

Overview of the Life of Vietnamese-Singaporean Multicultural Families in Ho Chi Minh City: **Insiders' Perspective**

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Abstract. In the context of international integration, global migration has become a common phenomenon, especially marriage migration. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is also a popular destination for overseas residents to live and work, notably Singaporeans, many of whom have married Vietnamese women and continue to dwell in their wives' native country. The article presents an overview of the life of Vietnamese-Singaporean families through document analysis and in-depth interviews with reputable community members in Ho Chi Minh City.

Keywords: Vietnamese – Singaporean marriage · multicultural family life

Introduction

In the framework of international integration, global migration, particularly marriage migration, has become a common phenomenon. In the past two decades, marriage migration has triggered a wave of demographic transformations and contributed to cultural diversity on a worldwide scale. In an understudied aspect, the Asian marriage outmigration movement is defined as women from East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia migrating to marry men from economically more prosperous regions, such as Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore [1]. Vietnam – one of the most populous nations in Southeast Asia with a rising economy - has been the subject of several research on "international marriage", "marriage with foreign elements", "and transnational marriage"... in Asia as a country with a high proportion of women marrying foreigners, particularly Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore... which in turn is one of the top nations of creating multicultural families. Even in Singapore, there was a time when the term "Vietnamese brides" – "cô dâu Việt Nam" replaced the term "foreign brides" – "cô dâu nư oc ngoài" which was generally reserved for brides originating from "third world" countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, China... as the number of Chinese and Filipino women marrying Singaporeans decreased [2].

Research on Vietnamese-foreigners' international marriages that exploit various aspects such as gender, economy, citizenship, mixed offspring, daughter-in-law, and husband's kinship... have shown unfavorable findings. In fact, international marriage between Vietnamese and foreigners, specifically Vietnamese - Singaporean or other prominent countries such as Taiwan and South Korea... Consists primarily of Vietnamese women marrying foreign men, with the majority of them migrating to their husband's country of origin. This is particularly comprehensible and often seen in nations significantly affected by Confucian culture, which is heavily patriarchal, "tam tong t'ư đ'ưc" (Three Obediences and Four Virtues), "tại gia tòng phu, xuất giá tòng phu" (must submissively obey her father at home, before getting married and her husband after getting married). Hence, most research on international marriage or Vietnamese foreigners' multicultural families concentrates on Vietnamese brides in the host country while ignoring the narrative of domestic multicultural families.

Ho Chi Minh City is Vietnam's premier economic, cultural, educational, and medical hub. The spirit of dynamism, creativity, openness, hospitality, international integration of a new economy, rich in potential and many opportunities of the city has attracted the majority of the domestic population and foreigners to experience, study, travel, work, seek business opportunities... And many Vietnamese-foreigners' multicultural families choose Ho Chi Minh City as a place to settle and reside for an extended period of time.

What will the reality of the life of Vietnamese-foreigners' multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City be when the study context moves from "paternal hometown" to "maternal hometown," especially after the Covid-19 pandemic? Within the framework of the Scientific Research "The life of Vietnamese – foreigners' multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City: Reality and solutions to contribute to building a cultured and civilized urban lifestyle," the content of this paper is limited to the scope of "life of Vietnamese – Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City."

2 Research Overview

As stated previously, the number of research on international marriages, marriages with foreign elements, or Vietnamese-foreigners' multicultural families... in Vietnam is relatively small and limited, with Vietnamese - Taiwanese or Vietnamese - Korean marriages perhaps being mentioned the most because Vietnamese brides marrying men from these two countries make up the majority of Vietnamese – foreigners' marriages. Typical studies include the following:

Nguyễn Thị Minh Phương with the Master's thesis topic "Gia đình đa văn hóa Việt — Hàn ở thành phố Hồ Chí Minh" (Vietnamese-Korean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City) (Phương, 2013) also shows interest in and deeper understanding of the cultural life of Vietnamese-Korean multicultural families. Hence, we can also see more clearly the gradually changing hues of the era's cultural landscape. If it was prohibitively expensive to marry a foreigner in the past, this tendency is becoming increasingly prevalent. The fact that Vietnamese women are marrying Koreans has become a societal phenomenon requiring economic, social, and cultural consideration. The research topic has clarified the practical issues, the real-life situation, the cultural adaptation process of Korean husbands and Vietnamese wives, and the issues of educating children in Vietnamese-Korean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City in particular and multicultural families in Vietnam in general. The study has predicted the growth trend of multiculturalism and offered policy suggestions from the two sides of Vietnam - Korea, contributing to the current and future happiness and sustainability of Vietnamese - Korean multicultural

families. Simultaneously, Kim Kyung Hee's Master's thesis with the subject "Giáo dục con cái trong gia đình đa văn hóa Hàn – Việt tại thành phố Hồ Chí Minh" (Educating children in Korean-Vietnamese multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City) (Kim Kyung Hee, 2013) has also contributed to the construction of an appropriate educational environment for children born into multicultural families. Hence, it is evident that the government and scientists are focusing on educating the children of Vietnamese-Korean families, a key issue in resolving issues in the married life of Vietnamese-Korean families [3].

The project "Marriage Migration between Vietnam and Taiwan: A View from Vietnam" by Nguyễn Thị Hồng Xoan and Graeme Hugo [4] in Attane, Isabelle; Guilmoto, Christophe Z. (Eds.): Watering the neighbor's garden: The growing demographic female deficit in Asia (Paris: Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography) uses research data from a large-scale survey conducted by the Institute of Population, Family and Children in collaboration with the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCMC to conducts over 1084 interviews with 635 households with one or more children married to Taiwanese and 460 short interviews with local youth aged 13 to 25 in 6 Mekong Delta provinces. Furthermore, there are 110 in-depth interviews conducted with 82 brides, 28 people from local authorities, and 23 panel discussions. The results indicate that low socioeconomic status in the families of women is believed to be the main determinant of international marriages. The vast majority of Vietnamese women choose to marry Taiwanese men in order to improve their family's economic situation. However, low competency and language barriers have made it difficult for many Vietnamese brides to relocate to Taiwan.

The article "Thi trư ong hôn nhân quốc tế trong bối cảnh đô thi hóa, công nghiệp hóa và tác đông đến sư phát triển kinh tế xã hôi" (The international marriage market in the context of urbanization, industrialization and its impact on socio-economic development) by Assoc. Prof. - Dr. Hoàng Bá Thinh published in Proceedings of the International Conference on Contributions of Social Sciences and Humanities to Socioeconomic Development, VNU-HN, 2020 [5]. The article is based on research conducted in August 2009 on the topic "The status of Vietnamese women marrying Koreans (the case study of Dai Hop commune, Kien Thuy district - Hai Phong city)", supplemented with in-depth interviews with some cases of women marrying Korean men and their families with children marrying foreign men. In 2009, more than 721 ladies from Dai Hop commune married foreign husbands, of which 188 married Korean men. Of the total samples, the percentage of households with 1 daughter married to a Korean man is 82%, 2 daughters married to a Korean man is 15.3%, 3 daughters are married to a Korean man and a Taiwanese man is 1.3%, and 1.4% of households with 4 daughters married to Korean and Taiwanese men. The effects of marriage with foreign elements mentioned by the author include impacts on Vietnamese social development, particularly economic; human resources and gender structure; the conception of the value of sons and daughters; the domestic marriage market; the relationship between domestic marriage and marriage with foreign elements; and village relationships. Impact on Korean society in terms of multiracial families; changes in educational programs and contents; social policy changes related to international marriage. Because our study on multicultural families living in Ho Chi Minh City differs from the author's research area, we agree with

the author's conclusion that the phenomenon of "multiculturalism" is also a problem for local social management since people have not handled the declaration of temporary absence well. On the same topic, the article "Phu n~u Viêt Nam kết hôn v 'ơi ngư 'ơi nư 'ơc ngoài: Xu hư ơng và một số vấn đề xã hội hiện nay (Nghiên c'ưu trư ong hợp tại huyên Thủy Nguyên, thành phố Hải Phòng)" (Vietnamese women marrying foreigners: Trends and current social issues (A case study in Thuy Nguyen district, Hai Phong city)) by Trần Thi Minh Thi posted on Vietnam Journal Online, no. 1 (433) 2019 [6]. According to the author, over 80% of foreign marriages in Vietnam occur in the southern regions. Women account for 85% of Vietnamese-foreigners' international marriages and migrate to their husband's homeland. However, there has been an increase in Vietnamese men in international marriages from 7.4% in 2008 to 15% in 2016. Some definitive conclusions, such as marriage between Vietnamese and foreigners, tend to transition progressively toward marriage based on love, understanding of family and partner, and traditions, culture, and laws... from both civilizations. The economic conditions, living standards, and social and cultural understanding of the families in whom the bride marries a foreigner have improved, through which the status and role of women in these families are significantly enhanced.

The article "Vai trò gi 'oi trong gia đình phụ n "ư Việt Nam kết hôn v 'oi lao động nư 'oc ngoài" (Gender roles in the family of Vietnamese women married to foreign workers) by Hà Thị Thúy, Trương Thúy H ăng, Phan Thị Thu Hà and Trần Văn Thành posted on VWA, Journal of Science, volume 24, no. 2–2021, uses the qualitative survey results from the ministerial-level scientific project "Thuc trang phu n~u Viêt Nam chung sống, kết hôn v'ơi lao đông nư'ơc ngoài tai Việt Nam" (The reality of Vietnamese women living and marrying foreign workers in Vietnam) conducted by the Central Committee of the Vietnam Women's Union in 2019 to find out Gender roles in the family of Vietnamese women living and marrying foreign workers. These mentioned foreign males are Chinese and Taiwanese. Research results show that although the wife contributes to the family's general income, it is not significant compared to the total income; There is equality between husband and wife in participating in household chores such as cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the house, taking care of and educating children...; Children are educated in the traditional Vietnamese manner, and they are encouraged to be bilingual from a young age, but learning the father's language is more difficult due to the father's work schedule and the mother's inability to teach the children the father's language.

As can be seen, the majority of research in Vietnam on international marriage or multicultural families is quite limited, with the majority of studies focusing on women who are married internationally in countries such as Korea and Taiwan, the case of international marriage between Vietnamese and Singaporeans is frequently mentioned in joint studies on Vietnamese-foreigners' multicultural families, but no specific study has been conducted on this multicultural family group. However, from the perspective of Singapore's multicultural milieu, there have been many studies on multicultural marriage between Vietnamese and Singaporeans and Vietnamese brides in Singapore. Some can be mentioned as follows:

Arul Chib and Hoan Nguyen posted the article "Essentialist Identities as Resistance to Immobilities: Communicative Mobilities of Vietnamese Foreign Brides in Singapore"

in the International Journal of Communication no. 12 (2018), pp. 1–22. The study conducted in-depth interviews with 33 Vietnamese brides in Singapore, of whom 83% were in their 30s, none had been granted Singapore citizenship, 24 had been granted a long-term stay card, and 9 cases had been granted permanent residency. 82% have no college or university education, minimal language skills, and low or irrelevant work experience; media technology and social media represent the mobility of women who are married migrants who are immobile, dependent, vulnerable, and discriminated against; through this network, they have found themselves, can celebrate cultural identities, and improved their livelihood [7].

The Master's Thesis (2 years) on gender studies, "Marrying from 'Asia' to Singapore - Gendered and Ethnicized Citizenship" by Ting Chen from Lund University in 2010, overviewed many important contents, including Singapore's history, Singapore's immigration policy, aspects related to married women migrating to Singapore... And Vietnamese women play a significant role in the depictions of foreign brides in Singapore.

The Master's Thesis from the National University of Singapore (NUS) by Phan Huong Hao [8], "Holding on to Fate: Vietnamese Brides and Marriage Migration to Singapore," studies Vietnamese women married to Singaporean men through commercial matchmaking agencies and Personal networks, the author is intrigued by the marriage migration dynamics of Vietnamese women from the Mekong Delta; analyses social patterns and cultural differences affecting the adaptation process of Vietnamese brides in Singapore, and individual's perception of love, marriage, and culture through experience through the process of living and adapting between husband and wife and the contribution of Vietnamese brides in Singapore to Vietnam in their role is a community of expatriates.

Cheng Yi-en must be mentioned because of his various research on international marriage between Vietnamese and Singaporeans in the article "Transnational masculinities in situ: Singaporean husbands and their international marriage experiences" (2012) on Area, 44 (1), pp. 76–82 [9], the research is conducted through data collection from Singaporean men with Vietnamese wives. There is this article with the same research objects, "Still 'breadwinners' and 'providers': Singaporean husbands, money and masculinity in transnational marriages" by Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Dr Juan Zhang, and Cheng Yi'en (2014) on Gender, Place & Culture, 22(6), pp. 867–883 [10]. Và bài viết "Between two families: the social meaning of remittances for Vietnamese marriage migrants in Singapore" co-authored with Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Chee Heng Leng, Vu Thi Kieu Dung, Cheng Yi'en (2013) on Global Networks, 13(4), pp. 441- 458 [11].

Examining some of the aforementioned studies, it is evident that the studies on multicultural marriage between Vietnamese and Singaporeans in the context of Singapore are gender-diverse.

2.1 The Reality of the Life of Vietnamese-Singaporean Multicultural Families in HCMC

From 2011 through 2021, around 230,000 Vietnamese residents marry foreigners, with Taiwan and South Korea accounting for the biggest number of Vietnamese brides despite strict marriage immigration regulations [12]. In fact, the number of Vietnamese women marrying Singaporean men in most official statistics is included in the "other" category -

excluding: China, Cambodia, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Europe, USA, Australia, and Canada with about 29,209 cases compared to a total of 170,044 cases in the period from 2008 to 2016 according to the statistics on the number of Vietnamese citizens marrying foreigners over the years by the relevant country/territory from the Civil Status Department, nationality, endorsement, Ministry of Justice, 2018 [6]. This shows that finding an official and relatively accurate statistic on international marriage between Vietnamese women and Singaporean men in Vietnam in general or in Ho Chi Minh City, in particular, becomes futile, or it can be said that it is now impossible. This means the number of Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City is also a statistical enigma.

"The Consul-General is indeed uncertain about the number of Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City; the problem is that when Singaporeans go abroad, they often only register information with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore; hence, the Consul-General does not have this number." (in-depth interview with Mr. Norman Lim – the President of Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam – SCCV HCMC).

As the President of the Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam (SCCV-HCMC) from 2012 to present, living in Vietnam and married a Vietnamese wife for more than 15 years, maintaining close relationships with over 300 SCCV-HCMC members who are Singaporeans living and working in Vietnam, the most of whom reside in Ho Chi Minh City, including members of Vietnamese – Singaporean multicultural families, we are grateful to Mr. Norman Lim for providing us with such a comprehensive and trustworthy account of the reality of living for Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City, including residence area of Singaporeans in general, Vietnamese - Singaporean multicultural families in particular in Ho Chi Minh City; the language of communication in the family; the wife's role in the family; Housing; reciprocal relationship with the paternal house - Singapore; advantages and disadvantages of Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City:

According to him, the majority of Singaporeans living in Ho Chi Minh City reside in District 7 - the Phu My Hung neighborhood - where the level of infrastructure, culture, and urbanization is high, District 4, Binh Thanh, and the former District 2 (now Thu Duc new city) because most of them work in District 1, the rent in nearby districts is more affordable than in District 1, near the city center and commuting-friendly.

Several SCCV-HCMC members do not speak Vietnamese; English is the primary language of communication. However, if they can speak Vietnamese, marrying a Vietnamese wife will provide more significant employment and living options in Vietnam because they can interact without an interpreter. Mr. Norman Lim can speak well in Vietnamese at home and at work, as this interview was conducted entirely in Vietnamese. But, he also stated that many of his friends who live here and have Vietnamese wives speak primarily English or Chinese with their children since they are interested in language education for their children.

"While I am at home, I speak Vietnamese, and as far as I am aware, many of my friends have Vietnamese wives as well, but they either speak Chinese or English.

Few families speak Vietnamese like mine because they are concerned about their children's language development; they are afraid that their children will not be able to keep up if they return to Singapore in the future if the children only speak one language at home. In my opinion, I will speak Vietnamese as much as possible." (in-depth interview with Mr. Norman Lim – the President of Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam – SCCV HCMC).

Vietnamese wives in Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City often do not participate in economic activities. Instead, they stay home to take care of their children, transport them to school, and care of their spouses. Typically, the husband does not impose or influence his wife's professional choices but instead relies solely on her personality and preferences.

"My acquaintances here have Vietnamese wives; typically, the wife is responsible for picking up the children, while the husband works to generate money to support the family." Or "According to my knowledge, many of them have Vietnamese wives, of whom the majority stay at home to care for their children. Rarely do husbands send their women to work. The wives stay home to care for the children, the household, and the husband" and "Depending on the personality of Vietnamese women, some of them who enjoy being active dislike being confined to their homes, preferring to go out to socialize, meet friends, go to work, and have their employer yell at them every day. Some dislike it, preferring to stay at home; it is difficult to say without knowing the individual" (in-depth interview with Mr. Norman Lim – the President of Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam – SCCV HCMC).

Regarding accommodation, Singaporeans traveling to Vietnam frequently reside in leased homes due to the high expense of purchasing a home or apartment in Ho Chi Minh City. The Vietnamese – Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City maintain a close link with the paternal family, connecting back and forth to visit once or more times a year depending on family circumstances.

"Depending on the family, there are families that stay 100% of their time in Vietnam on average, and return to Singapore once a year, at most twice per year. If they work here, but their families are in Singapore, they would return more frequently, monthly or once every two weeks; nonetheless, I rarely see them returning weekly. At most, return once every fortnight or monthly. If they have family in Vietnam, the Singaporean grandparent will visit once or twice a year." (in-depth interview with Mr. Norman Lim – the President of Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam – SCCV HCMC).

Regarding the advantages of Vietnamese - Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City, the first thing that can be mentioned is that Vietnamese culture is quite similar to that of the Chinese, for a foreign husband, especially one from Singapore when relocating to a place where the culture is not very alien, there are almost no significant hurdles. On the other hand, the Vietnamese people's friendliness and sociability are significant benefits of settling in Vietnam.

"Living in Vietnam, Vietnamese people are quite chummy; therefore, people truly enjoy living here; in contrast to Singaporeans in Singapore, society has developed to be as divided as Westerners, and I do not even know who my neighbors are. Personally, in Singapore, I have no idea who my neighbors are, but I know who they are here." (in-depth interview with Mr. Norman Lim – the President of Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam – SCCV HCMC).

The language barrier is the most frequent and significant obstacle for Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City.

"The only challenge is the language barrier; everyone enjoys living here but cannot speak Vietnamese. Conversing with someone who does not speak English or a foreign language is incredibly tough. My first-year experience in Vietnamese was that I could not speak a complete Vietnamese sentence. At the time, there were few English speakers in Saigon and other districts, so when I went to the restaurant and was given the menu, neither Chinese nor English words appeared, all in Vietnamese, there was not even a picture, at that time I wanted to ask for soy sauce, I didn't know how to say it, I took out a paper to draw it, it wasn't right, I had to go to the kitchen to show them, they were really nice, the service staff are very enthusiastic, and brought out all kinds of condiments for me to choose. I'll never forget it, so it's difficult to say that I can't speak the language, but when I talk about living in Vietnam, everyone likes it because Vietnamese people are very friendly." (in-depth interview with Mr. Norman Lim – the President of Singapore Chamber of Commerce Vietnam – SCCV HCMC).

We have described the realities of life for Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City from the perspective of an insider with a position and role in the community. Through firsthand observation and informal research, we agree entirely with the above opinions. Nonetheless, the material shown above is far from exhaustive. From this premise, we will continue to deepen our research and have more complete updates in the near future.

3 Conclusion

From a survey of studies in Vietnam pertaining to marriages with foreign elements, it is feasible to identify theoretical and practical difficulties that scientists have extensively examined. However, the studies focus primarily on Vietnamese women who are internationally married to Korean and Taiwanese men while ignoring other target groups, such as international marriages between Vietnamese and Singaporeans, which are referenced without delving into detailed research. On the other hand, studies on multicultural family life, such as economic life, family culture, and children's education... have not been conducted extensively. In contrast to Vietnam, from the perspective of Singapore's multicultural setting, there has been numerous research on intercultural marriages between Vietnamese women and Singaporean men; these studies are highly diverse, especially regarding gender.

It is difficult or impossible to locate reliable and somewhat comprehensive data on the number of Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families in Ho Chi Minh City. Most Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families reside in leased homes in District 1's neighboring districts, including District 7, District 4, Binh Thanh District, and District 2 (now Thu Duc New City). In the household, English and Chinese are common modes of communication; few men are fluent in Vietnamese; hence the husband's greatest difficulty when living in Vietnam is the language. Most Vietnamese wives choose to stay at home to take care of their families. The Vietnamese – Singaporean multicultural families frequently travel back and forth and maintain close ties with their Singaporean paternal relatives. Comparable culture and friendly Vietnamese people are the characteristics that attract and provide good living conditions for Vietnamese-Singaporean multicultural families to select Ho Chi Minh City as their home.

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