

WU YANHUA

Migration Relations and Survival Strategies of Vietnamese Female Marital Immigrants in Fujian Province, China

Abstract: This paper mainly addresses the important functions of migration relations in contemporary transnational marriages by analyzing the motives, paths, and post-migration lives of Vietnamese female marital immigrants (VFMI) from *Y County* in Fujian Province. It shows that these immigrants' strong or weak ties to their native country as well as foreign countries play significantly different roles during the three stages of migration (i.e., pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration). Strong ties in native countries often manipulate migrants' decision-making processes while weak ties provide them with more migration paths, and strong ties in foreign countries decisively impact their post-migration lives.

Preface

With the rapid development of the Chinese economy during the past few decades, the issue of foreign marital immigrants in mainland China has attracted wide attention among the international community. To date, most of the existing research on female marital immigrants has been limited to empirical studies of illegal Vietnamese female marital immigrants (VFMI) in the bordering areas of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province; little attention has been paid to the ever-rising number of legal VFMI in Fujian Province and other developed coastal areas in Southeast China. Since 2013, we have conducted in-depth field research on this immigrant group in *Y County* in the City of Quanzhou, Fujian Province. Working from the perspective of migration relations, we selected three cases to carry out empirical analysis and theoretical discussion in hopes of understanding these migrants' motives, paths, and post-migration lives in China.

Introduction to the Theoretical Perspectives of Relation Studies

Every stage in the migration process—including the decision whether to migrate and where to go as well as strategies for surviving in the new place—is closely linked to migrants' social relation networks (Feng, 2011, p. 12). Empirical studies on migrants in Europe, the USA, ASEAN countries, and Australia further confirmed that the relation networks of migrant groups exert dominant influence on the migration process, survival strategies, and social mobility paths of migrants (Li, 2005; Liu, 2000; Wang, 2000).

Hypotheses regarding the influence of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1982) vs. strong ties (Bian, 1997) in this regard are hotly debated in the academic community. In "The Strength of Weak Ties," Granovetter (1973) stated that strong ties refer to the intimate social relations shared by closely acquainted friends and relatives, while weak ties refer to more limited interaction between individuals from different groups. For Granovetter, compared with friends (i.e., strong ties), unfamiliar persons (i.e., weak ties) may be apt to provide more useful information due to their vastly different positionality

and perspective (Granovetter; Granovetter, 1982). Through an array of empirical studies in a few Chinese communities (including Tianjin, Singapore, and Hong Kong), however, it has been established that for most Chinese individuals, strong ties tend to be much more important in the course of help-seeking behaviors (Bian, 1997; Bian and Ang, 1997).

In effect, Granovetter focused mainly on individual behaviors under Western civilization, while Bian studied Chinese social relations against the backdrop of Confucian culture. For our purposes, these two perspectives are fundamental and complementary in expounding on the social relations of VFMI as influenced by both cultures. For VFMI, the continuous development of relations is a dynamic process ranging from the nation of emigration (Vietnam) to the nation of immigration (China). For example, previously strong ties (e.g., intimate friends in Vietnam) may turn into weak ones due to insufficient interaction after migration, or they may be kept strong as a result of frequent communication. Meanwhile, weak ties may be transformed into strong ties, which may in turn trigger more weak ties. In short, as VFMI embrace more and more information, resources, and opportunities, relations are no longer considered static; rather, they become dynamic at each different stage of the migration process.

General Introduction to VFMI in *Y* County

Y County is situated in the northwest region of Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, with a population of 569,400 and an area of 1,468 square kilometers. Since the Hongwu Year of the Ming Dynasty (1381 AD), people have travelled to the Malay Archipelago and settled down there. Thanks to such spirit of exploration, *Y* has long been a famous hometown of the overseas Chinese. To date, there are approximately 1.2 million VFMI living in 47 countries and regions throughout the world.

According to statistics from the Department of Immigration in *Y*, VFMI do not have a long history. Before 2011, they were rarely seen except in a few families of returned overseas Chinese from Vietnam. The earliest recorded VFMI in *Y* is Le Thanh Thuy, who came to Hengkou in *Y* from Tinh Kien Giang in Vietnam in April 2011. Since then, various Sino-Vietnamese social networks including returned overseas Chinese, their relatives living in Vietnam, and a few transnational couples from both nations accounted for a total of 53 VFMI. Between 2012 and 2013, another 112 VFMI from the provinces of Tinh Can Tho, Tinh Dong Thap, Tinh Hau Giang, Tinh Ca Mau, etc. in Vietnam settled down in *Y* through the efforts of marriage brokers, who fully utilized the ties of VFMI as well as bridegrooms' families in China and their relatives in Vietnam. From 2014 to 2015, dozens of VFMI kept on migrating to *Y*. Currently, the total number of VFMI in *Y* is well over 200 except for a few run-away VFMI for complicated reasons.

A survey of 165 VFMI indicates that 95% of them came from rural areas near the Mekong Delta, and 5% from Southeast Vietnam, Red River Delta, and Tay Nguyen. They are principally composed of farmers (36.5%), unemployed persons (37.5%), workers (2.4%), and other (23.6%, with most working as matchmakers). These VFMI are mainly from Tinh Can Tho in the Mekong Delta Region. VFMI in *Y* entered China legally and registered their marriages according to Chinese law. VFMI in *Y* have diverse origins, are moderately educated (i.e, middle school level), and are of a fairly young age (20-35). However, their

activities and choices are relatively restricted due to cultural shock, communication barriers, marital issues, and geographical isolation.

Migration Processes and Survival Strategies of Different Types of VFMI

VFMI experience transnational migration through marriage, which not only provides opportunities but also brings about challenges in their lives. During a long period of field research, we have studied more than 30 individual VFMI cases including farmers, workers, and matchmakers. For this paper, we choose three typical cases to analyze the mechanisms of decision-making, migration paths, and post-migration lives throughout the transnational migration process and explore the function of strong and weak ties therein.

Case 1: Ajiao's business as a matchmaker

Madame Ajiao, from Tinh An Giang in Vietnam, is 27 years old. She migrated to Y in 2012 and has one daughter now. She is an active matchmaker in *Community T* of *Y County*. She shares her migration experience:

I came to China in August 2012. In the past, I was working in a factory in Vietnam with a salary of 100 USD per month. My parents suggested that I should marry abroad, such that I could transfer money back and help them build houses and buy lands as other families did. I decided to marry a Chinese by following my cousin's advice, plus the fact that his daughter married a Chinese and my younger cousin married a Korean in ROK. Helped by his friends, together with nine other Vietnamese females, I flew from Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi and finally arrived in China with my husband-to-be. In Fuzhou, the broker helped us with the marriage registration.

Life is very complicated these years. At the beginning, my husband decorated houses in the town, and I stayed at home, bored to death, since my mother-in-law did not allow me to go anywhere. Half a year later, my husband bought a mobile phone and a computer for me to communicate with my parents in Vietnam. In 2013, my father told me that my cousin made a fortune by being a marriage broker in Vietnam, and he asked me to join my cousin. What a wonderful idea! But it was pretty difficult to be a matchmaker. Neither did I know anyone nor speak Chinese. Besides, they distrusted me, and I accomplished nothing after half a year. As a turning point, my husband joined us and introduced single males to the Chinese broker, and I looked for Vietnamese females from my cousin. Meanwhile, I helped the Chinese broker to contact my cousin. And voilà, it succeeded. During these three years, I have matched dozens of couples, to my delight, about 20 couples in 2014. Of course, I have earned much more than in Vietnam (2,000 RMB per couple). Frankly speaking, there are three important factors in the matchmaking market; that is to say, sincere Chinese males, honest Vietnamese females, and trustworthy marriage brokers. The Chinese males used to be my husband's colleagues and my husband knows them well. In Vietnam, my cousin introduces only those honest females. And we get along very well with the Chinese broker and often visit him and have dinner together. In 2014, my husband and I began to sell fish sauces and other Vietnamese articles to them [VFMI], and in turn, we mailed local teas to my cousin to sell in Vietnam.

At the moment, many colleagues of my husband married Vietnamese females and I have made friends with their wives. We spend lots of time chatting, shopping, and having dinner together. Sometimes, I help them to resolve domestic affairs and mail

things to their parents in Vietnam. Anyway, it is great to be a matchmaker. In 2013, my husband sent 2,000 RMB to my parents in Vietnam, 1,000 RMB in 2014, and 2,000 RMB in 2015. Now, since my baby was born, my husband has to do lots of work. I will continue when my kid grows up.

Case 2: Ayin's clothes workshop

Madame Ayin, who comes from Tinh Bac Lieu in Vietnam, is 26 years old. She migrated to Y in 2012 and has one daughter now. She manages a family clothes workshop in Community F of Y County. Here is her story:

I came to China in May 2012. My parents are poor, and I have many younger brothers and sisters. I was forced to give up my schooling and wash clothes at the age of 10. It was really hard for me and I was always crying in heaps of clothes. Then, an aunt [colleague] felt pity for me and introduced me to work in a fish shop. My family needed money to send the younger brother to school and I looked forward to changing my destiny in a foreign country. As a result, I was introduced to an adoptive mother [in Vietnam, adoptive mothers choose and train those beautiful girls from the countryside who want to marry men in foreign countries]. My adoptive mother offered food [and] accommodation and trained us to win men's favor. At last, I met my husband-to-be through my adoptive mother's arrangement. He paid my adoptive mother and asked her to apply for my travel visa to China. As soon as we arrived, the Chinese broker led us to the Bureau of Public Security and submitted the application of residence. After being registered as husband and wife in Fuzhou, we went home [to Y].

My husband has many brothers and sisters, and they are all very rich. I wanted to make money [but] my husband did not agree. Sometimes we quarreled and I cried. The aunt persuaded my husband to allow me to make clothes with her and I worked in her family workshop from thenceforward. The orders were from the bosses in Quanzhou and we mainly made women's and children's clothes, [and we were] able to earn approximately 10,000 RMB per year. I once stayed in Malaysia and knew some Chinese. From 2013, I opened my own workshop and asked the bosses in Quanzhou to send machines and orders to my home. By 2014, I had eight machines and employed seven Vietnamese brides to work in my house. Actually, there were more [VFMI]s willing to come, but my husband did not agree. We were very happy working together. After getting paid by the bosses, we went shopping [and] bought some fashionable clothes and cosmetics. Of course, there are twists and turns in life. For instance, some Vietnamese brides disliked their husbands and did not want to give birth [to their offspring]. They complained to me and searched for help. Out of sympathy, I asked the Vietnamese marriage brokers to sell contraceptive pills to them. Unfortunately, their parents-in-law found out and cursed me. They were so angry that they did not allow their daughters-in-law to work in my house. What's still worse, I was also severely scolded by my husband and parents-in-law. Anyway, I do what I [want]. Due to pregnancy reasons and protest from the parents-in-law, in 2015, there were only two Vietnamese brides working in my workshop.

I have kept a good relationship with the bosses in Quanzhou. These years, the whole economy is turning worse and there is not so much work to do. In the future, I want to open a supermarket with mahjong rooms with my husband.

Case 3: Ali's life in captivity

Madame Ali from Tinh Ca Mau, Vietnam, is 24 years old. She migrated to Y in 2012. She has a son now and is a typical Vietnamese bride in *Community F* of Y County. She shares her story:

I have younger brothers and elder sisters and led a leisurely life in Vietnam before I came to China. During that time, I was helping my mother manage a café bar. In recent years, more and more Vietnamese females chose to marry the Chinese, especially in the regions neighboring Ho Chi Minh. The business of the café bar gradually turned worse. And my father had [begun] an affair and did not take care of us anymore. As a result, I was forced to marry in order to pay my younger brother's college fees. My mother contacted a marriage broker and then I was introduced to my husband-to-be. At first, I did not want to marry him, though he liked me a lot. He bribed my mother with more money, and I had no choice but to marry him. So, I came to China in July 2012. Soon after, I found my husband very weird. He liked to run around on a motorcycle and did not care about the family. He idled his time away and did not make a living. Sometimes, he even lied to me. For example, he promised to buy a mobile phone for me to speak with my parents but never fulfilled [the promise]. I was quite angry and wanted to go back to my hometown. However, my mother did not comfort me but asked for more money from my parents-in-law. Once again, my father-in-law bribed my mother with 800 USD. For almost a whole year, I was held in captivity like a caged bird. I knew nothing and was like an idiot. Meanwhile, I was also terribly scared and telephoned my mother three to four per week. Most of the time, I watched TV at home. Though understood nothing [I watched], I was not bored anyway. Occasionally, I read some [Vietnamese] books from the marriage broker and learned to paint. At the end of 2013, I gave birth to a son and the family and relatives began to be nice to me. My father-in-law is a successful businessman and earns lots of money. When I meet with difficulties, I often ask for his advice. In 2013, he sent 800 USD to my mother as a reward and in 2014, 1,000 USD and articles were sent to Vietnam by him. In 2015, he taught me to run a business. My mother-in-law is a very kind woman and likes to prepare delicious food for me, though I do not talk much with her. The younger sister-in-law is running a convenience shop and often visits me. Also, the elder sister-in-law treats me well and gave me this gold ring as a present. Except for them, I rarely speak to any neighbors. I have run the business for one year and want to ask my younger brother to come and help in the near future.

Using a Relations Framework to Understand the Migration Process of VFMI Strong Ties Predominate in the Decision-Making Process of VFMI

From the preparation to the realization stage of the migration process, relation networks play a vitally important role for VFMI. In regard to the motives for transnational migration, there exist several theories in Western society; for instance, Ravenstein's push/pull theory, neoclassic economics theory, the new economics of migration theory, Wallerstein's theory of world systems, and the segmentation of labor markets (Li, 2000). I find the new economics of migration theory most appropriate for VFMI. This theory asserts that the migration decision is formed through personal interactions, with the key influential factor being the relative income gap between the place of origin and the

relocated place (Stark, 1991). More often than not, it is a collective, family-based decision-making process rather than an individual one (Taylor, 1986).

Ajiao was persuaded by her parents to marry abroad; this is not unusual, since some relatives are rewarded with real estate, land, and cash through transnational marriages. Ayin came to China in search of a better life, to escape poverty and contribute to her family of origin. Ali, who came from a broken family, had a different story. She was forced to marry a foreigner since her mother's business went bankrupt and her younger brother needed money for college fees. As these examples indicate, the financial status of the family of origin, the attitudes of parents and other family members, and any previous successful migration experiences (by relatives) combine to influence the decision-making process of VFMI. In particular, the vast income gap between Vietnam and China is a dominant factor. Successful migrants whose relocation brings real estate, land, and cash to their families of origin often encourage their families still living in poverty to increase their fortunes in a similar manner. Consequently, either passive or active migration decisions are made to alleviate the sense of depression caused by this income gap. Thus, the direct impetus for VFMI to move abroad originates from strong ties to parents, relatives, and other family members.

Weak Ties Promote the Realization of the Migration Process of VFMI

There are several classical theories concerning the transnational migration process, such as the theory of migration systems, the theory of migration networks, theories of organizational structure, and cumulative causation theory (Zhou & Li, 2012). I believe the theory of migration networks can best explain the case of VFMI. A "migration network" is a combination of interpersonal relations bonded by blood, township, and affection (Massey, Alarcon, Durand, & Gonztlez, 1987). Through a series of operations among kinship networks and social networks, migration will be finally realized (Hugo, 1981). At the same time, social networks will be expanded during the course of migration and will significantly influence upcoming waves of migrants by providing additional information and support (Wang & Qian, 2006).

In our three cases, the function of migration networks is evident. Through legal tourist visas and short-stay permissions, these Vietnamese females were enabled by local brokers to enter China. Through standardized and streamlined marriage networks, these females married Chinese citizens and gradually migrated to China according to corresponding policies and laws. These three women's experiences are generally representative of the cases of VFMI in both coastal and central areas of Southeast China in recent years.

Around the Mekong River Delta, many complicated underground marriage migration networks exist to help females migrate globally. Madame Ajiao mentioned that both her younger female cousin and her cousin's daughter married abroad through a broker who is her cousin's friend. Once she adapted to life in China, Madame Ajiao found the matchmaking business profitable and started to help other Vietnamese females migrate to China by using existing networks in both countries. Similarly, Madame Ali was

introduced to her husband-to-be by a broker paid for by her mother, while Madame Ayin came to China through her adoptive mother's arrangement.

These marriage migration networks are complex and thorough, managing everything from the organization of Chinese males' dating activities in Vietnam, to the application for passports and visas for Vietnamese females, to the designing of travel schedules and marriage registrations in China. Besides their sophistication, the scale of these Sino-Vietnam migration networks is also amazing. According to Madame Ayin, every year, several hundreds of Vietnamese females are sent to China with tourist visas by her adoptive mother. This coincides with Wei Wang and Jiang Qian's (2006) viewpoint that migration networks serve as the mechanism and cause for the unflagging process of migration. In our three typical cases, marriage brokers or an adoptive mother helped the Vietnamese females migrate to China successfully, embodying the function of weak ties in the promotion of the migration process of VFMI.

Using a Relations Framework to Understand the Survival Strategies of VFMI

After arriving in China, the next challenge for VFMI is surviving in a new location. It is evident that participation of VFMI in work and life during the post-migration period involves a coordination of both strong and weak ties in their migration network. Weak ties can gradually become strong ties through frequent interactions, and these new strong ties can in turn facilitate the expansion of weak ties. It is worth noting that strong ties have a comparative advantage in that they provide more information, trustworthiness, and social resources in the moment, while the strength of weak ties lies in the potential opportunities they may offer in future.

Existential states of VFMI with strong-strong ties in their original and relocated places, respectively

In the case of Madame Ajiao, strong ties in both the place of origin (e.g., her parents and cousins) and the place of relocation (e.g., her husband and his colleagues, relatives, marriage brokers, and Vietnamese friends) formulated her lifestyle through an exchange of information, finances, and social resources. Initially, Madame Ajiao was helped by her cousin (strong tie) to arrive in China with legal documents. After her marriage, she worked as a matchmaker under the guidance of her cousin (strong tie). However, her business did not go well at first due to the language barrier and lack of local social relation networks. At this point, she utilized various relation networks to adjust her strategies and improve the situation. For example, she asked her husband and cousin (strong ties) to search for optimal male and female candidates from their social networks (colleagues, relatives, friends, etc.). She then introduced the male candidates to a Chinese marriage broker. She assumed responsibility for the communication between the Chinese broker and her cousin, and as a result, managed to obtain a fair commission.

Madame Ajiao knew the importance of maintaining and expanding interpersonal relations in the matchmaking business. Not only did she establish direct interaction with the Chinese broker, but she also made friends with the VFMI. Gradually, she turned these weak ties (with both the Chinese broker and the Vietnamese females) into strong ties via frequent interaction, thus laying a solid foundation for further development of her relation

networks. Besides her matchmaking business, she also explored other strategies for survival and growth. For instance, she provided fish sauce to Vietnamese women and sold Chinese tea in Vietnam through her cousin. In addition, to fulfill the original mission of her migration, she sent money several times to her parents in Vietnam. This further strengthened her existing strong ties in her place of origin.

Existential states of VFMI with weak-strong ties in their original and relocated places, respectively

In the case of Madame Ayin, weak ties in her place of origin (i.e., a Vietnamese marriage broker) and strong ties in her place of relocation (e.g., her husband's aunt, bosses from Quanzhou, and Vietnamese friends) together played a significant part in her post-migration life via various exchanges in her relation networks, including exchanges of information, financial aid, social resources, and sentiment. According to Madame Ayin's detailed account, she preferred to be a migrant worker, but her husband (strong tie) strongly opposed the idea. Helped by her husband's aunt (strong tie), she got her first job as a garment-processing worker. As soon as she mastered the necessary skills, she established her own workshop by taking advantage of her relationships with the bosses in Quanzhou (strong ties).

As an earlier immigrant who had learned to speak Chinese, Madame Ayin made friends with many local Vietnamese brides (strong ties) and hired them to make clothes in her workshop. In addition to monetary income, the setup provided these VFMI with an ideal place to share their life experiences, seek emotional comfort, search for methods to overcome difficulties, learn about job opportunities, and discuss plans for the future. By working together, these VFMI established a brand new social relation network—namely, a township network in a foreign country. Madame Ayin made use of this network in several ways. On the one hand, she tried to make a profit by meeting various needs expressed by the VFMI; for instance, she sold contraception pills (obtained from the Vietnamese marriage broker) to VFMI who did not want to have children. On the other hand, by assisting the VFMI in everyday life with her knowledge of Chinese language and culture, she successfully established authority among them and organized them into a workforce. She was considered a prestigious local leader of the VFMI, as established in the interviews.

Madame Ayin's strategies contributed significantly to the short-term prosperity of her family workshop. Unfortunately, the selling of contraceptive pills directly harmed the core interests of the families into which these VFMI had married, and thus ended up backfiring. In addition to this issue, the workshop encountered numerous challenges related to the pregnancy of a few VFMI workers, a macroeconomic downturn, and a lack of extended social relations. This phenomenon corresponds with Granovetter's observation that the poor people who lie at the center of a reciprocal network that is relatively closed and isolated seldom gain the opportunity to get in touch with the weak ties in other networks, which consequently curtails further development (1973; 1982). To alleviate this crisis, Madame Ayin planned to open a supermarket by using her savings and seeking out other possible sources of funding. In summary, Madame Ayin got her first job through her husband's aunt (strong tie). Helped by the bosses in Quanzhou (weak ties converted to strong ties via collaboration), she then established her own family workshop. She

employed local VFMI (weak ties converted to strong ties via collaboration and township) to work for her. Her unique survival strategy thus made use of both weak ties in her place of origin and strong ties in her place of relocation.

Existential states of VFMI with null-strong ties in their original and relocated places, respectively

Madame Ali had almost no ties in her place of origin. Thus, the strong ties in her place of relocation (e.g., her husband, parents-in-law, sister-in-law, and other relatives) played a dominant role in her life, providing exchanges of financial aid, social resources, self-development, and sentiment via the new relation network.

In comparison with Ajiao and Ayin, Madame Ali's experience seems much simpler. Though dissatisfied with her husband-to-be, she was forced by her mother to migrate to China. Irritated by a series of odd behaviors and deceptions by her husband, she intended to give up the marriage and go back to Vietnam. However, due to financial pressure from her family of origin (who were bribed by the groom's family), she had no choice but to stay. To prevent Madame Ali from running away, the groom's family restricted her activities through powerful relation networks (strong ties). For a total of five years in China, Madame Ali did not establish any social relation network except her family and her husband's family.

After giving birth to a son, her life improved significantly within the family network. Her father-in-law promised her job opportunities and constantly sent money to her mother in Vietnam, her mother-in-law made delicious foods for her, and her sister-in-law and other relatives gave her material gifts (such as a gold ring) as well as emotional care. As a result, Madame Ali led an easier life and could choose what she wanted to do within the scope of the family, such as painting, studying the new language, and watching TV. Familial love and contentment thus brought some happiness into her life.

Though Madame Ali did not establish a broader social network, her social relations were sufficient for her to achieve several goals of migration, including meeting her original family's demands for money as well as satisfying her own emotional desires and development perspectives. Her strong ties in the place of relocation are now so powerful that she has adapted to her new lifestyle and is even encouraging her brother to migrate to China, too.

Conclusion

Social networks have different influences on the different phases of the migration process. During the preparation period, strong ties with their families of origin significantly contribute to the decision-making process of VFMI. These VFMI arrive in China mainly through guidance from weak ties such as marriage brokers (who arrange dating, visa applications, travel arrangements, etc.). Once settled, they take advantage of both strong and weak ties to meet their survival demands. In particular, strong ties with their grooms' families tend to reformulate these women's lifestyles in China. Many Vietnamese female migrants choose to marry abroad in search of a new and better life by taking full advantage of social networks in their places both of origin and relocation. Finally, from a global

perspective, it is important to consider to what extent and in what respect these VFMs will impact migration management and population development prospects in China.

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