



Field Trip Report

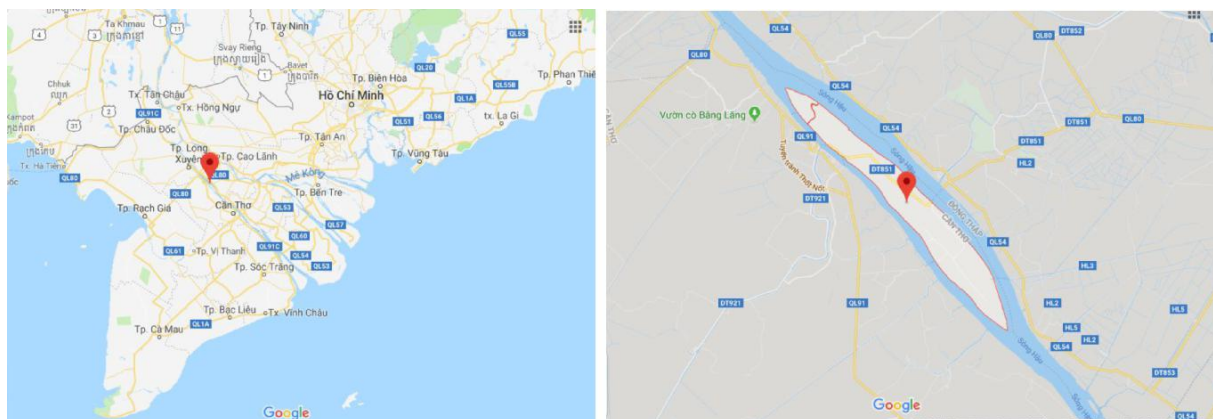
Field Trip Group 7: Transnational Marriages in Can Tho City

I. Framing

1. Introduction

Transnational marriage is considered as a common social phenomenon in the world. Some countries in the Asia have recently recorded a large number of women marrying foreign men. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand are leading this trend.¹ In Vietnam, Vietnamese women marrying Taiwanese, Korean and American men account 70% of 165,000 cases of those who marry foreigners (2008-2016)². Can Tho Province leads the highest number of women marrying Taiwanese and Korean men with around 3,300 cases (2008-2016)³.

Located in the middle of the Hau River and far away (48 km) from the center of Can Tho City, and accessible only by ferry, Tan Loc ward, Thot Not district, Can Tho City is called "Taiwan island". Tan Loc belongs to Tan Tay islet, has an area of 32,68 km.³



Picture 1. Tan Loc ward in the maps

Thousands of women from Tan Loc have married Taiwanese men (since 1999) and later Korean men (since 2006). The average age of women marrying Taiwanese and Korean men in Tan Loc commune is around 22 years old and their husbands are, on average, about 18 years older than them. They are generally economically disadvantaged, and their education levels are elementary or secondary. They often know little about Korea or Taiwan cultures before entering into these marriages. Remarkably, their marriages are bridged by brokerage firms and are commodified. Women have often only met their husbands one time and weddings are organized within 3 months of the first meeting.⁴

¹ United Nations ESCAP, 2015:42

² International Organization for Migration, 2017: 39-40

³ International Organization for Migration, 2017: 42-44

⁴ Kocun Can Tho 2018, 41; Nguyen Minh Anh and Tran Thi Phung Ha, 2018: 31



Although many couples in these marriages stay together, some divorce. According to General Statistics Offices of Korea, the ratio of divorced women is 1:5 among those who marry Korean men.⁵ In terms of divorced women returning home with their children from commodified transnational marriages, Tan Loc has the highest number in Can Tho. Returning women and their children face a lot of difficulties reintegrating into the Vietnamese society. There have also been cases of Vietnamese women, who fall victim to domestic violence, or even femicide. According to the Korean Centre for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN)⁶, as of 2016 3,183 of divorced women have children and a large number of them return to Vietnam with their children.⁷

2. Preconceptions

While we tried to reflect the complexity of the topic and our own positionality, we still entered the field with certain preconceptions about the practice as well as the actors involved. One of our main preconceptions - and at the same time limitation in terms of conducting transdisciplinary research - was that we framed the practice of transnational marriage itself as the problem, we wanted to do research on before entering the field, rather than finding out the main issues for the local community collaboratively.

We furthermore assumed that there was a certain social pressure from families and the local community influencing the women's decision to enter transnational marriages. This assumption was related to another preconception of ours, namely that there were certain economic benefits for the community stemming from the practice and remittances sent back by the married women.

We also discussed possible other influences the practice might have on the community, for example how the emigration of local women might lead to a renegotiation of gender roles within families and the community.

It seems important to also mention our preconceptions regarding the marriages themselves in relation to our common understanding of the concept of marriage. We assumed that it was mainly older men from a better economic background marrying young women, a discrepancy which would not only put the women in a certain position of dependency but also pose certain challenges on the relationship of the couples. Relating to the high age difference and the fast procedure of the marriages and following immigration of the women, we also imagined there to be a rather high number of abuse and divorces.

Finally, we assumed that the women, who got divorced and returned to Tan Loc were perceived as “having failed” and had to face challenges and stigmatization by the community.

While we tried to critically reflect and challenge our preconceptions, especially with regards to the agency of the women involved, these assumptions still influenced our way of conceptualising and conducting the research, which we will elaborate in the following chapter.

⁵ Kocun Can Tho, 2018: 139

⁶ The KOCUN Center is a Korean NGO that supports women leaving for and returning from Korea and is financed by the Korean government, amongst others.

⁷ Kocun Can Tho, 2018: 139



II. Research Process Implementation

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Transdisciplinary Research (TDR)

Transdisciplinary research, as well as our preconceptions, shaped and influenced our process during the field-trip. TDR means to do research with and for people, crossing academic disciplinary borders and working with many different actors with different perspectives. It implies that the research questions and the topics are not statically set by the researchers, but rather develop as part of the process. This requires adaptation and flexibility from all involved actors. TDR is further about knowledge co-production between academic and non-academic actors and the diverse disciplines. The different types and sources of knowledge within the process are equally valid and integrated in the research process. Combined new knowledge should evolve from their consolidation. Two main factors in TDR are equality and non-hierarchy. It is not one actor who is shaping and leading the research, it is the interaction between the different levels, humans and sectors. TDR is occupied with real life problems and creating socially robust knowledge that leads to sustainable outcomes.⁸

3.2. Methods

Our first step, with TDR in mind and given the limited timeframe for our research, was the decision to divide into two groups. The first reason for this was that we wanted to reduce the anxiety of our interview partners. This would have been much harder with a big group of strangers, sitting in front of one interviewee. Secondly, we wanted to integrate some aspects of TDR into our research. We decided that one group should raise very open and broad questions and the other should develop more specific and structured questions. We wanted to give our interview partners the chance to raise their own topics, instead of just answering a fixed set of questions. So, we decided that the second group would do semi-structured interviews with clear questions, but keeping in mind, that they should stay open to differ from this course anytime.

In the field we conducted these two types of interviews with families whose daughters had married abroad, women in transnational marriages, returned women, and women who had recently entered into transnational marriages and were going to Korea within the next months. Furthermore, we did group interviews with the Women's Union, staff from the KOCUN Center and with families of women, who are married to a Korean or Taiwanese man.

During every interview and diverse other visits and situations we also carried out participant observations. In this way, we tried to capture a view outside of what was said directly.

Thanks to our translators we were also able to obtain translated documents. For example, a guide book from the KOCUN Center, which is given to women, who are planning to go to Korea.

4. Main findings

4.1. Motivations for transnational marriages

The motivations for entering transnational marriages are as diverse as the women making these decisions. However, there seems to be certain trends in the motivation of women entering transnational marriages, which has changed over the past 20 years.

⁸ KNOTS Summer School and Field Trip 2019: Guidebook. Task Sheet For Students Participating.2019: 31-32



From the interviews with the families of the internationally married women we learned that those women, who entered into commodified transnational marriages when the trend began, did so mostly to help their families economically. In recent years the motivation for women to enter these marriages has become increasingly aspirational. Vietnam is still an authoritarian country (Thayer, 2014)⁹ and, in eyes of many of our interviewees, Korea has the image of a developed country with more possibilities to work, to start their own business or to study. During our research we saw evidence that the motivation to enter these marriages has become more focused on perceived opportunities for a better life in Korea and Taiwan. The motivation of any woman, who makes the decision of entering a transnational marriage, cannot be simplified to merely economic factors.

According to Bélanger and Wang¹⁰, for the millions of men and women from rural areas of Vietnam who decided to emigrate, this emigration was made possible either with temporary worker visa or with spousal visa. Thus, these migrants became either “wives” or “workers”. That’s one way of illustrating that for women from rural areas who have lower socio-economic status, transnational marriage is a way out of the country. However, one of our interviewees, who had higher socio-economic background, decided to marry a Korean man in order to pursue her dream of studying a Master’s Degree which her family couldn’t afford to pay.

Most of our interviewees, who were planning to leave to Korea, were aware that there are risks associated with these marriages, but still considered it worthwhile to take the risk. The awareness about possible risks, including abuse, seems to be related to the establishment of informal networks of women which serve as a platform to exchange experiences and advice but also for arranging marriages (see 2.5.). Additionally, KOCUN Center offers courses on Korean language and culture to prepare women marrying Korean men before their emigration to Korea. These classes, as well as the aforementioned guide book by KOCUN, include sections about sexual education and domestic violence.

Another factor which had influence on some of our interviewees’ motivation was the promotion of the Korean culture on social networks, and how South Korea is portrayed in the media. This may be a factor involved with the shift towards aspirational motivation, as a romanticized version of life in Korea is transmitted to young people in Vietnam through various forms of media.

4.2. Livelihoods and challenges abroad

The language barrier, food and cultural differences were named as main challenges by most interviewees, when discussing their lives in Korea and Taiwan. Given that there was no possibility to build trust with the interviewees in advance, these topics were probably mentioned with such a high frequency because they are easier to talk about than marriage conflicts and other more sensitive personal experiences.

Contrary to our preconceptions, many of the interviewees mentioned that the income of their husbands was not very high and that they had to take up at least one job to contribute to family income and to be able to send remittances. Care work is often influenced by this necessity to

⁹ Thayer C.A., 2014. The Apparatus of Authoritarian Rule in Vietnam. In: Politics in Contemporary Vietnam. Critical Studies of the Asia Pacific Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London

¹⁰ BÉLANGER, Danièle, WANG, Hong-zen, 2013. Becoming a Migrant: Vietnamese Emigration to East Asia. Pacific Affairs, 86(1), 31-50.



work and in some cases it was more the husbands family who was taking care of the children from transnational marriages. We observed certain dependency in this sense as one interviewee had to return to Vietnam after her mother in law had died because there was no one who could help her with taking care of the children. In other cases, women had to take care of their parents in-law as well, obeying the traditional, hierarchical structures in the husband's family.¹¹

In one case, the racist attitude of a mother and brother in-law were mentioned by our interviewee. She located this discriminatory behaviour within the context of the “obedient” and “good housewife” image which Vietnamese women are associated with in South-East Asia and the prejudices which come along with it.¹²

4.3. Returning to Vietnam

Some transnational marriages end in divorce, meaning that the women often lose their residency permit and have to return to Vietnam. Some of them want to return voluntarily and some go back for other reasons. They often return with their children. The children who come from transnational marriages often do not have Vietnamese citizenship and are required to apply for a visa on a regular basis, which costs time and money.

Along with visa requirements, the language barrier is another problem that children face and both of them complicate children's access to education. Based on the advocacy of the KOCUN center, the reintegration of the women and their children in Can Tho Province has been partially eased. The provincial government has alleviated some of the visa requirements, allowed for wider educational access for children of transnational marriages. Furthermore, according to our interviews, the KOCUN center has entered partnerships with the provincial government and the Korean consulate in Can Tho to extend access to the services they provide. For example, some women reported that a preparation course at the KOCUN center was a requirement to receive their Korean visa.

4.4. Impacts on family and community

One of the first things we were told when talking to representatives of the Women's Union was how the practice of transnational marriages was beneficial to the whole community of Than Loc, because of the charity families with daughters married abroad would give and invest to the community. Talking to parents of women married to foreigners however revealed their differing perceptions of transnational marriages depending on whether the marriage is seen as “successful” by them. The families whose daughter's marriage ended in divorce tend to keep it to themselves and do not see transnational marriage as beneficial.

Regarding gender hierarchies in Vietnamese families, we have figured out that there is a certain paradox. On the one hand, when a daughter is going to marry a foreign man, she is in some cases able to send money back to her family. This can increase her power within the family and reshape the family hierarchy to a certain extent. On the other hand, based on our interviews it is clear that the situation of women entering (commodified) transnational marriages in the family of her husband is not easy. In Korea or Taiwan, they enter into an existing hierarchy and often, as we have heard, into a traditional model of the family, in which the role of the wife is

¹¹ See: Tseng, Hsunhui. (2016). Racialization of Foreign Women in the Transnational Marriage Market of Taiwan. In: Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia: 205-223 10.21313/hawaii/9780824852962.003.0013.

¹² Ibid.



to be a mother and housewife. In addition to these power asymmetries, because of the precarious nature of new wives' position, there is added dependency in these relationships.

Returning back to the gender hierarchies in Vietnamese families, our research was too small in scope to get the full picture of existing gender hierarchies involved with the practice of transnational marriage. Nonetheless, based on the evidence that we gathered, we can conclude that the decision to enter these marriages is made by the women themselves and, at least in our case study, was not forced on them by their parents. It seems the moving to a foreign country through a transnational marriage is often perceived as an opportunity. In general, in none of our interviews was the trend of the transnational marriage addressed as problem by itself. Its legitimacy was never questioned.

4.5. Trends in the process of transnational marriage

The process of commodified transnational marriage has become more structured over the past 20 years. Each step of the marriage is more organized and the women often know where to turn to in each phase of it. In the past, the brokerage of transnational marriages was carried out by firms based in Korea or Taiwan and the metropolitan centers of Vietnam. Nowadays, although brokerage firms still exist, almost anyone can become a broker. In our interviews, cousins, aunts and friends were commonly mentioned. The brokerage process is therefore diversified and more complex than it used to be.

Once the marriage is arranged, the wife needs to apply for a visa. For women marrying Korean men, this is usually when the KOCUN center steps in and offers orientation and language courses. It was not formerly a requirement to pass through a language test when applying for a visa and now it is. The KOCUN center also provides a list of contacts to other centres in Korea to which women can turn to in case any problems or emergencies.

When we were talking to the different actors, the practice itself was neither questioned nor addressed as a problem by the community. Accordingly, the focus of the actors which were mentioned seems to be mainly on making the practice safer rather than on abolishing it, which is exemplified by the aforementioned initiatives of KOCUN center. An exception could be seen in the recent initiative of the Women's Union which attempts to provide vocational courses for women so that they have more job opportunities in their home communities.

III. Reflections and Outcome

5. Challenges

The structures of the summer school and field trip brought about inherent limitations to our research. Complete transdisciplinary research, given the time restraints and the context, was impossible. Therefore, our goal was simply to gain insight into how transdisciplinary research could be conducted and to practice the methods. For instance, we attempted to include some aspects of TDR in our research design such as the division into a semi-structured, deductive group, tasked with evaluating our preconceived areas of focus, and, an "open-water" group, tasked with inductively determining what was socially relevant for the actors that we interviewed.

Firstly, there were a number of challenges in implementation. The topic of research was set for the group before the research, as well as the interview partners. This limited any possibility of including other non-academic actors in the research and made adjusting the format and methods



of the research difficult.¹³ The pre-existence of the research topic and inability to completely control the structure of the research made any attempt to comprehensively fulfill the aspirations of transdisciplinary research quite impossible. This is because the local actors played no role in setting the topic of research or developing the research question and, therefore, we were unable to produce socially robust, locally valid and outcome-oriented research.¹⁴

Separate from our transdisciplinary aspirations, there were also challenges caused by the setting of our research. Various levels of the local Vietnamese Women's Union in Can Tho were involved in and helped to facilitate our research. Representatives of the Women's Union closely observed our research, even when they were not the interview partners. Furthermore, our interviews were often conducted in Women's Union or local government facilities. This observation was probably a product of the political environment of Vietnam, a country in which research and academic expression are tightly controlled. Additionally, the short timeframe of the research and language barriers played a role, although we had two interpreters at our disposal. Another important factor was the sensitivity of topics that we were interested in. Interview participants were uncomfortable discussing certain topics and there were certain lines that we could not cross (for example, the sexual aspect of these marriages). Finally, there were other structural factors, such as the large size of our research group, that made certain methods less practical.¹⁵

Although there were challenges, there were also successful features of our research project. The division into two groups, although it did not function as planned, still provided valuable insights. The perspectives of both groups, in combination, provided valuable insights that might have been overlooked by one, larger group. We engaged in frequent discussions, reflections and updates between and within groups. These discussions helped us to adapt during the research process and better distribute the workload between us.

6. Implications

The research that we conducted was qualitative in nature and, because of the pre-design of our sample by other actors and its limited scope, we can make no claim to generalizability in the classical (quantitative) scientific sense. That is, that our conclusions cannot be generalized to all other similar contexts. However, it is clear that there is significant and legitimate criticism of this classical understanding of generalization. One means of generalizing our results would be to use them as the first step in the process of theoretical sampling, that is, as a starting point for inductive theory development with additional material found based on the analysis of the existing material:¹⁶

Perhaps our most significant finding was that transnational marriage is not perceived as a problem by most of the actors involved. For the women entering into these marriages, it seems rather to be seen as a solution to economic problems, or a means to achieve aspirations. This points to a strong difference between preconceived / academic notions and discourse and the local perception of the phenomena. The fact that we were able to reach this conclusion, however, points to the potential of bringing together actors from varying backgrounds with the

¹³ Although we were able to divide into two groups right before the field trip and adjust the interviews accordingly.

¹⁴ KNOTS Summer School and Field Trip 2019: Guidebook. Task Sheet For Students Participating 2019: 31-32

¹⁵ For example, when we attempted a group discussion, the research group vastly outnumbered the participants.

¹⁶ See: Mayring, Philip. (2007) On Generalization in Qualitatively Oriented Research. In Forum Qualitative Social Research. Volume 8, No. 3, Art. 26



theoretical considerations of TDR, to identify and possibly overcome these differences in conception.

7. Outlook

We conclude, that transdisciplinary research and this case of transnational marriage are only partially compatible. The first reason for this is that the topic crosses borders, namely between Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. Structures and networks regarding transnational marriage reach across all three of these countries. This fact makes it practically difficult to apply TDR, since it implies the involvement of as many actors as possible and a long term relationship with them.

Second, the actors that we met did not perceive transnational marriage as a problem. Almost nobody questioned the practice itself. At most specific aspects were questioned. In our opinion, it does not fit within the logic of TDR that researchers are the ones to define what the main problems of the people that they are talking to are. TDR is about knowledge co-production based on the socially relevant problems raised by non-academic actors themselves.

Our last point is, that the topic of transnational marriage is related to non-transparency, shame and illegality. To do research in such a field makes it absolutely necessary to take time and build trust with the people. This was not possible in the scope of a five-day field-trip. From our point of view, the effectiveness and meaningfulness in applying TDR in this case depends on the specific interest and research question. For example, it would make sense to use TDR, if the aim was to determine the problems faced by divorced women after their return to the village with the aim of finding solutions to address these problems. It is hardly possible to apply TDR, when attempting to capture the whole picture of transnational marriage at a macro/theoretical level. Still, regardless of the methods and approach we used, it is clear the phenomena of transnational marriage requires additional research.

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