Becoming a Migrant: Vietnamese Emigration to East Asia
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Abstract
Since the early 1990s several million men and women from Southeast Asia’s lower socioeconomic classes have migrated to East Asia with a temporary worker visa or a spousal visa. This article is based on five years of ongoing fieldwork in migrants’ communities of origin in rural Vietnam and in places of destination in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. The authors make three contributions: first, they argue that the categorization of migrants as either “workers” or “wives” in research obscures the complex trajectories and motives involved in the process of “becoming a migrant.” Second, they challenge studies that unquestioningly invoke social network approaches to migration. Instead, social networks should be regarded as a double-edged sword for emigrants because personal networks are embedded in a powerful migration industry. Third, they contend that migration outcomes and levels of success are, in part, influenced by processes taking place before departure. This article sheds light on the tension between migrants’ agency and the structural constraints faced by candidates seeking to migrate from Vietnam, and from Southeast Asia more broadly.

Keywords: Vietnam, East Asia, emigration, migrant workers, marriage migration, migratory process

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5509/2013861031

According to the 2005 Migration Report published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the intensification of migration within Asia has been one of the major migration transitions in the world since the early 1990s.¹ The “age of migration” has brought about new migration opportunities that did not exist prior to the early 1990s and a
rapid increase in the volume of migrants in the last two decades. Categories of people were created by states, with a differentiation between legal temporary workers, foreign wives, visa overstayers (often called “runaway” workers or brides) and undocumented workers. Migration within Asian countries today involves more female migrants than before, particularly if migrant workers and migrant wives are added into the count. Large countries of emigration, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, have more women leaving their shores than men. Finally, recent migrants are moving to countries undergoing a migration transition from being mostly countries of emigration to countries of both emigration and immigration, such as Taiwan and South Korea. Of the total 215 million international migrants in 2010, 27.5 million were in Asia, equivalent to 13 percent of the international migrant stock. While large influxes of migrants from Asia migrate to the northern hemisphere, as of 2010, 43 percent of Asian migrants had migrated within Asia.

For migrants with low economic or social capital originating from developing countries of Asia, settlement migration to Canada or Australia is out of reach unless they qualify for skill-based or family reunification immigration. For many candidates to international migration from countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Vietnam, the only available (but not necessarily less desirable) options are temporary labour migration or so-called “marriage migration.” Most migrant workers work in factories, agriculture, fisheries, entertainment, the sex industry, the service sector or as domestic workers. These migrants are guest workers with limited-time labour contracts and no route to legal permanent settlement. Research underscores their limited rights and the frequent abuses they are subjected to by employers and brokers. “Foreign brides” consist, for the

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6 Recent migrants from the lower socioeconomic strata of Southeast Asian societies fall into two groups, as identified by national statistics in receiving countries: unskilled or skilled “migrant workers” and “foreign brides.” Danièle Bélanger, Hye-Kyung Lee and Hong-zen Wang, “Ethnic diversity and statistics in East Asia: ‘foreign brides’ surveys in Taiwan and South Korea,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, no. 3 (2010): 1108-1130.

7 Permanent settlement of low-skilled and unskilled temporary workers is only possible for migrants who marry nationals in the receiving countries, except in Singapore and Malaysia where migrant workers are prohibited from marrying Singaporean nationals.

most part, of female spouses from Southeast Asia or China who marry Taiwanese, South Korean or Japanese men. The type of marriage migration we focus on in this paper involves matchmaking agencies to which men pay large fees. Agencies organize marriage tours to the potential brides’ country of residence and, once a marriage is performed, the bride migrates with her husband to his country of residence. While emigration through marriage remains a small phenomenon in each individual sending country, international marriages have become very common in Taiwan and South Korea. Marriage migration gives the right to permanent settlement, and foreign brides have legal access to the labour market, citizenship and social benefits. In reality, some family members—usually the husband and in-laws—may obstruct migrant wives’ access to their social and legal citizenship as a way of controlling them.

Our inquiry into these migration flows focuses on how migrants experience emigration, including recruitment, training and leaving one’s country of origin, a process we refer to as “becoming a migrant.” We explore how future migrants navigate the migration industry, make use of networks and eventually obtain one type of visa for a certain country and become one type of migrant. Before being attributed an exit or an entry category by sending and receiving states, candidates to migration need to make sense of a complex web of recruiters, trainers, gate keepers and bureaucrats. This period may last months, and sometimes years. Further, we document how during this search for migration opportunities, potential emigrants rely on social networks that entail both opportunities and risks. Finally, we show how pre-departure narratives are relevant for an understanding of migrants’ experiences in Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. We argue that the study of the migration process may enhance our understanding of various migration outcomes: early forced return, timely return or overstay. We shift the gaze from explaining outcomes primarily due to receiving countries’ experiences and policy environments to the pivotal role played by the process of emigration.

9 Bélanger et al., “Ethnic diversity and statistics in East Asia.”
12 While our own research was structured around these categories of migrants, it became clear through the process of conducting the research that these categories hampered our understanding of the migration process.
Conceptualizing Emigration

Our approach to migration builds on the concept of the migratory process, which, according to Castles and Miller, “sums up to the complex sets of factors and interactions which lead to international migration and influence its course.”\(^{13}\) Despite the usefulness of this notion, the process of “becoming a migrant” is one aspect of migration that is rarely studied in migration research. Most research focuses on immigration and settlement processes, or the impact of emigration on sending areas after the migration has occurred, but seldom links the process of emigration and the experience in the receiving country. This paper contributes to filling this research gap by emphasizing how the emigration process of “becoming a migrant” in the sending country may affect the experience in the receiving country.

Emigration has been widely studied by neo-classical economic models, which are essentially economic rational actor models that assume potential migrants are fully informed with respect to their various options and make the best choice based on an economic calculation of expected income return. In contrast to these neo-classical economic theories of migration, the evidence we gathered in our research shows how little information most aspiring migrants actually have regarding the process of becoming a migrant and what awaits them in the destination country. For migrants who leave Southeast Asian countries as migrant workers or migrant wives, this type of model fails to explain the social structures of the migratory process that potential migrants must navigate. Another model provided by economists examines migration as the outcome of a household strategy to diversify income and minimize risks; however, this approach is also subjected to the criticism of economic essentialism and does not consider the various socio-political structural dimensions of the emigration process.

Sociologists have provided some insight into how networks and social ties may explain migration, particularly to comprehend the continuation of a migration flow once it is set in motion.\(^{14}\) As we shall see below, network and social capital theories provide useful guidance in shedding light on the experiences of Vietnamese migrants. However, as Krissman argues, such a sociological perspective pays little attention to the risks embedded in the migratory process. Theoretical perspectives on networks indeed often ignore the unequal power and class relations in the transnational social networks and assume that the social networks are positive. Network approaches thus often neglect other dimensions of the process of “becoming a migrant,” such as the centrality of the migration industry or the unavailability of information to potential emigrants.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 21.


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Conceptually, a focus on emigration relates to the concept of “context of exit.” Portes and Borocz\(^\text{16}\) have put forward the notion of “context of exit” and “context of reception” to examine migrants’ incorporation into the labour market in the United States. The “context of exit” distinguishes between voluntary and forced migration, migration from rural and urban areas and levels of social capital available in source areas. In their model, the “context of exit” can help explain the segmented assimilation of migrants, whereby some groups seem to fare better than others; hence, migrants coming from less favourable contexts of exit would be less likely to succeed. While useful, this concept focuses on macro-level variables, rather than on migrants’ individual and collective experiences. Our analysis emphasizes the importance of the context of exit at the micro level of migrants’ experiences. In addition, our emphasis is on how the “context of exit” connects to the “context of return.”

In the Asian context, Chu’s and Constable’s in-depth studies of emigration from China and Hong Kong to the US provide a vivid and thorough anthropological examination of the work, love, emotions and networking invested by would-be migrants.\(^\text{17}\) Their research shows how ways of imagining and constructing migration destinations like the US or Canada motivate many people to invest efforts and planning toward an eventual departure, whether they will migrate or not in the end. \(^\text{18}\) The research on Indonesian labour migration by Lindquist describes the gendered dimensions of emigration whereby men go into debt while women do not pay.\(^\text{19}\) These studies powerfully show the complexity and salience of emigration as part of actual mobility and also constitutive of the idea of mobility.

Fieldwork and Data

This analysis draws from multiple sources of data and our other previous analyses. This paper captures the key and overarching ideas that emerged from a five-year project broken down into several small studies on both labour and marriage migration. Between 2005 and 2009 we collected a total of 99 narratives from former migrant workers in Vietnam who had returned from Taiwan, South Korea or Japan. The interviews provided detailed accounts


of the entire migration process, from the day study participants first thought about going abroad, to the day of the interview. We thus adopted a life-course approach to migration and asked study participants to narrate the pre-migration steps, their experience abroad and the process of returning and reintegrating into life in Vietnam after being abroad. In addition, in 2009, we conducted a sample survey with 646 returnees in three provinces in Vietnam to supplement our qualitative data and provide statistical estimates for key variables we identified in the qualitative component.\textsuperscript{20} We also met with some workers in their destination countries and collected additional in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations.\textsuperscript{21} Finally, we conducted interviews with other actors involved in the migration process, such as brokers, government officials, trainers and local recruiters.\textsuperscript{22} The research on marriage migration was conducted in Vietnam, South Korea and Taiwan. Interviews with immigrant wives were conducted in South Korea and Taiwan at home, in the Vietnamese restaurants they ran, during government-sponsored language lessons, in community centres where they gathered, in social service agencies where they sought protection or legal aid for abuse and in Vietnam during return visits.\textsuperscript{25} Marriage brokers were also interviewed both in Vietnam and Taiwan. In addition, we studied a group of women who divorced or ran away and returned to Vietnam after a failed marriage abroad.\textsuperscript{24} In Vietnam, we undertook a survey of 450 households in three communities from which a large number of emigrant spouses to Taiwan and South Korea originate. We studied the impact of this migration on sending households and communities. This survey provided data on remittances received and on the impact of migration on gender power relations in families and villages of origin.\textsuperscript{25} In addition, we conducted a study of twenty Vietnamese migrant wives in Taiwan who experienced domestic violence. Taken as a whole, these data and our previous analyses inform the present argument. In pulling together results from various studies we conducted, we aim, in this article, at providing a general framework rather than empirical results on specific questions.

\textsuperscript{20} See Bélanger et al., \textit{International Labour Migration from Vietnam to Asian Countries}.
\textsuperscript{22} Hong-zen Wang and Danièle Bélanger, “Exploitative Recruitment Processes and Working Conditions of Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Taiwan.”
\textsuperscript{23} Anna Wen-hui Tang et al., “Politics of Negotiation between Vietnamese Wives and Taiwanese Husbands.”
\textsuperscript{25} Danièle Bélanger, Giang Linh Tran and Le Bach Duong, “Marriage migration within Asia: Remittances from migrants to natal families in Vietnam,” \textit{Asian Population Studies} 7, no. 2 (2011): 89-105.
Vietnamese Migrants to Taiwan, South Korea and Japan

Compared to other contract labour migrant-sending countries of the region, Vietnam sends a relatively small number of migrant workers abroad. Both annual outflows and current stocks of international migrants are significantly lower than those from large sending countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh. In 2005, for instance, the Philippines sent close to one million workers abroad, Indonesia about 400,000 and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka over 200,000. For the same year, Vietnam only sent 70,000 to 80,000 workers. According to the Vietnamese government’s latest estimates, there would be approximately 500,000 contract migrant workers in the world as of 2009. According to data from 2005, 90 percent of these workers were deployed in East and Southeast Asia with the main destination countries being Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. The Vietnamese government plans to substantially increase the number of unskilled and skilled workers sent abroad on contracts. Contrary to this ambitious objective, recent deployment indicates that Vietnam remains a small sending country, despite its total population of nearly 90 million and its large pool of potential migrants. The number of migrant workers sent abroad was fewer than 100,000 in 2008 and only 45,000 in the first eight months of 2009. Of the total number of migrants that left Vietnam in 2008 and 2009, approximately 30 percent were women.

Marriage migration to East Asian countries developed in the mid- to late 1990s after receiving countries of foreign spouses had established strong business networks through investment and the relocation of their manufacturing production to Vietnam. These networks increased transnational activities between nations and facilitated the establishment of matchmaking agencies and brokers. The matchmaking business originated in Ho Chi Minh City in the mid-1990s by the Taiwanese, and then in the late 1990s the Singaporeans and Koreans became involved. Similar to labour migration, marriage migration from Vietnam emerged out of an increasing need to diversify peasants’ livelihood strategies and in response to the national “worker shortage” and the local “bride deficit” in receiving countries.

Statistics from receiving countries indicate that, over the past decade, the

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two main Asian destinations of marriage migrants from Vietnam are Taiwan and South Korea, with approximately 100,000 women marrying men from Taiwan and 30,000 marrying men from South Korea during that period. Although these numbers are relatively small, women tend to come from the same communities, thus the local impact can be significant. At the receiving end, married Vietnamese women are part of a larger group of women coming from many other countries. Their Vietnamese “brides” rank second in South Korea and Taiwan, after “brides” from PRC China. In 2003 and 2004, approximately 30 percent of new marriages in Taiwan involved a foreign spouse, but only 15.5 percent did so by 2010. In 2006 the number of registered marriages to foreign spouses in South Korea peaked at 15 percent, with 41 percent of men employed in agriculture married to a foreign woman.

Narratives of Emigration: Navigating the Migration Industry

The pre-departure stage for migrant workers essentially involves the following steps: finding a recruiting agent or labour export company representative, borrowing money to pay the pre-departure fees, paying the fees, enrolling in a pre-departure training program and passing the health test requirements. In some cases, aspiring migrants are interviewed and must pass aptitude tests. Finally, the aspiring migrant obtains a passport and visa and boards a plane. This process generally takes between 6 and 12 months but, in rare cases, can be as short as one month or as long as three years. It is not uncommon for migrants to try a series of brokers or destinations before being successful. The route to migration is not a linear process, since it can be interrupted at any stage and then must be restarted from the beginning.

For aspiring migrant wives, we describe the process as experienced by women marrying through a matchmaking agency. Most aspiring emigrant women do not need to pay a fee to marry internationally; however, an increasing number of brokers in the north of Vietnam are adopting the model of migrant worker recruitment and have begun charging intermediary fees to the women and their families. In some communities, agents actively recruit women through their networks and invite them to take part in sessions during which foreign men come on marriage tours near their community to select spouses. Narratives reveal the numerous tribulations that migrants face during the pre-departure stage and how they strategize to reach their objective of becoming migrants. We highlight the three main themes that emerge from these accounts.

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Asia is known for being the region of the world where non-state actors are the most involved in the recruitment and management of migrants, including marriage migrants, labour migrants and students migrants. Interestingly, the International Labour Organization (ILO) points out in a recent report that this feature of Asian migration explains both the high efficiency of the system, which facilitates the migration of thousands of migrant workers and the very high risks involved, including frequent abuse, deception and fraud. The migration flows we analyze here are not self-sustained because migrants cannot rely on personal networks alone. Recent research has focused attention on the roles of brokers in mediating on behalf of potential migrants. In our previous examination of the recruitment process, we documented the unavoidability of the meso-level institutions that monopolize recruitment in Vietnam, both for migrant workers and migrant spouses. The type of recruitment we documented fits very well with the concept of the “migration industry” or “migration as a business.” The migration industry, which consists of various private, pseudo-public, legal and illegal agents who manage migrants and the migration process, plays a central role in migrants’ pre-departure stories.

The privatization of labour migration plagues aspiring migrants from Vietnam who have to disburse very high fees for the “privilege” of “becoming migrants.” In Vietnam, labour migrants are officially recruited either by state-owned labour export agencies who deal with foreign intermediates who are seeking workers for their clients or with large employers from receiving countries who recruit directly in sending countries of migrants. This system should theoretically protect workers from private or arbitrary costs; however, this is far from the reality. In Vietnam, many private companies rent the license of a state-owned company, recruit in the name of that company and then pay the state-owned company a fee, which is collected from the workers’

55 See Johan Lindquist, Biao Xiang and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Opening the Black Box of Migration: Brokers, the Organization of Transnational Mobility, and the Changing Political Economy in Asia,” Pacific Affairs 85, no. 1 (March 2012).
56 Hong-zen Wang and Danièle Bélanger, “Exploitative Recruitment Processes and Working Conditions of Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Taiwan”; Bélanger et al., “Ethnic diversity and statistics in East Asia.”
pre-departure down payments. Generally, workers must deal with a string of intermediaries, each collecting their own professional fees, before they reach the actual recruiting company or agent. In the survey we conducted in three provinces of Vietnam in 2009, we found that average pre-departure costs paid by aspiring migrants ranged from US$1,200 to US$10,000. These fees varied by country of destination and by occupation. In 2008, Japan ranked highest (US$10,053), followed by Korea (US$6,109), then Taiwan (US$5,292) and Malaysia (US$1,827). Factory workers normally pay much higher fees than domestic workers. In our survey, the largest variations in fees were between provinces of departure, indicating that the amount paid by migrant workers was largely dependent on where they lived.

The payment of fees is one of the most difficult obstacles for aspiring migrant workers to overcome. Most migrants must mortgage their homes and land to borrow money from banks, then obtain additional multiple private loans from their extensive kinship networks, with annual interest rates as high as 25 percent. The high pre-departure costs put migrants in a debt bondage situation whereby they must spend an average of 18 months working to repay their original loans. Because work contracts generally only last for three years, migrant workers, with the exception of those who can work many overtime hours to earn extra income, do not begin earning money until midway through their contracts. Exorbitant pre-departure costs and debt bondage are phenomena that have been identified by many researchers working on other sending countries of Asia, but their impact on migrants’ lives requires greater recognition. The recruitment system of migrant workers is extremely deregulated, with over 150 licensed recruiting agencies and thousands of small brokers searching for candidates in the rural communities of Vietnam. Enforcement of the export labour law is weak or non-existent and corruption is rampant. Although marriage migration is outside the scope of government planning and control, corruption does exist and women and their overseas potential husbands must spend increasingly large sums of money to obtain necessary official documents, which are mostly managed by brokers who specialize in marriage migration.

Navigating the migration industry requires patience and money. Candidates for migration are rarely informed of the official costs and can easily be charged excessive arbitrary fees before departure that significantly increase their debt bondage. The lack of a central and coordinated recruitment system makes the export of labour and import of “brides” a profitable business. The high cost of migration generates considerable revenue for many actors involved in the recruitment business. While all

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39 Danièle Bélanger et al., *International Labour Migration from Vietnam to Asian Countries: Process, Experiences and Impact.*

unskilled labour migrants from Southeast Asian countries pay recruitment fees (upfront or in the form of salary deductions), the very high cost documented here is specific to the Vietnamese case.\textsuperscript{41}

**Blurred Migrants’ Categories**

Aspiring migrants navigate constraints imposed by migration policies. First, they must deal with the destination countries’ policies regarding what types of workers will be recruited. Taiwan, for instance, was the main destination country of Vietnamese female migrants who were, mostly, recruited as elder care workers in private homes. In 2005, the Taiwanese government issued a ban on the recruitment of domestic workers from Vietnam apparently because a high number of them ran away. By 2010 there were 6,289 Vietnamese migrants who had escaped—a ratio of 8 percent (number of escapees to total number of Vietnamese migrant workers); the next highest rate was in Indonesia, which had a ratio of only 4 percent.\textsuperscript{42} As a result, the proportion of women migrating to Taiwan, working as domestic helpers, dropped rapidly, and women who aspired to migrate had to seek other migration possibilities. Some migrated to Taiwan as workers in the manufacturing sector; some worked during their short-term visits to relatives who had married and moved to Taiwan; and some migrated to other destinations. Secondly, migrants have to deal with various rules with respect to the recruitment of workers. For example, only married women between the ages of 25 and 45 years could be recruited as domestic workers to Taiwan, while single or married women could migrate as factory workers. To navigate these rules a woman sometimes used a sister’s birth certificate to obtain a passport so that she appeared either “younger” or “older.” Aspiring domestic workers would keep sending “better” pictures in the hopes of being picked out of the catalogue that was shown to employers in Taiwan. In some cases, the “better” picture is actually a picture of someone else, a situation which leads to tense first encounters between the hopeful, enthusiastic worker and the deceived, disappointed employer.

In the case of aspiring migrant wives, recruitment was much more contingent upon the first impression given during the groom’s marriage tour. Clothes, hair and makeup were carefully planned to increase one’s chance of being “picked” among many candidates. The prospective bride

\textsuperscript{41} The migration industry in the Philippines was established earlier than in Vietnam. In the Philippines, emigration is also more regulated and emigrants are better protected. The fees for migrant workers are lower: US$3, for a Filipino worker, compared to US$5,300 for a Vietnamese one (costs circa 2009). See Pei-chia Lan, “Stratified Otherization: Recruitment, Training and Racialization of Migrant Domestic Workers,” *Taiwanese Journal of Sociology*, no. 34 (2005): 1-65.

has to compete with other candidates, and marriage brokers play a key role in the selection process. For instance, brokers ask the potential grooms to write down the names of four or five preferred women and then, afterwards, push the groom into selecting a specific woman who comes from a province where it is easier to get a birth certificate. As a rule, a woman from the province of Can Tho is preferred over a woman from the province of Tay Ninh because the latter has a strict policy on issuing birth certificates for cross-border marriages.

If we examine how aspiring migrants manoeuvre the emigration process, we see how the categories of migrants are blurred as migration is negotiated. Categories of migrant workers or migrant spouses, we argue, obscure the complex trajectories and strategies deployed by aspiring migrants who navigate numerous constraints in trying to achieve migration. Lan’s story illustrates this complexity and encapsulates the aspects of the pre-departure process we emphasized above.

Lan heard about an opportunity to be trained in Ho Chi Minh City for migration to Canada. She moved from Hai Phong, enrolled in a training school and paid US$3,000. The school promised her a job as an assistant nurse in Canada. After three months of pseudo-training, the school shut down and its staff vanished. Lan had been the victim of a scam. Broke and owing money, she decided to enrol as a migrant worker for Taiwan. She paid an additional US$4,000, but her broker eventually disappeared. That too had failed. Faced with all these debts, she then decided to marry a South Korean man, hoping to kill two birds with one stone: first, to marry, since at 26 she was considered too old to marry in her village and, second, to go abroad to work and send money home to pay her debt. She eventually managed to marry a South Korean man but was the victim of domestic violence. She ran away and returned to Vietnam, fearing for her life. When we interviewed her, she still owed the money and was trying to go to work abroad again.

Lan’s attempts at migration failed, but migration can be successful if the immigration regulations can be manoeuvred. Since it is extremely expensive to become a migrant worker in East Asian countries, potential migrant workers can use the existing family network to facilitate the process by accessing visitor visas issued for family reunion. For example, in Taiwan it is very common for the migrant wife’s parents to visit their daughter to help care for a new baby and, at the same time, do some handicraft jobs in the home or help run a shop. With hard work, potential earnings can reach about US$350 a month per person, a much higher income than could be earned in rural Vietnam, which has an annual income of about US$50 per household in the Mekong Delta. The immigration regulations allow visitors to stay up to three months,
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but the fine for overstaying a visit for one year is only US$330,\textsuperscript{44} so there is strong economic incentive to come to Taiwan and overstay.

It is apparent that the potential migrant workers re-route their paths in the migratory process by utilizing different structural opportunities. Aspiring migrants from rural Vietnam may knock at various doors before they become either migrant workers (factory workers or elder care workers) or foreign brides in Japan, South Korea or Taiwan. If an aspiring migrant is unsuccessful in becoming one type of migrant, he or she may try an alternate strategy. Questioning the categories utilized in research with respect to immigrants in receiving countries, i.e., refugees versus immigrants and documented versus non-documented, should extend to the emigration process. The lines between migrants of different categories are shaped by migrants’ networks, social capital and opportunities, along with the policies that restrict or open doors, which frequently blur the lines artificially created.

Some of our study participants had hoped to migrate to South Korea or Taiwan as workers, but, faced with the impossibility of borrowing enough money to pay the high costs, they turned to the “cheaper” option of marrying abroad. Given that, the vast majority of women had a sincere desire to marry, get out of poverty and help their families. Whether exiting as migrant workers or migrant wives, would-be migrants had to rely on networks to secure recruitment routes.

Relying on and Suffering from Networks

In contemporary migration studies, the social network approach is a dominant paradigm to describe international migratory processes. According to this approach, networks are a key form of social capital for accessing international migration opportunities. More specifically, the network theory of migration posits that migrants migrate because of their insertion into a personal network that provides them with the support, information and material means to achieve migration. However, the network approach to migration leaves little room for actors who are non-kin, non-local or completely unknown to future migrants.\textsuperscript{45} In Vietnam, all potential migrants must enter a “commodified recruitment web” in order to be considered as migrant workers or potential brides, although many enter this web with the help of kin or local actors, which gives no guarantee of a successful future. When migration is highly commodified and gatekeepers monopolize administrative procedures, the protection of network ties is far from assured. Contrary to what most migration research argues with respect to the positive role of networks, our data show that social network ties are of no help in


\textsuperscript{45} Fred Krissmann, “Sin Coyote ni Patron.”
cases where personal networks are embedded in a for-profit recruitment system with gatekeepers closing side doors to avoid direct and “free” migration. In brief, networks matter, but they do not always lead to positive outcomes. The example of Tuan illustrates the two sides of network ties in this type of migration.

Tuan was unemployed and had two young children. He wished to migrate abroad for work. One of his uncles introduced him to a recruitment agency located in the city of Hai Phong. Tuan went to Hai Phong and began the paperwork to migrate to Taiwan. In total, he had to pay US$6,000 in numerous instalments to a recruitment company representative. Eventually, he obtained his visa and flew to Taiwan. Upon his arrival, he was sent to a remote farm and was told that he had to live in a container at the back of a field. He was there alone, forced to work 15 hours a day in the fields. He then realized that he had been the victim of a scam, but, since he did not know where he was, he did not dare try to escape. In addition, he still hoped that he would be paid for his hard work. After three months, he was taken away at night and brought to the airport for deportation. He ran away from the police at the airport and managed to find a job as an undocumented worker. After returning, he realized that his visa was a two-week tourist visa. He tried to visit the recruitment agency, but they had moved and he could not locate them. He lost over US$6,000 in this bitter experience.

In this case, Tuan had been introduced to a recruiter by a strong tie. The trafficker entered the kin network and convinced a man to introduce him to his nephews. Because the introduction came from a close tie, Tuan returned ashamed and did not dare complain. It indicates that being introduced by a relative or someone from the village did not necessarily increase the odds of succeeding as a migrant worker.

Marriage migrants, like potential migrant workers, contact the key matchmakers through different layers of people. If the migrants know the agent they might go to live in the agent’s residence in Ho Chi Minh City. In these cases, migrants do not have to pay their living costs because the husbands will normally pay them after the marriage has been arranged. Most marriage migrants know the backgrounds of their future husbands in Vietnam before they board a plane, but some are victims of trafficking. Official face-to-face interviews from destination countries before entry visas issued make it more difficult to cheat. However, if the marriage partners are introduced by friends or family members in destination countries and if the marriage has problems, the women face the dilemma of speaking out or enduring their situation. Normally, the failure is regarded as bad luck and, as with failed migrant workers, returning home following divorce is considered shameful. Contrary to Massey’s thesis, the role that social capital

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in the form of personal networks plays in promoting safe and successful migration can be minimal.

**Relationship between Emigration and Paths to Return**

The relevance of studying the pre-departure stage of the migration process becomes more apparent when analyzing the subsequent stages of the migration experience in destination countries. In this section, we use debt-bondage and family poverty before departure to illustrate how migrants’ experiences during the emigration stage can help us comprehend outcomes in the destination country. These outcomes determine “paths to return,” which in turn affect the “context of return.”

Once a migrant has reached a destination country to begin work or join a new spouse, many paths can unfold. For instance, some migrant workers are sent back home early and do not complete their contracts; this often means that the debt incurred to pay their pre-departure fees is still pending. Some run away from their legal employers to work as undocumented workers; some return home after completing their contracts; and others overstay their tourist or work visas and continue working until they are caught. Some make money and some do not. In our survey of 646 returnees, 40 percent assessed their overall migration experience as having been a failure. Migration outcomes vary a great deal and follow complex paths. In Vietnam, public discourse of negative outcomes generally places the blame on employers, brokers in receiving countries and careless receiving states that do not pay enough attention to foreign workers’ rights. In private social circles, early returnees, particularly female workers, are often suspected by relatives and fellow villagers of having behaved badly and having provoked their early dismissal. In receiving countries, negative outcomes among foreign workers, particularly those who perform work without legal documents and overstay, are blamed on the migrant workers themselves, who are construed as being lazy or abusing the receiving country’s generosity and effort to provide them with work.

Migrant spouses enter new territory in their marriages, families and society abroad. Some experience successful incorporation: they lead happy married lives, learn the language, have children, send remittances home, join the workforce and enjoy peaceful relations with their in-laws. At the other end of the spectrum, some face domestic violence, abuse and tense relations with their husbands and in-laws. Some run away from their family and stay in the destination country; some eventually acquire citizenship and then divorce; and others run away and return to Vietnam. Husband families with

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47 Daniele Belanger et al., *Marriage migration within Asia.*

48 Anna Wen-hui Tang et al., “Politics of Negotiation between Vietnamese Wives and Taiwanese Husbands.”

49 Daniele Belanger et al., *Sweet dreams, sour endings.*
a foreign bride often fear that the woman will escape. Some families confiscate IDs and passports, while some do not allow foreign brides to communicate with friends, go out or obtain employment. In Vietnam and the receiving countries, runaway brides are portrayed in two ways: trafficked victims or materialistic women. They are either victims in need of assistance or, more often, betrayers who have deceived the husbands and their families by marrying without sincere intentions. When a marriage fails because the foreign wife runs away, the woman is blamed, although there are various reasons for her to have left the marriage and returned to Vietnam. Such negative outcomes take on a different meaning if we take the pre-departure stage into account.

As discussed above, migrants’ debt bondage impacts their labour market trajectory in the destination country. A major problem faced by receiving countries is the issue of “runaway workers”; hence, measures are put in place to keep migrant workers bonded to an employer. Because workers’ mobility in the labour market is limited or non-existent, they cannot change employers easily. If problems occur, some workers resort to the unauthorized labour market by leaving their documented jobs in the hopes of making more money “outside,” as migrants put it. In many cases, workers reported having been approached by unsolicited brokers who recruit runaway workers. Some lure workers with promises of high salaries and good living conditions. These brokers contact workers directly on their personal cell phones, approach them through friends or simply cruise around certain places they are likely to be found, like train stations in Taiwan. The question is, however, why some turn to undocumented work and others do not.

The case of Japan, where Vietnamese migrants enrol in programs for industrial trainees and interns for three years, is a good example. Every year, approximately 6,000 Vietnamese workers become trainees in Japan, and Vietnamese trainees represent approximately 6.5 percent of trainees in that country. As mentioned above, in rural Vietnam labour migration to Japan entails the highest pre-departure fees among Asian destinations. Japan is considered the most lucrative receiving country, and it enjoys a very positive image in Vietnam as being the most modern, richest and safest of all potential destination countries. Hence, brokers charge exorbitant fees in exchange for high expected returns. Workers returning from Japan are expected to display all the signs of a successful migration, which puts extra pressure on them to earn as much as possible. Migrants to Japan have to acquire an extra

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51 Yen-fen Tseng and Hong-zen Wang, “Governing Migrant Workers at a Distance: Managing the Temporary Status of Guestworkers in Taiwan,” *International Migration*, forthcoming.

52 Danièle Bélanger et al., “From trainees to undocumented workers: Vietnamese migrant workers in Japan.”
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large debt to pay a security deposit that cannot be recuperated if they breach the term of their contract (either by not completing their contracts or overstaying their visas).

Once in Japan, workers are faced with another mechanism theoretically aimed at reducing the odds of them running away: mandatory savings on their salary. Employers retain up to 50 percent of the workers’ salary over the three years of employment, and this sum is to be paid upon completion of the worker’s stay. This practice makes it extremely difficult for workers to send enough remittances home, even to cover the monthly interest on their loans. Those who do manage to send money home in the first year are those who are able to work overtime. The overselling of Japan as a desirable destination puts extra pressure on workers to bring back substantial earnings after repaying their debt. Failure to do so is less understandable than for those returning from other less desirable, more risky destinations. Those who finance a person’s migration to Japan through loans or mortgaged houses and land are making a type of investment and the migrant has the responsibility of meeting expectations upon returning home. In our fieldwork, we met returnees who revealed how they had to borrow money in secret in order to purchase gifts and goods to display their success abroad in order to meet local expectations. For these returnees, the context of return meant enormous pressure to meet local expectations of success at all costs.

These factors, combined with brokers’ offers of higher salaries and more overtime work opportunities in the illegal work sector, motivate many workers to move out or run away. The debt bondage problem and the image of Japan as the Eldorado of migrant workers thus help explain the seemingly high rate of Vietnamese overstayers and runaway workers in Japan. According to Shipper’s typology of foreigners in Japan,53 trainees who become illegal workers are at the very bottom of the ladder among all foreigners. Both his research and ours document how illegal workers experience extreme stress, threat of incarceration and even abuse.

Most marriage migrants from rural Vietnam said that they married their husbands because they wanted to help their families in Vietnam move out of poverty. This goal is mostly achieved if we look at the survey data of economic contribution by the married daughters.54 The marriage migrant’s strong motivation to help her natal family financially impacts the emigration process in Vietnam and her subsequent life in Taiwan with her husband’s family. According to a Taiwanese diplomatic official in Ho Chi Minh City, the two most frequently asked questions by Vietnamese women about transnational marriages are, first, how long will it take to apply for naturalization and, second, can they work as soon as they arrive in Taiwan.

54 Danièle Bélanger et al., Marriage migration within Asia.
For these women, marriage to Taiwanese men can provide them with the possibility of obtaining citizenship and a job to earn money. However, the husband’s family may have contradictory expectations of the marriage and may want the wife to stay at home to take care of the whole family. Such a gap in expectations often leads to conflicts in the marriage.\(^{55}\) If the husband’s family can assist in remitting money to the wife’s family in Vietnam, a migrant spouse will be more willing to play the gender role imposed on her. But when there is a gap in expectations or unhappy personal relations in the extended families, finding a job would help women become financially independent, on the one hand, and to leave an unhappy environment, on the other. However, such an option is often a blasting fuse for serious domestic violence.\(^{56}\)

Among a group of twenty interviewees who reported domestic violence in Taiwan, all of them, except a woman who lived in Ho Chi Minh City and whose father was a businessman, were from poor rural areas in Vietnam where they helped their families make a living from farming. They imagined they would find a job in Taiwan after marriage and be able to contribute more to their family’s finances. As Khoa said, “I didn’t care if my husband was old or ugly. Even though he was 34 years older than me, it was still fine with me. My father worked so hard and my family was still very poor. What I really wanted was to help my family by marrying a Taiwanese man.” But her husband did not allow her to work, and he demanded that she stay at home to take care of her two children. Also, he was not willing to give her any money to help her Vietnamese family. Later Khoa invited her mother to come to Taiwan to take care of the two children, while she worked 12 hours a day to earn about US$1,700 a month. She was then able to give some money to her mother and brothers in Vietnam. Khoa’s husband was irritated at her for not staying at home, suspected her of engaging in affairs, and resorted to domestic violence, which was reported to police after a few years. Among abused Vietnamese women abroad and some returned migrants interviewed in Vietnam, the gap between expectations created during the pre-departure stage and the realities faced by women after migration was often the main underlying reason for their conflicts with husbands and their families. The entire migration process thus sheds light on the relationships between emigration, experience abroad and return.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that the understanding of migration flows requires greater attention to the process of emigration that unfolds in the country of

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\(^{55}\) Anna Wen-hui Tang et al., “Politics of Negotiation between Vietnamese Wives and Taiwanese Husbands.”

\(^{56}\) Anna Wen-hui Tang and Hong-zen Wang, “From Victims of Domestic Violence to Determined Independent Women.”
origin. The general context of our argument is the centrality of the migration industry in the migration options available to individuals and families from relatively low-economic strata of Vietnamese society. Our analysis contributes to the body of literature on unskilled labour migration and marriage migration from Vietnam in three ways. First, we show that a close examination of the process of “becoming a migrant” reveals how migrant categories defined by modes of entry (either labour or marriage migrants) or by legal status (legal and undocumented migrants) neglects complex emigration negotiation processes whereby migrants are inserted in specific social structures, have access to economic and social capital and are influenced by the emergence of a migration culture. In other words, migrants are not completely self-selected prior to migration because many of them, especially women, navigate possibilities and eventually end up labelled or categorized according to criteria constructed by bureaucrats and researchers.57 Second, the positive dimension of networks for migrants needs to be reconceptualized in cases where a powerful migration industry dominates the migration process. When emigration becomes a business, network ties are embedded in market relations and may not be advantageous for migrants. In fact, personal networks offer a particularly effective means of deceiving and abusing candidates for migration. Third, we provide evidence supporting the idea that the emigration process influences the experiences and outcomes that unfold during and after migration. Hence, emigration, immigration and return must be approached as a continuum if we are to make sense of migrants’ experiences and whether a migrant succeeded or not.

In sum, based on the case of Vietnam as a sending country of migrants to Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, this article argues that analyzing activities in the sending country can shed light on strategies, experiences and trajectories in the receiving country. This process needs to be documented and discussed because, prior to migration, the migrant is a non-migrant, a person navigating possibilities and constraints, procedures and forms, brokers and payments, waiting time, training or legal regulations. It is through this process that options and barriers unfold and that one eventually becomes a factory worker, domestic worker, foreign bride, visitor to relatives, unauthorized worker or trafficked person. This label, which will stay with the migrant for years after the migration, will determine his or her entitlements and social and legal position in the receiving country.

The case of the privately managed migration of workers and marriage migrants in East Asia indicates one characteristic in the region: the increasing commercialization of migration. As migration and border control policies in the receiving countries of East Asia remain strict while more individuals wish to migrate internationally, migration has developed into a lucrative niche. In this era, aspiring migrants have to resort more often to brokers,

57 See Pei-chia Lan, Global Cinderellas, chapter 1.
consultants and agents of various sorts to process paperwork, prepare themselves for interviews, etc. Aspiring migrants have to develop complex strategies, pay large sums of money in many cases, expose themselves to risks and resort to illegal routes when legal ones do not work. This situation reinforces the need for studies on the processes taking place during the pre-departure period when this aspect of the era of migration unfolds and can, in part, shape the future course of the migratory process of many within Asia and around the world.

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