay to have their residential status (hộ khẩu) transferred to different provinces on paper without actually moving. After the marriages are finalized and migration completed, they transfer their residence back.

In these transnational marriages, most of the girls’ age range from 16 to 20 and their husbands are 35 to 55 years old (even though there are a few exceptions when the couples are both older). There are various reasons why the girls get married so young. One is their youthful desire to get out of Hải Thành to explore the world. Second is the feeling of being left behind when almost all the friends have married and migrated. The girls I know often talk of reuniting with their friends abroad and even having class reunions in Taiwan and South Korea. Third, their parents are concerned that their daughters having nothing to do at home might get into all sorts of trouble and, therefore, want to get them married as soon as possible. Finally, young age acts as
a risk minimizer. Hoa, my Korean classmate, explained to me that in case their marriages do not work out in the end, they are still young enough to get married again. These various reasons concerning age reflect how youth, for many women, has a transformative power: it can bring life-changing options like transnational marriages. But they have to utilize it before they get older and lose the opportunities.

The Normalization of Transnational Marriages: Gender, Imagination, and Experience

Gendered ideologies

Movement is often gendered: how, where, and whether or not one moves is different for men and women. For example, women are often judged in Vietnam if the way they move is graceful or not because graceful women attract men (yêu điều thực nữ quản tiểu hiểu câu). In this community, women are excluded from long offshore fishing trips, which are consider to be men’s domain. Similarly the commonality of transnational marriages and migration of women from Hải Thành is shaped by gender. In particular, it reflects the cultural belief that women are outsiders and men are insiders with regards to family and lineage. Vietnamese women, once married, are considered to belong to her husband’s lineage. Because men are the foundation that prolongs the lineage, they are the root and rooted in the home. Women, on the other hand, are seen as moving from one family to another family, from one lineage to another lineage. Moreover, traditional Vietnamese marriages were often arranged and women had little say in whom they married. Traditional literature in Vietnam has long compared women to an object that cannot control its own fate:

Thân em như hạt mưa rào

Hạt rơi xuống giếng, hạt vào vườn hoa
Women are like the ra indrops
Some drops fall into the wells, some into gardens.

_Thân em như thế bèo trời_

_Sóng đập gió đối biệt tập vào đâu?

Women are like the water fern
Tossed by the waves, blown by the wind, where will they end up?

Those folk poems indicate a common past reality of Vietnamese women venturing out of home in uncertainty because of marriages. If they were lucky, they would land in good families. If they were not, there was nothing anyone could do about it. This cultural attitude about the ‘uncontrollable’ fate of women came up many times when Hải Thành parents explained to me why they agreed to let their daughters marry foreigners and move to distant lands. To them, their daughters did not belong at home and they were destined to make that journey, even a long one, to a new home. The success of that journey is determined, more or less, by their daughters’ luck.

The cultural ideology of women as outsiders and men as insiders, women as floating and men as rooted, however, has an interesting twist with regards to gender preference and family contribution in Hải Thành. There is a local inclination of sending daughters overseas over sons. Not only because men should stay home to take care of their parents and lineage, but also overseas men do not send as much money home to their parents as overseas women. Nga, my Korean language teacher, made it intelligible for me: since men are the roots, they have to take care of their own family first. Women, on the other hand, are already taken care of by their husbands and therefore can send more money home to their parents. I knew a number of wealthy families in Hải Thành, including the three owners of a local discotheque, a big café, and a furniture store, who sent their daughters abroad (not through transnational marriages) while
keeping their sons at home. It is the cultural ideology on gender that has played a role in enabling local women’s transnational movement. This feminization of remittances is not limited to Hải Thành. Studies show that Asian women send more money home in China, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Vietnam (Fleischer 2010, Pinches 2001, Jackson, Ho, and Na 2013, Marx and Fleischer 2010). Daughters are viewed as more responsible and reliable to send parts of their incomes to their families (Earl 2014).

As I discussed above, local women’s transnational marriages are culturally related to the concept of luck (and, thus, risk). It does not mean, however, that Hải Thành parents just blindly send their daughters away or that the girls have no say in their marriages like in the past. The decision of a transnational marriage is also tied to a dream of life transformation made possible by overseas migration. These dreams are sold to the girls and their parents through matchmakers like Duyên, through the media like Facebook and movies, and through other girls who have successfully migrated. They demonstrate the importance of imagination to movement.

*Imaginations of movement*

Scholars of movement studies have long pointed out that culturally and historically laden imaginaries are at the root of movement because they produce the motivation and desire to move. Imaginaries, enmeshed in global circuits of mediated images and narratives, inform how people envision the world and identities and their mobilities in it (Salazar and Graburn 2014, Salazar 2011). Such imaginaries are different from individual imaginings in their being widely shared, expressed in binaries (nature-culture, here-there, local-cosmopolitan, traditional-modern) and often reflecting socio-cultural and political stereotypes (such as orientalism, colonialism, or cosmopolitanism). Therefore, imaginaries of other places and people are highly molded by
power and hierarchy, resulting in both horizontal (geographical) and vertical (economic-financial, social-status, cultural-cosmopolitan) values (Salazar 2011).

In Hải Thành, people’s imaginaries of ‘the West’ and capitalism clearly demonstrate how meanings and values are ascribed to form a hierarchy of binaries. Local people view Western societies as better and more desirable because they are associated with cosmopolitanism, industrialism, cleanliness, freedom to move, human rights (particularly women’s rights) and welfare, and opportunities for social mobility. The myth of social benefits in Western societies is especially appealing as countless Hải Thành residents believe only in the West can a person stay home without any need to work because they receive monthly support from the government. In Vietnam, the opposite is perceived: rurality, agriculturalism, pollution, restriction of movement, domestic violence, and lack of welfare benefits and social advancement. Moreover, the superiority of the West is seen in its family structure: nuclear families vs. Vietnamese extended families where one has to live with the in-laws. These binaries reflect what Carling (2008) calls ‘transnational resource inequalities’: asymmetry in the distribution of different forms of resources: not only material and cultural resources but also movement resources (legal entitlements to international movement based on citizenship and residence status).

The appeals of ‘the West’ lie in more than just differences in resources but also differences in lifestyles, especially for the younger generations. Our discussion in Korean class illuminates this point:

Linh: I know some of the girls who chose to marry locally. They have quite a leisure life; I saw that they spend a lot of time playing cards with each other.

Nga (teacher): Playing cards but [they] do not get to see beautiful scenery, travel, or go on airplanes, or take pictures of cherry blossoms and flying snow.
Classmate 1: They don’t get to go out every weekend, go in cars. People over there, they work and play, here they only work and do not play.

Linh: but people here are quite well-known for knowing how to play.

Classmate 2: Yes, but they don’t travel very far; they only limit themselves to local places. Only going to the karaoke places, aren’t they sick of it already? There, they travel.

Nga: See, the autumn leaves are falling, see the red color? Where do you get that in Vietnam? Where do you get an incredible wedding photo album like this?

Classmate 1: There are some magically beautiful wedding photos, especially those taken by the sea. Teacher, you just push my blood of desires (máu thèm khát) to the climax.

Both my teacher and classmates expressed their desires for certain lifestyles such as owning cars, traveling, having leisure, and self focus. In that sense, they aspire to an urban lifestyle and the globalized cultural practices associated with elites and middle classes (Earl 2014). They indicate that even though some Hải Thành residents might have money, they still remain working-class because of their limited experience and rural way of living. As such, the gap between Hải Thành and the foreign countries is not only in resources and the ability to accumulate them but also in lifestyle and social class, proving that social class is better conceptualized transnationally than nationally, a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

There is also a hierarchy between capitalism and socialism. Hải Thành people praise the economic boost brought about by the country’s economic reform. They compare the communist economic system of the past in which the closed command market brought forth extreme poverty and hunger (nghèo đói) with the capitalist system now in which the free market economy
provides a better standard of living. It is precisely because of the extreme poverty in the 1980s that many Hải Thành people left Vietnam as economic boat refugees. This comparison reveals the local people’s relief that they are no longer so financially desperate to have to flee the country like boatpeople in the past, but also a sense of regret that they missed out because they perceive “Western” capitalism as so much better than “Asian” capitalism, illuminating the existence of alternative capitalisms. Similar to how tourism to developing countries depends on three myths: the myth of the unchanged, the unrestrained, and the uncivilized (Echtner and Prasad 2003), Hải Thành people’s imaginaries of the West sustain three myths: the myth of the new/modern, of the orderly, and of the civilized.

According to this logic, it is hardly surprising that Hải Thành residents rank the attractiveness of foreign destinations according to where they can migrate: Western countries (like Canada, Australia, Sweden, or the UK) rank first, followed by East Asian countries (Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan). Indeed, this ranking usually indicates social prestige in Hải Thành, not only in terms of the successful migration to more desirable destinations but also in terms of how much money one has available to realize such migration. A well-known fact in Hải Thành is that it takes much more money to send your children to Western nations than to East Asian nations. Migration through marriages to Taiwan or Korea costs almost nothing in Hải Thành. On the other hand, in order to migrate to Australia, for example, there are only two extremely costly ways: self-supported education or fake marriages, both amount to at least $50,000. That does not include the very high risk of visa denial and loss of all the money.

It does not make sense, therefore, for many people in Hải Thành when certain Hải Thành girls have the opportunity to migrate to “the West” yet turn it down in favor of marriages with
East Asian men. For example, a Hải Thành girl puzzled two successful local men, the owners of a discotheque and a café who both sent their daughters to Australia, with her choice:

C: *Let me ask you this: the daughter of Lan Cuông has everything; why does she still need to marry a Korean man?*

Q: *it’s just a fad she follows.*

C: *I don’t understand. Her sister is in Canada. She lives here with her brother, both are provided well by the parents. Even the Korean man she marries was shocked to see how huge her house is, questioning if she is so rich, why she still marries me? See, even the Korean man was perplexed. And she is very pretty. Both she and her sister are extremely pretty. And she can totally go to Canada. Instead, she marries a Korean. What the hell?*

Q: *She doesn’t know any better.*

It is easy to assume that transnational marriages are caused by poverty or the lack of knowledge on the girls’ part. Such an assumption fails to explain the choice of Lan Cuông’s daughter who is neither poor nor uninformed because it misses the important role of imaginaries in producing Taiwan and especially South Korea as desirable destinations. Studies have demonstrated the power of modern media and people’s experiences in producing and circulating representations of other places and people. Films, literatures, and arts can lend ‘authenticity’ to the imaginaries (Salazar and Graburn 2014). For instance, the K-pop culture has created an Asian-wide sensation, manufacturing very favorable perceptions of South Korea. Viewers of Korean television dramas believe that South Korea is a country of modernity, urban glamor and women-centeredness (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). In Vietnam, Korean and Chinese soap operas occupy most of the total drama time on television, to the extent that Vietnamese authorities are
concerned with young Vietnamese being Koreanized (Viet Van 2012). What makes Korean soap operas especially popular is how Korean masculinity and femininity are produced to allure viewers: The men are masculine but tender and sensitive as well as extremely romantic while the women are beautiful, glamorous, and always manage to find the right men that will change their lives from humble background to elite status (Creighton 2009, Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). Vu and Lee (2013) summarize the appeal of K-dramas: “Korean dramas feature handsome, meticulously dressed men and beautiful women. … The extravagant display associated with the stars and fashion in Korean serials blatantly presents pictures of a dream world that many women in the region want to have, but only a small proportion can afford” (Vu and Lee 2013, 3). Their study shows that Vietnamese women who watch Korean soap operas frequently hold a less accurate and more positive perception of Korea. They also have stronger desires to marry Korean men and are more willing to contact matchmaking services to make it happen (Vu and Lee 2013).

The fascination with everything Korean (and to a lesser extent, Taiwanese) is the same in Hải Thành. Many girls religiously follow Korean fashion trends. They dream about going to Korea to transform themselves into beautiful women, or having romantic love like in the movies, or seeing the beautiful scenery like the pretty white snow blanketing landscapes and the golden foliage of fall, which, according to my classmates, cannot be bought even with much money in Vietnam. In Hải Thành, thanks to the high number of transnational women already migrating to Korea and Taiwan, these imaginaries are strengthened not only by soap operas but also by Facebook where Korean lives are represented in romanticized ways. For example, Binh showed me a photo of her friend on Facebook with an exclamation: “I’m so jealous of her.” I noticed that within hours of being posted, this cutesy picture of a happy romantic Hải Thành-Korean couple received almost 300 likes and much admiration in the comments.
Hoa, even before her marriage to a Korean man, had proclaimed on Facebook her love for Korean romanticized sceneries:

“How could I live without it … Beautiful beyond imagination. I want it now.”
The appeal of Korea and Taiwan goes beyond just the media. It is redoubled by stories told by Hải Thanh people who have been to Korea or Taiwan. Many parents, after visiting their daughters, come home and profess their awe: Korea is like heaven, the air is pure without a single grain of sand, the buildings are tall and modern, and people are so clean and beautiful. Transnational women who visit home also put a lot of effort into their looks to prove that they are now Kiều.\(^{39}\) People would automatically point out to me when we went out who the Korean or Taiwanese transnationals (Kiều Đài Loan, Hàn Quốc) were even among the crowd because of the way they dressed.

The romantic allure of East Asian countries produced and circulated in Hải Thanh is very different from the imaginaries of the West. The latter is about having a good and (financially) stable life. According to many Hải Thanh girls, those who have migrated to Western countries may have more money but they have to work and they don’t look as fashionable\(^{40}\) or are not pampered by their husbands, who are usually Vietnamese. When we talked in our class about the differences between third country Kiều and Korean Kiều, Hoa said:

\begin{quote}
I notice that third country Kiều do not dress up as stylishly as Korean Kiều. My aunts are in Canada and they dress exactly as they did back in Vietnam. It is said that you have a better life there and the dollar is worth more, but I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all. There, the husband does not provide for you. You have to work to earn money to buy clothes. In Korea, the husband takes care of you from a to z. Even if he is poor, he still has to find a way to provide for you, maybe not as much as other people but still half as much as others.
\end{quote}

\(^{39}\) Thai (2014) explains that Vietnamese migrants, when faced with limited economic opportunities in the countries they settle, feel the need to turn to consumption in the homeland as a source of power and self-valorization.

\(^{40}\) Of course, beauty and aesthetics in Hải Thanh are very much shaped by Korean standards.
I then asked them about the common notions of ‘ploughing’ (cày) (i.e. working hard) to make money when Vietnamese migrate abroad, Ngọc responded:

_No, I won’t plough. My job is to eat, sleep, and be beautiful. I will wake up and cook for my husband in the morning. After he leaves for work, I will go back to my bed and continue to sleep. My husband will take care of me with everything else._

Hoa and Ngọc both expressed the desire to be taken care of financially rather than the desire of having opportunities to work and earn money. Interestingly enough, in Vietnam the notion of a better life abroad is mostly associated with more opportunities, resources and resource accumulation (Small 2012b). Hải Thành residents, especially those who are older, convey this sentiment very clearly along with the belief in gender equalities that enable women to earn more money and protect themselves from domestic abuse. Many of the girls in Hải Thành, on the other hand, find the patriarchal family model in Korea more attractive. They believe and like that in Korea their husbands have the responsibility to provide for them no matter what. They do not want to work; they would rather be pampered housewives and focus more on themselves (such as their beauty), desires they think cannot be achieved in the West. Interestingly enough, many East Asian women struggle with their roles as housewives and the loss of their independent identities (Lukacs 2015b) and scholars argue that the continued tradition of men having productive roles and women reproductive roles reinforces patriarchal inequality in the distribution of power and authority in East Asian societies (Kaku 2013, Kong

Ngọc also added that when she moved to Korea, she would not get a job to send money home for her parents. Instead, she would get pregnant and then sponsor her parents to Korea so that they could work and earn money for themselves. My teacher Nga responded “_[t]hat fits the policies of our nation and the Communist Party_” (Đúng chính sách của Đảng và Nhà nước). By joking about the approval of the state and the party on Ngọc’s choice, Nga implicitly confirms the increasing acceptance of individualism in Vietnam and the notion of citizenship as self-responsible.
2013). But in the case of Hải Thành girls, many consider being provided for to be a desirable privilege. It is understandable that these romanticized imaginaries of Korea are appealing to young women because Vietnamese women frequently shoulder much hard work both inside and outside of the house and they are not indulged in Vietnamese society (Khuat, Bui, and Le 2012). Therefore, many of Hải Thành girls choose to follow their dreams in East Asia rather than the more “advanced” West.

Moreover, it should be noted that places are not evaluated simply in terms of being “behind” or “ahead.” Jansen (2009) shows that places are often ranked by their movement through time. That is, for a place to become home, the place must bring a sense that it is going somewhere. Hải Thành people rank the destinations in terms of how “far” they imagine a place could go, or, in other words, how many opportunities for social advancement that place can provide. Such consideration and ranking affected the choice of Thu, a daughter of a well-off family in Hải Thành. Thu’s aunts were boatpeople who had resettled in Canada. I met Thu because she wanted to talk to me about study abroad. Thu applied for a college in eastern Canada but could not get in because she failed her IELTS test. Thu indicated she would probably take the test again. In the meantime, her aunts in Canada tried to facilitate a fake marriage for her but she was concerned about the difficulty of getting a Canadian visa. According to Thu, it was easy to have a fake marriage to go to France or Sweden but she did not want to go because there was no job for her in France or Sweden. When I asked her what kind of job she would get in Canada, she replied: nail. Her cousins had told her she would make 70 million VND (3,500 USD) per month doing nails. Minus the living expenses, she would save 30 to 40 million per month. Her cousins said after work Thu could go shopping and she should buy an expensive brand-name purse so
people cannot look down on her. Thu believed she could not achieve such a life in Vietnam or France, where she would probably be a stay-at-home wife.

There is not only ranking among countries in the West but also between the West and the East. Surprisingly, the West does not necessarily come out ahead. Even though it is still firmly believed in Hải Thành that the West is “real” capitalism (tư bản thật) where “true” happiness dwells, the West does not open its door to family members in Vietnam. It is almost impossible for parents or siblings to visit their children or sisters who have migrated to Western countries. What makes Korea particularly attractive to many Hải Thành girls is the effortlessness of getting visas for their parents to visit. The visa is valid for six months and can be renewed easily. Thus, many Hải Thành parents have been able to visit their daughters when they have babies and, more importantly, work under the table to earn money. The abundance of low-wage jobs in Korea and the ease of getting them for Hải Thành parents reduce the pressure on transnational women to support their parents tremendously. Many Hải Thành girls prefer Korea to Canada because they see it as a win-win situation: lives are better for both them and their parents without them having to work too hard.

The imaginaries of Taiwan and Korea are then translated into desires: desires to go on airplanes, to dress like actresses, to wear sunglasses, to stop being rural, to find quick money and happiness, etc. Many Hải Thành people see those desires, which act as the motivation for transnational marriages, as foolish because they believe their imaginations are unrealistic. It is common to hear people mock transnational women: they think they will find heaven but when they get there, they will see it is worse than Hải Thành. The implication here is that the girls are young and brainless and they will pay the price for either being greedy or being naïve.
Experiences of movement

While imaginaries might contribute to the popularity of transnational marriages in Hải Thành, it is only part of the story. Decisions to marry foreign men involve not only desires of a better future but also considerations of past experiences. Acts, especially ethical acts, are temporalized. Many anthropologists have argued that time is not a coherent flow from the past to the present and to the future, where causes lead to effects in a predictable manner. In fact, if we think about how we act at the moment (the Now), it often involves speaking, thinking, remembering what happened, and hoping what will happen. In other words, we weave together specific past events and specific future anticipations to make sense of the current moment (the Now) so that we can be informed of possibilities and act at that moment. Unlike a notion of time as flowing coherently, this creation of the Now is pragmatic (a selection of specific having-beens and could-bes that sheds light on the act at the moment) and the past events and future hopes can be disjointed rather than unified (Zigon 2014b, Miyazaki 2003, Munn 1992). By creating a particular temporal relation to a singular ethical moment, one is able to create particular possibilities to act in that unique moment (Zigon 2014b).

Considering transnational marriages as a moral experience in Hải Thành, the act of getting married transnationally is shaped in the moment by both the specific could-bes and had-beens. The imagination of a better life in Taiwan and Korea are not groundless but solidified by the experience of their friends’ life transformation. Here’s how Hoa explained to me her decision to get married:

At first, I was very much against that idea: I thought it was like marrying my father because most Korean and Taiwanese men who came here were so old. But then I saw how happy my friends all had been with their (transnational) marriages so I changed my mind. I too wanted
a husband who would treat me nicely and take care of me. I also wanted to make money so that I could send it home for my parents.

Hoa talked about how her friends’ marriage experiences changed her opinions and in so doing, created the possibility for her own marriage. We often think of experience as historical and past-oriented (Scott 1991). However, in this case, it is experience as lived-through that enables future possibilities. Or as Zigon (2014b) argues, experience is oriented toward the creation of future possibilities of acting and being. Through the experience of other transnational women, the particular possibility of getting married transnationally was realized and acted on, instead of closed off, for Hoa.

The recurrence of transnational marriage experiences also highlights the central role of repetition in opening up possibilities for acting. Zigon (2014b) speaks of repetition as the chance for change – for acting and being different because one cannot expect a different outcome if one keeps doing the same things. So repetition, for people in Zigon’s study, opens up a possibility for differences: a new way of being and living.

In the case of transnational marriages, repetition does not lead to a possibility of change; instead, repetition is a way of ensuring the same possibilities. Hải Thành residents say that the majority of transnational women they know are happily married, so if they or their daughters or sisters marry transnationally, they are likely to find happiness too. Thus while repetition, in general, makes possible different ways of acting (as people often way, “just stop doing the same”), repetition in Hải Thành makes people go: “just keep doing the same.” The act of getting married transnationally is, arguably, shaped in the moment by the repetition of the had-beens (successes of other transnational marriages) and the could-be (hopes and anticipations their own marriages and their families).
Repetition also plays a role in making transnational women disregard negative could-bes and had-beens as hopes of a better future outweigh fears of an uncertain future, and stories of successful marriages outweigh stories of divorces. Thanks to repetition, hope is transformed into confidence.\(^{42}\) In this sense, the past experiences and future hopes, that are pulled in the temporalization process, make the act of marrying transnationally possible, are not necessarily coherent but selective and disjointed.

Transnational marriages are, therefore, not a fad mindlessly followed by young naïve girls in Hải Thành. The decision to get married with East Asian men arises out of the hope for a better future as well as the likelihood of realizing what many other girls who have left achieve. Hoa summarized this expectation as follow: “I look at all my friends who have married Korean husbands and in general, they are stable, good. I don’t understand how but anyone who has gone to Korea has money to send home for building a house for her parents. In the first year, they send enough to build parts of the house like a kitchen or a bathroom. Then after three to four years, or five to seven years if longer, they can send enough to build brand new houses.” Hoa expressed that if all her friends had been doing well conjugally and financially, she probably would too.

**The Infrastructure of Transnational Marriages**

The popularity and feasibility of transnational marriages in Vietnam relies in no small part on the family networks and the private matchmaking agencies that facilitate transnational encounters and subsequent marriages. Vietnamese women who have successfully migrated through marriages can act as a go-between to find husbands for their sisters or cousins.

\(^{42}\) Even though such a sense of confidence is, of course, never complete.
Transnational marriages through family networks often provide more security and trust for people involved than marriages made possible through a matchmaker agency. The matchmaking agencies, however, are able to bring many Korean and Taiwanese men to Vietnam, allowing the women to have more choices and lessen the time they have to wait for potential matches. They are, consequently, more popular than family networks in orchestrating transnational marriages. The men usually have to bear most of the cost for transnational marriages. A Taiwanese man seeking a Vietnamese wife has to pay a fee of between $7,000 and $10,000 that will cover everything: his flight to Vietnam, expenses for the selection, wedding, and paperwork (Wang and Chang 2002).

When a Korean or Taiwanese man visits Hải Thành, he is shown and introduced to a number of potential women at local hotels. All potential brides are brought together in a room and he moves from one woman to another to consider them. With the help of a translator, he asks a few questions to whomever he finds attractive. If there are many women, he will pick a number of them for the next round until he finally selects a bride. Depending on the number of women attending for that day, this whole process can take from half an hour to three hours. After he has selected a woman, the matchmaker will arrange the wedding in the next days and start preparing for the wife’s migration paperwork. In order to have a smooth process, the matchmaking industry includes sub-agents in both Taiwan/Korea and Vietnam that handle recruitment and paperwork. My fieldwork indicates that the transnational marriages between Vietnamese women and East Asian men now cost around $10,000.

The transnational marriage network that facilitates the huge number of marriages includes agencies in South Korea or Taiwan and their partners in Vietnam. In Hải Thành, these partners started out in the early 2000s as handling only the paperwork and legal procedures.
However, when the business started to bloom, they took on the role of brokering. They rely heavily on local recruiters referred to as cow herders (người chăn bò). This term implies that the girls are like clueless animals (cows) that needed to be herded and guided. There are about seven or eight major matchmaking agencies (mó) in Hải Thành but many cow herders. Cow herders are usually local women who know all the young girls in their hamlets. They go directly to their neighbors to persuade the girls and their parents, using their status as neighbors or relatives to create trust. When the matchmaking agencies bring Korean men to Hải Thành, the cow herders get the girls to the hotels for selection (đi tuyển). One cow herder can work for many agencies, taking one girl to many agencies until she is selected. Similarly, if a Korean man cannot pick from the girls the cow herders bring in, the agency will ask different cow herders for more girls. A cow herder is paid $350 (7 million VND) by the agency for each selected girl.

To recruit more girls for “selection day,” cow herders pay each girl 50 cents (10,000 VND) just for showing up or pay for motorbike taxis (xe ôm) to come pick up the girls and transport them to the selection locations. Local people liken the image of a guy riding a motorbike and two or three girls dressing up with heavy make-up in the back seat to the picture of a farmer transporting a couple of pigs on his motorbike (chở Như chở lợn). The local slangs that refer to the girls as “cows” and “pigs” fit with the rural context, but are striking in their degradation of the girls. In these linguistic utterances, the girls are not even regarded as humans but animals who have no agency and are prone to the guidance and manipulation of (other) humans. This blatant ridicule of the girls is part of the moral backlash they face for challenging national loyalty and traditional femininity, a topic I will discuss at length later in the chapter.

In addition to incentivizing the girls, cow herders also tell them to wear nice clothes, wear make-up, and teach them appropriate answers to Korean men’s questions to enhance their
chances of being selected. Cow herders even maximize their pool of girls by taking pictures of local women and posting them online for Korean men to select (tuyển qua ảnh). Once a girl is selected by a Korean man, the cow herder will convince the girl to meet him. Their methods are so pervasive that almost all Hải Thành girls have been courted or photographed by cow herders.

I met with a cow herder when I accompanied Bình, a twenty-seven-year-old girl I knew from my Korean class, to discuss a potential man for Bình at a café. Bình asked me to come with her because she was rather nervous and was not sure what to expect or to ask Duyên, the cow herder. Bình told me in advance that Duyên had married a Korean man before but ended up in a divorce. She worked illegally in Korea for a few years before she got caught and deported back to Hải Thành. Now Duyên worked as a cow herder and an interpreter for a matchmaking company. Duyên came to the meeting almost half an hour late and said that she was so busy at work because her company had brought many Korean men to Hải Thành lately. Duyên was probably in her late 30s and looked very polished in a short and tight-fit yellow dress with black shiny heels. I noticed that she put on much gold jewelry: a chain, week bracelets, dangling earrings, and a ring with a big stone. As soon as she sat down, she started talking:

You know, after I had gone to Korea, I did not want to come back to Vietnam. Here when you go to Metro supermarket in Hải Phòng city, the workers there are so haughty. In Korea, they bow down to greet you. If you marry a Korean man, you can also work there. Remember then to convert the money you earn in Korea into Vietnamese money to give you more motivation. If you just said, “oh, that’s not much, just enough to buy a dress” then you won’t be motivated to work. You will have to work hard to earn money in Korea; in Vietnam you can play but you won’t make any money. Anyhow, you should get married no matter what. When you are sick, just to see
your husband’s shadow will make you feel better. Moreover, a woman without a husband in Vietnam will be subjected to gossip.

After painting the general picture about work, marriages, and overseas life, Duyên turned to warn Bình:

*My company does real work with real people, no cheating here. But because of that, we are strict. Any potential bride that causes trouble won’t be tolerated. We will stop doing business with her immediately. If you agree, the fee is ten million VND (500 USD). We will return the fee to your parents if you still stay with your husband past a three-month period.*

Duyên then proceeded to talk about the man she chose for Bình:

*He’s 50 but he looks very young, like 40. Let me show you his photos. He does not have a big house like this café, but in Korea you never starve and you never have to borrow money. Vietnamese have big houses but they are empty inside and we are in debt. This man is rich: he makes $6000/month compared to the average of only $2000. He owns a restaurant chain plus a farm with 2000 cows, not 2 cows. He went to Vietnam once but could not select any woman. Were it not for the problem that I can no longer get a Korean visa, I would marry this man myself.*

Duyên asked Bình for photos so that she could send them to the Korean man. Bình gave her two photos she took at a studio last year: she wore a black and white dress with bare feet in one photo and jeans with boots in another. As soon as Duyên saw the photos, she exclaimed:

*Why were you barefoot? If you go to see this man, or any man, you need to put on makeup. Korean men like women with makeup on. Korean people, from the moment that they wake up, look for lotions and skin products. They put on all kinds of stuff; that is why they are so white.*
Finally, Duyên assured Bình that this man was a good man and she was doing Bình a favor by introducing him directly to Bình. Bình then could avoid the risk of not being selected because she had no competitors.

In this example, Duyên exhibited the common characteristics of a cow herder. First, she dressed up expensively with nice clothes and jewelry, sending an implicit message that association with foreigners enables Vietnamese women to be beautiful and rich. Then she cleverly mentioned the social class issues that rural Vietnamese women face: from being looked down upon when visiting the city to not having money and employment. Both of these issues, she argued, could be resolved once a woman married a Korean man. Moreover, according to Duyên, a woman needs a husband to protect her physically (from sickness) and socially (from gossip). A Korean man is a real deal and does not deceive you with a façade like Vietnamese men. Duyên then downplayed the negative quality of age and put an emphasis on his money. This particular man was better than other Korean men because he made more and he was picky. Therefore, if Bình succeeded in marrying him, she would be special (better than many other women who failed to attract him). However, if Bình wanted to realize this dream, she had to be disciplined: she had to follow the company’s rules, had to work hard, and had to dress her body in ways that Duyên considered to be modern and attractive: no bare feet (because bare feet mean ‘primitivity’) and with makeup.

It is very difficult to verify the information that Duyên or other cow herders provided to the potential brides. Many Hải Thành girls face the risk of false information. The girls that I befriended usually had a realistic outlook (one can only believe half of what the cow herder says) and relied on gut instinct after meeting their husbands in person. In this case, Bình told me that the story Duyên gave her seemed inconsistent: if a man made that much money and owned a
restaurant chain, it was strange that his house was small. Nevertheless, Binh did not hear from Duyên again despite her promise. After I left the field, Binh successfully married a Korean man, also through a matchmaking agency but not Duyên’s company.

Besides cow herders, agencies also need translators, teachers of Korean language, and paperwork people. They are paid around $1000/month, which is very high in a rural Vietnamese context. These individuals all participate in persuading (and sometimes recruiting) the girls to marry East Asian men. The higher the number of girls, the more money they can make.

The popularity of transnational marriages in Hải Thành has dramatically changed the nature of the marital transaction. Since the majority of transnational marriages happen in southern Vietnam, until the mid-2000s there were not many Taiwanese/South Korean men looking for wives in the North, where Hải Thành is located. As the supply of willing wives-to-be surpassed the demand, Hải Thành families had to pay a large sum of money ($1,000-$3,000) to the matchmaker agencies to make sure that their daughters were introduced to Taiwanese/South Korean men and that the paperwork went smoothly. It is a common saying in Hải Thành that local women bought their husbands. But the situation has now changed: since 2007 the number of transnational marriages in the South is declining, while it is gaining momentum in the North, especially in the city of Hải Phòng (Trung Kien 2013). The supply of Taiwanese/South Korean men has exceeded local demand and local women do not have to pay money to the matchmakers anymore. The East Asian groom pays for all the costs of the marriage (wedding, legal paperwork, language classes, airfare). Moreover, the girls have a lot more choices in deciding

43 In 2014, the Korean Ministry of Justice revised the Immigration Control Act and all foreign brides have to pass the TOPIK test (they must be able to speak Korean beyond the basic level) as one visa requirement (Kim 2015).
which men they want to marry. This situation applies to transnational marriages arranged by both agencies and family members. I once witnessed a conversation between Hoa and a cow herder:

Cow herder: I know this thirty-one-year-old guy that is very handsome.

Hoa: I will only marry a handsome man.

Cow herder: I’m being serious. This guy is extremely picky.

Hoa: Oh, I am serious too. Whoever my husband is, he has to be handsome.

This exchange indicates how the girls have a lot more say in their marriages now, even though this fact might surprise the matchmaking people. When I asked the girls in my Korean class what their criteria for their Korean spouses included, they listed the following: monthly income over $2000, good-looking, living in urban areas, not living with (Korean) parents, and younger than their own parents. One of my classmates, Ngọc, often complained to me how her own father thought she was too picky: [My father said] Why do you always go back [from the selection places] empty handed and shaking your head (đi không về lạc)? The old guy, the young guy, the hairdresser guy, the working guy, the short guy, the tall guy, you said no to them all.

Ngọc faced quite a bit of pressure from her father who wanted her to get married to a foreign man so that he did not have to worry about her future any more. He felt that his responsibility as a father would be completed if she married a foreign (i.e. richer) man. He explained that Hải Thành girls who married locally usually did not do well financially and ended up asking for help from their parents. He agreed to let Korean men come to his house to meet Ngọc. He also queried about marriages with Japanese, which was very new at the time in Hải Thành, in case Ngọc could not select a Korean man. But Ngọc took her time. By Vietnamese standards, Ngọc is a very attractive girl. At 18 with light skin, big dove-like eyes, tall and thin figure, she had rejected many Korean men who saw her photos online and came knocking on her
door. She waited for almost two years before she eventually met her Korean husband. Similar to the opinion of Ngọc’s father, it is known these days that Hải Thành girls have become a lot “pickier” (kén chọn).

**The Wedding Ritual of Transnational Marriages**

The weddings between Vietnamese girls and their East Asian grooms, especially if arranged by matchmaking agencies, happen quickly and differently from regular Vietnamese weddings. Traditionally, before the wedding begins, the bride’s and groom’s families go to a fortuneteller to pick the “good and lucky” date for the wedding. They visit each other’s family, give bride price, and kowtow before the ancestors’ altars. Then they invite all the family members, friends, and coworkers to a wedding reception. Guests are supposed to bring gifts or money for the newly wed to cover the cost of the wedding and help them start a new life together.

In transnational weddings between Vietnamese girls and East Asian men, the wedding date is set as the day after the successful selection day (ngày trúng tuyển) no matter if that date is traditionally understood as good or not. All the girls who are selected on that day will have one wedding ceremony together. The agency uses the money the groom pays them to cover the cost of the wedding, the rings, the location and the number of guests for each girl’s family (the number is usually 30 people for the bride. The groom may or may not have any relatives with him). The girls and their families have no say in their weddings. The guests who attend the weddings are exempt from bringing gifts or giving money because the girls’ families do not have to pay anything. Unlike the orderly and celebratory traditional wedding ritual, the transnational
wedding appears like a strange and confusing experience for those attending. My landlady, Uncle Tú’s sister, described to me her experience of attending her distant cousin’s wedding:

*It’s different. They first announced who married whom, names, hometowns, etc. Then all eight of them came to the front. We clapped. That was it. Then the food was served. We were eating while someone was singing at the same time. Dance music was on, loudly. Those who sang kept singing and those who ate kept eating. The agent people themselves sang, but not professional artists, because the grooms paid for the music. Then it was over. There was no ritual at all and nobody was speaking on behalf of the bride’s family or the groom’s family.*

The haphazard nature of these weddings with East Asian men, captured in Ms. Hy’s comment above, contrasts with the complicated ritual of traditional Vietnamese weddings. As such, it seems to make light of the important life-long commitment that most Vietnamese take seriously. Coupled with a wide age gap between the Vietnamese girl and her foreign husband, the wedding creates a sense of pity and sorrow for the girl’s parents and those attending. Even though many Hải Thành girls will have proper Korean or Taiwanese weddings later on in Korea or Taiwan with the grooms' families, the weddings in Vietnam are the only ones of which their own families could be a part. Their weddings raise a question about the nature of their conjugal relationships and contribute to the critiques on transnational marriages that the girls and their parents frequently face.

However, if the girl finds her husband through a relative of hers instead of an agency, the wedding will happen at the girl’s house, not at the hotel. Even though the girl’s family cannot pick a date because it has to be done soon before the groom goes back to his country, at least the girl will not have to share the ceremony with any other girls. The groom still pays for all or almost all the costs of the wedding. Mơ, Uncle Tú’s second daughter, was married for a year to a
Taiwanese man whom she knew through her sister Châu in Taiwan. At my request, Mơ gave me photos of her wedding at home in 2012.

Figure 4.4 Photos of Mơ’s wedding with her Taiwanese ex-husband at home

Her husband came to Vietnam alone, accompanied only by Châu, to meet Mơ. After spending a few days together, they agreed to a marriage. Their wedding happened five days later and followed a traditional Vietnamese ritual with the bride and groom kowtowing before the ancestor altar. Mơ’s family also invited their relatives and neighbors to a wedding feast in their front yard. Mơ rented her wedding dress but bought the second dress (the black and polka dot dress) at Parkson, an expensive and upscale shopping mall in the city of Hải Phòng with her ex-husband’s money. She was particularly proud of the three-tier wedding cake that her ex-husband specifically asked Châu to order for him. Mơ believed it showed she was special to him;
otherwise he would not have gone through all the trouble to buy it. Also noted in the photos was
the display of their love in public (they kissed each other in front of everyone, which is generally
still taboo in rural Vietnam), perhaps implicitly aiming to counter the moral accusation that
transnational women regularly face: that they married for money rather than love. I will return to
this morality topic later in the chapter.

After the quick wedding (at home or hotels), the foreign husband often stays for a few
days or a week before returning to his own country. The wife remains in Vietnam to take
language classes, wait for the paperwork to be completed, and go for a visa interview at the
embassy. Once all these tasks are completed, she can board a plane to Taiwan or Korea and start
her new life there. This whole process takes about six months. The time period after the wedding
and before the husband leaves is considered the couple’s honeymoon in Vietnam. The foreign
husband is expected to take his new wife to a vacation spot (the beach or the capital), pamper her
with gifts, clothes, food, etc. to show that he loves her. For instance, during Mơ’s honeymoon
with her Taiwanese ex-husband, he took her and her family to a big supermarket in Hải Phòng
city to shop for food (even though there were many local markets), to a couple of restaurants also
in the city, and to go fishing in a nearby province (see figure 5.5). All of these activities could be
done locally but the multiple trips to the city and other places sent a message to Mơ that she was
special and he was willing to go the extra mile, literally and figuratively, and pay more for her.
This material expectation is another factor in people’s perception that transnational marriage is
based on money, raising more questions about the morality of the practice (see the next chapter).

Yet despite what many in Hải Thành see as the showy material aspects of transnational
marriages as well as its commonality, numerous local residents have openly questioned the
benefits of transnational marriages. In particular, they ask: why marry a working-class man just
so one can go abroad? Where is the social mobility? Their questioning indicates how social class is still viewed within the boundary of the nation-state even though people’s lives are now lived across nation-states.

Figure 4.5  Activities that the Mơ and her husband did together after the wedding

(going to the Big C supermarket in the city to buy stuff for his wife)

(with his wife’s family to a karaoke bar)

(in front of a restaurant)

(taking his wife to go fishing)
The Case of Transnational Social Class

Transnational marriages are often portrayed in the media and in popular opinion as marriages of underclass or ‘inferior’ people in Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam (Bélanger, Khuat, and Tran 2013, Tsai 2011, Hsia 2007, Lee, Seol, and Cho 2006). Moreover, Bélanger, Khuat, and Tran (2013) remark that Vietnamese women in transnational marriages are depicted as low-quality citizens making poor decisions and such representations serve to distinguish the rural (women) as lower-class in contrast to the urban middle-class. Popular opinion considers it an irony that while Vietnamese women marry East Asian men in the hope of jumping the class hierarchy, they actually experience downward class mobility after their marriages in Taiwan or South Korea. In Hải Thành, it is common to hear people discuss the illusion (tưởng bối) of the girls and how their lives will be just as difficult in Taiwan and South Korea as in Vietnam.

This framework for understanding social class is till confined within the boundary of the nation-state even though transnational women live their lives across two countries. It fails to explain the extravagant consumption patterns of Việt Kiều during home visits or their high social status in Vietnam despite their socio-economic situations in the countries to which they migrate. As Thai (2014) argues, we often conceptualize social class and status within nations. The Weberian tradition see class division among different social groups within the same society. The Marxist tradition in development studies, even though focusing on global differences, tends to see them in terms of first and third world countries, core and peripheries. This binary approach obscures the anlysis of class across nation states (Thai 2014, Radhakrishnan 2011).

According to Thai (2014), a framework to study social class transnationally is critical to understand the situation of low-wage migrants because their income takes on very different social and economic meanings in the homeland: “migrants … find opportunities in the homeland
to transnationalize their framework for identity, competence, esteem, worth, and status associated with their class position. The homeland thus serves as a powerful (and perhaps the only) social space for expressing meaningful social citizenship” (2014, 194). The contrast between invisible labor and visible spending in the homeland allows migrants to change their social class in the dual frame of reference (Thai 2014, Smith 2006, Espiritu 2003, Goldring 1998). Social class, when viewed transnationally, is different from the nation-bounded conceptualization because it shows that migrants can belong to two different social class systems (working-class in the migration country and upper-class in the home country). Therefore, standard measures of social class such as income and education are not always applicable to the transnational social class (Espiritu 2003).

Seeing social class transnationally rather than nationally offers a different understanding of the relationship between social class and physical movement in Hải Thành. In spite of all the criticisms and doubts, Hải Thành girls, once having migrated to East Asia, join the rank of Việt Kiều. No matter how they fare socially and economically in Taiwan and Korea, they still enjoy a higher status in Hải Thành as transnationals. As many of my classmates said, if nothing else, they have the label (mắc) of being Kiều. Their higher social status is seen even more clearly in the next chapters as I show how transnational women are constantly compared as better than translocal women, who also engage in physical movement but not globally. Understanding social class as transnational serves to challenge the assumption of downward mobility in transnational marriages. Transnational social class underscores the power of transnational migration in shaping social stratification across nations and highlights the need to understand social class beyond nation-states in the era of global movement and connections.
Conclusion

This chapter described the phenomenon of transnational marriages in Hải Thành and the impressive infrastructure that sustains and promotes them. Moreover, instead of emphasizing the economic factors that are usually cited as the roots of marriage migration, I highlight the roles of gendered ideologies, imagination, and experience of migration in encouraging and normalizing transnational marriages. As migrants, including transnational women, live their lives across nations, I also argue that it is important to view their social class as transnational. In the next chapter, I discuss another important dimension of transnational marriage, morality, to demonstrate the ways morality helps us understand the relationship of migration, gender, and social class in Vietnam.
Chapter V

“Good” or “Bad”? The Morality of Transnational Migration

This chapter focuses on the moral discourse about transnational marriages in Hải Thành. I argue that migration is often embroiled in class and gender tensions and such tensions are reflected in the morality of migration. Despite their commonality, transnational marriages in Hải Thành remain a hot moral issue that centers on the dichotomies between love and money, selfishness and altruism, and tradition and modernity. Here, I follow Zigon and Throop (2014) to view transnational marriages as a moral experience; that is experience qualified and organized in moral terms. It is also morality recognized and enacted experientially.

Moral Binaries

Love vs. Money

Much of the criticism of Hải Thành girls and their transnational marriages displays the supposed tension between intimacy and money, which is then translated into issues of decency and greediness. When it comes to the interplay between intimacy and money, Zelizer argues that most people have assumed them to belong to “separate spheres and hostile worlds” (2005, 20). In other words, economic activity and intimate relations should be in distinct spheres because contact between them creates moral contamination. For example, monetization of care turns it into self-interested sale of services and workplaces are constructed as asexual because sexuality poses a threat to the business. The binary between love and money becomes the root for the dichotomy between sentiment and rationality, solidarity and self-interest, family and market (Zelizer 2005). Because of these assumptions, moral and legal judgments abound when money
and intimacy overlap despite the commonplace of monetary transactions in the intimate familial and social lives (such as immigrants sending remittances home as symbols of love, parents paying college tuitions for their children, people giving money as gifts in weddings, birthdays, and funerals).

In Hải Thành, transnational marriages generate much moral backlash because of the perception that intimacy is purchased. Parents are accused of selling their daughters for money (the commodification of women). Hải Thành girls are judged as gold diggers (the local term is money traders – đi buôn tiền). They marry for money rather than love and are willing to marry men as old as their parents, indicated by the local sayings such as ‘ngon thì ở, dở thì đi’ (stay if [the guy is] affluent, leave [for Korea] if poor’) and ‘70 có chứ 13 cũng vưà’ (if a seventy-year-old person has money, even a thirteen-year-old will agree to marry that person). Therefore, these girls are viewed as greedy, shallow, and inauthentic. Their commodified eroticism, sexuality, and perceived obsession with materiality make many people regard them as prostitutes who trade intimacy for money. Hải Thành girls, their transnational marriages, and all people involved are discussed as an unfortunate human cost of the market, as examples of the dangers of modernity, as well as an alarm about what it means to be a good or a bad Vietnamese nowadays.

Yet, at the same time transnational marriages have brought significant wealth to Hải Thành families. Most Hải Thành residents acknowledge the role of remittances from transnational women in helping the economy of the commune. Parents proudly show off their newly built two-floor houses thanks to the money that their daughters send home after only two to three years of marriage. People talk about having disposable incomes and enough savings for major events that require big spending such as funerals, weddings, and sickness. Remittances are
often sent as monthly stipends for parents to cover living expenses\textsuperscript{44} and as occasional support for siblings when they need to build houses or buy boats. In these situations, transnational women are considered morally good, being dutiful daughters and loving sisters. For most rural Vietnamese who have struggled all their lives, money does bring happiness and sending money home equals sending love. In fact, many Hải Thành girls view money as an indicator of love. Consider the case of my classmate Hoa who changed her mind about marrying a Korean man. Before marrying her husband, Hoa had gone every week to attend a few “selection days” but failed to find a man who she believed truly loved her. When I asked how she would know that a man truly loved her, she responded: “[H]e will buy me a lot of stuff. If he loves me, he will buy me clothes, jewelries, and take me out to places. That’s how I know he loves and trusts me.”\textsuperscript{45}

The stories in Hải Thành show, as Zelizer has argued, that money and love are not dichotomous but intertwined in complicated relationships. However, national discourses in Vietnam still link transnational marriages with the commercial commodification of women and consequently place the Vietnamese brides squarely in the tension between self-interest and altruism.

\textit{Self vs. Nation}

Vietnamese women, including Hải Thành girls, engaged in transnational marriages are usually accused of shaming the nation. They are judged harshly as being ignorant, opportunistic, and poor, as prostituting their bodies for foreign visas, and being deceitful and defrauding (Bélanger, Khuat, and Tran 2013). Moreover, since women stand as the allegory for a modern

\textsuperscript{44} The stipends have significant meanings because they act as social welfare for the elders. Since the dissolving of collectives, most rural Vietnamese do not work for the state because they are farmers and as such, receive no social benefits or pensions to provide for their old age.

\textsuperscript{45} In fact, Nga made sure to teach the girls in class how to tell their Korean husbands or suitors to buy smartphones, cosmetics, and anything else they wanted to know.
nation and the vehicle to shape national identity (see chapter II), these Vietnamese women cause outrage for ruining the country’s reputation. SBS, a major Korean television network, in December of 2014 had to issue an apology to the Vietnamese people after its TV series named “Modern Farmers” insulted Vietnamese women. In the second episode, a Korean mother told her alcoholic son, “If you continue to be a drunk like this, even if you go to Vietnam, you still can’t find a woman to marry you.” When the series were aired in Vietnam, Vietnamese viewers were offended. They objected that this line was hurtful to Vietnamese women marrying Korean men and Vietnamese women in general. SBS apologized shortly after and explained that the intention was to portray the pathetic nature of the Korean farmer, not to belittle Vietnamese women (Thoai 2014). The President of the Vietnamese Women’s Union directly addressed this “shaming the nation” problem in 2006. At the conference, titled “Issues of Vietnamese women marrying foreigners,” she denounced the women as being irresponsible towards their families, communities, and nation. She considered the marriages between Vietnamese women and old, sick foreign men as offensive to the nation, affecting the image of Vietnam (Bélanger, Khuat, and Tran 2013). Bélanger, Khuat, and Tran argue that these women are cast as irresponsible because they don’t fulfill their duty of building the country, offensive because they challenge the patriarchal order and bypass Vietnamese marriage traditions. Vietnamese women marrying foreign men are constructed as a gendered threat to nationalism (2013).

Ironically, the withdrawal of the Vietnamese state from social services and the emphasis on neoliberal self-cultivation have instead fostered a strong sense of individualism. Ngoc reasoned to me when I asked her about the moral accusations of transnational marriages:

*Everyone wants money. Everyone wants happiness. Nobody wants hardship. If Vietnamese men can provide for me like Korean men, I will stay here, no questions asked.* Ngoc believed that
there is nothing wrong with self interests because it has been normalized: everyone does it. In fact, self interests are necessary because everyone has to fend for themselves. It shows that Vietnamese women are faced with double standards that have become increasingly irreconcilable: on the one hand, they are encouraged to be self-responsible citizens, while at the same time they are expected to represent the nation and put the country’s interests first.

It should be noted that Vietnam is not alone in policing and moralizing women and gender relations. Globally, young women who dare to transgress the boundaries of “respectability” now or in the past are accused of being “seducers, betrayers, and complicit pawns of a corrupt social order” (Burke 2008, 366, The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2008, Edmonds 2010, Farrer 2002). They make people nervous because they expose the social hierarchy, political agency, disillusionment with modernity, and contestation against national regimes (Edmonds 2010, The Modern Girl around the World Research Group 2008). The morality backlash often expresses the tensions and ambiguities faced by a changing nation, like the tension between tradition and modernity in the case of H'ai Thành.

**Tradition vs. Modernity**

Transnational marriages are said to create chaos in the local community. For example, local men cannot find local women for marriages: as of 2013, there were around 2000 H'ai Thành men of marriageable age who were still single (Duong 2013). Even women who are already married locally can always leave their husbands and children to marry foreigners and parents complain about losing the money they pay for the marriages. Also, a crisis of femininity has emerged because traditional qualities of proper femininity are disappearing: young people are
engaging in “inappropriate” lifestyles and women, especially older women to whom daughters send remittances, have become gamblers amid the sudden wealth they have.

Figure 5.1 A Hải Thành woman wearing ‘inappropriate’ skin-showing shirt while gambling

However, transnational women are also admired. Young men and women model themselves after Taiwanese and Korean fashion, creating an image of Hải Thành not as a rural place of backwardness, but a place of modernity. It is talked about among local people that transnational marriages have changed gender relations, restraining local men from beating and mistreating their wives, increasing the weight of women’s voice. Transnational women are also regarded as role models for modern Vietnamese women.
These are conflicting and shifting moral experiences and discourses, depending on who is conversing with whom. Through transnational marriages, moral qualities and criteria of good people and good acts are both enacted and resisted, resulting in the paradoxical ways transnational marriages and women are morally regarded. Therefore, traditional concepts that often view morality as totalizing and unifying what counts as a “good” woman are unable to explain the conflicting moral positions occupied by Hải Thành people because the assessments of them change with time, people, and contexts.

**Morality as relational**

I follow Zigon (2014a) to argue that we can only account for the problem of intersubjectivity and shifting perspectives of moral experiences and values if we recognize the self as fundamentally not rational and autonomous but relational and affective. Accordingly, what counts as moral should not be viewed in terms of judging (good or bad) but in terms of making, repairing, and bettering relationships. Focusing on morality and ethics as relational and situational rather than totalizing provides insights into how the care of relationships is central to the praise, criticism, and evaluation of gendered movement. It also provides a way for us to understand how seemingly incompatible moral discourses and dispositions can coexist.

It is important to note that conceptualizing morality in this way moves beyond the binaries of good and bad. Because living morally in the world means first and foremost a morality concerned with dwelling comfortably within already established and important relationships, what one does in maintaining a relationship that is essential to oneself, even if it means negatively affecting other relationships, need not be considered immoral (Zigon 2014). Thus, the act of marrying transnationally is a moral act for Hải Thành women despite negative
accusations of being greedy and spoiled, because it betters the relationships crucial to their identity: relationships with their parents and relatives. “I marry for my parents” is less a common justification than a way of attunement and fidelity to the relationships that constitute the women’s subjectivity.46

Indeed, family remains one of the most important facets for Vietnamese individuals and society. The downsizing of the welfare system and the restoration of the household as the unit of production and consumption have made families central to Vietnamese life. Following Đôi Mới and the implementation of the market economy, the Vietnamese state cut most of its social welfare programs (entitlement programs and universal benefits) by the end of the 1980s. Consequently, family, for most Vietnamese, has become the main provider of social security as individuals rely on their families to buffer the vulnerabilities of the free market (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). Even though the economic restructuring has made it possible for many Vietnamese to venture beyond the family to get good jobs in other social institutions, it often requires education, social and political networks, and financial accumulation, all of which are beyond the reach of most rural Vietnamese. Korinek et al. (2006) shows that decisions regarding work still serve the best interests of the families rather than the individuals in Vietnam. In fact, in many developing societies, the family has acted as an agent that mediates social changes and resources because life chances are still highly shaped by family background, networks, and values (Edgar 2004).

46 At the same time, Lukacs (2015a) argues the importance of care and care work for youth in Asian neoliberalism for bringing a sense of self-worth when faced with the condition of unstable and unsatisfactory salary and job security. Arguably, marrying foreign men and caring for their parents and family brings local girls a much-needed sense of pride and worthiness when they are bound in Hải Thành by unemployment and the inferior status of rural women.
Understanding the central role of the family helps us realize why so many Hải Thành girls say they like to marry foreign men so that their parents do not need to paddle the boat till they die (đi cho bố mẹ không phải chèo thuyền đến chết) and why many parents claim they want only one daughter to marry transnationally, preferring the others to have local marriages to keep them close to home. Transnational marriages are deeply tied to families’ well-being and their strategy to get ahead. The link between individuals and their families is very strong, and in Hải Thành it is particularly salient in the deep concern of transnational women with how financially well off their families are considered to be because it reflects on their own status in the community.

**Morality as gendered and classed**

In writing about neoliberalism in Vietnam, Schwenkel and Leshkowich argue that the relationship between personal desires and family creates moral individuals (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). On the one hand, consumption is still criticized as selfish and materialistic but on the other hand, personal desires fulfill a vision of family and social life that are seen as virtuous. In Vietnam, the individual becomes moral because he/she is embedded in the family and community (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012). For example, a woman seeking infertility treatment is a good woman because her family can be perpetuated; residents building extra stories on their houses demonstrate both conspicuous consumption and filial piety (elevating their ancestral altars); and social workers finding homes for abandoned children are reintegrating them into families and communities (Pashigian 2012, Harms 2012, Leshkowich 2012b). However, Schwenkel and Leshkowich show that making certain individuals and acts moral conceals the fact that these moral modes of being and configurations of family are also middle
class: “The rhetoric of morality naturalizes the middle classness as somehow reflecting desirable personal qualities, rather than a privileged position in an environment of increasing structural inequalities” (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012, 396-397).

In this new vision of social and moral order, it is not surprising to see why rural (and thus lower class) Hải Thành girls are often excluded from being viewed as moral despite their support of the well-being of their families and community. Their depiction as low-quality citizens making poor choices with regards to their transnational marriages maintains the social and moral distinction between them as rural girls and the middle-class urban people.

Not only is morality tied to class, it is also gendered. Thinking of morality in terms of maintaining and caring for relationships and social embeddedness explains why different people in Hải Thành regard the moralities of others (such as translocal women, transnational women, parents, and fishermen) differently because they have varying sets of relationships with the others. Thus a fisherman may praise his wife, a translocal woman, as proper and criticize a transnational woman as trashy while a transnational woman may criticize both the translocal woman as greedy and the fisherman as abusive. However, the debate about the morality of women is much more pronounced among Hải Thành residents than the debate about local men’s behaviors and practices. This is consistent with the fact that Vietnamese women have always been held as the morality keepers of the nation.

The new era of market reform and global capitalist integration and the shifting demands on Vietnamese femininity explain why migration for marriages in Hải Thành is such a heated, conflicting, and personal issue. The common reason for transnational marriages, to be dutiful daughters, reflects the changing loyalties from the nation during the wars to the nuclear family in the post Renovation era and the Confucian virtues of current Vietnamese femininity. Yet, at the
same time, these marriages are associated with female deviances, namely greed, ambition, and promiscuity, that represent the corruption of the free and global market. Hải Thành girls are caught in the double standard of being both markers of modern transformation and symbols of cultural dangers and loss. Their embodiment of contradictions evidences how they are morally judged. For example, one of the local fishermen and one of my main informants, thirty-nine-year-old Hiệp, did not hold back from condemning the transnational marriages:

It’s a fad thing (phong trào). Everyone wants to do it. They go to Taiwan and Korea for a while; things do not work out as they thought, they return. I recently noticed that a few women in my neighborhood left for Taiwan and Korea but came back after only a year. Then they left again. It’s like they married Taiwanese men; oh my god, did not like it; returned; married Koreans; left again. So ridiculous. It’s their lifestyle (that’s problematic). It’s like “keeping up with the Jones” (đua đòi). Our community is (financially) great. If they stay and get married here, they will have great lives. But they all go, all fly off. Because their friends who married Taiwanese go home on airplanes and wear sunglasses. Nobody wore sunglasses before, but now they are Koreans, they have to wear sunglasses. So all the girls who are not married have to get married to Koreans. They don’t know anything about lives in Korea nor do they care, as long as they can become Koreans. I went to one of the hotels where the girls were introduced to the Korean men. There were 5-7 girls sitting waiting. Two Korean men came to see them, just looked at them for a minute, said a couple of nonsense sentences that were translated, then one of them pointed at the girl he liked. The matchmaker asked if she agreed to marry him. She nodded and shook hands with him. Done. That’s it. The wedding was held the next day. What kind of love is that? What kind of husband is that? You don’t even know anything about him. What kind of happiness is it that can come so quickly? Your parents have raised you for so many years, how
can you just throw your life at the hands of random men like that? I don’t understand. They (the girls) are so young; they don’t know any better. Then good men here just cannot find anyone to marry because they are not Koreans.

While Hiệp admitted that transnational marriages allowed rural women to be members of modern society (fly in airplanes and wear sunglasses), he also criticized their deviance and its consequences. Transgressing the rules of femininity through greed, ignorance, lack of devotion, and filial impiety, according to Hiệp, results only in the loss of happiness (in marriages with local men) and divorces (in marriages with Korean or Taiwanese men because these marriages have no substance). Implied in Hiệp’s criticism is also the repeated theme that the girls are naïve and ignorant, making poor choices with their lives. Together, they consolidate the negative stereotype of rural women in Vietnam as uneducated and greedy and reproduce the class hierarchy between the rural lower class and the urban sophisticated middle class.

Later, in our conversations, Hiep surprised me when he said: “I told all my female friends that are still not married to marry Korean men.” “Why?” “Because Korean men have money. Their lives will be better than living here.” His surprising comment exposes the constrains and contradictions of Vietnamese femininity that requires women to retain traditional values in the context of social and economic flux yet fails to acknowledge the necessity for women’s economic striving in the pursuit of modernity.

Additionally, his comment reflects how morality should be conceptualized as relational because it sheds light on this rather confusing but recurrent phenomenon in Hải Thành: criticizing the group but praising the individual members of that group. I encountered stories like that all the time when I talked to local people. Many parents that have transnational daughters scorn transnational women in general but say the exactly opposite about their daughters or their
nieces. In these stories, we see how morality is reflected through experiences of hope, anxiety, conflict, care, struggle, and happiness. They show that what seems from the outside as conflicting moral discourses and positions not only can coexist but are not necessarily seen as incompatible by the subjects because they are based on the cultivation of different sets of relationships that matter to the selves. Thus, if we use traditional philosophical and social concepts such as virtue, duties, rights, good and bad, as Zigon and Throop (2014) pointed out, we merely contribute to the reproduction and imposition of what is already considered to be moral than to the understanding of the morality lived by the people we work with. Moreover, these concepts often fail to fully capture the complexity of morality that includes hope, care, anxiety, and conflicts as experienced by people in Hải Thành.

Beyond binaries: The complexity of morality

I remember a month after Thanh, Mo’s oldest daughter, got married to a Korean man, she got very drunk and cried “I left my boyfriend for you, mom.” Thanh’s parents divorced five years earlier when she was 15. She and her two siblings lived with her paternal grandmother. Thanh knew that her father cheated on her mother, but indirectly blamed her mother for initiating the divorce and leaving behind all three children. “My mother wanted a divorce even though my father wanted to reconcile. When she left, she said she would never come back to the house. But she did not think it through. If we (the children) are sick, she has to come back, right? We are her children. Now that she said it, she does not come.” Thanh said her father provided for her financially but she lacked the emotional support traditionally coming from a mother. Then she met her boyfriend, who was a local young boy not from a rich family but who cared for her. She
said he made her feel happy and sheltered. Unfortunately, she was not the only girl he liked. He claimed that he did not deserve her and used that as an excuse to break up.

At the same time, Mơ, Thanh’s mother, had been trying to get married to a foreign man to escape her poverty, but failed repeatedly (see the chapter VIII). One day, Thanh’s second cousin who ran a local matchmaking agency called: a Korean man saw Thanh’s photo online and had flown to Vietnam to see her. Thanh agreed to meet the man and, to everyone’s surprise, Thanh accepted his marriage proposal on that day. When Thanh and her husband went to Uncle Tú’s house for dinner after the wedding, they were accompanied by a matchmaker. As Mơ came out to greet them, the matchmaker turned to assure her: “Don’t you worry about her. Plus, if all is well, she will be able to sponsor you to Korea soon.” Thanh’s husband was quiet but put food into her bowl during dinner. He offered to take her shopping afterwards but Thanh turned him down. Mơ complained to me later that Thanh was stupid for declining the offer. If Thanh had gone, Mơ would have been able to go shopping with them as well.

Thereafter, Thanh no longer talked about her ex-boyfriend, but kept telling me how nicely her Korean husband treated her. “He always saves the good food for me. He informs me where he goes and what he does. He calls me three times a day to ask after me: have you eaten yet? Where are you? Did you do anything fun today? Did you go to class today? How is the weather? If it is cold, you need to keep warm.” A month later, Thanh, who rarely drank, got drunk and sobbed about her marriage to her mother, “I left my boyfriend for you, mom”. Six months later, right before departing Vietnam, Thanh posted on her Facebook page:

*Is it wrong if love still lingers in my sadness? Honestly, I don’t want us to part. Since I can’t choose my own dream, I am as lost as you. Time cannot turn back; please continue living your life as you have been.*
A year and a half later, she gave birth to a son and was then able to sponsor a visa visit for her mother to go to Korea. She still posted sad messages on her Facebook:

*Lonely nights, me and nobody else ... When life goes by so fast, it is perhaps this quiet time that makes my heart so heavy, my sadness persisting through the months and years. This movie of life full of tragedies slowly runs ... I listened to an old love song, tried to find a peaceful sleep, and tomorrow will be a new day.*

Thanh’s story represents some heart-broken girls I have known who left their Vietnamese lovers and claimed it was a sacrifice to the happiness of their parents. In her story, she was conflicted between her love for her boyfriend and her love for her mother. She hoped to forget her boyfriend to have a new life for herself and her mother. Money was and was not important in this story. It was important with regards to her mother’s future but Thanh did not care too much about her husband’s money (she chose not to go shopping with him). She married a man she does not love for certain purposes, and even though he treats her nicely, she has been feeling lonely ever since. In this story, Thanh is both a good daughter and a bad wife, she married both for love (for her mother) and money, and she is both selfish and selfless.

Thanh’s story shows that the collapse of morality into binaries (such as good vs. bad, money vs. love, and selfish vs. altruistic) often obscures personal stories and struggles that are central to the moral experience embroiled in transnational marriages. For example, the moral discourse that separates love from money often depersonalizes people involved in transnational marriages, turning them into cold calculating individuals blinded by money, while in fact transnational marriage is a deeply personal and loving issue.

In other stories about transnational marriages, I was told about the pain, worry, concern, and excitement of parents. It was the pain of mothers worrying about their daughters living in a
different country. It was the concern of fathers with being accused of selfishness for preventing their daughters from finding their own happiness if they end their transnational marriages. Many parents told me that they sacrificed the love and support (that they would get from nearby daughters) for a better future for their daughters. They quoted a folk saying that if a daughter gets married close by, she will bring her parents food, even if it is just a bowl of vegetable soup (con gái mà gà chồng gần, có bát canh căn nó cùng mang cho), meaning that she will be able to care for them at proximity. A mother in Hài Thiện, who sobbed when talking about her worries and yearnings, encapsulates this beautifully:

*I miss her a lot. When she just left, I cried like someone beat me, for weeks. If people mentioned her, I started crying again. When I served the family dinner during the New Year’s Day, tears dropped from my face because I missed her. Then I worried about her new life: whether she was treated well by her husband and her mother-in-law or whether she would make mistakes, being so young, and they would laugh at her. For days, I could not eat, not even if they were to serve me a royal banquet. It was only after she called home and said her life was good that I could finally eat.*

At the same time, there was also relief and joy. The girls express the excitement of marrying the men they love and living in a different country, etc. All the accusations of gold diggers usually neglect the fact that many of these young girls have found love in their marriages. One of my classmates could not stop talking about her husband to us and would leave in the middle of the parties to go home and talk on the phone with him. Hoa expressed her pining for her husband so much that she counted the days till she could get her paperwork done and reunite with him in Korea: “I just want that when I open my eyes, I can see him.”
Unfortunately, the moral binaries have taken personal struggles out of consideration and reduced such complex moral experience like transnational marriages into mindless acts that strip women and everyone involved of their own agencies. When I asked why women from this commune marry East Asian men en masse, most people answered: it’s a fad (phong trào); the neighbor’s daughter does it so I have to do it too, sort of like keeping up with the Jones (a dua, dua đoi); or they marry foreign men just because they want to fly on an airplane or wear high heels (đi quốc công) – the reasons are stupid. They answered as if transnational marriages happen without any careful thinking. What is also problematic is how these answers deny agency to the women, yet put the blame squarely on them rather than acknowledging their opportunities as well as their oppression in the society.47

I happened to encounter a poem that was shared by many Hải Thành girls on Facebook. I could not find out who the author was, but the poem clearly conveys the voice and response of a transnational woman to moral accusations:

Đừng báo ẻm tham tiền mê ngoại quốc
Mà hãy nhìn cách đổi xử đì anh
Ai không muốn ở quê mẹ an lành
Và có được mái gia đình hạnh phúc

Lúc mới quen anh thể non hẹn biên
Hừa đủ điều làm chuyện để em tin
Nhưng đến khi ẻm cho anh cái trinh

47 To be fair, when probed more deeply, many residents do acknowledge some of the problematic gender relations and economic aspirations in Hải Thành that prompt women to seek foreign spouses.
Thì anh khinh và đi rinh con khác

Để mình em khóc thầm trong chua chóc
Lạc lội về giœa đối trả điệu ngoài
Làm sao em giải thích với người ta
Ai thứ tha lỡ làm em khờ dại

Còn không thì có nên chờ ngay nọ
Hai năm đầu anh bỏ anh cùng
Nhưng đến ngày em nở em sinh
Là khi anh vớ tình tim của lả

Anh đi đem về kiếm chuyển rầy lả
Anh đánh vợ như là chơi bóng đá
Cô khi em chạy về nhà ba mà
Mặc tìm bầm mà nhìn cũng không ra

Còn khi em về sống với người ta
Tuy có xa và hớ cũng hớ già
Nhưng anh à hờ không hồi cái trinh
Và không khinh biết em đã lờ đài

Hờ cho em bình yên mới sớm mai
Họ ôm em mỗi đêm dài em ớm
Họ lòn còm thục sôm ñề chăm con
Họ cho em được những gì em muốn

Thời anh à đừng trách tiền lời cuốn
Tự trách mình chẳng muốn giữ ng✉ơi ta
Cò vợ rồi vẫn cứ thích la cù
Không rượu bia cùng dĩ vào nhà trợ

Hãy học hỏi những điều hay nói họ
Vì vợ là để mình quý mình yêu
Chữ không phải bị nghị hà đầu điều
Phải chịu khó và chịu nhiều uất ức

Please don’t say that I love money and foreign men
You should first look at how you treated me
Who doesn’t want to have the safety of the motherland
And a happy family?

When we first met, you promised me the earth
And swore everything to make me believe you
But after I had given you my virginity
You disdained me and looked for another chick.
I was left crying silently in bitterness
Feeling lost among your blatant lies.
How can I explain to other people?
Who will forgive my foolish mistake?

Even the case of us becoming husband and wife
You coddled me for the first two years
But the moment I gave birth
Was when you looked for ‘novelty.’

You came home late and made excuses to scold me
You beat your wife like you played soccer.
Sometimes I ran back to my parents’ house
With so many bruises even my parents could not recognize me.

But when I live with a foreign man
Even far from home and they are old
But my dear, they don’t ask about virginity
And don’t despise me if they know my mistake.

They give me peace every day
They hold me through the night when I am sick
They wake up early to take care of our children
They give me everything I want.

My dear, don’t blame it on money and greed
Blame that you cannot keep me
Even when married, you still like to wander
Either into beer places or hostels.

You should learn the right ways from foreign men
Because a wife needs to be treated with love
Not to be tortured with everything
Making her struggle and miserable.

This poem speaks about the push and pull factors of transnational marriages from the perspective of a woman. Unlike the stereotypical moral judgments, these factors are not simply based on money or naïveté. The woman in the poem acknowledges the difficulties of building a life far away from home, but such difficulties do not compare to the problem she encounters in her relationships at home. In this poem, we see a part of Thanh’s story as well as, later in chapters VI and IX, other translocal women’s stories as the writer expresses common problems Vietnamese women face in their relationships with Vietnamese men: double sexual standards with regards to virginity and faithfulness, domestic violence, and gendered division of labor (men: outside the home; women: inside the home). Therefore, she would rather sacrifice being close to her parents to marry a foreign man. Only then is she loved and cared for as a wife and a
mother. Her choice, represented also by many young girls in Hải Thành, indicates unwillingness to put up with gender disparities in Vietnam.

Conclusion

The pretty modern girls from Hải Thành and their aspiration for transnational marriages emerge from the context of recent changes in the economic restructuring of Vietnam that have made life very difficult for women and rural people. They are stuck between the conflicting demands of the state’s ideology and the market’s competitive logic and between the sharp division between the rural lower class and the urban middle class. Yet, binaries prove to be inadequate to understand their situation. The Hải Thành girls have shown that moral binaries of good and bad do not work as they can be both victims of poverty and calculating actors, altruistic daughters and materialist gold diggers, vain followers and smart manipulators. Moreover, connecting both imagination and experience of movement, they manage to cross the class division between the rural and the urban in Vietnam by acquiring a cosmopolitan status. Their transnational movement is highly desirable in a global world where economic differences between developed and developing countries are enormous. However, not all marriage migration results in upward mobility. In the next chapter, I discuss the marriage migration of translocal women to demonstrate the hierarchy between international and internal migration and to show that migration can also result in acute alienation and displacement right at home.
Chapter VI

Women as Fish: Internal Rural Migration, Social Displacement and the Morality of Personhood

Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous chapters to discuss the pattern of double rural-to-rural migration to and from Hải Thành. Particularly I look at how the internal migration of translocal women is compared to the international immigration of transnational women. Here I unpack this rural to rural pattern of movement in order to further illustrate the intimate relationships among movement, social mobility and displacement, and morality. By exploring the gendered, racial and moral elements of different migration by transnational women and translocal women in this community, I illustrate how different kinds of movement become coded with specific kinds of class status and moral subjectivities.

In this chapter, I specifically explore the diversity of rurality, which, in much scholarship, is simplified and condensed as "the rural." I suggest that migration from one rurality to another should be understood through the lens of social mobility. Ironically, this practice engenders the unwelcome ramification of social displacement for translocal women and complicates the assumed linear, simplistic relationship between migration and social mobility. By focusing on the displacement of translocal women, I join other mobility scholars in questioning the celebration of movement as a universal benefit (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, Mai and King 2009, Partridge 2009, Ahmed 2004, Skeggs 2004, Tsing 2002, Tesfahuney 1998, Massey 1993). The displacement and confinement of translocal women in Hải Thành reveals that mobility can produce immobility and that movement and non-movement are not fixed binaries. Instead, mobility and immobility are relative and constitutive of one’s life in interrelated processes.
Moreover, by illustrating the lower social status of translocal women compared to transnational women, I argue that not all migration culminates in social mobility, thereby illuminating important symbolic and material differences between internal and international movement. However, this hierarchy is complicated by translocal women who actively navigate the social and physical spaces of morality and gendered movement. I explore how different kinds of movement are realized and evaluated in moral terms, thus demonstrating that a focus on morality can reveal the complex relationship of class, gender, race, and migration movement in contemporary Vietnam.

**Women as Fish: Marriages in and out of Hải Thành**

The highly mobile population of Hải Thành has effectively changed the face of the once poor community. With the fishing industry generating wealth and the Việt Kiều sending remittances home, Hải Thành people always proudly say that their rural lives are equal to those in the cities, at least materially. They constantly remind me of that fact by pointing out that their incomes rival those of urbanites and showing that they have nhà tầng (houses of multiple floors), xe xịn (expensive scooters), quán đêm (a night life), etc. The place also receives support from the city of Hải Phòng to widen its local port, to build new roads connecting it directly to the center of the city, and to turn half of its farming land into housing projects by 2025. But the most noticeable change created by the sudden wealth in Hải Thành is the lifestyle of young local people. Hải Thành people have a reputation in Hải Phòng city for frequenting bars and restaurants, gambling, using drugs, dressing “inappropriately” and having carefree sexual relationships before marriage. Many urbanites, of course, look down on Hải Thành people, taking these behaviors as a proof that these rural yet financially able people lack cultural capital,
are uncultured and insatiable. The urbanites often use the expression “ăn chơi như người Thủy Nguyên” (dress and party like the Thủy Nguyên people) to mock the uncultureness of Thủy Nguyên rural people in general and Hải Thành in particular.

The changes in the lifestyles of the young people are often used to explain the immigration and migration in Hải Thành: young Hải Thành women, the logic goes, choose to marry Taiwanese and Korean men because they don’t want to marry badly spoiled local men. Local men want to marry women from other places because these women are not, the logic continues, spoiled like Hải Thành women and they do not know of the men’s lifestyles. Thus, a double rural-to-rural migration pattern is created due to marriages: translocal women move from rural places to Hải Thành and transnational women move from Hải Thành to rural places in Korea and Taiwan\(^48\). In this way, the internal rural-to-rural migration happens to compensate for the transnational rural-to-rural migration.

While marriages are the driving force of the double rural-to-rural migration, to the local people, especially the fishermen, the transnational and translocal women are viewed very differently. They are both described by Hải Thành men as fish, but while one can be caught, the other is elusive. In the local fishing tradition, fishermen, when on their boats in the middle of the night at sea, burn light bulbs to maximum capacity to attract squid and fish. After a while, the fish and squid become blinded by the lights and that is when the fishermen pull the net up to catch them. Many fishermen told me they use the same method to court translocal women: the fishermen show off their wealth and generosity while meeting the women, waiting for the “blinded” moment to woo them into the marriage. Of course, sometimes that tactic scares off

\(^48\) There are transnational women who reside in urban areas and they are considered luckier than those in rural areas. Urban residency is an increasingly important criterion for Hải Thành girls when choosing their potential husbands.
some women, but the majority of women in my research indicated that the financial difference between Hải Thành and their communities is an important factor in their marriages and migration.

Transnational women, on the other hand, are the good fish that get away. Similar to how Hải Thành fishermen complain that they cannot compete with the Chinese fishermen over fishing, they also complain that they cannot compete with Korean and Taiwan men over local women. Moreover, the women, like the fish, have the ability to cross national borders while the (fisher)men are stuck within the border. The fish that gets away, as always, is seen as better. The fish that the Chinese fishermen catch is said to be bigger and the transnational women that the Korean and Taiwanese men marry are said to be better than translocal women.

The fish metaphor is very apt in showing that while very similar, translocal women are often judged to be inferior to transnational women and this comparison illustrates the intimate convergence of social class, migration, and displacement. To this convergence we now turn.

**The Rural as Destinations: The Politics of Rural Migration**

Mobilities scholars have recently noted the conceptual and cultural shift in the refashioning of identity in which movement becomes the basis of the new identity formation (Urry 2000). There is an understanding that “not only one can be at home in movement, but that movement can be one’s very own home” (Rapport and Dawson 1998, 27). As such, Urry (2000) spoke of a mobile identity, Beck (2006) of a cosmopolitan identity, and Clifford (1997) of an uprooted identity. Moving away from the literature on migration and diaspora that views movement as a form of dislocation and displacement from home, Chu (2010) argues that to move is to belong to a desirable world where mobility is often considered a force of social reproduction.
However, not all movement is the same and it matters greatly where one moves. There are directions of migration, especially in post-colonial countries, that are preferable and attractive: rural to urban and domestic to international. The latters (urban and international migration) are often associated with economic-financial, social-status, and cultural-cosmopolitan values (Salazar and Smart 2012).\textsuperscript{49} The consequences of these perceptions are twofold: first, rural-to-rural migration is often unnoticed, resulting in the conflation of diverse ruralities into homogeneity and second, people who move from one rural locality to another, especially internally, are often excluded from social and mobility capitals associated with more desirable rural-to-urban or international migration.

Rural-to-rural migration is often ignored in mobilities studies. Scholars tend to focus on rural to urban migration, both internally and internationally. Vertovec (2011) claims that the city is the foremost setting for the anthropology of migration because of its everyday multiculturalism and its large scale (see also Caglar 2010, Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, Brettell 2003, Bommes and Radtke 1996). Accordingly, the most recent research on migration and movement is based in big cities such as New York, Miami, Barcelona, Frankfurt, Manchester, London, and Beijing (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011, Foner 2010, Però 2007, Stepick et al. 2003, Zhang 2002). This lack of attention to the rural as an important destination of migration fails to account for the significance of rural localities as accessible, desirable and transformative migration destinations for many rural people (for studies of rural-to-rural migration in Vietnam, see Carruthers and Dang 2012, Winkels 2012, Taylor 2007, Hardy 2003a). It also creates the

\textsuperscript{49} However, the preference for international migration over internal migration is not always the case. Kalir’s research shows that for small business entrepreneurs in booming China, moving abroad as construction workers actually means “moving down” with respect to one’s social mobility (Kalir 2013).
biased assumption that only cities, and not rural places, are diverse, resulting in an unbalanced interpretation of migration.

It is the diversity of ruralities as well as the hierarchies among them that open up economic opportunities and contribute to the transnational and translocal marriages in Hải Thành. Most of the fishermen’s wives are from relatively poor rural areas, ranging from the northern mountainous provinces (Bắc Ninh, Bắc Kạn, Cao Bằng, Hà Giang, Lạng Sơn) to the provinces of the mid north coast (Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An) and Central Highlands (Buôn Mê Thuột). This is how a woman in Hải Thành described the home place of her daughter-in-law in Thanh Hoá when she visited it:

“The road was small and very dark; there were not many lights like we have here. The houses were sparse and surrounded by trees. I jokingly told the in-law family that if they fought and the wife left, the husband would not be able to find her because she could easily hide anywhere. Their house was as big as the house I built for my chickens. It still did not have a concrete exterior layer and you could see the bricks on the wall. And there was no bathroom. Oh, if they had had the bathroom like we did, it would have cost them a couple of hundred millions.”

The fact that their hometowns are poorer than Hải Thành is openly admitted by the translocal women as well. They remark on the lack of jobs for young people and on the insufficiency of farming that puts rural lives in hardship and distress. Nguyệt, a woman from Ninh Bình, married a neighbor’s son in Uncle Tú’s hamlet six years ago. She acknowledged:

“My hometown is very poor and the majority of people are farmers. Even though we toil away in the field, we barely make anything. It is a little better now, but not much. When I was young, we were so poor that my two older siblings did not go to school but stayed home to help my parents. The whole family depended on a small plot of rice field. We also raised goats on the
mountain, about ten. We only sold one or two of them when we were in a dire need, not daring to sell more in case we need money later.”

The poverty of rural Vietnam and the insufficiency of farming have pushed most rural youths to the cities looking for jobs (see also Earl 2014, Hardy 2003a). Hải Thành, however, is a bit different. Most translocal women recognize that, compared to their hometowns, it is easier to make a living in Hải Thành. Although the amount of land for farming in Hải Thành is so small that most families do not sell their rice or vegetables, the women have access to other job options. Nearby the commune, within the rural district of Thuỷ Nguyên, are three textile and shoe factories where women can find work. Within the commune, jobs mending and fixing fishing nets and traps become available every time the fishermen are home. Women can also go to Cát Bà Island to raise farmed fish and clams or trade and sell seafood. However, these kinds of jobs provided by the fishing industry are often limited to local people who grew up in Hải Thành and know all the ins and outs of fishing. Some translocal women can set up street stalls to sell food and drinks because Hải Thành people, unlike many other rural folks, have money to spend. The profits generated by these jobs are not much, and most translocal women, even if they work, are still dependent on their husbands’ and their parents-in-law’s incomes. What is different, between women in Hải Thành and those in other rural places of Vietnam, however, is that many women in Hải Thành do not need to work to sustain their families.

Not only are there differences between ruralities in Vietnam, but also between those in Vietnam and South Korea. Although Hải Thành is considered better than many other rural places in Vietnam, it trails in comparison to rural Korea. The rural in Korea is described in local discourses as cleaner, more beautiful, more sufficient, and more modern. Uncle Tú’s sister, after visiting her daughter in Changwon, Korea, said:
“They have a huge amount of land but they are able to work all of it because they have machines. That is why they can live comfortably as farmers. Unlike us here, we always struggle with not making enough. There are plenty of jobs even for older people like me. And everything is so clean, no dust. Even in the summer, the sun is not unbearable and in the winter, you work inside the greenhouses; you don’t freeze like you do in Vietnam. You know, my complexion is so much lighter after a year there and there is no dirt stuck in my fingernails even after work. It is just so much better.”

Again we see how hygiene (clean vs. dirty) is used as an indicator of economic differences between Hải Thành and other rural places and between Hải Thành and rural Korea (see also chapter IV and Jiang 2014, Lai 2014, Rogaski 2004). In fact, it is the economic differences, among many other factors, that motivate translocal and transnational marriages and migration. They make many women willing to marry outside of and far from their hometowns. They draw people to Hải Thành and rural Korea, turning them into rural places of great diversity. In other words, the literature on migration often fails to account for the differences among ruralities as they are conflated into “the rural,” and in so doing, pays little attention to the rural-to-rural migration that is motivated by economic mobility. In my interviews and talks with local women (before they marry transnationally) and translocal women, they express the desire of not having to struggle to make ends meet and having better lives for their children. Unfortunately, although economics are no longer much of a concern for both groups, translocal women do not necessarily reap the social mobility benefits that transnational women do.

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50 The hygienic distinction, as I will explore later in the chapter, is also racialized with the implication that white is clean and black/brown/dark is dirty.
Connection, Hierarchy, and the Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Migration

King and Keldon (2010) have shown that a division remains in migration studies between internal and international migration and that they form two almost entirely separate literatures with different conceptual, theoretical, and methodological standpoints, which rarely talk to each other (see also Kalir 2013). And since the emergence of the “migration-development nexus” in the 1990s, both scholars and policy-makers have tended to focus almost exclusively on the relationship between development and international migration, overlooking the fact that in most developing countries, internal migration is equally important (King and Skeldon 2010). The overemphasis on international over internal migration also stems from the intellectual bias that views “nation” as the main unit of analysis (Wilding 2007, Hage 2005). The problem with the separation of internal and international migration is that it ignores many similarities in the migration processes between the two and provides only partial insights into the complex livelihoods of migrants and their communities (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, Cohen 2011, King and Skeldon 2010).

In Hải Thành both internal and international migration are crucial to sustaining the community in terms of economics, lifestyles, and population, and thus should be studied in concert. Their interconnection is clearly seen in the relationship between translocal women and transnational women in Hải Thành: the in-migration of translocal women compensates for the out-migration of transnational women. More importantly, the identity and status of one group are defined against those of the other group.

While transnational women and translocal women are similar in many aspects (they both, supposedly, marry up and both migrate from a rural place to another rural place), most people in Hải Thành, including the women themselves, insist that there are no similarities between the two
groups. The differences they cite are many. First and foremost is the amount of money that transnational and translocal women respectively remit to their parents. The remittances from transnational women can reach up to $4,000 per year and within three to five years can enable their parents to build brand new two-story houses, a major source of pride and social status in Hải Thành. After the houses are built, the remittances from transnational women are used to cover the living expenses of the parents and put in the bank for investment. As a result, many parents of transnational women stop working and stay home. They become a group of “walking people”: every early morning or late afternoon, they (especially women) take a walk around the neighborhood as physical exercise, a powerful sign of self-care and graceful, comfortable ageing. Some show off their comfortable lives by wearing “modern” clothes and gold jewelry on their rounds. Local people told me that only “walking people” have time to walk because they have transnational daughters; others are busy working. Therefore, wealth, in this community, is expressed through both the body and having leisure time. Urry wrote that “unforced ‘movement’ is power, … for individuals and groups a major source of advantage” (Urry 2007, 51, my emphasis). Walking parents, by choosing to walk around the neighborhood, show off their wealth and social status, thanks to their daughters living abroad. Translocal women, on the other hand, mostly give money to their parents only when the New Year comes. The sum they give is small in comparison, ranging from $50 to $100. That amount is not enough to help their parents build houses or stop working to take a walk everyday.

Translocal women are also considered to be not as talented as transnational or local women. One Hải Thành resident summarized the commonly heard arguments:
“If they (translocal women) were talented (giới giang), they would not be staying at home all the time. Moreover, if they were so talented, why would they have to marry so far away from home? They would have been taken by local men already.”

Both of these lines of reasoning are problematic because they fail to acknowledge in-marrying women’s understandable lack of familiarity with the fishing industry as well as how common translocal marriages have become throughout rural Vietnam nowadays. As agriculture has become a sure way to poverty (Taylor 2004b), many young Vietnamese have migrated from rural to urban areas looking for jobs. This is where they meet their future spouses who most likely are from different hometowns. Therefore, the phenomenon of translocal marriages in Hải Thành is not uncommon, although I believe this community’s atypically high number of transnational marriages exacerbated the phenomenon. As opposed to the non-talented translocal women, transnational (and local) women are considered more accomplished, according to Hải Thành residents, because they can go anywhere (to the islands or foreign countries) and still manage to make a good living, sending money home for their parents and the community at large. The difference in economic capacity translates into other status differences between the two groups. Nguyệt, now in her mid 20s and living in Hải Thành for six years, explained to me:

_Nguoyt_: They have money so they are, of course, different from me. They are foreigners now and that is so different from us. They have money to show off; I don’t have money so how can I compare with them, like how dare I walk side by side with them. There are times when I talk to them and they don’t even bother to answer. They only talk to people with money. Even when they talk to me, it is just some

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51 See Thai (2014) for a study on why low-wage Vietnamese immigrants send home a large portion of their incomes and spend extravagantly on relatives during return trips.
superficial and quick stuff. They go abroad so they are high and rich (giàu sang) while I am low and poor (thấp hèn).

Linh: How do they show their differences?

Nguyệt: By how they walk. The way they walk is so different. I don’t have money so I walk like a normal person. They have money so they sashay like a supermodel. And they talk with airs and graces, lengthening the tone. Instead of saying “I do this,” they will say “Iiiiiii do thiiiiiiiiis.” You know, instead of just saying it right out, they have to say it like it is so special. Then they will add foreign words to their conversations and talk with a foreign accent, like a Westerner speaking Vietnamese. How strange, you know, because they are Vietnamese. Even the gestures are an effort to put on airs. For example, if they need to get something from their pocket, their thumb and index fingers will touch each other while the other three fingers extended up. Of course, not all of them are like that.

Linh: Are there any other ways you can tell that they are transnationals?

Nguyệt: The most obvious signs are their clothes and their complexions. Their complexions are beautiful, lighter and pinkish because they do not have to work over there. And because they have gone abroad, they know how to dress really nicely. Their clothes look very different from the clothes you can buy here. We, on the other hand, just dress simply.

This dialogue shows how transnational women are perceived as having a high social status and they actively consolidate their status by acting like they are more refined and imbuing themselves with qualities of foreigners. However, Nguyệt’s choice of words suggests that even though transnational women are evaluated as fake and pretentious owing to how they walk and
talk, they are still envied because they embody certain qualities associated with life abroad (cuộc sống Việt Kiều) that are out of reach for translocal women: fashionable clothes, nice fairer complexion, and an exemption from dirty, hard agricultural work that makes women less attractive. This tension between translocal women’s aspiration and resistance against beautiful transnational women as well as local women, as we will see later on in the chapter, is an important factor in how translocal women construct their identity and navigate the social structure. Nguyệt further illustrated this distinction and tension when she told me about the first time she went out with her husband and his friends:

“When I first moved to Hải Thành, my husband took me out to the discotheque with his friends; that experience terrified me. I was poor and I dressed differently from the women here. Plus my hands and feet were not as clean as theirs and my legs were not as beautiful; it was embarrassing. They danced like crazy there, even the one who was pregnant and had a big belly, but I just stood like a stick and they kept looking at me. They wore nice clothes while I dressed funny. I felt so uncomfortable. I wanted to go home but his friends were all there so I could not. I just sat there and drank some water. From then on, I would go out only with my husband and decline to hang out with his friends.”

What is evident from Nguyệt’s description is how social differences are revealed in more than just consumption (nice clothes, manicures) but also lifestyles (dancing, for example). Hsiao (2010) has cautioned against the narrower conception of the new middle class in Asia as consumers with purchasing power. He notes that a conceptualization of the Asian middle class needs to include self-improvement, lifestyles, social awareness, and a globalized outlook. Class culture involves a long process of socialization, not simply status-marking consumption. The transnational and local women are admired for their cultural sophistication: knowing how to
dance, to wear what clothes, to have their hands and feet done, and to incorporate foreignness in their way of talking and walking. Nguyệt, on the other hand, lacked the “ease or cultivated naturalness”: the familial habitus that allows the upper and middle class to “disguise what they have learned as what they are born with” (Jenkins 1992, 90, Bourdieu 1984). That is why Nguyệt felt like she was sticking out like a sore thumb for not knowing how to dance and appeared very uncomfortable. Bourdieu (1984) remarks that taste is a system of perception and appreciation that produces classifiable practices and works, resulting in distinctive lifestyles and social differences. Nguyệt understood that she had different tastes than transnational and local women and perceived her lifestyle as a sign of different, albeit inferior, class status.

The attractiveness of abroadness, in a post-colonial society like Vietnam, is often shaped by not only money but also by arrangements of power such as colonialism, capitalism and modernities. As Gupta (1998) and Chakrabarty (2000) argued, the former colonial power becomes the standard against which those living in the former colony are measured, always to their detriment. My conversations with Hải Thành people reveal that the West stands for everything that is desirable and opposite of what they are unsatisfied with in Vietnam: capitalist (vs. communist economy), industrial (vs. agricultural), cosmopolitan (vs. rural), democratic (vs. totalitarian), opportunities to make money and travel (vs. the lack thereof), clean (vs. polluted). Even though South Korea and Taiwan do not belong to the West, they still have all the Western characteristics listed above. Korean and Taiwanese people are not white, but their skin color is still much lighter than the Vietnamese. South Korea and Taiwan, the so-called Asian dragons, have therefore become the Asian role models for the Vietnamese in their quest for catching up with the West. In such a context, it is understandable that local people often view the Vietnamese transnational women who have changed themselves into Korean and Taiwanese as more modern,
classy, and wealthy than the ‘simple’ rural Vietnamese in Hải Thành. The differences are shown in not only how translocal women view transnational women but also the other way around. A transnational woman remarked on her sister-in-law:

“I cannot clearly say why but the way she dresses just makes her look dirty. It’s not that the clothes are unclean but she looks kinda dirty. She also does not have her nails done so her hands do not look nice. And she walks loudly; I can recognize her by the noise she makes. When we eat, I have the feeling that she just eats a lot. I don’t know. I just do not talk to her much.”

The body and lifestyle, including manners such as walking and eating, are once again used to discuss the hierarchical statuses and classes between translocal and transnational women. Besides the economic differences, I believe that the translocal women also do not necessarily get any social capital associated with moving because of the politics of migration that favor the urban and the cosmopolitan. In the situation of translocal women in Hải Thành, their marriage migration to a rural, internal place does not relieve them of the “rural women” status. Translocal women, despite having mobile and uprooted identities, are still regarded as rural and backward and they are devaluated by what is seen and framed as unpleasant behavior and unappealing, unhygienic bodies. We see repeatedly the importance of dressing, maintaining beautiful hands, and hygiene (dirty vs. clean, the white/black binary is transformed into fairer/darker skin color) as markers of social classes among the women. In other words, the body and lifestyles are a site where social differences are articulated (Earl 2014, Jiang 2014, Kang 2010, Bourdieu 1984).

Skin color has been an important bellwether of status in Asia for centuries. In India, skin-color discrimination is a legacy of the mythical Aryan race theory and the British colonialism that associate lighter skin with upper caste status (Jha 2016). The Japanese and Korean construct themselves as “whiter” and “middle-class” nations above “blackier” and “lower-class”
immigrants and their countries. These immigrants are from “lesser Asia” who are “desperate” for 3-D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) (Kim 2015b). A recent Thai beauty ad that claims “Just being white, you will win” drew a storm of criticism for racism (Chan 2016). These studies have shown that skin-color privileges are influences of colonialism and ideas of beauty are based on Western standards, especially skin colors.

In Vietnam, Lê Hoàng, a famous director penned an op-ed in response to a popular skin-whitening ad by Vaseline and the booming of skin-whitening products on the unregulated market:

Only those who are insensitive and shallow would think that women, in general, and girls, in particular, are afraid of, in hierarchical order, thieves and robbers (first), mice (second), and mothers-in-law (third). That thinking is utterly wrong. They are afraid of having dark skin first, second not having light skin, and third, (if they already have light skin) their skin cannot be whitened more. Having fair complexion has long been a forever dream of girls, to the extent that a compliment about having light skin means a compliment on their beauty and instead of praising that they are so pretty, one only has to say they have skin as white as grapefruit flowers. Studies have shown that girls would rather die than learn how to swim because swimming tans the skin. If swimming made the skin lighter, men would never be able to find a spot for swimming (Lê Hoàng 2015).

Lê Hoàng observed that in Vietnamese show biz, only one singer has a “chocolate” skin while everyone else has moved to the other side: fair skin. Apparently, fair skin has an incredible importance with regards to beauty and class status in Asia. In this context, it is understandable that going abroad is usually synonymous with having fairer skin in Hải Thành because it shows an upgrade in status; that transnational, and to a lesser extent, local, women’s status is reflected
in their fair skin; and that translocal women are seen as inferior because they do not have the privilege to distance themselves from manual work or to pay for skin whitening services. Skin color is both a product and producer of privileges and class status.

Besides skin color, clothes, as Jones (2001) notes, are important elements of self-presentation and as such, are significant markers of class boundaries. Clothes in Hải Thành indicate conformity with different ideals of femininity (dress like the Koreans vs. dress simply), visibly separate the two groups (transnational and translocal women), and signal different class affiliations (cosmopolitan vs. rural). Similarly, Jiang (2014) argues that hand fetish and hygiene is the new class indicator, distinguishing the higher class from the “dirty” working class. In the industrial time, the hands were associated with manual labor, a lower form of labor compared to the more advanced mechanical labor. As such, a measure of modernity is the extent to which the hands are freed from labor. Beautiful hands have, arguably, become the representation of civilization and modernity (Jiang 2014). It explains the global obsession with manicures, which, more than being simply a question of women’s unattainable beauty standards and oppression, is also a venue for women to negotiate their social statuses (Kang 2010). In her study in New York, Kang concludes that the reasons women have their nails done vary from having higher self-esteem, attractiveness to partners, stress relief, bonding with other women, career advancement, and increased mobility (Kang 2010). Depending on their social positions, defined by race, sexuality, and social class, the meanings and rewards of manicures and beauty differ among different women. For example, airbrushed nails, while considered to be beautiful by many African American women, stigmatize them as belonging to a lower social class. At the same time, by choosing a more “boring” middle-class nail style (French manicures and pastel colors), a working-class woman can augment to a professional status. Nails, as Kang convincingly shows,
“grow out of [their] bodies but also out of social relations and circumstances in which these bodies are embedded” (Kang 2010: 132).

Manicure for women in Hải Thành is a ticket to an exclusive club of women who have the money and time to pay attention to beauty and pamper themselves. Vietnamese rural women, who are subjected to agricultural work, considered both dirty and hard, and who do not have disposable incomes, cannot join this club. Almost all translocal women in Hải Thành I know do not have their nails done, yet know where the nail salons are and exactly how much each specific style costs. Their knowledge of manicures comes from listening to transnational and local women talking about manicures at home. Transnational women in Hải Thành, by having their manicures done and criticizing translocal women for the lack thereof, are essentially claiming their bodies as both special and normative, consequently reinforcing their class privileges. At the same time, translocal women’s failure to keep their hands “clean” and nice is read as personal inadequacy rather than as a re/production of marginality and disadvantages. Therefore, just like how the nonwhite body is the marked other against which the ideal woman is defined (Hill Collins 2005, Bettie 2003), the rural women’s body becomes a specter against which a cosmopolitan, urban ideal is defined. In other words, transnational women’s beauty and privileges have no meanings without the failure of rural, translocal women to measure up. The women’s hands express both a privileged distance from hard labor and bind the articulation of class with the articulation of gender.

What is most interesting to me, however, is how the class hierarchy is mapped onto ethnic differences in Hải Thành. Often Hải Thành people told me that the in-marrying daughters-in-law of their specific neighbors were very rural (quê) because they were ‘ethnic minority people’ (‘người dân tộc’, commonly contracted in Hải Thành as ‘toọc’). The term ‘ethnic
minority’ in Vietnam has such a negative meaning that it easily slides into race, loaded with connotations of primitiveness and savagery. Such connotations can be seen in the remarks made by one Hải Thánh man about his own daughter-in-law, Trinh, who is an ethnic Thái woman from Thanh Hoá:

“*She’s very different from us here. Her true nature (bản chất) ... is that she argues all the time with her husband. If he says one sentence, she has to say another. If needed, she can physically fight her husband, unlike women here. Fight till the end! Before moving here, she lived in the mountain. From the road to her house on the top of the mountain, it takes more than an hour of walking. Their lifestyles are strange: they do not grow any food or raise any livestock. Instead, they just go into the woods and fetch whatever they can find for the day. Absolutely no long-term thinking. There is nothing to live on over there. It’s exactly like how the TV portrays the ethnic life. I don’t really understand her and I don’t trust what she says yet. Because of her background, it is very hard for me to teach her.*”

Here, the man implied that ethnic people are marginal, wild, and primitive, both in their lifestyles and their personality. They are marginal because they live in the mountain far from the center. They are wild because they are aggressive verbally and physically. They are primitive because they do not practice agriculture. They are also dangerous and cannot be trusted, which makes them difficult to restrain and discipline. This representation is in line with the dominant discourses in Vietnam that fortify the binaries of majority-minority, modern-ancient, and civilized-barbarian (Michaud 2010).

Even though there are indeed ethnic women marrying local men, the number is small and many translocal women that are thought of as ethnic are really not. When I questioned Hải Thánh people why they said these women are ethnic when they are not, they explained, “*We
were just joking because ethnic people are very honest, thus not very smart (ngố) even though they like money (tham tiền). They also dress very rurally.” I witnessed how often the term ethnic (tọc) is used in Hải Thành to talk about differences. When a grandmother jokingly told her five-
year-old granddaughter, “You must be ethnic (tọc) because you dress so funny,” she cried, “No, I am not ethnic. My mom is ethnic but I am not because my dad is not.” Her mother, a translocal woman, is a Kinh woman, not a minority. In other words, all the “bad” and “backward” qualities of translocal women are mapped onto ‘ethnic inferiority.’ The ethnic mapping of class indicates a permeating but normalized hierarchy between the Kinh and other minorities in Vietnam. It is so normalized that Hải Thành people can go about branding people they deem different and inferior to them as “ethnic.” Here we see that the categories of ethnicity and social class are collapsing into one. Then, this collapse of class and ethnicity/race is conflated with the figure of a rural woman.

This is possible because in Vietnam, the ideologies of race and class have combined to shape the ideal femininity that draws new forms of inclusion and exclusion along the rural/urban and local/global divide. The modern Hải Thành women project their identity by conforming to a Western/white ideal of beauty (fairer skin color, being cosmopolitan, clean hands, and nice clothes) and fixate their contrastive other in the image of the “ethnic” rural other (dark skin color, coming from a remote place, ugly hands, and dirty clothes). As such, rural women are rejected because they are perceived to embody ethnic/racial regression.

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52 In Vietnam, the Kinh are the largest ethnic group, accounting for 86% of the population (Tổng cục Thống kê 2010). Other ethnic groups in Vietnam (such as Hmong, Tai, Nung, Thai, etc.) are seen as minorities.

53 It should be noted that the politics of race, class, and gender play out quite similarly for Vietnamese transnational women in Taiwan and South Korea. Vietnamese transnational women are also discriminated against in East Asia because they are rural women from a less economically developed country (Tsai 2011, Epstein 2008, Hsia 2008, Lee 2008, Hsia 2007,
The exclusion of rural women from modern Vietnamese society at large can be traced on the covers of books and magazines about women, in particular, how women can become modern, wonderful, and seductive. The female models on these covers are fairly similar in terms of styles and beauty (white stylish clothing, careful make-up, and accessories). Take, for example, the book titled Phụ nữ Hiện đại Thế kỷ XXI (Modern women of the 21st Century) published by the Lao Động Press in 2011. The modern Vietnamese woman, shown in the cover, has her hair and nails done, wears jewelry and make-up. Her outfit is a modernized version of a suit and she seems to be standing in front of a business building. It is noteworthy that she has a fair complexion and is wearing white, reinforcing the Western beauty standards. In other word, the modern Vietnamese woman is a chic “white” urban businesswoman rather than a plain, “dirty” rural farming woman.

Figure 6.1: Covers of magazines depicting modern Vietnamese women

In the end, the perceived racial/ethnic, along with social and economic, differences consolidate the hierarchy between transnational women and translocal women. This hierarchy reflects important differences between international and internal migration, demonstrating that not all migrations are the same and the destinations of migration (rural or urban, local or global) are significant in the socio-economic values and evaluation of migration. While mobility in the global world is usually given positive values, the marginal status of translocal women in Hải Thành challenges the simplistic and assumed relationship between migration and social, financial, and cosmopolitan climbing.

The Fish out of Water: Migration and Displacement

Similar to the perceived causation between physical and social mobility, there has been much celebration of mobility in its association with freedom, liberation and resistance. The romanticization of mobility in the image of the nomad is evident from the work of Mackinders, Deleuze and Guattari, and Bachelard, all of which connect mobility with power and thus perceive in the nomad the ability to evade power and link mobility (of the nomad) with freedom and liberty (Adey 2009). However, the case of translocal women shows that they are not only considered inferior but also controlled and marginalized in Hải Thành. The marginalization of translocal women in Hải Thành is revealed, first, in their physical immobility and confinement in the home. Unlike those who move to the cities for jobs, translocal women who have migrated to Hải Thành for marriages often find themselves unemployed. The lack of jobs for rural women in Vietnam in general and the fact that most translocal women are under-educated make many of them stay-at-home housewives. They might do some seasonal farming if their families do not rent out their plots or hire people to do the work. However, the amount of land in Hải Thành is so
small that agricultural work does not take much time. Moreover, they often stay with their parents-in-law and are financially dependent because the parents-in-law control the family budget.

Because of their ambiguous position as outsiders who are also now insiders, they are not trusted by the local people. Translocal women rarely visit their neighbors as local people and their parents-in-law would view these visits as occasions for gossip. “What else besides gossip will they talk about? They don’t have jobs; they stay at home; they don’t understand the politics and economics of the country or this community; what do they have to talk about besides gossiping?” is the answer that local people gave me. Gossiping in Vietnam generally means speaking ill of your own families and the neighbors, which in a small rural place like Hài Thành, where everyone knows and is related to one another, will spread like fire. Gossip is an unspoken taboo in the Vietnamese face-saving culture (Hữu Ngọc 2004). It is worth mentioning that gossip is often associated with gender in which the men are said to talk about national and big ideas (đàn ông bàn việc nước và việc lớn) while women are considered to be only concerned with petty talk (phụ nữ hay buôn dưa lé). The fear of gossip and its association with women explain why translocal women, when asked why they did not visit their neighbors, simply said they did not feel welcome. The fishermen, on the other hand, never said to me that they are not received warmly when visiting their neighbors or friends. It is as if men can talk outside of the confines of the home but translocal women cannot.

I witnessed this lack of trust of translocal women and the worry about gossip personally in my fieldwork. Most translocal women whispered when talking to me for fear of their parents-

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54 For studies on the lack of trust and discrimination against migrants from other provinces and ethnicities in Vietnam, see Winkels 2012, McElwee 2008, and Hardy 2003a.
55 This belief is strongly linked to Confucian ideology that educated men are the leader of the society’s morality and formation (Luong 2010).
in-law overhearing our conversations. Sometimes their parents-in-law would take over and answer my questions on their behalf. The worst was that many of my interviews and connections with translocal women were cut off after I happened to meet their parents-in-law in their houses. After that, either the parents-in-law would say to me when I visited again that their daughters-in-law had gone somewhere or the translocal women would text me and tell me not to contact them again. In some instances, I could speculate that the parents-in-law did not want me to know, based on what the translocal women told me, that they had lied to their daughter-in-law about having more money than they actually did or that their son had been divorced by his first wife because he was a drunk. In others, I was just clueless because I did not even have a story yet. Given that I never faced a similar problem talking to any other groups in Hải Thành, the abrupt disengagement reveals quite clearly the translocal women’s status as outsiders that need to be controlled.

Besides the dreaded gossip, translocal women often feel out of place in a different kind of rurality and discouraged by what they perceive as lack of hospitality. Trinh, the Thai daughter-in-law mentioned earlier, complained to me that she wanted to visit the neighbors but unlike her hometown, every house here had a front gate and it was always closed. She felt as if her neighbors did not want to welcome any visitors. Similarly, Nguyệt said she was so afraid of all the big dogs behind the gates that she did not dare to visit her neighbors. Nguyệt said in her hometown, people work on each other’s paddy field for mututal help and if the children go away, neighbors come and visit the parents. There is little differentiation among people. As Hải Thành has become more prosperous, the locals have built big houses with boundary walls and heavy metal gates, signs of conspicuous consumption as well as of individualism. Both of them are
viewed as intimidating by translocal women who often come from humble backgrounds and have a stronger sense of communalism.

To make the matter more difficult, local women look down on translocal women and do not hang out with them. One day I went out with my classmates when I ran into a translocal woman we all knew. While I said hi and asked her how she was doing, my classmates generally kept their distance. A few days later, the translocal woman came up in our conversation and my classmates revealed why they did not like her and other translocal women as a whole:

- They dress so ugly.
- She [the translocal woman] looks like a ghost. Ugly. She looks like a beggar.
- The wife of Hùng is the same.
- Yep. They look ridiculous and disgusting. They look black, dirty, and drippy (đen đen, nhót nhót, bàn bàn). They are from very poor places.
- Plus, they have heavy accents, just like the language of ethnic minorities.
- And their nose is so flat.
- Frankly, I just do not pay attention to them. With just a quick glance, I can tell that they are from rural places. I can’t help discriminating and looking down on them. In my head, I think, how can these rural people be so disgusting (kinh)? How can they wear such pants? Such shirts? They look like a sore in my eyes and how they are so different from us. But I just think that in my head. They are poor, we are not. That is what I think.
- Yeah, and when they get here, they also catch the laziness symptom of Hải Thành. The daughter-in-law of Ms. Trang, she is as lazy as a ghost (lười nhứt ma). The moment Ms. Trang leaves the house, she goes back to her bed to sleep.
- Oh, they are also very cheap and stingy, will never cough up anything.
The fact that my classmates all agreed on the “bad qualities” of translocal women using very extreme language (ghost, beggar, drippy, dirty, sore, stingy) speaks to how deeply translocal women are discriminated in Hải Thành. To my classmates, the translocal women are so “ugly” and “disgusting” that sometimes they are not even humans (they become ghosts), and if they are, the are the lowest of humans (beggars). Thus, they should be ignored. The reasons for discrimination are various: we don’t know them; they dress so ugly and dirty; they do not know how to have fun; their personalities are questionable (such as they are lazy and not generous). All of these “bad qualities” are assumed just because translocal women are poor, rural, and presumably ethnic. Even though the local girls consider themselves “rural girls” as opposed to “city girls” (gái quê vs. gái phố), they use the term “rural” to denote the “backardness” of translocal women in conversation. It shows once again that ruralility is not homogeneous, but hierarchical and diverse. Moreover, in the context of Vietnam, the social class divide is often mapped onto the spatial divide between the urban and the rural. Being beautiful, then, is seen as more modern and urban while not being beautiful is associated with being rural. This distinction, based on beauty, occurs repeatedly in how local girls sternly judged translocal women. The conversation among my classmates reiterate how beauty is one indicator of social class and reinforces how social class in Vietnam is expressed through gender along the dichotomies of rural vs. urban, ethnic majority vs. minority.

As a result of discrimination, translocal women end up being socially and physically isolated. Their social network consists of only their in-laws and their cousins if they have also married local men. Local people often say that they do not see translocal women often and do not really know who they are. The irony is while the local people, especially the parents-in-law, often boast about the “good” lives of translocal women (they really do not have to work much
besides a bit of farming; they only stay home and look after their kid; compared to women in other rural places, their lives are ten times better), translocal women often feel constrained and inferior.

An, originally from Hà Tĩnh province in central Vietnam, is one of the older translocal women. Now 35, she has been in Hải Thành for more than ten years. She met her husband in the south where both were working in factories in Binh Dương, but decided to come back to Hải Thành after she was pregnant as they needed help with childcare. Her husband now works with his brothers on a small family-owned boat and he is away most of the time. An said they borrowed a significant loan to build the boat and it would take at least two more years to pay off. Tight with money and isolated at home, An found a job at a textile sweatshop in the neighboring commune. She said the job is very hard: she works long hours; she is not allowed to take days off; it’s suffocatingly hot in the summer and bone cold in the winter; and she is poorly paid. Yet she described how much she loves working there:

“I go to work and I feel happy. I have friends there, you know. People who I can talk to during lunch, people who I can hang out with. We eat together and we take a nap together. Sure, it is long hours and I have to stand on my feet all day. They are sore often. Sometimes, especially in the winter, I come home so late that the whole house has gone to sleep. I still have to make dinner for myself and eat by myself; I feel quite lonely. But staying home is even lonelier.”

This is a powerful example of the extent to which translocal women feel isolated in Hải Thành. Even though An works in an exploitative sweatshop, she does not mind it because that place has given her a much needed social network of friendship and made her happy. Despite having been in Hải Thành for more than ten years, An still feels like an outsider. An admitted that she hardly knows anyone other than her extended family-in-law in Hải Thành. Money is not
the main reason for her to work in a sweatshop because she is poorly paid. It is a sense of being in a supportive community of friends that is important to her. What is also significant is how work perhaps gives An a sense of accomplishment and identity in a commune where translocal women like her are ignored and devalued.

The marginalization of translocal women in Hải Thành is further shown in their invisibility in local discourses. There exists no term to talk about translocal women as a group in Hải Thành. Hải Thành people use Kiều Dài Loan, Hàn Quốc (Taiwanese and Korean transnationals) to refer to transnational women and gái Hải (Hải women), a short form of gái Hải Thành (Hải Thành women), to refer to local women. But translocal women are not assumed to belong to either of these two groups. If they ever get talked about, it is usually as specific wives of specified fishermen, never as a group. Even though translocal women often distinguish themselves from local women, local people do not compare local women to translocal women but to women in other places. In other words, translocal women rarely appear in local discourse. This linguistic absence indicates that translocal women have no identity outside of being defined by men (being local men’s wives). It seems that translocal women have no public acknowledgement of their life histories, struggles or identity outside of marriage. They are defined by heterosexual and patriarchal language that designate themselves as subject to male authority.

The absence of translocal women in local discourse has other political implications. As Foucault noted, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention” (Foucault 1972, 49). Discourse, in creating the subject through marking the boundaries of exclusion, leaves us with the silenced
group, who because of the linguistic absence, have no way of articulating their subjection.

Translocal women, in a Lacanian understanding, are a signified (a reality) without a signifier (a place in language) and therefore are “real” but outside of the social and discursive reality.

Being made invisible, indeed, is one painful form of oppression as Butler illustrated:

“Indeed, one can be interpellated, put in place, given a place through silence, through not being addressed, and this becomes painfully clear when we find ourselves preferring the occasion of being derogated to the one of not being addressed at all” (Butler 1997, 27).

The invisibility of translocal women implies being ignored, devalued, rejected, and not being heard. It is also a denial of their identity as independent and desirable since translocal women are not seen as attractive and significant enough to even be identified. The displacement of translocal women is, thus, twofold: they are physically present but evacuated from language and they are denied a physical place in public spaces where community life unfolds. They are, in short, refused a place of being and of having possibilities to form human relationships. Their displacement is the problem of placelessness.

In a lot of ways, translocal women are the fish that get caught somewhere else and are out of water once in Hải Thành. At first, I supposed that because many of them are young and relatively newly wedded, they are not yet integrated in the community. They have not been able to gain the trust and respect from their in-law families, neighbors, and people in the commune. They also have not made friends and social connections outside of their immediate families. However, An’s story proves that their isolation might be chronic. My suspicion was further confirmed when I met Chung, a translocal woman whom I introduced in chapter II and who has been in Hải Thành for more than 20 years. Her husband was an alcoholic and died of a liver disease a few years ago. She sold snacks near the elementary school to get by and raise her son.
Poor and widowed, Chung openly admired the lives of transnational women in Korea and Taiwan. She expressed her desire to marry a foreign man to transform her life but was hesitant because of her age (she is now 39 years old). When I asked her how she knew what life in Taiwan or Korea was like, she answered: I talked to old women who visited their daughters there and they told me everything about Korea and Taiwan. I only talked to old women who buy stuff from me; I did not dare to ask the young women (implying transnational and young local women). Even after 20 years in Hải Thành, Chung still did not feel accepted and comfortable. She considered herself to be inferior to transnational and local women and stopped herself from interacting with them. Chung’s and An’s stories lead me to believe that translocal women will probably be displaced in Hải Thành for a very long time.

Figure 6.2 A plain altar for Chung’s husband in the house with plastic flowers, a plastic plate, and simple offerings
The question of belonging, writes Vijayasree, “acquires an additional edge of urgency and poignancy in the case of female migrants, because, for them, the issue of self-definition can hardly be isolated from larger questions of gender” (Vijayasree 2000). Vijayasree talks about Indian writers in the West but her comment also illuminates the predicament of translocal women in Hải Thành. Their migration is a re-entry into the northern Vietnamese patriarchal structure that excludes women as outsiders (*ngoại tổc*), through tracing descent through men, patrilocal residence, and an emphasis on male authority (Luong 2010). Their migration, instead
of bringing freedom and social mobility, reinforces their female status as being displaced, invisible, and, ironically, immobile.

The situation of translocal women calls for two important corrections in migration studies. First, while most of the literature on migration assumes the connection between displacement and cultural differences in transnational migration, it often neglects that internal migration also creates a significant source of discrimination and isolation. Second, the intensity of displacement due to migration is highly gendered. The translocal women’s isolation is a consequence of the cultural construction of women as gossipy, distrustful, backward, and not having an individual identity other than as someone’s wife. Indeed, they prove that one does not need to migrate out of the country to be displaced; one can be displaced by being right in their national home and by being a woman.

Even though translocal women are marginalized and considered inferior to transnational women and local women, they complicate this hierarchy by actively navigating the space of morality. They join the local people, especially the fishermen, in questioning the morality of transnational marriages and transnational and local women’s behaviors and in establishing themselves as moral women. Their understanding, shaping, and realizing of morality reveals how morality sheds light on the messy relationship between gendered migration and social class.

**Morality in Motion: Women, Migration, and Identity in Hội Thành**

Studies on the interconnection between morality and gendered migration usually rest on assumptions about appropriate gender roles and gender-specific ideologies (such as meanings of “good girls,” “obedient daughters,” “virtuous women,” and “respectable places”) and how they enable and limit gendered (mostly female) movement (Sun 2009, Yan 2008, Silvey 2007, 2004,
I am less interested in this functionalist and cause-consequence approach; instead, following Strathern (1997), I focus on moral reasonings and practices to understand the construction of identity and social relations in the realm of migration.

I explore both moral practices and discourses used by translocal women, but underscore the importance of moral discourses because they provide a range of possibilities for negotiating moral interactions and identities in everyday life (Zigon 2008). Zigon explains that “through such everyday, language-utilizing practices as conversation, gossip, and instructional interactions—for example, advice giving—and verbal performances, speaking individuals negotiate, construct, and come to agree on their moral ways of being” (Zigon 2008, 136). I want to stress that focusing on the negotiation over moral discourses is not the same as finding out shared assumptions of what counts as a locally moral woman or how these assumptions affect gendered movement. Rather than arriving at this bounded and shared understanding of morality, I aim to reveal how Hải Thành people interact with each other in everyday life in order to accept themselves, get past the moral breakdown, and charitably live together (Zigon 2012, Jackson 1998, Davidson 1984). In other words, I am more interested in considering how local relationships form not on the basis of mutual understanding, but in spite of identified differences.

Morality and moral experiences are often realized, enacted, described, and organized in moral discourses. Translocal women, just like everyone else in the community, privately engage in moral discourses, especially those concerning transnational brides, to negotiate the nature of interactions and stratification in everyday life because moral discourses reveal the process of subject formation (who we are, how we react, who we love and hate, what we desire, etc.) and our position in relation to others. Every time I brought up the topic of transnational women,
translocal women insisted that there were no similarities and dived into the differences between them and transnational women. For example, Nguyệt fleshed out the details:

Nguyệt: They dress so fashionably. They wear dresses, tank tops with spaghetti straps, and have their toenails done. They can wear things like that because they just don’t have to work. Their husbands pay for everything. They have such debauched lifestyles, over the limits, and lose the true nature of Vietnamese women. Most of them are like that. For example, many are already married to Korean men, but when they are home, they still go on dates with men and sleep with them. The woman who used to live right across from us would go overnight with her male friend; of course she slept with him. My husband said his female friends are all like that. It’s the women’s fault. If they were decent, how could the men dare to touch them? My husband, whenever I mention women here, he would shake his head. And if I ask him whether a transnational woman is pretty, he will respond that they put on so much makeup that they look like freaks. He’s so funny.

Linh: So how do you dress?

Nguyệt: You know, since I moved here, the young women dress so nicely that I have also started paying attention to my appearance. I don’t wear loose clothes anymore and choose what fits my body. But nothing tight or revealing like the women here. I still don’t wear dresses or skirts like transnational women because I live under the same roof with my father-in-law. My relatives when I came home all said I look a couple of years younger now.

When I asked Trinh, the translocal ethnic woman, about the money aspect of the marriages, she answered:
“Yes, I admit that one of the reasons I married my husband is that his family is financially stable. But I am unlike the transnational women whose greediness has no limit. I am not going to marry a man who is my father’s age just because of money. They are all after money. Even my sister-in-law. I love my husband and my family, unlike those who marry because of money and leave the man when they are given citizenship status. I want a stable life, not a life with one husband now and another husband later (nay chồng này mai chồng kia).”

Both of these translocal women were judging the transnational women against the recurrent ideals of Vietnamese femininity that is based on Confucian patriarchy as discussed in chapter II: filial piety, devotion, and faithfulness (Pettus 2003, Rydstrom 2003, Gammeltoft 1999). They chastised the transnational women for being consumeristic, greedy, unfaithful, and debauched so that they had lost “the true nature of Vietnamese women.” Because of that, transnational women are no longer humans but “freaks,” as remarked by Nguyệt’s husband. Most of these moral issues are, unsurprisingly, conveyed through how a woman dresses and how love and money are related.

**Body and morality**

In Hải Thành, morality rearticulates itself through the gendered body of women to safeguard traditional femininity. Similar to how clothes produce the modern girls in previous chapters, clothes have also become an important marker of different femininities. Clothes mediate between the body and the external world by concealing what is private and personal (Finnane 2008, Jones 2001). As such, clothes can highlight the cultural differences between the people and the world they are living in, as well as the process of cultural re/negotiation (Chiavetta 2008). We saw in chapter IV how clothes represent a means of identification with
Western culture for transnational women. For translocal women, clothes represent acceptance of the imposition of traditional femininity as well as an attempt to rework that cultural model. Not wearing skirts or dresses yet choosing clothes that fit better illustrates translocal women’s efforts to negotiate between the “backwardness” of the rural countryside and the immoralities of the global capitalist market.

It is very important for translocal women to pay attention to their clothed bodies because the awareness of home is “mediated by an understanding of place and its relationship to the body” (Crane and Mohanram 2000, x). Crane and Mohanram argue that bodies are place-specific and bodies are racialized if they appear unnatural and out of place. A transfer of bodies to a new place implies new meanings attached to the bodies within power relations of the new place. They concluded that “[i]t is the body that grants the subject a sense of personal identity, a sense of belonging to the normative group or of being the Other. Thus one carries the notion of home within the body by being at home with it or experiencing it as unfamiliar” (Crane and Mohanram 2000, xi). Hài Thành is an unusual place for translocal women to make their home: it is a rural location but its wealth measures up to urban standards and, unlike many other rural places in Vietnam, it has a very large number of transnationals (Việt Kiều), making it quite cosmopolitan for a rural commune. Translocal women have to walk the fine line between dressing well enough for a modern Hài Thành, yet conservatively enough to still fit in a rural patriarchal community, as demonstrated by Nguyệt’s comment above. She has stopped wearing loose clothes and opted for jeans more often to show her youthful modernity, yet nothing too tight or revealing (like tank tops, dresses, or skirts) to upset her in-law family and neighbors. Failing to perform and strike a fine balance between these contrasting expectations of womanhood, translocal women would end
up being labeled by the community as “dirty” (bân) and “rural” (quê) and deemed as minorities (người dân tộc).

Figure 6.4 Trinh’s wardrobe. She has a lot of denim clothes, which are considered modern in Hải Thành. The red dress is the only dress she has but it was a gift her sister-in-law in Korea gave her. Trinh said she had never worn it.

Love and morality

While Nguyệt discussed morality via a woman’s body, Trinh is concerned with how morality is also expressed through the discourses and practices of love. Love becomes an important criterion for translocal women to contrast themselves to transnational women. Trinh implied that “I marry for love is better than I marry for money” and many other translocal women I spoke to agreed with this sentiment. This binding of love and marriage is a rather new phenomenon for the Vietnamese. Scholars of Vietnamese studies have noted that, even though
love is not a new concept for Vietnamese, conceptualizations of what love is, who is loveable, and when love is appropriate are malleable and shaped by changing historical, political, and social contexts (Phinney 2008, Pettus 2003, Soucy 2001). Love has always been used throughout Vietnamese history for the purposes of governing the population (Phinney 2008, Pettus 2003).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Vietnamese intellectuals under the influence of French romanticism viewed individual romantic love as an important component of the modern self. By the 1940s and 1950s, romantic love was condemned as “bourgeois” and replaced by revolutionary calls for love of the country. From the 1960s to the mid 1980s, before Đổi Mới, the Vietnamese Communist party promoted socialist love in the construction of a socialist subject that was progressive and free from feudal rules. Phinney (2008) remarks that this was the first time in Vietnamese history that love became a legal basis for marriage. Socialist love was also strictly governed by the state that set new criteria for desirable and appropriate mates based on class labeling (Phinney 2008). Since Đổi Mới (Renovation) in 1986, the Vietnamese state focused on nuclear families as the foundation of the society. Vietnamese people are told to shift their object of affection from building a socialist nation to taking care of their own families and themselves. The happy, healthy, and wealthy families will ensure the success of the nation as a whole. As such, the Vietnamese state, as many states elsewhere, has appealed to the essentialist notions of maternal love and put the responsibilities of creating happy, healthy, and wealthy families on women (Phinney 2008, Pettus 2003, Soucy 2001). Ironically, the essentialization of maternal love reinforces the gender inequalities that the Vietnamese state worked hard to eradicate during the previous period. Soucy aptly summarizes the problematic notions of love in Vietnam:
“To put it bluntly, women no longer serve their man because that is what women are supposed to do under the patriarchal system. Women now serve their man because it is an expression of their love” (Soucy 2001, 41).

Love has become a pivotal concept that marks a break from arranged marriages and patriarchal feudality. More importantly, as shown through the shifting notions of love in the last 100 years, love has come to be an essential component of a modern self, be it a “bourgeois” intellectual, revolutionary, or socialist self. The discourses of romantic love are often directed at younger women with rampant representations of romantic love in the media and pop culture. Soucy (2001) documented how the magazines, music CDs, and karaoke songs in Vietnam take love as the main theme and reinforce how love is integral to marriage and happiness. Moreover, the unprecedented rise of South Korean soap operas throughout Asia, including Vietnam, has explicitly connected love and youth culture through romantic love stories between young, good-looking Korean couples (Creighton 2009, Chua and Iwabuchi 2008).

In Hài Thành, love alone is an unswayable reason for marriages deemed undesirable. Parents feel that they have no say in their children’s choices of spouses because “the kids say they love each other.” Parents in Hài Thành acknowledge that the times have changed and thus are very afraid of being blamed for taking away their children’s happiness. They will, contrary to the traditions of arranged marriages in the past, let their children marry to whomever they proclaim their love no matter the distance or differences in ethnicity or social class. Interestingly enough, love is often declared by translocal women, not transnational women, when talking about their marriages. Translocal women use love (often at first sight) to defend themselves against accusations of money seeking. When asked why they married Hài Thành men after only knowing them for a short time, many translocal women responded: I loved him at first sight.
Love, as the sole reason, is enough to shut down any public display of skepticism and disapproval of people involved (from the couples themselves to their parents). Moreover, translocal women take love as a critique of transnational women as demonstrated by Trinh’s further explanation:

“I don’t know about others, but I marry a Vietnamese man because it is based on love. That way, our marriage and happiness will be long-lasting. Marriages with Korean men have no love. They only like each other when they see each other. Then when they live together, they will start to see the differences that drive both of them crazy.”

The critique here is not just of the corruption of love by money as discussed in the previous chapter, but also of marriages without love, which is not acceptable because love has become the foundation for marriages and personhood in Vietnam. I suspect that love has a weighty significance in Hải Thành because their rural location often puts them in a position of “backwardness.” By insisting on love, the young people in Hải Thành and their parents show that they indeed do belong to the category of a modern Vietnamese. It is also a way for translocal women to indicate their differences from transnational women.

Identity and Morality

One can interpret these moral discourses and critiques as translocal women challenging the hierarchy between them and transnational women: by establishing themselves as proper Vietnamese women as opposed to the corrupted and loose transnational women. In these discourses, the translocal women notice and express their differences from transnational women, saying what they dislike about transnational women, and vocalizing their “good” desires (having

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56 The gossip, however, may still persist, but privately.
loving families and dressing nicely but properly). They imply that they may not be as rich as the transnational women, but they are morally better.

However, I believe that the main intention of revealing these moral discourses is not necessarily to challenge or contest the social order because these discourses are not widely shared. Translocal women, as mentioned previously, are relatively isolated. They have very few friends and stay at home most of the time. Thus, they cannot talk about transnational women with many people. Moreover, most of them have sisters-in-law who are transnational women, restricting them from speaking badly of transnational women at home, especially in front of their parents-in-law. The only people that they may speak to about transnational women are their husbands, their cousins (if they also marry Hải Thành men), or to me in private. So what is the point of these moral discourses? I believe that they serve two purposes: 1) to maintain and better care for their relationships with their husbands, and thus, 2) to morally accept themselves and to be comfortable with others.

If morality is first and foremost about sustaining and caring for relationships that matter to the self (Zigon 2014a), then translocal women, through moral discourse, remind their husbands that they are the moral wives, unlike transnational women. They are modest, hard-working, faithful, and chaste as opposed to the loose and lazy transnational women. They are the wives who will not run away or run after money, who love their husbands and their children and who work hard to take care of the family. They are wives that husbands can trust and love, especially when the husbands are often away from home. Such trust is so important that most translocal women rationalize their husbands’ restrictions on them as helping them stay true to who they are and not be influenced by the transnational women. For example, many fishermen do not allow their wives to have cell phones (only landlines) or smartphones (because they can
get on Facebook pages of transnational women and adopt their lifestyles). They also check the call and text history of their wives’ phones. Most translocal women are not allowed to wear clothes that show their legs or arms in public, to wear bikinis when going to the beach, or even more extremely, to work outside of Hải Thành. Translocal women accept all these restrictions, saying that they do not want to be like transnational women, but their acceptance seems to be only within the confines of their marriages. Some told me they would be different if they were not married. A translocal woman’s remark on how I dressed elaborates my point:

Because it is so hot in Vietnam, I often wore Aladdin pants (loose pants with tight elastic bands at the bottom) all summer long. One day, Hạnh, a translocal woman who married Uncle Tú’s son, asked me why I wore such pants. I think at that point, she was comfortable enough with me to speak candidly:

“You wear clothes just like me; they are so ancient (cổ). People who are single like you should wear tight jeans and shirts. That will make you look modern. Maybe showing a bit of your skin too. If I were not married, I would have dressed like that. Look at my sister(-in-law) Mơ, she is divorced, she can wear whatever she wants.”

Her comment surprised me because until then, I was not aware that modern clothes in Hải Thành meant jeans and tight, revealing clothes. I always opted for loose and comfortable clothes because I never felt the need to assert my “modernity.” I had successfully relied on my social status as a city person educated in the U.S. to gain respect from people in Hải Thành and therefore, was not restricted by the local norms of modern dressing for women. Her remark also conveys how my understanding of modern dressing is different from the local understanding. Hạnh, like most other translocal women, does not have my social and cultural capital of education and urban background and looks to clothes as a way to interpret class standing. She
saw me, a single woman who chose to dress in a way that is viewed as wrong, as puzzling and probably as wasting opportunities.

In this case for translocal women, clothes are a visible reminder of their subjection, lack of power, and imprisonment of wishes within the patriarchal family. The moment a woman is married, she is under the power of her husband and his family and loses her freedom to represent herself. Therefore, for translocal women, moral discourses and practices (like what to wear, who to call, what to do) are aimed at earning and maintaining the trust of their husbands, thereby strengthening the relationships with him. That’s what they believe to be moral themselves. This belief, of course, fits well with the current construction of Vietnamese femininity that makes women responsible for their family happiness through moral expectations of serving the husbands and self-sacrifice (Khuat, Bui, and Le 2012, Pettus 2003, Rydstrom 2003, Gammeltoft 1999).

In addition to the care of conjugal relationships, moral discourses are important in allowing translocal women to accept themselves and be comfortable with others who are different. Zigon (2012) argues that what is important about narratives is not their meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacity but the very act of speaking with others so as to charitably live through the moral problem with them. To him, the act of talking is a process of working to feel comfortable in the new form of life into which one has been thrown and to find ways to once again be with oneself and others. Moral narratives and discourses are, therefore, more about anxiety reduction than meaning-making (Zigon 2012). This fits well with my findings among translocal women, who, even though not conversing directly with transnational women, use moral discourses to reduce the anxiety of their marginalization and social inferiority to transnational and local women. More importantly, moral discourses are about accepting who
they are and their social positions (they may not have as much money but they are morally better) so that they can keep going in Hải Thành: living and interacting with others who are financially and socially different. Therefore, moral discourses, as conflicting, personal and interpersonal as they are in Hải Thành, are crucial to understand the fluidity of social relations that is based not on shared and mutual understanding, but on attempts to accept oneself in order to be in the world with others. This is crucial because in the case of translocals in Hải Thành, the trauma of migration might entail the loss of one’s very sense of identity. Along with the refashioning of bodies, the sense of self must also be reconstituted and reacquired in a new place. This sense of self is recreated and renegotiated not only through moral discourses but also through other practices (such as how translocal women conduct themselves while living with their in-laws), a topic that I will focus at length in the next chapter using Hạnh, uncle Tú’s daughter-in-law, as an example.

**The Resilience of Small Dreams**

Translocal women have come to Hải Thành through marriages in hopes of better lives and, like their female counterparts, the transnational women, their hopes are realized for some and dashed for others. Chung had thought that her life would be better when she married her husband and moved from the poor mountainous area in Bắc Giang province to Hải Thành. However, her husband turned out to be an alcoholic who could not keep his fishing job, shoved his anger on his family by beating up his wife and son, and lived off his wife’s meager income until he died prematurely in his 40s due to liver failure. Chung openly admired transnational women, including both their beauty and what she was told about their “easy” lives abroad. When I asked her what kept her from going to one of those selection days to find a foreign husband, she
told me it was her fate (số). She said she had proven to her in-law family her devotion by having put up with her husband. Her parents-in-law were very supportive of her and would not oppose if she remarried while her son, now 18, flat out told her she should marry a Korean man because she would then be able to send him money to support him. To him, that was the only way they would both be out of poverty. But Chung believed that she was destined to suffer, proven by her broken dream and her miserable marriage. Therefore, she should not try to change her life (i.e. marrying a foreign man) because adversity had sealed her fate. Unlike the cases of transnational women, like Hoa in chapter IV, whose past experience opened up the possibility for change, Chung’s past closed the door and kept her living perpetually in suffering and longing.

The day I went to say goodbye to her before leaving the field, it was raining. I stopped by her little food stall by the elementary school near lunch time and she insisted that I go to her house to have a proper farewell talk. I told her to get on the back of my motorbike and I would get her home but she refused. She turned around to ask her neighbor to look after the stall for her, hopped on her grey and rusted bicycle, and said to me, “Let’s go.” I looked at her from behind, riding her bicycle, in the rain, bare headed, until I realized I needed to follow her. In that very moment, I was made aware of her acceptance of life and resilience.

Trinh is luckier than Chung. She feels loved by her husband even though once in a while, she has to put up with her mother-in-law’s lectures on how to become a good (i.e., Kinh) wife because she is an ethnic Thai woman. Nguyệt’s parents-in-law are working near Cát Bà island and her husband is also away on fishing trips. She told me she did not have to worry about money, and even though she would love to have her husband and family not so frequently absent, her two children kept her busy and contented.
And finally, there was An. Along with Chung, she was the poorest of all translocal women I had met. Her husband is the oldest of three sons and all three of them, as well as their wives and children, live together on the same plot of land with their parents. Her own family has a small private room that fits a queen size bed, a small wooden cabinet, an old TV, a desk where her daughter studied every night, and a fan. Sometimes when I came to see her in the evening during the hot summer, we sat together on the floor in the heat because the only fan was saved for her daughter sleeping on the bed. An’s husband is a fisherman who is away most of the time. An said her husband cares for her and their daughter: whenever he is home, he does not go hang out with his friends but stays at home to cook and clean for An as well as picking up the daughter from school and playing with her. He told An that they did not need to have another child because raising another child with an absent husband would take a toll on her. For him, a daughter is enough even though he is the oldest son and expected to have a son to continue the family lineage.

An explained that her daughter eats three times a day with her parents-in-law for free. An also has breakfast, which in rural Vietnam is a main meal, with them everyday without having to make any monetary contribution. She gets to keep all the salary she earns from the sweatshop. She hopes that her savings and her husband’s earnings combined will pay off their share of the loan they took for building a boat in two years. Then she can work on fulfilling her dream:

*I want to build a cute little house for us that has everything. It does not have to be expensive stuff but I really like a white fridge, a white rice cooker, a new TV, and a red scooter. I will paint the house pink and the windows white. We will have a front yard and I will put a lot of plants there. Then I will hang decoration string lights in front of the house and a few pots of orchids. When my husband is home, we can all sit and drink tea under the lights.*
An’s dream is probably the most colorful and cheerful of all the women’s dreams I had heard in Hải Thành. Her stories, along with those of Chung, Trinh, and Nguyệt, provide a different side of their lives from displacement and isolation. Each in their own way has found the courage or acceptance to live without regrets or complaints. There are of course other stories of unhappy translocal women who suffer or who have left. Together, they create a more complicated picture of migration and life transformation rather than the assumption of a causal relationship between the two. The fact that they are women and that their migration happens due to marriage demonstrates how gender plays a significant role in shaping the outcome of migration. As we shall see more clearly through the life of Hạnh, uncle Tú’s daughter-in-law, in the next chapter, gender constructions both produce and become products of the relationship between migration and social class.

Moreover, in Hải Thành, seeing marriage and migration as moral experiences organized and realized in moral discourses provides insights into how people live and interact in a morally ambiguous world where migration, subjectivity and social worth are unevenly woven. The focus on diverse trajectories of migration also sheds light on the hierarchy of mobilities that exists in Vietnam, and on the differentiations in status, personhood and rurality that are implicated in these migrations. By paying attention to these complex dynamics of mobility, morality, and place we can understand how marriage, migration, and social worth intermesh, like the often tattered and sometimes empty nets of the fishermen of Hải Thành.
Part IV

THE ILLNESS OF PRIDE: MOBILITY/MOVEMENT CONTESTED
Chapter VII
A Host Family Story
The Illness of Pride: Expectations and Disappointments of Transnational Movement

A Different Reality

This is a story of my host family that, similar to most others in this commune, exhibits all different kinds of movement: those of boatpeople, transnational and translocal marriages, and fishermen. Uncle Tú, as I fondly called him, now in his early 70s, worked for 35 years with my uncle at Hà Long Canned Food Company in Hải Phòng. He was one of the very few Hải Thành residents that managed to find a state-owned job in the city. His family did not move but remained in Hải Thành and he visited home every weekend when still working. Since his retirement, he stays in Hải Thành. My uncle has not seen him much but they keep in touch via telephone. My uncle said uncle Tú has a daughter who married a foreign man, a sister who fled as a boatperson and settled down in Japan, and a younger brother who was the Chairman of the commune at the time. I surmised that since uncle Tú had both foreign and political connections he must have been doing rather well financially. Then I came to meet him at his house and surprises awaited.

Uncle Tú’s house was small and plain, located modestly at the end of a hamlet. The front metal gate had rusted away and small pieces had fallen off. The faded yellow walls were weathered and taken over by mold and dirt, creating dark gray patches all over, which made me feel like parts of the house had been abandoned for years. The house had only one floor and, in contrast to many other fancy houses of Hải Thành, was plain with no exterior decorations. At the
center of living space inside was an outsized ancestor altar and a worn out table and a set of wooden benches. Two beds were positioned at two other sides of the room and the family’s only TV, a small 13 inch, was on a cabinet to the right. Uncle Tú was wearing an undershirt when he ushered me in. He made tea and poured some in our cups. I noticed that the teapot and cups did not match and both of them were chipped, a few cups had even lost their handles. We talked for two hours and I stayed for lunch afterwards. Uncle Tú was warm and welcoming.

Figure 7.1 The front gate and a room in Uncle Tú’s house

Figure 7.2 Uncle Tú standing in front of the main living space
Six months later, at the same table, Uncle Tú nostalgically recalled his past. *Our family had the first of everything in this community. The first TV. The first fridge. The first motorbike. When I bought that TV, the community kids followed me from the store, cheering all the way home. That night, we screened a movie in the front yard and all the neighbors came to watch it.*

His family's prominence in the early 1990s was not surprising. At a time when people were still suffering after the strict communist command economy, he was among the very few that held a steady salaried job in the city. Besides all the appliances, he also used to own a piece of land.
right on the main street. Uncle Tú’s family was not rich, but his was the better among the poor. Over time, Hải Thành transformed into a prosperous rural commune thanks to the remittances from transnationals and the fishing industry. More people could afford to buy TVs and fridges and build bigger houses. But as others replaced their old TVs with flat-screens, bought Honda motorbikes and upgraded them to scooters, Uncle Tú’s first of everything remained the first; he had no second or third.

His younger brother, on the other hand, had made it to the position of a Commune Chairman (chủ tịch xã) after 20 years in politics, a position that he held for ten years until he was forced to resign in 2013 amid an intense land conflict. He had built a sizeable two-floor house on the main road opposite the commune administration building, right at the hub of everything. His other house sat next to Uncle Tú’s house in the hamlet but was left vacant for years, waiting to be sold when the price was right. In Vietnamese, there is a common saying that “If one person has a position of power, his/her whole lineage can benefit from it” (một người làm quan cả họ được hưởng). However, Uncle Tú, well-known in the commune for being upright and too frank, looked down on and refrained from interacting with his powerful brother. He often mocked his brother as “king of the village” (vua làng), implying the limitless and unaccountable power that his brother had. I once witnessed Uncle Tú accusing his brother publicly in a yearly lineage anniversary of being a “corrupted evil person” (thằng ăn hỏi lở mồm lạc xạ). Ruffling his influential brother’s feathers also means that Uncle Tú did not get along well with his other siblings who often sided with the chairman. I attach below his family tree to make it easier to follow the stories of Uncle Tú’s family.
Another successful member of the family is one of their sisters, Ms. Liên, who joined the boatpeople migration in the 1980s and ended up in Japan. She is the family’s only boatperson but has done well enough to build one of the first modern two-floor houses on the main street. She paid her sister, Ms. Hy, to live there and look after the house. When I came to Hải Thành for fieldwork, Uncle Tú arranged for me to stay on the second floor of that house. He said his house was noisy with children and I should have a quiet space for study. I did not have to pay rent because Ms. Liên was not there but I offered to pay for utilities. On the first day of my moving in, Ms. Hy immediately appointed herself as my “mother.” I found it strange and could not figure out why she called herself my “mother” until four months later when I finally understood what she saw in me. It started with a story about Ms. Liên and her money and gifts.

**Expectations and Broken Dreams**

Uncle Tú’s father died during the American War and his mother died of old age in the 90s. When she was very sick, she moved in to live with his family. The rumor lingered among his siblings, till the day I went to Hải Thành 15 years later, that Uncle Tú wanted to take care of...
her so that his family could hoard all the money that Ms. Liên sent back to support their mother. On the other hand, Uncle Tú said their mother was bedridden and no one else was willing to care for her. *None of them wanted to do the difficult job of feeding, washing, and changing her.* The money Ms. Liên sent, he claimed, was not much (300,000 VND or around 15 USD per month) and no other siblings contributed any money because they assumed Ms. Liên’s remittances must have been big. This assumption speaks to the belief that *Việt Kiều* are rich and if they are rich, of course they will remit *substantially*. Consequently, family members were often competing and jealous of each other with regards to how much remittance they received.

Being the family’s first *Việt Kiều*, Ms. Liên also sent gifts back every year to her family. The year I was in Hải Thành, she first sent all her siblings new down coats for the winter. Then all her nieces and nephews received theirs. In a final batch were coats for the nieces-in-law and nephews-in-law for a total of at least 12 coats. The order of sending signals a clear concentric hierarchy in receiving her support: siblings first, then their children, and lastly, their children-in-law. She also sent some miscellaneous items, such as medicinal balms, multivitamins, and ceramic knives. I witnessed her relatives fight among each other for the gifts and one of the strategies they used was to stake a claim of closeness and entitlement. For example, Ms. Hy asserted that she was Ms. Liên’s sister and she took care of her house so she should receive more gifts than her other siblings and cousins. It dawned on me then that Ms. Hy immediately claimed to be my “mother” because in her mind, I had been living in the U.S. for ten years so I must have money and gifts too. How could I not give them to my “mother”? I kept some polite distance from her even though we lived in the same house. After Ms. Hy found out later by asking around that I had been eating with Uncle Tú’s family, she was visibly anxious. She invited me to eat with her for three days in a row, laying on a heavy guilt trip. My turndown made her even more
worried that she would have to share my “gifts” with Uncle Tú’s family. When she visited Uncle Tú’s house one day, she said in a joking voice to everyone that because I lived with her, I was “hers,” not “theirs.”

This double assumption of wealth earning and giving made me annoyed but I was not a local and only had to live with it for a year. However, for most Hải Thành residents, it has created pressure on both transnationals and their families back in the community to perform “affluence” accordingly, something that local people refer to as “the status of Kiều is burdening” (cái tiếng Kiều là nặng lâm). Uncle Tú’s family perfectly exemplifies this heavy burden.

After successfully building her new life in Japan, Ms. Liên was in a position to help her siblings more. She promised to Châu, Uncle Tú’s youngest daughter, that if Châu took good care of her mother, she would help Châu migrate to Japan. But for some reasons unknown to many, the daughter of the chairman was sponsored to move to Japan, not Châu. In anger, the nineteen-year-old Châu decided to marry a foreign man to prove to everyone that she could go abroad on her own. She met her Taiwanese husband literally on the road, not through a matchmaker, and agreed to marry him soon after in 2003. Uncle Tú told me that he approved of the marriage because unlike many other Taiwanese men, his son-in-law was accompanied by his own parents when he went looking for a Vietnamese spouse. Uncle Tú said it meant they were a good family who cared for each other. Then he sighed. *Who would have known the truth then?* Châu’s sister said the family felt they were cheated. Châu had an elaborate wedding celebration at home with all the relatives attending. Uncle Tú made me watch the wedding on tape with him and Châu’s sister, Mơ, so that I saw how great a wedding I could have and was inspired to get married soon. I was surprised at how much gold jewelry her mother-in-law put on Châu. The wedding and the
gold Châu received evidenced to everyone that Châu was married into a good well-to-do family and made Uncle Tú very proud. He was smiling contentedly in the video.

Unexpectedly, Mơ commented: *All the gold was fake.*

*Fake?* I asked in atonishment.

Mơ: *Yes. All throwaway imitation stuff. Even the wedding ring was fake. Curse them (the family-in-law) all. Châu thought they were real – look how broadly she smiled.*

Linh: *How did she know they were fake?*

Mơ: *After a long time. She needed to sell some for money and was told the truth by the jeweler.*

In a way, Châu’s own marriage played out almost exactly the same as the jewelry. She thought she married into a good family but what she received was just an imitation. Her mother-in-law turned out to be an abusive alcoholic and her husband a lazy gambler. He was a driver but owed so much money that they had to sell his car. He was unemployed for a while before finding a factory job. Châu was the main breadwinner for a few years, supporting the family, including their two sons. She worked at home, sewing shoes on contract for a Taiwanese company and earned a meager income. Unlike the stereotypes of *Việt Kiều*, Châu was poor. Yet, she still tried to send money home to her parents, usually before the lunar new year. Multiple family members told me that the sum was about 20 million VND (around 1,000 USD) per year. That amount, unfortunately, was spent not only on her parents but also her struggling siblings.

Uncle Tú has four children. The oldest daughter, Thái, was married to a local businessman and opened a cellphone store. They were doing well financially until her husband went into significant debt and found it impossible to make enough to pay off even the interest on
the mortgage. They departed for South Korea in 2014 out of desperation under visitors’ visas sponsored by their daughter who married a Korean man. They both have been working 14 hours in factories to pay off their debts. The second daughter, Mơ, divorced from a fisherman and moved back to live with Uncle Tú and his wife. She set up a small food-stall near the commune administration building to sell grilled corn in the winter and drinks in the summer. The son, Thạch, was a fisherman but stopped because he could not handle the hardship. Now he was unemployed and, along with his wife and two daughters, also lived with his parents. Thạch’s wife, a translocal woman, sells eggs and bread for breakfast in the market to earn some money. Uncle Tú and his wife had to support not only their children but also their grandchildren. The whole family of seven relied on his small monthly pension of three million VND (150 USD), limited income from the women’s street-side food stalls, and Châu’s yearly remittances. Despite their financial difficulties, Uncle Tú’s family still has a designation of “family that has Kiều” (gia đình có Kiều) and this reputation has real ramifications.

The Pride Illness

One fall day near Mid-Autumn festival, we were waiting for Ms. Thơ to come home to have dinner when Châu called. Mơ answered the phone and started updating Châu on how the family was doing:

*We are struggling here, not enough food to eat. The front gate is severely broken, the boundary walls are about to collapse. Thái and her husband just arrived in Korea and he made 40 million VND (2,000 USD) per month under the table. My friend, Lan, her sister in Taiwan makes really good money. Her sister just sent her 17 million VND (850 USD) for her facial surgery. It’s harvesting time now and mom has left since two o’clock to glean rice left behind.*
After a while, uncle Tú’s wife, Ms. Thơ, came home and Mơ handed the phone to her. I heard her denying that she went out to glean. Then Châu probably asked if she still had some money because she responded: *I still have enough for a few more months.*

Mơ immediately said out loud so that Châu could hear her on the phone: *All (the money) is gone; we only have one bill left.*

Ms. Thơ corrected Mơ: *Don’t worry about the money. I can still manage; don’t worry. You can send some when you have money.*

Mơ: *Send money home; the more (you send), the less (we still feel) (càng nhiều càng ít).*

Châu then likely asked about the boundary walls because Ms. Thơ explained: *The walls have some pieces broken off but we can wait till Mơ goes to Korea and sends money home to fix them. Have you heard anything from the new work place? If they accept you, you should work for them.*

At dinner, Uncle Tú looked at me and asked rhetorically: *Did you see the pride illness (bệnh sỹ)? Châu is a Kiều so she did not want her mother to go gleaning or our house to run down. That’s not acceptable because we are a Kiều’s house!*

Ms. Thơ protested: *I went out to glean but I biked all the way to Hải Thái to do it. Moreover, I went on the back roads so nobody knows who I am.*

Ms. Thơ went on to talk about how Châu wanted to work for a factory so that she could earn a bit more. She had been putting aside money in order to pay a fee of 1000 USD for Thạch to work in Taiwan as a migrant laborer. Châu insisted to her that: “*Our family cannot keep going down like this.*”

This exchange reveals the extent to which Kiều has become almost synonymous in Hải Thành with “money.” Ms. Hy always told me that Uncle Tú had plenty of money thanks to his
daughter Châu. Mơ questioned why Châu did not make as much money as her friend’s sister or her brother-in-law and why she did not send more money home. The expectation comes from not only within but also outside of the family that Kiều will transform their family lives. When people fall short of this expectation, like Châu and her family, they suffer from an illness called “pride illness.” This illness affects them mentally and behaviorally. Châu felt ashamed that her parents’ house was in a bad shape, that her brother was unemployed, and that community people would judge her because her family was going down and not up. Her mother had to go to another commune to glean to prevent neighbors from recognizing her. Mơ constantly demanded from Châu, without much empathy for Châu’s difficult life in Taiwan, so that her family could be like her friend’s family. Similar to the externally fancy but empty houses described in the previous chapter, Châu and her family felt the need to keep up a façade, and in so doing, they ironically maintain the myth that Viêt Kiều must be rich.

Studies about Vietnamese transnationals and the perceptions of them in Vietnam explain why Viêt Kiều are believed to be well-off. Ivan Small (2012b) argues that for most Vietnamese being overseas means more than just geographic distance but also economic differences and imagined opportunities only afforded by idealized capitalist systems. Money is imagined to accumulate in a way that is impossible in Vietnam (See also Harms 2011, Thai 2011, 2008, Dang 2000, Thomas 1999). Thai (2014) adds that the invisibility of the manual and heavy labor that many Viêt Kiều perform in their new countries in contrast to the heavy spending during return visits to Vietnam creates an illusion of money being easily earned and spent. But while there has been much research on transnationals’ return visits to show off their new status, especially through the way they dress and spend money, little has been written about how their own families also struggle to live up to the designation of Kiều. I believe one reason for that lack is
the focus on Vietnamese who have migrated a long time ago and successfully sponsored their immediate family members overseas. However, for newly migrated transnationals, like Châu or many other women from Hải Thành who married East Asian men, their migration has not yet resulted in the migration of their family. Their social status is evaluated not only on how well-dressed they are and how much they spend on return visits but also on how financially well-off their parental families are. In other words, the financial well-being of their families has become the extension of transnationals’ status. Therefore, the pride illness affects not only the Việt Kiều themselves but also their families.

Not Competing for Gifts

When Thái, Uncle Tú’s oldest daughter, and her husband went to South Korea, they left behind their eight-year-old son, Sơn, in the care of her father-in-law. He had promised them that he would move into their house to take care of Sơn. Sơn was a chubby and rather spoiled kid because he was the only son and his parents used to be wealthy. He was not taught any manners and would demand anything that he wanted. Every time he visited Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ, he fought with the other grandchildren over candies and toys. I saw him at Uncle Tú’s house three weeks after his parents departed in July; he looked a little sad and had lost some weight. When I gave the children some biscuits, he took half of them and told me he had not had any biscuits for a long time. Ms. Thơ sighed to me: “His grandfather cannot care for him as well as his mother.”

Two weeks later, I was having lunch with Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ when Thái called her mother to ask if Sơn could come and live with them. It turned out that her father-in-law did not stay in their house but came back to his home most of the time. Thái said she was worried that Sơn did not eat well and did not do his homework. She asked her mother to take care of him so
that she and her husband could focus on working in Korea without worrying about their son. Ms. Thơ told her to stay calm. Then continued: “When the new academic year begins, I will come and ask Sơn’s teacher if he has done his homework. For now, since you had already asked Sơn’s paternal grandfather, you should let it be. If Sơn needs anything or if he is hungry, he can come here for help. He is our grandson, we will never shoo him away.”

I was surprised at Ms. Thơ’s response so I asked both of them why they did not take Sơn. Ms. Thơ replied that if they take him now, they will offend his grandfather. Not satisfied, I further asked: “He is just an in-law; how come an offense to him is more important than your own grandson?” Ms. Thơ kept repeating the same answer until Uncle Tú finally said: “If we take him now, we will be said to steal his “work” (công), steal his gifts and his shares (cuộp quà, cuộp phần).” Uncle’s Tú answer reflects the general belief that caring for Sơn will ensure rewards from Thái and her husband. It also resonates well with how his relatives believed he must be rich for having hoarded all the money Ms. Liên sent to take care of their mother and why Ms. Hy was worried when she found out I ate with Uncle Tú’s family. As Hải Thành residents compete for Kiều’s remittances, they seem to forget about building and maintaining familial and communal relationships that are often seen to be the bedrock of Vietnamese rural life. In this particular case, the expectations of gifts reinforce the heavy burden of the Kiều status and the pride illness that, sadly, prevented a young child from being cared for properly. Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ finally sent Mơ out to take care of Sơn, but it was after another month of Sơn being neglected. Sometimes, Sơn still came to eat with us. He had become a bit more subdued and less demanding; I figured it was because his parents were no longer there to fulfill his demands. At times he seemed sad to me, but on an eight-year-old face, the sadness looked like an expression of confusion. Or maybe it was both.
As I explained in the previous chapter, Uncle Tú’s family, like others in Hải Thành, struggles with the changing socio-economic conditions of Vietnam that have made it difficult for rural people to earn a living and respect. Many have chosen to leave the community in search of stable financial lives and self-worth. Unfortunately, the stories of Uncle Tú’s family show that physical movement does not always lead to upward social mobility. Yet, both transnationals and their families actively maintain that assumption despite the difficulties of living with its heavy burden and the pride illness. Such an assumption of success continues to nurture the hopes of life transformation in Hải Thành and, consequently, contributes to the massive outmigration of its young women, like Châu, in transnational marriages to realize their dreams. However, what happens when a Hải Thành woman, despite her desire, fails to get married transnationally? In the next chapter, I will discuss the life story of Uncle Tú’s second daughter Mơ and her unsuccessful attempts to find a foreign spouse to demonstrate that the marriage migration of women from rural Vietnam cannot be separated from issues of beauty, age, and morality.
Chapter VIII

A Daughter Story

Aging in Timepass: Waiting for a Better Life

Thirty-nine-year-old Московск is the second daughter of uncle T réuss. When I first met her in 2011, she had divorced her husband more than a year before and had moved back to live with Uncle T réuss and Ms. Thurtlei. Московск told me that her husband, a fisherman, had an affair with a female fish retailer and wanted to keep the retailer as a small wife (vợ nhỏ). Московск did not want to share her husband with another woman and was willing to walk away empty-handed, giving up even her children, just to divorce him. Their three children, one son and two daughters ranging from 10 to 20 were given under full custody to Московск’s husband and his family, the norm in Vietnamese patriarchal society. Московск swore that she would never step into their house again and her children had to come see her at Uncle T réuss and Ms. Thurtlei’s house. Shortly after their divorce, Московск’s ex-husband married the fish retailer. Since moving back to her parents’ house, Москов earned a living by setting up a small street-side food-stall across from the commune administration building to sell drinks in the evening. This chapter documents Москов’s life and struggle shortly after she moved back to live with Uncle T réuss and Mrs. Thurtlei. Here I discuss the ideas of waiting and life suspension as Московск faces issues of age, expectation and entitlement, and gender relations.

57 Timepass is an Indian word that indicates the action of passing the time often aimlessly or unproductively.
Age and Beauty

Mơ liked to look pretty and paid attention to her appearance. Mơ’s sister-in-law, Hạnh, told me that Mơ used to look old-fashioned (cô) but since her divorce, she had remade herself. In the summer, Mơ usually wore mini shorts, mini skirts, or short dresses. In the winter, she wore dresses with high boots and pantyhoses. Mơ knew how to put on a “modern” outfit (i.e. jeans and tight clothes): I once saw her wearing a nice pair of skinny jeans on orange wedges, a long black Mango shirt under a short denim jacket with an embossed name necklace. Another time she surprised me when showing up with a pair of big round eyeglasses even though she was not near-sighted. It turned out that eyeglasses were “in,” according to Mơ, and she had to buy a pair with non-prescription lenses. She also made sure to paint her face meticulously before going out. Once Mơ had to go to a pagoda at four in the morning and since she could not turn on the light so as not to disturb her parents’ sleep, she put on makeup the night before. She combed and tied her hair, painted her lips, powdered her face, and wore eyelash extensions. She later complained to me that she could not sleep well that night because she had to lay still for fear of smudging her makeup. Whenever I happened to be in the house during or after her makeup sessions, Mơ would often ask “Do I look pretty?” I said yes and she tittered like a small child.

Julia Twigg’s research shows that clothes and fashion offer a sense of renewal, which explains Mơ’s feelings of excitement and joy related to feeling pretty. Dressing is a way to re-present and enhance oneself and one’s mood (Twigg 2013). It makes sense then that Mơ turned to fashion after her divorce. Her effort at re-presentation, as I will discuss in more detail later, is shaped by Mơ’s social position as a rural, working-class divorcee and reflects Edmonds’ argument that beauty capital is highly gendered and classed (that is, when a female is divorced, 58

58 As I described in chapter VII, in the main living space two beds lay on opposite ends. Mơ slept in one bed and her parents slept in another.
uneducated, and poor, physical attractiveness is the only resource that brings her social status and a sense of self worth) (Edmonds 2010). However, Mơ’s appearance was often seen by other Hải Thành people as a gendered transgression and, not surprisingly, garnered both admiration and criticism.

One day, after I had dinner with Uncle Tú’s family and Mơ had left to tend to her food-stall, Hạnh whispered to me as I washed dishes by the rainwater well: “Mơ wears such revealing clothes that our neighbor complained to me. The man who sells furniture across from Mơ’s stall said Mơ wore so short a skirt that he could see even her pubic hair. Then Hạnh continued: Mơ wears clothes that are only acceptable on young girls. Since she is much older, she should not wear anything so short. I told her that but she said it was none of my business. Grandma (Ms. Thơ) also talked to her but she insisted that if she liked to wear short clothes, it was her business. She also said that she would yell at whoever dared to speak ill of her. But I know she cannot do that because if she confronts them, they will shame her. Mơ used to wear full-length clothing when she was still married. Here, women who are stylish must be either single or divorced.”

Hạnh’s remark indicates two important and intertwined factors controlling a woman’s body in Hải Thành: marriage (or more generally, relationships with men) and age. A young girl is usually single and as a single female, she is free to wear whatever she wants to attract men. But once she is married, she should not draw other people’s, especially men’s, attention.

Spending much time with Mơ, I knew for a fact that she wore undershorts under her short dress. Therefore, the furniture seller lied about seeing her pubic hair. His false statement, however, does express the problem of slut shaming and how women’s appearance is used to control their sexuality, implied in his mentioning pubic hair. Even more explicitly, Mơ’s father and brother both scolded and called her “prostitute” (đĩ) many times due to the way she dressed. Feminists
have shown that slut shaming is a product of double gendered standards: males are expected to be overtly sexual while women should police themselves and other women to remain minimally sexual (Tarrant 2016, Mendes 2015, Tanenbaum 2015, Silva and Mendes 2015). Slut shaming is a form of judgment when a female does not adhere to feminine norms. Interestingly, a female is called slut usually not because she is sexually active. Studies by Tanenbaum (2015) and Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) demonstrate that often this is because she maintains her agency and/or because she is socially vulnerable. When a female is perceived to choose to violate feminine standards, she deserves her slutty reputation. Slut shaming also signals social class boundary as women of middle-class and upper class are seen as “classy” while those of lower-class are deemed “trashy” (Tanenbaum 2015, Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Mơ’s insistence on her own choice (that the way she dressed was her own business) coupled with her status as a rural working-class divorcee makes it easy for people to judge her as trashy.

However, it was precisely how Mơ kept her appearance that attracted men. Mơ was open about finding another man after her divorce. She went on dates, kept an active profile on Zalo, a popular messaging app in Vietnam, and met men both locally and in the city. During the time of my fieldwork, she had gone out with at least four men who were willing to pamper her with gifts and food for an extended period of time. Mơ uploaded new selfie photos on Zalo a couple of times a week and constantly received messages from strange men complimenting how beautiful she was. Similar to the young girls discussed in the previous chapter, her appearance helped her gain admiration from men even though such beauty practices had moral implications.

More importantly, Mơ enjoyed the attention that she received. It made her happy. She usually smiled and laughed when telling about her men: this guy or that guy was pursuing her, that a guy would threaten to disturb her food-stall if she did not answer his call or go out with
him. Mơ once pulled me aside as soon as I arrived at the house for lunch to tell me that a guy frightened her last night. *It was very late, around 11.30. I was cleaning up (my food stall) and packing up my stuff to go home when a drunken guy came and sat next to me because he said I was so pretty. Nobody was around and I was terrified to death. Luckily, I just pushed him away and left.* I found it strange at the time that Mơ was giggling the whole time she recalled the incident. While she claimed to be afraid, she also appeared to be happy. The paradox of being afraid of men’s sexual assaults yet liking their sexual attention speaks to the power dynamics between men and women in Vietnam: women are subordinate to men and derive their sense of importance from men’s approval. The attention and sense of importance that Mơ received from men, as we shall see, is significant for Mơ who often felt that to the society she was a failure.

Not only was Mơ judged according to feminine standards, but also age standards. Hạnh remarked that Mơ’s clothes were for young girls. Mơ did indeed wear some clothes belonging to her twenty-year-old niece. After Thái (Mơ’s sister)’s oldest daughter married and migrated to South Korea, Mơ texted her niece on Zalo to ask whether she could use clothes her niece left behind. Hạnh’s comment suggests that even though Mơ was a divorcee and had more freedom over what to wear, her clothes were still inappropriate because of her age. Age ordering in dress, as Twigg (2013) explains, is a common phenomenon across cultures. Clothes often express the progression of age and dressing appropriately with age is a practice rooted in cultures of aging. They often express negative ideas about age and aging, including lesser values of aging bodies and older people.

*These centre around the need to cover up, hiding the failure of the body to meet the youthful norm; the avoidance of clothes that make claims to the sexual allure in the form of low necks, short skirts or exaggerated fit; the adoption of self-effacing, darker styles that make no claim to visibility; the avoidance of highly fashionable dress, or girly, seductive, ultra-feminine styles.*
These “rules” are largely expressed negatively in terms of forms of dress no longer appropriate; there is little positive in these norms (Twigg 2013, 147)

The custom of age ordering in dress means that fashion, beauty, and femininity are implied in youthfulness and older people, especially women, need to retreat into invisibility, asexuality, and androgyny. From high art painting to modern media in Vietnam and around the globe, young females and their bodies represent the ideal of timeless feminine beauty and desirability (Twigg 2013, Taylor 2004a, Pollock 2003). Mơ herself was very aware of how femininity and sexuality are epitomized in young women. One evening in May, I went out with a young girl in Hải Thành for a drink. I told her to pick a place and she chose a street-side food stall near the stadium because she said the place was lively and fun. As we rode our motorbikes past Mơ’s food stall, the young local woman pointed out to me that Mơ’s place was empty and not fun because the seller (Mơ) was, in her words, “an old woman” (bà già). When we got to the food stall near the stadium, I immediately noticed how packed it was and how young and sexy all three sellers were. They wore tight mini skirts, high heels, and heavy makeup, which did not make much practical sense for a job that required a lot of walking and bending over (because the chairs and tables on the street were very low). But everyone there understood that it was their youthful beauty and overt sexuality that attracted customers, males and females alike. I stopped by Mơ’s place afterwards to help her clean up and go home. She asked where I had gone that night and when I told her about her competitors, she sighed and said: It was crowded because the girls are young and wear sexy clothes. A few days later, Mơ hired her own eighteen-year-old daughter, Mai, and Mai’s friend to be her assistants. I rode my bike by their place a week after and saw three women (Mơ, Mai, and Mai’s friend) dressing almost identically in short dresses. Their sales picked up with more customers since then.
The norm of age ordering in dress not only reflects the “failure” of older people to live up to youthful beauty standards but also a belief held in many cultures, including Vietnamese culture, that old age marks a passage in life that focuses less on the surface and display and more on inner essence. Appearance becomes a matter of triviality while virtues are worthy of attention. Yet, at the same time, fashion and stylishness still play a notable role in being visible and gaining social and cultural status (Edmonds 2010). This paradox puts women who have passed their youth like Mơ in a difficult moral position: either violating gender and age “rules” or risking slipping into invisibility.

Dressing brings forth such moral charges because it is a form of disciplining the body and its expressions. Studies show that in Foucauldian terms clothes produce subjects under the exercise of bio power (Twigg 2013, Ash 2010). For example, the uniforms that prisoners wear mark them as separated, disciplined, and docile (Ash 2010). The “dress code” for young girls in Hải Thành create self-disciplined subjects that exemplify certain notions of youthful femininity and sexuality. Twigg (2013) argues that because clothes makes discipline and social order, they are imbued with morality. We are judged by how we look and those who fail to conform to the rules are targets of ridicule, exclusion, and criticism. Older women or women of lower class and of color are judged even more harshly than men, younger or white upper-class women because their violation threaten the social order based on age, gender, class, and race. For these the moral language of judgment (such as tacky, cheap, trashy, and inappropriate) generates great anxiety when it comes to dressing. The label “prostitute” that was given to Mơ implicitly communicates her inferior social position of being an older, working-class divorcee.

Finally, if dressing is a form of performativity as discussed in the previous chapter, the moral condemnation regarding age-inappropriate dressing is also related to the dangers of failed
performance (Twigg 2013). Therefore, Mơ’s short dress was improper because it was too sexual for her age and because she failed to be attractive to many people in Hải Thành as well (hence her need to hire younger women for her food stall).

Age not only influences how one dresses but also how one acts and behaves. In the case of Mơ, she got along great with the young local women who chose to marry (mainly very wealthy) Hải Thành men and with young local men. They were often ten years her junior. They went on camping trips together, gambled and hung out at each other’s houses, chit chatted at Mơ’s food-stall, and dined in various restaurants. While I was not surprised at Hạnh’s claim that Mơ should not dress like a young woman, I was astonished to find out that it was improper for Mơ to hang out with people much younger than she was. It turned out that Mơ was disapproved of for engaging in age-inappropriate practices such as too much of partying and eating out. Uncle Tú once explained to me that people like Mơ are considered “a grown-up without any wisdom” (có lơn mà không có khôn), implying lack of maturity. In other words, Mơ was at the age of a matured woman and she should not have acted like a young woman. That also means that she should not have hung out with people not in her age group.

The case of Mơ and the young girls described in the chapter III shows that age is an important social organizer, along with gender, class, race, and sexuality. Age difference separates Mơ from the young girls. The girls were criticized but tolerated to some extent because, as many Hải Thành residents explained in chapter III, they were young and did not know any better. Mơ, however, should have known better because she was much older. It is hard to say if Mơ’s non-conformity is an act of resistance or compliance. While she resisted the age-ordering dress code, she reinforced the ideals of femininity as being ultra-feminine and sexual. At least Mơ’s non-conformity was admired by one of her neighbors, Chung (whom I introduced
in chapter III), a woman of her age and a widow. Chung told me in our interviews that she wished she had the money and courage to dress as nicely and have as much fun as Mơ. Chung saw Mơ as a larger-than-life woman who had the courage to continue cultivating youthful forms of femininity that mature (and married) women were supposed to leave behind.

**Age, Gender, and Men**

Age also plays a crucial role in Mơ’s relationship with men. In chapter III, I discussed the local girls’ rush to get married to foreign men before becoming “old” (that is, in this context, early 20s). Those girls who have become “old” lose power, have to close their eyes when choosing their spouses and supposedly, end up marrying “old, poor, and ugly” husbands. Yet at the same time, there exists a popular belief in Hải Thành that any woman, no matter how young or old, beautiful or ugly, able or disable, never married or divorced, can always marry a foreign husband if she ever wishes to. Many locals have claimed that women who, by local standards, were old, ugly, or disabled, would have been “unsaleable” (ế) and would have remained single, but that is no longer the case in Hải Thành. Such a belief reflects two important assumptions: first, a remarkable number of local women who have married foreigners, so many that people think it is doable for everyone; and second, an implicit moral judgment of the desperation of transnational marriages, in which both the men and the women involved would be willing to marry even the “undesirable.” However, this is a myth because I have witnessed several women’s struggles and failures to marry foreign men and they usually have one thing in common: they have passed their youthful age. Mơ is one of them.

After her divorce, Mơ clearly expressed her wish to remarry and to find a good man to “shelter” (đùm bọc) her. Châu, Mơ’s sister in Taiwan, promised Mơ that she would find a
Taiwanese man for Mơ. In 2012, Châu told Mơ that one of her husband’s acquaintances, a 54-year-old man, agreed to marry Mơ after seeing Mơ’s photos. Mơ thought that the man was too old and ugly for her but Châu retorted that Mơ herself was old already (she was 35); she should not be picky. Shortly after the Lunar New Year of 2012, Châu accompanied the Taiwanese man to Hải Thành to arrange a wedding (wedding photos in chapter IV). Unfortunately, 2012 was the start of Taiwanese government’s severe restrictions on transnational marriages between Vietnamese and Taiwanese after national fear of low-class Vietnamese ascendancy in Taiwan. Mơ and her Taiwanese husband went to the embassy three times but were unable to get a visa for her to go to Taiwan. Disappointed, her husband asked for a divorce and within less than a year, Mơ was single again.

Learning from her experience, Mơ said she would no longer look for a Taiwanese man but instead she asked her cousin (Uncle Tú’s oldest niece), one of the most famous matchmakers in Hải Thành, to find a Korean man for her. In January, 2015 Mơ was called by her cousin to go to a selection place to meet with a Korean man. The next day I came over for lunch and Mơ’s brother Thạch told everyone out loud that Mơ was selected by a Korean director of a matchmaking agency. I congratulated Mơ when she got home but she was quiet. Later she said it was nothing official, nothing to talk about. During lunch time, Hạnh asked why a man would choose an “old” woman instead of a young girl, especially if he was a director. Mơ, on the other hand, said a marriage with this man would be difficult. He told her she would have to wait for three years before doing any paperwork because she had already married twice before.

I asked Mơ to go to a café with me the next evening. I noticed that Mơ looked sullen and gloomy and I asked her why. She told me she had called off the arrangement with the Korean man. It turned out that a cow herder Mơ knew had told her that despite her two previous
marriages, she was still eligible for a third marriage and did not have to wait for three years like the Korean man explained to her. In a sad voice, Mơ concluded that he lied to her and it meant he only wished to have fun with her rather than wanting to marry her. She continued: “Morally, how can I do that? What if he has a wife and children? He said he does not but how can I know for sure? After all, he is a director.” She then said she would not go to a selection any more: “I feel so ashamed. If you go many times, people will know that you failed many times. Moreover, those Koreans they inspect you like a commodity. I feel like I lose my dignity. I will wait for Thanh to get pregnant and sponsor me to Korea. If I am lucky, I will meet a man who truly loves me. Otherwise, I will stay with Thanh and work to save money for my retirement in Vietnam. I know it is difficult for me to remarry because I have age (i.e. old) and I am divorced with three children.”

During my four years in Hải Thành, I saw that this was a pattern of Mơ’s relationships. All the men who were interested in her started out pampering her and giving her compliments but none of them wanted to marry her. Mơ broke up with them after finding out that they had lied to her about their pasts, their incomes, and their commitment.

Age certainly affects Mơ’s relationships with men. As discussed in chapter III and reiterated here by Châu, Mơ, considered locally as “old,” should not be so picky when it came to marry a Taiwanese man who Mơ thought to be too old and ugly for her. Hạnh thought that Mơ also had become unworthy of a man with money and status like the Korean director. I suspect that her age, along with her divorce, contributed to her relationship disappointment as she found out men she dated only wanted to “have fun” with her. Mơ herself was ashamed at what she saw as her multiple failures when going to the wife selection place.
Twigg (2013) argues that age is one of the master identities and a key dimension of difference. Yet it is often neglected in the intersectionality of gender, class, race, and sexuality. When comparing Mơ’s situation with those of the young girls in previous chapters, we see how age, combined with gender, orders and ranks people, shapes their experience by enabling or limiting it. Hạnh and other people in Hải Thành no longer saw Mơ as attractive and worthy (of marriage) as young girls. While it was relatively easy for young girls to get married (thus the “myth” that any local woman could successfully marry East Asian men), it was a lot harder for Mơ. There are reasons why her age, coupled with her gender as a woman, made the situation worse.

Mơ really wanted to get married. She looked into many options: local men, Taiwanese, Korean, Hong Kong, Singaporean, and even French men. However, she had not had any luck with East Asian men and she (or her family) did not have money to pay for the initial marriage fee with foreigners from other countries. All her family members told her that she should just wait for her daughter to get pregnant and then sponsor her to Korea. That way, she could go abroad for free. None understood Mơ’s desire to find a husband. In my years of knowing Mơ, once in a while she would talk about her desire:

Mơ:  I was divorced and left my children to their father and his family. I did not raise them so how can I expect them to support me when I get old? Moreover, they still blame me for leaving their father.

... Mơ:  I can’t stay in this house (i.e. Uncle Tú’s house) in the future because I have a brother. I don’t have a house.

59 Of course, Mơ and her family did not want to let other people know about their lack of money because of the illness of Kiều pride (see chapter II).
Linh: Why can’t you stay here in the future?

Mơ: I can’t. Because I already left home to marry. It’s difficult. Difficult in a hundred ways. I just want to find a husband to entrust my fate to him. If I have a husband to rely on, my future will be brighter, right? I don’t need to marry a foreign man, but it is difficult to find a decent Vietnamese man my age.

... 

Mơ: Marrying a foreigner means, first and foremost, a search for a source of life (tìm nguồn sống). I don’t know about life transformation but I want a source of life because there is nothing here. Nothing to develop.

As a woman, Mơ was blamed for the divorce and for destroying the family because she chose to leave her husband (even though he had a small wife). Thanh, Mơ’s oldest daughter, told me that other women in her extended family were even physically abused by their husbands but they never left. “My father never beat my mother,” said Thanh. Relatives of Mơ told me it was unwise of Mơ to leave, especially empty-handed because her husband never asked her for a divorce. One of them said: “Mơ made a stupid mistake. Her ex-husband gave her money every month so why leave? Because she left, the other woman could take over her place and the house. If she had not, what could that woman do?” According to them, Mơ lost everything, even a husband! Nobody held Mơ’s husband accountable while blaming it all on her. They also implied that a woman without a husband is not reputable. Moreover, since she was a (once married) daughter, she was not allowed to share the inheritance of the house. The house now belonged to Mơ’s brother and Hạnh’s husband, Thạch. Basically Mơ was punished for breaking the marriage and the male dominated system that it supported. She felt that she had nothing, “nothing to develop.” It is no wonder then that Mơ looked to another marriage as a solution to her problem,
as something that would bring her “a source of life” and “make her future brighter.”

Unfortunately, looking for a husband had been an uphill battle for Mơ due to her age and divorcee status.

The importance of a husband and thus a family to a woman and her sense of self and esteem is proven even more so in the events regarding Mơ’s birthday. On the second week of June 2014, while having dinner with Uncle Tú’s family, I asked Hạnh when her oldest daughter Nhi had her birthday. She replied June 7. I responded with a surprise: “So you didn’t celebrate it?” Hạnh told me, “It has not come yet.” It turned out that in Hải Thành, birthdays are celebrated according to the lunar calendar. I said, “That is different from Hải Phòng (city). We follow the solar calendar. I will buy her a birthday cake when it comes.”

Mơ: Oh, cakes from stores in Cầu Đát Street in Hải Phòng are delicious. My birthday is July 20. I will also celebrate and I will celebrate it according to the solar calendar, no longer following the lunar calendar!

Mrs Thơ: Oh goodness, who does that? Ridiculous. If you have a husband and children, when it comes to your birthday, your husband and children remember it and will celebrate it with you. Nobody does it themselves.

Mơ: It does not matter. Leave me alone. I like to do it. I will ask my friends to come.

Hạnh: Which one? You only have Lan as your friend, nobody else.

Uncle Tú and Mrs. Thơ: No friends remember other people’s birthdays.

Uncle Tú: A “friend” like Lan is everywhere.

Hạnh: I have not celebrated my birthday for years.
Mơ, in her frustration, looking like she was going to cry, reacted: “I have had such a hard life. If I want to celebrate my birthday, let me do it. Everyone in this family looks down on me.”

Mơ later did invite her friends over the house on her birthday in July and then out for dinner. When her friends left the house, Mrs. Thơ turned to me and said: “what a circus show” (trò hề).

In this exchange, age marks its significant role in shaping people’s experience. There is a difference between celebrating a birthday for an eight-year-old girl (Nhi) and a thirty-eight-year-old woman (Mơ). When someone’s birthday is remembered, the message is that he or she is special. Nhi knew she was special because her parents threw her a party on her birthday. Mơ, on the other hand, was denied that privilege because she did not check the boxes that Vietnamese society requires of her at her thirty-something age: married with children. Birthday, in Hải Thành, is an occasion to cement a collective, not a personal, identity. The argument that only the family (not friends) should celebrate one’s birthday means that birthday is a show of respect and acknowledgement of one’s fulfilling and successful role as a family member (parent, wife, husband, child, grandparent, etc.). It is almost like: look around me, I have such a happy family and I am such a good family member that my family remembers my birthday. With that understanding, we can infer that both Mơ and Hạnh have failed in their expected roles. Hạnh did not have a birthday celebration for years because she was in a troubled marriage (see chapter IX) and Mơ because she was divorced and left her children to her ex-husband. Thus, the conflict between Mơ and her family lies in the tension between collective identity and personal identity. Mơ wanted to mark her day for herself while her family thought the whole thing was a circus show. Her family saw Mơ as a failure not only because of her divorce but also because of her
friends. Recalling that they are a lot younger than Mơ, her family implied that her friendships were fleeting. They were not “real” friends for her. Mơ’s age has socially limited how Mơ should act and who she should befriend. However, Mơ did not conform to social pressure and still went on to celebrate her birthday with her friends. I argue that such an act, perceived by Mơ as making up for her hard life, was enabled in part by her expectation of leaving for Korea in the near future.

**Timepass and Waiting**

Unlike the young girls in Hải Thành, Mơ has not been able to migrate abroad through marriage. However, because her oldest daughter Thanh was already married a Korean man, Mơ would sooner or later be sponsored to visit her daughter. Mơ’s sister, Thái (introduced in chapter VII) and Thái’s husband were already in Korea for the same reason. Parent sponsorship to Korea has become very common in Hải Thành. Parents get a six-month visitors’ visa to Korea and almost all of them work illegally to save money for their future lives in Vietnam. They often extend their visas to stay in Korea as long as possible, even for years. Mơ, while hoping to get married to a Korean man, was also waiting for her daughter Thanh to get pregnant so that Thanh could apply for a visa for Mơ. There was no uncertainty of whether Mơ would go to Korea; the question was only when and till then, she had to wait.

In chapter III, I discussed the idea of self-preservation in which Hải Thành girls practice beauty while waiting for their future blossoming in Korea. Building on that premise, I want to further examine the experience of waiting in relation to migration by focusing on Mơ’s waiting period before she moved to Korea. Griffiths (2014) claims that although the relationship between time and space has been well examined by philosophers and geographers, time, especially
waiting, remains under-theorized in relation to migration and mobility (see also Conlon 2011). Studying the coupling between waiting and moving, or as Conlon (2011) argues, seeing waiting as a crucial feature of migrant (im)mobility, will also contribute to the call to see stasis and mobility as interconnected, not dichotomized (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, Conlon 2011, Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006).

According to Jeffrey (2010), waiting is a key dimension of modernity: the increasing regimentation and bureaucratization of time have created multiple settings such as traffic jams, offices, clinics, transportation, in which we all wait (see also Hage 2009). Moreover, experiences of waiting have become prominent for certain populations, especially the subaltern across the globe: the increasing number of migrants in detention centers, the asylum seekers, the unemployed, the rural poor, the whole nation or region (such as Zimbabwe in 2008 or Sub-Saharan Africa) – all waiting/hoping for a different future. They are people “in wait” with feelings of boredom and lost time (Jeffrey 2010). Yet at the same time, waiting is often viewed as wasteful and passive in which people lack agency. Hage (2009) wrote that waiting “involve[s] a large degree of passivity: things are beyond our control, out of our hands, and we can ‘only wait’ for what we wish to happen as opposed to actively do something or another to make it happen” (Hage 2009, 2). The growth of capitalism in the West and its associated time discipline have led to time being seen as quantifiable and split into leisure time and labor time. Time thus has become a currency to be spent rather than passed (Thompson 1967). Waiting, therefore, is often viewed as unproductive and wasteful (Rotter 2016). There is also a strong association between waiting and boredom (O’Neill 2014, Jeffrey 2010). Perhaps, the view of waiting as passive, wasteful, and boring in which nothing happens contributes to the lack of attention to waiting in mobilities studies.
However, some scholars have challenged the limited understanding of waiting. They have argued that waiting is not necessarily passive but is indeed actively experienced and lived (Rotter 2016, Conlon 2011, Rotter 2010, Jeffrey 2010). Rotter (2016) identifies other dimensions of waiting: waiting as an affective state in which an awareness of wants and desires are heightened; waiting as a period of intense activity; and waiting as a productive undertaking.

Waiting is affective because in waiting, people dwell on what they are waiting for. Waiting involves the interested aiming at something greatly desired (Bourdieu quoted in Rotter 2016). A desire for and an investment in the attainment of certain outcomes are essential to the experience of waiting. Waiting can make those who wait highly aware of their desires and needs (Rotter 2016). As such, in waiting there is also a sense of optimism and hope of achieving desires (Hage 2009). Mơ was very mindful of what she wanted in waiting for a marriage with a foreign man or waiting for her daughter to sponsor her to Korea. Mơ told me she longed to be like her sister Châu in Taiwan because Châu had changed to be more beautiful and speaking more softly, no longer as loudly as a cow mooing (rồng lên như bò). She also yearned for a husband who would take care of her, take her out to dinner at night, call her three times a day, and accompany her everywhere. If she could not get married again, she hoped that at least she could work in Korea for a few years so that she would have some money when returning to Hải Thành later. In other words, Mơ desired a life transformation and she was waiting for a better, more secure future in which she would feel loved or independent rather than subordinated as she did at the moment.

More importantly, waiting is not necessarily a period of boredom. While waiting generates a sense of limbo and reflects an inability to bring about desirable forms of change, waiters can carve out a space of suspended reality in which they can enjoy the freedom otherwise
circumscribed by familial and social expectations and controls (Griffiths 2014, Jeffrey 2010).

Indeed, the young Indian men in Jeffrey’s study developed a sense of mischief and irreverence during timepass. Griffiths talked about asylum seekers engaging in otherwise-unacceptable activities like waking late, drinking, hanging out, and clubbing. These practices reflect an awareness of being partially detached from surrounding institutional norms. Many people in Hải Thành have made a similar argument about activities of young girls who wait before their marriage migration to East Asia. They have told me that because these girls would get married and leave, during their waiting period, they could do what is socially unacceptable, such as having pre-marital sex and “playing” with the boys, wearing too revealing clothes, waking up late, not doing housework, or partying too much. In the case of Mơ, waiting for migration has enabled her to have more freedom in her life.

For example, even though Mơ hoped for a marriage with a foreigner, she also enjoyed dating Vietnamese men knowing that such dating would not lead to a marriage. One of them was too young for her, another was a disreputable local man, and the last one I knew of did not even live in town. Mơ told me that dating too many men could give her a bad name, but being a woman, it would be extremely sad if no man paid attention to her. Her mother and her family turned a blind eye, expressing more than once to me that she could date and play with as many Vietnamese men as she wanted so long as she did not marry them. She should wait to get to Korea to have a better life. More than just an acceptance of her playing with men (captive chơi bời), the waiting period made Mơ aware of time as a resource that she should utilize before leaving. The result was her being self-centered and any criticism from her family about her self-absorbed behaviors was countered with her repeated reasoning: “my life was so miserable
already; why do you keep censuring me?” or “my life was already so miserable; just let me do what I want now.”

Mơ’s self focus was shown in several ways. First was her spending time on herself without much contribution to her family. Mơ rarely did any housework. She often left home in the morning and hung out with her friends. Her mother did all the cooking while her sister-in-law Hạnh did most of the cleaning. While I was eating with the family, I did the dishes. When Mơ ate at home, she was expected to help me with the dishes but usually she did not. Sometimes she said she was too tired or too sick, to which her brother often mocked her “so tired but just a phone call to hang out and she felt better.” Sometimes she said she needed to run some errands. One day, Mơ finished eating and got onto her bed, sleeping. As I was about to bring the dishes to the kitchen to wash, Uncle Tú asked me: “Did Mơ sleep already? “Yes.” He winked at me and said “My daughter sleeps so easily; she is very good at sleeping.” He sarcastically implied that Mơ pretended to sleep to avoid doing dishes. In the family, Mơ was known to be lazy and dirty. Uncle Tú compared Mơ to Hạnh as the following: “One is clean while one is filthy. One is only clean with her face, knowing how to use a brush on her face but never touching the broom to sweep the floor. She is so “clean” that dirty clothes are piled inside the closet and she lets them stink without washing for days.” During the rice harvest time, Mơ was asked to help Hạnh. She complained to me that having to wake up at four in the morning was no different from being a water buffalo.

The focus on the self also manifested itself in her exaggerated self importance. For example, Mơ told everyone that her Korean son-in-law sent her some lotion that cost 100 million VND (around 5,000 USD). Uncle Tú pouted his bottom lip in grimace: “100 million? Why don’t you ask him for a house instead?” Another time, I asked the family during dinner about a
fisherman I had just interviewed. Mơ told me she knew that man because of her ex-husband who was also a fisherman. She then recalled a story about her husband being caught by a marine police back when they were together. But the policeman fell for her even though he had just met her so he let her husband go. When I asked if she had something to say about the fisherman I interviewed, she repeated to me: “The policeman really loved me.” Later we talked about the Spratly and Paracel Islands, Mơ said she had been to all of them with her ex-husband. Uncle Tú corrected her that her ex’s boat was too small to even get to Nam Định province, let alone to these islands. Mơ snapped: “My ex-husband was a great fisherman. He could do it.” Mơ also constantly described herself as a hardworking woman, a good daughter who cared for her parents, and devoted (ex)wife who handled everything at the house, and loving parent. At first, I thought perhaps Mơ’s need to assert her importance and good qualities was an endeavor to counter how she was perceived as a failure. But I believe it was also an attempt to navigate the liminal space of waiting.

Mơ liked to have fun. During her time when she waited for her moving to Korea, she spent a lot of time dating men, eating out with friends, partying, going on picnics, getting drunk, playing cards, and gambling. Hải Thành people often do not approve of these activities, especially for women. According to Mơ, having fun was to make up for her difficult life, particularly her unhappy marriage, before she eventually went to Korea and had a different life. While the liminal status can allow people to feel detached from social control, it is important not to overestimate this freedom. Mơ was very aware of social expectations and as such, repeatedly denying her acts so as to create her image as a good woman. In August, after not seeing Mơ at home for weeks, I asked after her to Mrs. Thơ. She whispered in my ears “She probably went to her friends’ houses to gamble.” Mơ’s brother Thạch said out loud: “She has been gambling. She
has a new group of friends she plays with now in hamlet three. Yesterday, I heard she told her
daughter that it cost her 5 million (250 USD) to fix her bicycle and asked her daughter to send
money for her.” After lunch, I did the dishes by the well while Mrs. Thơ was preparing food for
dinner. She stood near the kitchen door and talked to me, but as if to reassure herself: “Perhaps
she did not go out to gamble. If she did gamble, I would scold her. She told me she did not. She
promised me. She said she only watched.” When Mơ got home later in the afternoon, Mrs. Thơ
immediately asked: “Did you gamble today? You were gone the whole day.” Mơ denied: “No, I
did not. I went to fix the bike.” We both knew that it was a lie because the bike was fixed
yesterday and it supposedly cost $250! Similarly I have seen Mơ denying drinking, dating, or
spending money on a hairdo. In a way, Mơ walked the fine line between social expectations and
personal freedom during the liminal waiting period. On the one hand, knowing that she would
leave, the waiting was a spur to actions outside of circumscription. On the other hand, she tried
to minimize her social trespassing.

Mơ’s situation is a good example of “the multiple and ambivalent forms in which agency
takes shape in relation to waiting” (Hage 2009, 2). The waiter is neither completely passive nor
totally free. Moreover, according to Hage (2009), there is a politics around who is to wait
because waiting can define class and status relations in the very obvious sense of who waits for
whom. Waiting can put waiters in a submissive and less powerful position (Rotter 2016,
Bourdieu 1999). This sense of powerlessness was clearly conveyed in the classic play Waiting
for Godot in which Vladimir and Estragon wait in vain for, and in a sense, are “held” by
someone named Godot (Beckett 1969). However, in the context of migration, waiting has a
special dimension that gives the waiter a sense of entitlement and expectations that complicates
the power dynamics of who waits for whom and what waiting entails.
Waiting and the Morality of Money

Most of the activities that Mơ did during her waiting period required money. Mơ actually did not have much money but she was good at getting people, from her family to her friends and acquaintances, to spend on her. In the example in chapter II, Mơ told her sister Châu in Taiwan to send more money home (“the more, the less – càng nhiều càng ít”). Two months after her oldest daughter, Thanh, married a South Korean man and migrated, I heard Mơ ask her daughter about money on the internet phone:

Mơ: When will you send money home for me?

Thanh: You will have to wait for a while.

Mơ: I’m just joking. You can send money when you have it. Do you know this girl called Thịnh in the next hamlet? She just left last month and she already sent her mother money. But never mind. If a friend of yours is visiting home (Hải Thanh), please send along the set of lotions that your husband bought for me.

A couple of days earlier, Mơ said during lunch that she was going to tell Thanh to send her some lotion because her hands were dry. Uncle Tú scolded Mơ: “Thanh has not had a job in Korea so she does not have any money. You should not ask her for anything.” Mơ retorted: “No job, no money but she can still afford a jar of lotion. Look how much she eats in Korea; she’s as fat as a pig.” Later in the night, Mơ said she would call her niece in Korea to tell her to ask Thanh’s husband, on Mơ’s behalf, for money. When I expressed my reservation about that idea, Mơ assured me: “Don’t worry. I know how to do it.” Earlier in this chapter, Mơ told Thanh to send $250 home to cover her cost of fixing a bicycle.60

60 $250 was way too much; usually it should have cost only around $50 or less.
Mơ received money not only from her family but also her friends. Mơ often befriended wealthier people in the commune, usually those who have relatives abroad and/or husbands who are talented fishermen. Mơ told me that she carefully chose whom to hang out with and richer people were more generous (thoảng) with their money. In early September of 2014 Mơ came home to tell her mother and me that she would go to Cát Bà Island over the weekend because the brother of one of her friends, who now lived in Canada, just came back to Hải Thành for a visit and would pay for her to go with them. Mơ then gave her mother four million VND (200 USD) earned from her food stall to put aside for safekeeping. Ms. Thơ mumbled about Mơ going out too much and remarked that there was still a little money left in Mơ’s wallet and Mơ got irritated: “I have to keep some money with me just in case. I never have to pay when I go out anyway so why are you concerned? If I don’t spend it, I will bring it back.” Ms. Thơ did not say anything else. In other words, she must have felt that although Mơ should not be hanging out with people younger than her, the censure was less severe if Mơ did not lose money.

According to Mơ, the rich, unlike the poor, did not calculate with their friends. Until, of course, they did, in which case Mơ just stopped befriending them. I noticed one day that Lan, one of Mơ’s friends with whom she frequently went out, did not come to Mơ’s house to play cards. I later asked Mơ if Lan was sick. Mơ said she stopped hanging out with Lan because Lan was “tight” with money. I was surprised; Mơ had said in the past that Lan paid for Mơ many times. It turned out that after their camping trip the previous week, there was 80,000 VND (4 USD) left in the group budget. Mơ kept it and was annoyed when Lan asked for it to be divided and returned to everyone. Mơ claimed that Lan was rich enough not to take the money from her.
“Her sister just sent her money and she spent 20 million VND ($1000) on lotions and cream, and another 20 million VND on a facial.”

The examples illuminate how money is perceived and received in the context of transnational migration. Studies have shown that migrants often view monetary support as a form of altruism while their non-migrant relatives regard remittances as a duty and an obligation that is connected to moral principles, expectations, and perceptions of migrants’ success (Thai 2014, Small 2012b, Cohen 2011, Singh, Cabraal, and Robertson 2010, Carling 2008). Carling (2008) argues that migrants and their non-migrant relatives are bound by asymmetric relationships. Besides the resource inequalities, migrants and non-migrants are different in terms of transnational moralities. For example, migrants are expected to repay the debt to the family and the community to which they once belong, otherwise they will be accused of “forgetting where they came from” (Carling 2008, Hage 2002). As such, non-migrants often develop a sense of entitlement to support from their migrant relatives. This sense of entitlement is commonly accepted and morally founded – Gowricharn (2004) calls it “moral capital.” In contrast to the popular belief that migrants have the upper hand in the relationships with non-migrants because of their remittances and gifts, the non-migrants themselves cultivate a moral capital that makes migrants “repay” the gift of communality if the migrants do not want to be morally judged as “ungrateful” (Gowricharn 2004). Åkesson (2011) argues that non-migrants frequently downplay the remittances and support they receive so as to increase their moral capital and decrease the hierarchy of gift giving.

This finding mirrors Mơ’s experience. Mơ felt a sense of entitlement towards her sister in Taiwan and her daughter and son-in-law in South Korea. She guilted her daughter about not

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61 Knowing Mơ, I highly doubt that these amounts of money were real. However, it indicates the way Mơ deemed that transnational money was easily made and easily spent.
sending money to her by comparing her daughter to another girl, demanded that if her daughter could eat well then her daughter could save money for her, wanted to ask her son-in-law for support, and denied the significance of her sister’s remittances (“the more, the less”). What is more interesting about the situation in Hải Thành is how entitlement and morality are extended even to non-migrant relatives, such as her friend Lan. As I discussed in chapter VII, Mơ first used Lan’s sister to question why her own sister, Châu, did not send much money home. Now, Mơ ended her friendship with Lan because she morally judged Lan for failing to live up to her friendship standards with regards to money. Mơ believed that since Lan received so much money from her sister, she should have been generous towards Mơ. This sense of entitlement explains why Mơ never seemed to me to mind having her friends (with overseas relatives) pay for her. Mơ was not an exception with such expectations in Hải Thành. In a place where many households have overseas relatives and where the myth that these Việt Kiều remit a lot of money exists, the expectations of support are placed not only on migrants but also their family members. Similar to how both migrants and their families have to handle the illness of pride to live up to the designation of Việt Kiều, both have to deal with the expectations of giving. I frequently heard Hải Thành residents complain that their better-off relatives did not want them to visit their relatives’ houses. They said the better-off relatives would “take the broom and sweep them out of the houses” (câm choi quét ra khỏi nhà) for fear of having to lend money and being unable to refuse. The morality of support has an extra layer in Hải Thành.

Conclusion

Soon after I left Hải Thành, Thanh was pregnant, and in 2015 Mơ went to Korea. She has been working there since. This chapter, focusing on Mơ and her waiting time in Hải Thành, examines
the role of age in combination with gender and class in shaping the possibility and outcome of marriage migration. Unlike the young and single girls in Hải Thành, Mơ had more difficulties finding a foreign spouse and failed to migrate abroad due to her age and divorce. She eventually made it to Korea thanks to her daughter after waiting for almost three years. Her waiting in Hải Thành, unlike common conceptualizations, was not boring and passive. Waiting was a time for Mơ to contemplate her desires and wishes as well as to enjoy her otherwise circumscribed personal freedom. The specific conditions of migration and movement, moreover, determine what waiting entails, including many self-focused activities and the morality of interpersonal relations and expectations. Studying waiting adds to our understanding of the experience of migration and movement and demonstrates the important connection between stasis and movement.
Chapter IX

A Daughter-in-Law Story

Humans are not Dragons: Marginalization and Class within the Family

Introduction

This chapter gives a closer look at the intimate life of translocal women in Hải Thành. In chapter VI, I discussed moral discourse as a way for translocal women to gain dignity and make sense of the differences between themselves and transnational women. In this chapter, I shift the focus to their moral practices and especially how they act in their families. I argue that moral practices earn them needed acknowledgement in their own families where exclusion and differentiation are as pronounced as outside the families.

What’s Love Got to Do with It?

One of the main assertions that I kept hearing repeatedly from translocal women during my fieldwork was that, unlike transnational women, they married for love. However, love was the word that I never heard Hạnh (now 30 years old) or her husband Thạch (34 years old) speak about one another. Their marriage was a union of circumstances.

In 2009 Hạnh was working in a seafood factory in the South when she received a phone call from her mother: her father was seriously ill; she needed to come home immediately. Hạnh gave up a job she had held for five years and boarded a bus to return to her hometown, a rural poor commune that was not too far from Hải Thành. At the same time, Thạch was in love with a local girl, but she abruptly left to marry a Taiwanese man. Thạch’s cousin was married to Huyễn, who happened to be Hạnh’s cousin. And the story went that Thạch followed his cousin to visit
Huyên and her family and he met Hạnh. Hạnh’s father wanted her to get married before he died, while Thạch was heart broken and wanted to take revenge on his ex-girlfriend. Their wedding was held seven days later. Neither one of them had the time or were in the right mental state to get to know each other before marriage.

After the wedding, Hạnh moved to Hải Thành to live with Uncle Tú’s family. The newlyweds were given a small room separated from the main house. Within the next four years, Hạnh gave birth to two daughters but found herself often struggling to provide for them. Hạnh had a small stall selling breakfast food near the local market, which brought in very little money while her husband had been without a stable job for a long time.

Thạch was a fisherman when he was 20 years old. Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ once told me his story during dinner: “We sold all the gold they saved as well as pigs and chickens to buy him a boat, net and boat engine. However, after only a few months, he said that the profession was too arduous and demanding. He refused to go and we had to sell the boat and everything else for less than half. Then we sent him to Hải Phòng city to take classes to become an electrician so that he could make a living. But he dropped out before finishing because it was hard.” Since then, Thạch had been mostly unemployed, except for short intermittent periods when he had some part-time “light job” (việc nhẹ) (in Uncle Tú’s words). Uncle Tú often lamented that he did not know why they (Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ) had two lazy children (Mơ and Thạch) while they both were industrious. Not only did Thạch not like difficult jobs, I was told that he also rejected ‘lower-class’ jobs such as xe ôm (equivalent to a rickshaw driver except instead of a rickshaw, it’s a cheap motorbike). Uncle Tú said Thạch stayed at home but did not want to become a xe ôm because of shame. Ms. Thơ added: “If he actually did, he would make quite a bit of money.” The
feeling of shame that Uncle Tú mentioned was tied with the pride illness that the family suffered: Thạch had a sister who lived in Taiwan, how could he be poor enough to turn into a xe ôm?

During my time spent with Uncle Tú’s family, I saw Thạch very infrequently. He mostly came home for food and, while others in the family were busy cleaning up after a meal, he quietly took his motorbike and left silently so as not to draw attention to his departure in case his own children might ask to follow him around. Thạch spent most of his time hanging out with a small group of friends at a café near the hamlet and spent lots of his money on football bets. According to Mơ, if he ran out of money, Ms. Thơ would discreetly supply him with some cash behind Uncle Tú’s back. Hạnh said to me that Thạch was not even an invisible husband because “an invisible husband who does not do anything or help out, at least, does not beat his wife or verbally abuse me.” More than once, frustrated with her husband, Hạnh got into huge fights with him. Mơ told me that a few months before my fieldwork began, Hạnh held a knife threatening to kill Thạch in one of their fights, but he ended up beating her up instead. When Nhi was two years old, Hạnh had enough, left Thạch, and went to her mother’s home. However, she eventually returned out of love for her daughter whom she could not have taken with her.

The story of Hạnh and Thạch demonstrates that translocal and transnational marriages are not as different as locally perceived. Many translocal women and local men expressed their disapproval of transnational marriages due to what they declared as a transaction without love. However, similar to many transnational couples, Hạnh and Thạch barely knew each other before marriage and Hạnh’s father wanted her to marry Thạch partly because his family was financially better off. They did not love each other. I believe that they are not the only exception. Many local men were in the same situation as Thạch: left by local women (who married East Asian
men), they quickly married women from other communes whom they did not know well through a matchmaker.

More importantly, this story illustrates a response to the critique of local women who are said, especially by local men, to be greedy and naïve in their pursuit of transnational marriage without love. Local men generally did not see the role they played in pushing local women away. But in the poem I cited at the end of chapter V, the author, speaking on behalf of many women who married transnationally, explained why she chose a Korean man instead of a local man. She depicted local men as unfaithful, lazy, abusive, and addicted to gambling. Her portrait fits well with Thạch and many other local men that I knew. Their behaviors are allowed partly because of the wealth in Hải Thành and partly because of the gendered structure that subjects women to inferiority and scrutiny. Translocal women who married Hải Thành men had it even worse because the added factor of the patrilocal residence and marriage migration pushed them to the margin both within the community and the family.

**Marginalization and Class within the Family**

In chapter VI about translocal women, I discuss how they are made invisible and confined to the home due to their social class as rural (poorer) women and their status as outsiders. Here I want to emphasize the gender construction and the way it further displaces translocal women. I often wondered why Hạnh, despite having been in Hải Thành for almost seven years now and seeming to know all the gossip in town, did not really have any friends except for Huyền, her cousin. When I expressed my puzzle to her, Hạnh explained: “Because I am married.” I followed up with a question of whether someone in the family forbade her from going out or socializing and she responded: “No. But as a married person, if I go out and visit
other people, they will say I am lazy. I should be at home doing housework. If I want a change of air, I will go visit my mother.” Hạnh’s situation translates that she would probably only have familial relations, not social relations. The double standard that keeps women accountable for family happiness and wellbeing while letting men off the hook (Thạch was never subjected to the same expectations⁶²) has been criticized frequently in feminist scholarship for holding women back with their career and personal development. However, it should be noted that the double standard results in not only social and personal restriction but also physical confinement for married women in Hải Thành. Being enclosed at home does not necessarily mean that translocal women do not experience social differentiation. On the contrary, they often found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy as social class permeates the family.

Studies on class, despite arguments of individualization in contemporary societies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), still indicate that the family remains central in reproducing social classes and inequalities. They see the family as the unit transmitting not only economic capital but also cultural and social capital through family enculturation (Crompton 2008, Lareau 2003, Kendall 2002). In other words, the family is often regarded as coherent and uniform. The importance of family as a unit that buttress against the vulnerabilities of the socio-economy in Vietnam is demonstrated in many studies (Earl 2014, Barbieri and Bélanger 2009, Korinek et al. 2006). However, the gender and class structure in Vietnam challenges this assumption and nowhere can we see this better than in Hải Thành because of the pronounced phenomenon of marriage migration that significantly affects both gender and class relations. To illustrate the

⁶² Thạch often vocally criticized Mơ that she was lazy, liked to gamble, and lied frequently. I once saw Hạnh questioning him “How are you different from her?” to which he responded “It’s different for me because I am a man.”
class dynamics within the family, I focus on Hạnh’s uneasy relationships with her mother-in-law, Ms. Thơ, and her sister-in-law, Thơ.

On a very hot day in July, we were having dinner when the matchmaker, who was Uncle Tú’s niece, visited. The matchmaker came to see her mother who lived right next door to Uncle Tú and brought crab for her family. While the crab was being cooked, she walked over to Uncle Tú’s place. She came inside the house, sat down next to him and put a 500,000 VND (25 USD) note into his hand. Then she called for Nhi and Chi, gave each 100,000 VND (5 USD), and handed 300,000 VND (15 USD) to Ms. Thơ, telling her to give it to Thạch later. When she looked at our dinner, she exclaimed: “How come uncle has nothing to eat?” and told Hạnh to go to her mother’s house to get one crab for Uncle Tú. She asked after Thạch and Uncle Tú said “Same old, same old.” She then offered to loan Thạch money if he ever needed it for a job. When she left, Uncle Tú told Ms. Thơ to have some crab but she adamantly refused. Uncle Tú chuckled: “She gave it to me so you don’t want it, right?” “Yes”, replied Ms. Thơ.

Watching the whole thing, I remarked, “This woman is strange. She only gave money and food to the men and kids in this family while Ms. Thơ and Hạnh were here too.”

Ms. Thơ clarified: They only give to their own people; we are just in-laws.

Linh: Has she ever given you anything?

Ms. Thơ: No, not ever in my 20 years here; she only gives him money.

This incident is very revealing of how married women were blatantly treated as nonmembers in Hải Thành. What is more interesting is how the alienated status prevents them from getting economic capital from their in-laws. In a wealthy place like Hải Thành where remittance is an important source of income, the gendered differentiation easily produces classed differences among members of the family. For instance, Hạnh once told me that every time Châu
returned to Vietnam, she gave Hạnh one million VND (50 USD) but Hạnh was sure that Mơ received more because “I can’t be as equal as her own sister.” Hạnh, already from a humble background, could not compete with Mơ (and Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ) in getting support, and as such remained relatively poor.

The difference in economic capital translates in how she was treated in the family. Mơ never asked Hạnh to join any of her parties at home and while she might save some food for her parents, she never offered anything to Hạnh. On a very few occasions when Hạnh’s mother came to visit her, Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ did not invite Hạnh’s mother to have tea in their living room. Hạnh’s mother just quietly went inside Hạnh’s room and quietly left a couple of hours later. Moreover, Ms. Thơ often remarked how she and Uncle Tú had to help Hạnh financially to raise Nhi and Chi yet never admitted her son’s problems. Sometimes, I said that Thạch should have helped Hạnh more and Ms. Thơ told me: “In this world, if you have a good wife, you will have a bad husband. Humans are not dragons; we can’t have a perfect couple (Thể gian được vợ mất chồng; có phải ròng đầu mà được cả đôi). A good couple is too much to ask (Được cả đôi thì ăn đủ à?).”

Here we see how the dynamic of class within the family plays out. It is reflected in the distribution of food (who gets to have food), in a constant condescension (not empathy) that Hạnh could not raise her children on her own and Ms. Thơ and Uncle Tú have to support her out of familial obligations, in social and familial invitations where exclusion of Hạnh and her mother was obvious, and in the way Hạnh’s work was minimized and Thạch’s problems were ignored because a good wife and a bad husband was a “normal” arrangement; otherwise “we would be dragons.” Hạnh’s status as a young daughter-in-law from another village has contributed to her exclusion both socially and financially, both in the society and in the family. However, like other
translocal women discussed in chapter VI, Hạnh generally does not want to let the alienation weigh down on her and instead seeks to assert herself through moral practices of being a good wife, mother, and daughter-in-law.

**Moral Practices**

During one of our private conversations, I asked Thạch if he loved his wife and he told me “no,” saying that his marriage was a product of foolish young age. I then asked him if he had any regrets marrying her and he said “not anymore.” In a rare moment Thạch acknowledged Hạnh’s contributions: she gave birth to two adorable daughters and she worked very hard, thus he could lean on her. Thạch’s statement surprised me because I never heard him speak nicely to his wife but it showed that Hạnh’s labor was not invisible. Indeed, despite her disappointment and exasperation at Thạch, Hạnh did not stop performing the traditional duties of being a wife. For instance, Hạnh told me once that she was done with Thạch: *“He yells and swears at me all the time. I do housework, he yells. I cook for him, he yells. I clean the house, he yells. He says, why do you work so much, for so long? He does not babysit after finishing eating so that I can eat. He does not even care if I eat or not. I am so mad. I will not cook for him anymore.”* Yet the next day, she continued serving him with food as if nothing happened.

Being a good person is also a way for Hạnh to alleviate her lower status in the family in which the other two young people, Thạch and Mơ, do not live up to familial and social expectations. It shows best in how Hạnh sometimes intentionally upstaged Mơ. During dinner one day, Mơ showed off her newly painted nails and said she was savvy to find a place that did her nails for only 30,000 VND (1.5 USD). Hạnh deadpanned *“nails that are painted frequently will be easily dull-looking”* and killed Mơ’s high mood. Later, Hạnh told the family about one of
her customers winning a lottery after having a dream. Then Hạnh turned to Mơ to ask: “What are the winning lottery numbers today?” Mơ responded: “How would I know? I have never played lottery.” However, 15 minutes into the conversation, Mơ slipped out that the winning numbers were 83, that she was unlucky because she had the 8 but did not have the 3, thereby exposing her own lie. Hạnh knew that Mơ often gambled and that Mơ could not hide it very well, so Hạnh laid down the question that seemed random to let Mơ blurt out her lie. The revealing episode happened right in front of Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ, and Hạnh subtly showed her parents-in-law that she did not gamble while Mơ did and lied about it.

Being a good mother is another area that gave Hạnh respect. In the family, she was the only one who could discipline her oldest daughter Nhi who was very cute but quite stubborn. When Nhi refused to eat her lunch one day, Hạnh took out a long stick and started hitting Nhi on her bottom. Nhi cried and ran to her grandparents looking for help but they did not intervene. Mơ, on the other hand, told Hạnh to stop. Hạnh reacted: “I need to teach my daughter. If I don’t, she will grow up to be spoiled like your (second) daughter.” Mơ’s face turned pale. After Hạnh left to go into her room, Mơ said to her parents that Hạnh’s comment was disrespectful. Ms. Thơ said “Well, she has to discipline her children.”

Figure 9.1 Nhi before going to class
Mơ: *Who can guarantee that she (Nhi) will be better than my (second) daughter in the future?* Plus, *I might give birth to her but it’s heaven that gives her the personality (cha mẹ sinh con, trời sinh tính).*

Uncle Tú: *Who knows about the future but if it rains today, at least it is good today (mưa ngày nào mát mắt ngày ấy).*

Mơ put her bowl down and walked out of dinner: *Yes, I heard you; I heard you loud and clear; you don’t need to put me down any more.*

In this incident, Hạnh asserted her confidence and authority in raising her own daughter and that no one else in the family could stop her. Moreover, referencing Mơ’s second daughter as a bad example, Hạnh indicated her superiority as a mother over Mơ at that very moment. Mơ tried to minimize what her family members considered to be failed parenthood by referring to the nature vs. nurture debate, arguing that child development and growth were mostly ‘natural.’

Uncle Tú did not buy that argument, essentially siding with Hạnh and embarrassing Mơ. Because Vietnamese women are still held responsible for family well-being and happiness, fulfilling her role as mother and wife allows Hạnh to have earned some regard in the family. More importantly, it gives her leeway in countering restrictions from her more powerful mother-in-law.
At the end of the harvesting season, one of Hạnh’s relatives in her hometown who farmed fish in a pond told Hạnh to come to catch fish for free if she wanted. Hạnh held her youngest daughter, one year old at the time, to Ms. Thơ and asked Ms. Thơ to look after the daughter while she went fishing. Ms. Thơ muttered that she was tired and that she had already helped Hạnh this morning in the rice paddy. She also questioned why Hạnh needed to go. Hạnh did not ask any more for help and brought her daughter with her. At four o’clock in the afternoon, Ms. Thơ complained loudly that Hạnh still had not come home and was gone for far too long. Hạnh did not get home until 7 o’clock but transported back a giant bag of at least 70 pounds of fish (some to feed the chicken and dogs, some edible for humans). Ms. Thơ saw that amount of fish and said nothing more.
Ms. Thơ, as usual, remarked how she had helped Hạnh in an attempt to subtly control her. But Hạnh resisted Ms. Thơ’s wishes and went fishing anyway because she knew she would bring fish back for the family. Acting as a good family member in this situation enabled Hạnh to trump her mother-in-law’s rein over her. It is a way for Hạnh to bargain for personal freedom within the constraint of class and gender as a poorer daughter-in-law. Moral conduct, similar to moral discourse, helps displaced translocal women in Hải Thành like Hạnh negotiate their inferior status and reshape their sense of self in a new home(town). She asserts her agency (“weak power”\textsuperscript{63}) in a way that is culturally scripted and socially tolerated. Focusing on moral practices reflects not only the resilience of translocal women but also their vulnerabilities that necessitate more of these practices.

The exclusion and class differentiation that translocal women experience within their families demonstrate that the connection between movement and upward or downward mobility is highly contingent on the gendered structure. Furthermore, unlike the traditional, and at times romanticized, understanding, family is not necessarily a coherent unit that promotes and supports the well-being of its members against the difficulties of the society. We see this conceptualization clearly in how transnational women (and local girls) in Hải Thành expressed that their decision to get married was to help their families (chapter V). But the situation of translocal women proves that family can also be where class distinction is felt daily and closely.

This chapter on Hạnh concludes the last part of my dissertation in which I aim to show the complexities of movement and social class in rural Hải Thành. Retelling the stories of struggles in my host family, I explore significant processes that disrupt the connection between movement and upward mobility. For example, Mo’s life story indicates the importance of age

\textsuperscript{63} See Fiske (1993)
and beauty with regard to marriage migration. The situation of Hạnh shows how the devaluation of the rural, the hierarchy among different ruralities, and the gender structure result in displacement and marginalization rather than social mobility for translocal women. The expectations of money and remittances reveal the morality of debt, altruism, and face saving and the demands of migration. The consequences of failure to meet the demands range from shame and guilt, anxiety and disappointment, distrust and neglect, to a reinforcement of stratified hierarchy right within the family for those who ironically want to overcome it in the first place. The complicated process of migration, social class, and rurality offers important understanding of contemporary Vietnamese society in which historically and socially shaped experiences and forms of desire have come into unequal relations.
Conclusion

Moving the Chains

“Nobody Loves Me”

On April 2014, ten days after Thanh, Mơ’s oldest daughter, left for Korea, Mơ, Thạch and Mơ’s other daughter Mai decided to go to China to work (illegally). Mơ told me that she decided to go because she wanted Mai to have a job. They each had to pay one million VND (50 USD) to the middleman who agreed to take them to China. They had to cross the border in Quảng Ninh province. Unfortunately, on that same day, a group of 16 Chinese, who were being deported for illegal entrance, shot at the Vietnamese police and killed one policeman at the check point where they planned to cross (Sơn 2014). The checkpoint was closed for days and the three had to return home. When Mơ, Thạch, and Mai left in the morning, Thạch and Hạnh’s daughter, four-year-old Nhi threw a tantrum, crying that “Everyone in this house left; nobody loves me anymore. I will find my way to go too.”

Less than a year after I left the field, Ms. Thơ was diagnosed with brain cancer. When I called Uncle Tú and Ms. Thơ on the phone from the U.S., she had been sent home by the hospital. She sounded very weak but still remembered to wish me success with my study. Uncle Tú told me Mơ had left for Korea and no one else was around to help take care of Ms. Thơ. Hạnh was busy with her own daughters while Thạch remained absent. Uncle Tú shouldered almost all of the caretaking. A few days before the lunar new year of 2016, Ms. Thơ passed away. It was only then that her three daughters, one in Taiwan and two in Korea, could all come home but her grandchildren abroad could not. Four months later, Thanh posted a photo of Uncle Tú with Thanh, Thuý and Thắm (Thái’s daughters) and their children standing in front of the house. A
family reunion of three generations across two nations: Vietnam and South Korea. However, Hạnh was not included in the photo.

To me, these two stories emphasize the commonality of movement in Hải Thành that even a four year old thought she could go away. More importantly, they converge on the same theme of movement and loss, whether it is Nhi’s perceived loss of love, the absence of family members when Ms. Thơ was sick, or the saddened loss of Ms. Thơ. They also, as clichés-sounding as they are, reflect people’s constant striving and search for a better life even when it means having to leave behind their own family. What I find moving when looking at the photo of this family is that it is not that “nobody loves me” but, on the contrary, it is because of love that the acceptance of what migration entails comes more easily: the triumph as well as the failure, the losses and the gains, the departure and the reunion. Yet, at the same time, the absence of Hạnh and her daughters in the photo is a reminder of the social hierarchy that, while prompting movement and creating transformation in Hải Thành, is still being reinforced.

**Encounters, Interconnections, and Rurality**

I began this dissertation by asking how it was possible for a place like Hải Thành to exist – a place of contradictions: rural yet modern, local yet global, people with working-class profession (fishing) who have family members that are (seen as) upper-class transnational Việt Kiều. I also asked why my host family was the exception to the successful stories of migration in Hải Thành. How, why, and to what ends does movement play a role in producing and sustaining these contradictions and what insights does it provide us with the study of rurality? In the previous nine chapters, I have followed the two groups of women in Hải Thành: local girls waiting to become transnational brides and translocal women migrating from other rural towns in
Vietnam. Their encounters in everyday dialogic processes illuminate how migration, desires for beauty, glamour, modernity, and life transformation arise out of the recent tremendous social changes in Vietnam. These changes reveal stark differences in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, region, and rural/urban dichotomy that fundamentally question and refashion Vietnamese identity and self-worth. In how they come to identify and be identified, especially morally, the two groups of women highlight the struggles of many rural Vietnamese in a search of belonging and dignity (that is, what it means to be a successful moral Vietnamese) amid ubiquitous differences.

At the core, this dissertation is about exploring the changing landscape of Vietnamese rurality and the apparent social stratification in Vietnam through the lens of rural-to-rural movement (rather than the more common approaches that look at consumption and lifestyle). Because rurality has specific connotations related to class (lower class, lack of modernity), gender (tradition, seen as both backward and moral), ethnicity (minority), the complex interaction of class, gender, ethnicity, and age in a rural setting like Hải Thành refashions the link between movement and social class in surprising ways. I particularly deconstruct dualisms that shape the hierarchical social structure and instead show the covert relationships that reverse the order and/or join noticeable differences. By focusing on interpersonal encounters of seemingly distinctive female groups, I make the case for the coexistence and connection of contradictions.

The women in my study are both victims and agents of marriage migration, both admirable and at times, hard to sympathize with, in their acts and practices. Their identities rest on both traditional Vietnamese values and Western aspirations and display the hierarchy between the East and the West, socialism and capitalism, while simultaneously contesting it. They are
regarded by local people as both moral daughters, wives, and siblings and as immoral self-indulgent girls or immoral ‘ugly’ rural women. Their marriage migration links imaginaries with the experience of movement, connects the period of waiting with a relative sense of restrained freedom, and leads to both belonging and displacement, upward and downward social mobility. Prevalent binaries in mobilities studies such as motion and fixity, local and global, transnational and internal movement, imaginaries and experience of movement, victimhood and agency, rural and urban, moral and immoral fail to explain the complicated relationship between migration and social class in Hải Thành. Rather, the fluidity of categories and the interconnection of dichotomies in Hải Thành show us how human ties develop and become meaningful in aligned and misaligned way. It is through the relationships between differences that cultural meanings and identities are both rescripted and transformed, which make room for continual attempts, struggles, and endurance.

Choosing Hải Thành as the site of my research on migration, the dissertation explores the transformation, heterogeneity, and stratification of ruralities in an era of urbanization and globalization. Rurality is often treated as a homogeneous category and, as a destination, the rural is usually ignored in migration studies. However, I have argued for the complexities of rurality by describing the different kinds of rurality that exist inside and outside of Hải Thành. They are intertwined by the process of migration and the search for upward mobility. The many layers of rurality, expressed through different standards of beauty, education, economic capital, and morality, illuminate different ways to understand rurality in Vietnam. The rural can be both modern and traditional, mobile and emplaced, cosmopolitan and local, flashy and modest, financially rich and socially devalued, etc. What the rural represents depends on how transnational and translocal migration is interpreted and evaluated. Studying the relationship
between movement and social class in a rural context like Hải Thành, therefore, demonstrates
how the meanings of rurality are contested and renegotiated and how a rural place, like any
urban center, can be diverse, different from one another, and constantly transforming.

**Future Threads**

My dissertation, due to time constraint, only focuses on the migration of women. As I
turn to look to future research, I want to weave in the movement of (fisher)men in Hải Thành.
This addition will contrast and complement the research on female migration and paint a more
comprehensive picture of movement. In particular, a study of fishermen’s movement will explore
how movement embodiment shapes our understanding and evaluation of movement. The
fishermen’s maritime movement is very distinctive from land-based movement and will reveal
unique ways to study questions of meanings, borders, and exclusion. Second, due to the
intersectionality of gender and age, most (young) women in Hải Thành are excluded from public
political life, leaving the men to maneuver the bureaucracy of the local government. As more
global conflicts have moved outward from the land to the sea, the relationship between
fishermen and the state is becoming increasingly important. Therefore, a study on fishermen’s
movements will bring to life much more clearly the role of the Vietnamese state in shaping
movement and its meanings. Last but not least, because men are considered the root of the
Vietnamese lineage system and, in rural Vietnam, are often in charge of religious rituals, a close
examination of fishermen will highlight the role of religion in relation to movement. This future
project on fishermen will be a crucial contribution to the study of maritime movement, which has
been given almost no theoretical space in mobility studies (Anderson and Peters 2014, Peters
2010, Phelan 2007).
A Concluding Remark

Rosa Luxemburg once said, “those who do not move do not notice their chains.” Indeed, movement in Hải Thành is a mirror that illuminates the chains people face. This dissertation is a modest exploration of the weight of those chains as well as the un/successful efforts to break the shackles. It shows the interplay and tension between the world we live and the world we want or imagine, which is both poignant and hopeful, like the reunion photo of Uncle Tú’s family.
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