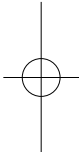
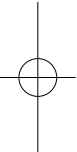


Critique of Korean Multiculturalism as Viewed through Gendered Transnational Migration in Asia: The Case of Vietnamese Returnee Marriage Migrants*

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(Abstract) This article analyzes “returnees from marriage migration” by focusing on Vietnamese women from Cần Thơ and Hai Phòng who have been to South Korea for marriage migration. In contrast to prevalent concerns in South Korea about the possibility of “child abduction” by Vietnamese mothers/divorcees, the author found many “deserted” Korean Vietnamese children and their mothers in Vietnam through this research. There is also a growing number of Vietnamese “return marriage migrants,” women who came back to South Korea after their first divorce and return to Vietnam. The article emphasizes the complexities and multidirectional trajectories of marriage migration and highlights the agency of female migrants, whose contribution to family welfare and to “development” is often overshadowed by their status within the family.



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1. Preface: The Women Embarking on Repeated Migrations

As an anthropologist who has maintained a focus on South Korea's experiments with multiculturalism, starting in 2012, I played an intermittent role as an external policy consultant for a South Korean NGO that carried out "pre-departure orientation for prospective marriage migrants" (from 2007 onward) in Vietnam. Starting in late 2016, I became more directly involved as a joint representative of the NGO, and in my capacity as such, took part in policy decision-making and carrying out business plans. This new role became available due to the NGO encountering a managerial crisis just as it was setting foot into the world of providing assistance for returnee marriage migrants. The impetus for this research came from my involvement in establishing a support center for returnee marriage migrants and Korean Vietnamese children in the southern Vietnamese city of Cần Thơ.¹ During that time, I learned that in recent years, an increasing number of returnee marriage migrants were remigrating to South Korea. Feeling the need to examine the life trajectories of these returnee marriage migrant women, I set about my research. In examining cases of Vietnamese returnee marriage migrant women from Cần Thơ and Hải Phòng who remigrated to South Korea, this research demonstrates the complexity and multidirectional trajectories of gendered transnational migration. As such, it endeavors to provide a critical assessment of "Korean-style" multicultural policy and familism.

The present article came together because of two major realizations during the course of research. The first realization was that these women were not only crossing state borders but were traversing, unencumbered, the boundaries between legal categories stipulated by each country, such as residency criteria and il/legality. Anthropological research on women's transnational migration in South Korea has maintained a particularly tight focus on the category of "marriage migration," rather than looking more broadly at the diverse forms that the women's migration can take, such as labor migration or study abroad. While this is, in part, a direct result of the prioritization of establishing domestic settlement support for marriage migrants—set off by a rapid increase in women migrating to South Korea

¹ In this article, "Korean Vietnamese child" refers to a child with a Vietnamese mother and a Korean father, while "Vietnamese child" refers to a child whose parents are both Vietnamese.

for marriage in 2000–2005—it also is due to the South Korean government’s social integration policy, which is based on “marriage migrant women,” who are married to a South Korean national (F6 visa), rather than on “migrant workers,” who are assumed to reside in-country for only a short period. Thus, the implicit treatment of female labor migrants and marriage migrant women as entirely distinct categories contributed to research predominantly focusing on marriage migrant women.² As categories of residency requirements formulated for the convenience of managing immigration, however, these correspond only to particular viewpoints and lenses that the state uses to classify foreign nationals. They do not explain the complex motivations women have for transnational migration nor the multidirectional trajectories that play out over extended periods of time. In fact, to understand the active subjectivity of these young women—women who do their utmost to carve out a life amid structural shortfalls in an unfamiliar society after making a risky and bold decision to migrate—we must closely examine their long-term trajectories of migration. How do these women go about their lives in the long-term, layered as they are with policy-level and legal categories thrust upon them? How do they move onward?

This is not to say that policies or theories that divorce the two categories of “labor migration” and “marriage migration,” in order to grasp the subtleties of each, are wrong. Rather, following Piper and Roces (2003), the current article stresses that, in reality, the boundary between the two is exceedingly gray and complex. At the same time, as researchers become accustomed to policy jargon and theoretical concepts and try to parse how they are

² Research such as Kim Minjeong et al. (2006) and Chae Suhong (2007) cover the cases of women who arrived in South Korea as labor migrants but ended up marrying South Koreans; nonetheless, the former’s primary subject of analysis is “marriage migrant women” while the latter’s is “returnee labor migrant men.” Hae Yeon Choo (2016) comprehensively covers Filipina marriage migrant women and Filipina labor migrant women in various professions. Rather than focusing on women’s confrontation with South Korean multiculturalism after meeting a South Korean spouse, Choo focuses on Filipina labor migrant women who marry Filipinos or US military members. Such a tendency to distinguish labor and marriage migration can be found in countless other articles related to marriage migration, including phenomenal anthropological research into how married Filipinas live in South Korea long-term as undocumented labor migrants (Kim Minjeong 2011). This is because the undocumented Filipina labor migrants are limited to those who came to South Korea on tourist or work visas, and merely overstayed their permitted sojourn period, while the possibility of marriage migrants becoming illegal labor migrants is excluded.

constructed or apply to a certain phenomenon, they have a tendency to inadvertently invert the proper order, tailoring reality so that it fits the concepts. Acknowledging this tendency, this article means to underscore the need to return to the perspective of actors. In doing so, it asks the following questions: What did South Korea's multicultural experimentation mean for the Vietnamese women? With the passage of the Multicultural Families Support Act in 2008—which can be more accurately characterized as a stopgap for low domestic birthrates than as a particular appreciation for diversity—when migrant women were no longer members of “families,” what limitations and possibilities arise for migrant women when the private sphere of their gender, marriage, and fertility collides with the public sphere of citizenship, custody rights, and entry visas? What kind of lives do the children of returnee marriage migrants live in the liminal space between divergent family institutions and legal systems? Why do some women who return to their home countries remain in their hometowns, while others migrate yet again to a third country, and still others return to South Korea?

The second realization concerns who the “returnee migrant women” are, and it came when the author discovered women who had married a Korean while still in Vietnam but, even before migrating to South Korea, had de facto ended their marriages. Up until now, the term “returnee migrant women” (*gwibwan yeoseong*) was a field term used to describe women who migrated to South Korea after marrying and then, for any number of reasons, returned home to Vietnam. The term applied broadly to women who completed divorce procedures in either one or both countries, as well as to women who were no longer in contact with their husband or whose marriage status was ambiguous, usually due to the woman's hesitancy to fully go through with divorce. Upon encountering women who had married in Vietnam but had been deserted, without contact, by their husbands—before even filling out the paperwork necessary for migrating to South Korea—and thus found themselves bound by the status of “having visited” South Korea once, I sensed the need to include such cases in academic discussions of who “returnee migrant women” really are. As a result, this article uses “returnee migrants” to refer to “all instances in which an internationally married couple is unable to stay together continually in either South Korea or Vietnam, whatever the reason.” The stories of these returnee women—who, in fleeing their birth country and the structural limitations of the family, dipped their toes in the multicultural experimentation of South Korea before returning, or migrating to a third country, or, even after

much consideration, resolving to return to South Korea—illustrate that the family formed through migration is a fluid entity that is reconstructed as it agilely responds to an endless stream of new crises and opportunities. Moreover, in order to understand regional migration as a bottom-up, practical network rather than a political slogan of regional integration, we must analyze migration from a longer-term viewpoint, looking at its features as a process formed in continual negotiations between members, severed and revived in new forms.

2. Research Subjects and Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted with five returnee women who had remigrated to South Korea, all of whom had sought out the Korea Center for United Nations (KOCUN) in Cần Thơ of their own accord. They agreed to an interview after re-arrival in South Korea. I traveled to visit these women, spread out across South Korea in Gyeonggi, Gyeongbuk, Gyeongnam, Jeonnam, and Jeju areas, to conduct interviews. Additionally, I conducted 17 in-depth interviews with returnee migrant women in Hải Phòng, which took place in the form of a preliminary study for the KOCUN being built in the northern city in early 2019, with the full support of local activists.³ According to a 2018 analysis of the status of marriage migrants at KOCUN's branch in Hanoi, the proportion of Vietnamese returnee migrants who remarried South Korean men was higher in the northern regions than in the southern regions. However, women's self-help groups were still inchoate in the North; thus, a field study of returnee

³ This project was made possible thanks to the activities of civic groups. Any faults present in the research are the sole responsibility of the author, not KOCUN, without which this research would not have been possible. For that, I express my gratitude. The name of the NGO appears here in full with the express authorization of its founder. Professor Jeong Jinseong started KOCUN's pre-departure orientation program for prospective marriage migrants in 2007, using private donations from South Korea. Later the program was granted funding by the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF). Support programs for returnee migrants and Korean Vietnamese children came about after meeting returnee migrant women during the pre-departure program in Vietnam. With financial support from Hyundai Motors Vietnam and the efforts of local and central activists of KOCUN, the Cần Thơ center was established in January 2018. With their help, I was able to coordinate in-depth interviews with Cần Thơ women who remigrated to South Korea. The Hải Phòng center opened in 2022, also supported by Hyundai Motor Vietnam and the MOGEF.

Table 1. Descriptive information of 22 interviewees. K refers to Korean, V refers to Vietnamese.

Informant code	No. of children	Child's country of birth	No. of times married (spouse's nationality)	Work experience	Undocumented (where)	No. of migrations to South Korea (status at departure)	No. of migrations elsewhere (destination)
C1	Pregnant with 1 KV child	South Korea	2 (K, K)	No (Pregnant)	No	1 (Immediately deserted after marrying in Vietnam, leading to divorce)	0
C2	KV 1	Vietnam	2 (K, K)	Yes	Yes (South Korea)	2 (Deported after illegal stay; remarried)	0
C3	0	N/A	2 (K, K)	Yes	Yes (South Korea)	2 (Left of own will after illegal stay; remarried)	0
C4	KV 2	South Korea	1 (K) Divorced	Yes	No	2 (Return to Vietnam with child; visit to South Korea)	0
C5	KV 4	Vietnam	1 (K) Divorce in progress	Yes	No	1 (Migrate to South Korea while living in Vietnam)	0
H1	0	N/A	2 (K, K)	Yes	Yes (South Korea)	Currently 1 (2nd marriage; deported)	0
H2	KV 1; V 2	All in Vietnam	2 (K, V)	Yes (Vietnam)	No	0 (Deserted by 1st husband; unable to go to South Korea)	0

Table 1. (continued)

Informant code	No. of children	Child's country of birth	No. of times married (spouse's nationality)	Work experience	Undocumented (where)	No. of migrations to South Korea (status at departure)	No. of migrations elsewhere (destination)
H3	0	N/A	1 (K)	Yes	No	1 (Departed upon divorce; hopes to remarry internationally)	0
H4	0	N/A	1 (K)	Yes	No	1 (Deserted while visiting her parents; her father hopes she'll remarry internationally)	0
H5	V 2	South Korea; Hong Kong	2 (K, V)	Yes	Yes (South Korea; Hong Kong)	1 (Deported after illegal stay)	1 (Hong Kong)
H6	V 1 (with V father met in South Korea post-divorce)	Vietnam (no contact with father)	2 (K, K)	Yes	Yes (South Korea)	1 (Departed of own will due to illness after illegal stay; remarried but deserted and unable to reenter South Korea; hopes to remarry internationally after divorce)	0
H7	V 1	Hong Kong	2 (K, V)	Yes	Yes (Hong Kong)	1 (Fled; departed South Korea 2 weeks after marriage)	1 (Hong Kong)

Table 1. (continued)

Informant code	No. of children	Child's country of birth	No. of times married (spouse's nationality)	Work experience	Undocumented (where)	No. of migrations to South Korea (status at departure)	No. of migrations elsewhere (destination)
H8	Pregnant with V 1	(Vietnam likely)	2 (K, V)	Yes	Yes (South Korea)	1 (Departed of own will after illegal stay)	0
H9	KV 1	Vietnam	1 (K)	Yes (Vietnam)	No	0 (Awaiting papers following marriage)	0
H10	KV 1	Vietnam	1 (K)	No (Opposed by in-laws)	No	1 (Departed upon divorce; hopes to return on child-raising visa)	0
H11	V 1; KV 1	All in Vietnam	2 (V, K)	No (Language barrier)	No	1 (Departed upon divorce; hopes to return on child-raising visa)	0
H12	0	N/A	1 (K)	Yes	Yes (South Korea)	1 (Departed of own will due to illness after illegal stay; hopes to remarry internationally)	0
H13	KV 1	Vietnam	1 (K) Divorce in progress	Yes	No	1 (She wants a divorce)	0

Table 1. (continued)

Informant code	No. of children	Child's country of birth	No. of times married (spouse's nationality)	Work experience	Undocumented (where)	No. of migrations to South Korea (status at departure)	No. of migrations elsewhere (destination)
H14	V 1	Vietnam	2 (K, V)	No	No	1 (Departed upon divorce)	0
H15	Pregnant with V 1	(Vietnam likely)	2 (K, V) (Opposed by K in-laws)	Yes (Vietnam)	No	0 (Korean brother-in-law met husband & told her to divorce)	0
H16	V 1	Vietnam	1 (K); moved in with (V)	Yes (Vietnam)	No	1 (Departed upon husband's death; her mother hopes she'll remarry internationally)	0
H17	V 2	All in Vietnam	2 (K, V)	Yes	Yes (Russia)	1 (Departed upon divorce; her mother hopes she'll migrate to work)	1 (Russia)

women in Hải Phòng was carried out instead.

Field research in Hải Phòng was an important catalyst for uncovering a new pattern, consisting of labor migration to a third country after returning from South Korea—a pattern not observed in the South. It necessitated a fresh look at the complex significance that marriage migration had for the lives of these Vietnamese women. The difference came down to whether they were marriage migrants who found work upon arrival or labor migrants who found a spouse upon arrival; marriage migration and labor migration overlapped remarkably, the distinction between them often fuzzy (Piper and Roces 2003). These Vietnamese women thought of marriage as a “life-changing opportunity” in many respects, and there were many who wanted to work while being married. When married life with their South Korean husband did not work out, some women returned to Vietnam straightaway; others continued to work in South Korea after fleeing their marriage because they “might as well, after what it took to get here,” which often led to staying in the country without the necessary documentation. In the same vein, there were women who chose to take the risk of migrating to work in a third country after returning to Vietnam from South Korea, who, while working “illegally,” met a new Vietnamese man, with whom they cohabitated and had a child before finally returning to Vietnam. Out of the 22 young women I spoke to, 9 had experienced being undocumented—a much higher rate than anticipated. Moreover, with the exception of women who formally remarried with a Vietnamese man (two) or were engaged to the father of their Vietnamese children (two), there were several women who hoped to remigrate to South Korea with their Korean Vietnamese child on a child-raising visa (two), or were considering leaving their Vietnamese children with the children’s maternal grandmother to migrate elsewhere for work (one) or marriage (five). When counted with the five women from Cần Thơ who had already remigrated to South Korea, these numbers beg the question—at what point, exactly, does migration end?

In order to erect a center that fits the needs of returnee migrant women and Korean Vietnamese children in the northern region, an understanding of their on-the-ground situation was needed, so questionnaires were distributed and in-depth interviews were conducted; 145 surveys were collected over five months. What we were most interested in getting a better picture of was what prompted the women’s decision to return to Vietnam, as well as whether they had experience working, whether they had children (and if so, whether they had custody), how they reared their

children, and matters related to their life upon return to Vietnam. One reason I felt it necessary to collect quantitative data, beyond the practical necessity of setting up the center, was that after taking on a more direct role as a facilitator/joint representative, I was asked by media outlets the somewhat baffling question, “Isn’t helping returnee women, in a way, abetting child abduction or even encouraging women to do so?”⁴ As a researcher, I wanted to look more closely at where such questions were coming from.⁵

3. Introduction of the Employment Authorization System and the Complexities of Marriage Migration: A Look at South Korean Government Statistics

The complexity of marriage migration can be inferred by looking at related statistical data in concert with the South Korean government’s labor policy and its policies for overseas Koreans. The ever-increasing number of Vietnamese marriage migrant women and the continual overwhelming proportion they make up of the overall composition of marriage migrant women since the 1990s, stand in stark contrast to the continual decline of Korean Chinese (*joseonjok*, or *chaoxianzu* in Chinese) marriage migrant women, following the introduction of the working visit system in 2007. The working visit system grants people of Korean descent living in China and post-Soviet countries, free travel to and from South Korea, with a maximum stay of four years and 10 months for unskilled labor. This largely undercuts the appeal of marriage migration, which permits migrants to work and invite family from their homeland. Moreover, with the revision of the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans

⁴ Upon being asked such questions, I investigated the matter and was referred to a specific Korean Supreme Court ruling. It stated that ensuring the happiness and interests of the child is the most important standard for judgement. In instances where the mother is the child’s primary caregiver, and the mother takes her child with her to provide continuous care—rather than abandoning the child in a situation where there is no one else to look after the child—this constitutes the full execution of the mother’s responsibility as a caregiver. As such, her actions “do not constitute the crime of abducting a child” (Case No. 2010Do14328; Decided June 20, 2013). My thanks to Im Seongtaek [Lim Sung Taek] of Jipyong LLC, who was serving on the board of KOCUN at the time, for his help in finding the court decision.

⁵ For more on the Hải Phòng survey, see Han Seungmi and Han Jun (2019).

(“Overseas Koreans Act”) in 2004, even those who arrived in South Korea as students faced no restrictions on seeking specialized employment after switching to an F4 visa. As a result, one could say that marriage migration began to be considered as merely one of many options for going to South Korea among overseas Korean populations.

This vastly contrasted the situation faced by Vietnamese migrants. The gender ratio (men to women) of industrial training visas (D3/D8) in the 1990s stood between 2:1 and 3:1.⁶ But when the employment permit system took the place of the industrial training program in 2004, the gender disparity of migrants on work visas (E9) skyrocketed dramatically, to nearly 10:1. According to the employment permit system, an employer must prove their need to hire migrant workers. Because South Korean workplaces tend to prefer male migrant workers, women are left waiting in Vietnam, despite passing Korean tests, because there is so little demand for them. In passing through the gendered domestic labor market, the employment permit system—a “good” system adopted to make up for the shortfalls of the industrial training system—actually ended up creating a much higher barrier to unskilled labor migration exclusively for women.⁷ And so, as articulated in the assertion that when it comes to countries like South Korea and Japan, where the inflow of unskilled laborers is tightly regulated, marriage constitutes a primary path to migration for many women (Lee Hye-Kyung 2008: 112; Piper and Lee 2016: 482). For Vietnamese women, whose labor migration to South Korea had been complicated, marriage migration to South Korea—where “unlike those who marry Taiwanese men, Vietnamese women who marry South Korean men are allowed to work” (Hien Ahn Le 2016: 178)⁸—carried with it the hope of working to provide for family

⁶ My thanks to Dr. Yi Gyuyong [Lee Kyu-Yong] of the Korea Labor Institute for his advice to look at D3 visa holders and D8 visa holders together. Ministry of Justice statistics on *registered* aliens in South Korea by nationality and sojourn criteria can be found at www.data.go.kr. Figures for foreign nationals—“legal” or not—who did not register their place of residence, or who are in the country illegally are not included.

⁷ The term “gendered domestic labor market” is used to refer to female labor migrants’ difficulty in entering the South Korean labor market. When labor and costs are unchanged, South Korean employers exhibit a clear preference for male workers, but they will employ women if it allows them to cut costs. However, even in such cases, there is a high chance that employers will hire migrant women who are already in the country or South Korean women. One reason for this is that when they initially hire migrant women, they must provide separate women-only boarding facilities for them and pay out other related costs.

⁸ Unlike in South Korea, where there are no laws against married migrant women

members in Vietnam, even if their husband did not put forth effort to take care of them. In other words, marriage migration constituted a “life-changing opportunity” for them. A field survey of returnee women in the Cần Thơ area, carried out by KOCUN (2017: 19), and a Vietnamese field survey of marriage migrant women to South Korea, carried out by a scholar at Vietnamese National University in Ho Chi Minh (Tran 2009, as quoted in Hien Anh Le 2016), respectively, found that 77.06 percent (215/279) and 77.7 percent (1,152/1,483) of women cited economic motivations, such as providing for family, for marrying internationally. But when sitting down to interview these women, one realizes the need to be circumspect when interpreting these findings. This is not a matter of questioning the authenticity of their marriage due to their strong economic motivation for getting married, but because the desire to marry, start a family, and live a happy life is equally important as the desire to improve their own life and the lives of their family members by earning money. Accordingly, such statistics can, ironically, illuminate how husbands (and their families) who prohibit these Vietnamese women from pursuing work opportunities, or who siphon off a sizable portion of their wife’s income, cause conflict within their marriage. Chae Suhong (2007: 29) goes so far as to call all marriage migrant women “potential labor migrants.” Many marriage migrant women long for economic empowerment; thus, conflict arises when such desires are snubbed. In the words of a representative from a Vietnamese community regarding the high divorce rate of “multicultural families” in South Korea: “Migrant women want to earn money, but their husbands don’t want them to” (Yi Jaejin 2015).

4. Returnee Women’s Experience with “Illegal” (Undocumented) Sojourns: Women’s Subjectivity in the Gendered Geography of Power

Because of KOCUN’s nature as a human rights organization, one drawback to utilizing its data is that it does not include cases of the many “happy” Korean–Vietnamese families who do not require help. Another drawback is that I was unable to hear accounts from the Korean ex-husbands of

seeking employment (so long as they have an alien registration card), Taiwan prohibits migrants from working until granted permanent residency (Tsai 2011).

Vietnamese returnee migrant women. However, the stories of these women—who, even after experiencing the breakup of their family due to divorce or fleeing, still get back up on their feet to form a new family, taking care of their children to the very end, all while repeating transnational migration and settlement—provide a valuable opportunity to ruminate on how South Korea’s exceptionally Korean-centric “multiculturalism policy as a population policy” affects these women, and how looking back after such extreme experiences shows us the true face of South Korean society.

One aspect that stood out during my interviews was the mundanity of illegality. While there were more women than expected who had entered the labor market without the necessary documentation, it was interesting to note that doing so did not appear to be considered a moral quandary. Though they were “illegal,” they were merely attempting to work hard for a better life; to them, playing around, eating out, or turning a blind eye to their family back in Vietnam was more contemptible. In truth, such “illegality” engendered by the expiry of their term of legal status did not outwardly mark them in their daily lives. This was not only the case in South Korea but in Hong Kong as well, a city that returnee migrants in Hải Phòng traveled to with relative ease. Being “illegal” in the global labor market was something that happened all the time but was not anything to be too afraid of; women considered it along the lines of “you’re unlucky if you get caught,” but being caught would not be the end of your life. De Genova (2013) calls the occasional “border spectacle” of expelling undocumented laborers in roundups by state authorities, in this age of globalization, a sort of “ritual” for paradoxically absorbing a greater number of undocumented workers in the lulls between roundups, naming such institutionalized connivance “obscene inclusion.” Thus, “illegality” that arises from hard-to-discern changes in one’s everyday life becomes mundane as it repeatedly comes into and out of sight, moment to moment.

Both men and women take on the unstable labor status of an undocumented person. However, women who are on their own struggle to make ends meet on meager wages even after they find work, and they are likely to end up in a work environment where it is “difficult to endure the pestering of men” they work with (Kim Minjeong 2011: 346–347). In other words, women have a more difficult time living as undocumented workers. Although this is not the case for all migrant women who flee their marriages, occasionally women move in with, and even have children with, men from their home country. These men understand what migrant women are going

through working in a foreign country and provide a measure of stability. This, too, is highly paradoxical in that such “pseudo family relations” help women defend themselves in many ways (Kim Minjeong 2011). Excerpts of interviews that appear in this section tell the stories of women who worked after fleeing their marriage, only to be deported to Vietnam, where they remarried with a South Korean and returned to South Korea; or women who worked after fleeing their marriage, only to be deported to Vietnam, at which point they migrated to Hong Kong to work, where they met a Vietnamese man while working without papers and started a new family by moving in with or having a child with the man. The excerpts show how these women forged their way as subjects through the topsy-turvy migration process within the “gendered geography of power” (Pessar and Mahler 2003).

When their marriages came to an end, the women took one of several courses of action. For some (7 women) their Korean husband or his family took it upon themselves to get the woman a return flight, or the woman herself used her own emergency savings to immediately return to Vietnam. A majority of others used the remainder of their visa’s validity to begin working, in order to “at least make up the cost of a flight home.” Because it is extremely difficult for women who break out of the bounds of the family before even having a child to extend their visas in South Korea, staying in the country naturally led to illegal sojourns for some (7 women).⁹ Even while still married, many marriage migrants want to have an income based on their own labor; but in order to do so, they must invest time building trust and carry out grueling negotiations with not only their husband but also their patriarchal in-laws. Of the Cần Thơ women who opted to flee their marriage, even after four to five years of matrimony, all had finally managed to start working after much negotiation, but they did not have control over the money they earned (C2, C3).

Some women could not abide the excessive control their husbands wielded over their movement and communication, as they were already facing the shock of a new environment at the beginning of married life (H1, H5, H7, H12). One woman, for instance, fled to a Vietnamese acquaintance’s home, fearing the aberrant behavior of her alcoholic husband;

⁹ Of the total 9 interviewees who had experienced being undocumented, two women did not experience being undocumented in South Korea, but rather in a third country they migrated to, to work, after leaving South Korea.

but when she exhibited severe emotional instability from the shock, she was sent right back to her husband. In the end, when her husband's delusional jealousy turned into domestic violence, she escaped once again. For nearly five years, she worked without papers, laboring in factories or cleaning buildings.¹⁰

While domestic violence remains a crucial factor in and a primary cause of multicultural families breaking down, as is often argued (Kim Hyeonmi 2012: 123), even in instances without violence, the extreme crack-down on the woman's behavior and communication, economic difficulties, and the loss of control over income straightforwardly led women to flee their marriage.

In 2006, when I first got married. ... Once I got here, I saw that they were no better off than my family back in Vietnam. So I wanted to work. ... About a year later, my mother-in-law allowed me to work, so I started working at a nearby restaurant. ... My mother-in-law told me that I had to give her 100,000 won a month. Even though I paid for her living expenses and her phone bill! ... Around a year after I started working, I told my mom in Vietnam that I wanted to get divorced. My mother ... told me to just bear through it. But because I mentioned the idea of divorce, my mother-in-law wrote down "From now on I will give 300,000 won to my mother-in-law every month. I'll do what I'm told, and I won't get a divorce." She told me to sign my name [on the note]. I needed to sign that to keep living at the house! ... [She said that] if I gave her an allowance, she'd send me back to Vietnam, but later on she didn't even buy me my plane ticket! ... I was, so sad! And upset! And disappointed! I'd given her so much, but for what?! I told my husband's older sister. When I did, she said, "Go ahead, get a divorce, we'll find another woman." I was so saddened. ... When everyone else went out to eat one time, I stayed back and packed my things and left. Even though I ran away, sometimes I would still call my husband. He's a nice person, and while I ran away, I don't want to get a divorce. I ran away, but I want to stay in South Korea longer. Six months after I ran away, my mother-in-law and husband filed the divorce papers. ... I hired a lawyer and went to appeal, and then my mother-in-law pulled out the old contract! Because my signature was on it, I lost the case!

After the divorce, I had a bit of time left on my visa, and I wanted to stay in South Korea longer, so I worked illegally for over a year. I worked at a factory in Busan that I learned about through a Vietnamese friend who lived

¹⁰ One woman's husband was out of the house all day, every day, leaving her to be her "mother-in-law's live-in nurse" while living with her father-in-law. When her father-in-law repeatedly attempted to assault her, she ran away and worked without papers for approximately a year before returning to Vietnam (H8).

in the same neighborhood as me until she ran away. But I guess someone must have reported me. ... I got caught (in 2011). In a room on the fifth floor of the immigration office, they took my clothes, all my belongings, and told me to get undressed, and gave me one pair of clothes, one pair of underwear, and one menstrual pad. (Interview with C3, June 30, 2019)

This woman, unable to endure how her mother-in-law tied her down, ran away, only to be served divorce papers. After returning to Cần Thơ, she began working at a South Korean company located in Hanoi, which a Vietnamese acquaintance introduced her to, and in 2014 she remarried with the friend of her supervisor. In 2016 she remigrated to South Korea, had a child, became naturalized, and was, overall, highly contented with her new marriage.

It was a new discovery to find that the process of finding work took place through Vietnamese acquaintances already in South Korea, and to find that these young marriage migrant women are routinely working as undocumented laborers in South Korea. But what really caught me off guard was the women's migration to a third country after returning to Vietnam and its multi-directionality. One woman who ran away within a week of her arrival in South Korea and returned to Vietnam, unable to endure her husband's domineering control, noticed that people around her were going to China and making large sums of money. Seeing this, she decided to go work at a garment factory in the Đôngxing region of southern China. Through a broker, she was trucked up to Quang Ninh province in northern Vietnam, making it easy for her to cross the border into China. However, the 14 people who were on the truck were all kept in a single room and told to wait until there was work for them. Growing fearful at hearing this, the woman escaped and walked all the way to Hong Kong, leading to an "illegal" sojourn and the birth of a child (H7).

At about the same time, another woman returned from South Korea to Vietnam after being served an "immediate divorce ruling," but she was strong-armed by the parents of her new Vietnamese spouse to "illegally" migrate to Russia with her husband, via her husband's aunt in Canada (H17).¹¹ If one traces the migrations of these women, they will find

¹¹ This woman's Korean mother-in-law resembled the mother in director Bong Joon-ho's *Mother* (2009), able to justify any type of violence carried out on her son's behalf. Each night, she would give her infirm son drugs and nudge him into the bedroom. The young woman refused to sleep with her husband a few times and within 6 months was served an "immediate divorce ruling" (a type of summary divorce procedure that no longer exists).

journeys to northern Vietnam, southern China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and even Russia. If the family and relatives of the women are included in consideration as well, these journeys stretch into Taiwan and Japan.

The story of one particular woman, who worked and had a child while undocumented in both South Korea and Hong Kong, serves as an example of the multi-directionality of migration and the complex trajectory of regional integration. Within a week of being wed in 2009, this woman fled from her in-law's home in Gimje, North Jeolla Province. She had been forcibly cooped up in the family home, unable to leave on her own. She made it all the way to the home of her aunt in Wangsimni, Seoul. While she worked as an undocumented laborer, she conceived a child by the Vietnamese man she was living with, thinking that they would marry. But when she saw him going out on the town and having affairs, using money that she had earned, she resolutely kicked him out of her house. To completely sever all ties with him, she moved to Ansan. She had her child and lived on her own with the help of the Suwon Presbyterian Church, but she was unable to continue living on her own and thus moved in with another Vietnamese boyfriend.

When the baby was just eight months old, I left it with the church during the day and went out to work, but within two months I was caught! My baby was still at the church, and I was in the detention center for around a month. Using the Korean birth certificate, I got a passport issued for my baby from the Vietnamese embassy and returned [to Vietnam] with my baby [in 2013]. ... After coming back to Vietnam, for a while I just looked after the baby. But I saw people around me who were going to Hong Kong and working and making money, and it looked good. So I left the baby with my parents and left again in 2015, then came back in 2018. It was illegal. If you're not lucky, you could always end up caught and put in jail or even deported, but a lot of people still went. By car or scooter, people went to Quang Ninh province then crossed into China, from which point they'd go from Shenzhen to Hong Kong via freight containers. ... The first four or five months, I sent the money I earned back to my parents and paid back all the money I'd borrowed before going to Hong Kong. But people I knew started getting caught one by one, so I wasn't able to work all that much. I got caught a number of times too and ended up in a detention center. It was while I was working there that I met my current husband, and we had our daughter. My husband was an illegal [resident] too. ... (Smiling) The best thing about going to Hong Kong was meeting my boyfriend! He and his parents loved that we had a kid so much, they were so happy and excited, and so we decided to get married!

I was there for three years, but the truth is that I wasn't able to work more

than a few months. As soon as I got to Hong Kong, I was in detention for two months, where they took away all my IDs and issued me a permit. The permit didn't allow for work, but each month I got a certain amount of aid that I used to charge my metro card and pay room and board to my landlord. I was able to live in Hong Kong on account of the permit, but the government aid was so scant that I always was trying to work under the table. ... When I first got caught working, I was in the detention center for 7 months, and when I last got caught, my boyfriend had to stay with the baby for a month, and for the last two weeks [of my stay] I had my daughter with me in the detention center. ... When you finish your sentence, they ask you if you want to go back to Vietnam. If you tell them yes, they'll make you go back on a certain date, and if you say no, they'll give you your permit again. [After getting out,] my boyfriend took our daughter and went back to Vietnam ahead of me, and because I was pregnant at the time, I gave birth to my second child, a son, in Hong Kong, and I stuck around for a little bit with him before going back to Vietnam [in 2018]. (Interview with H5, July 7, 2019)

When asked about her life in Vietnam upon returning from South Korea, this woman candidly shared her exploits in both South Korea and Hong Kong, to my surprise. Although she had smiled while saying that meeting her “husband” was the best part of her time in Hong Kong, because divorce filings in South Korea had not been complete, she was unable to marry her new “husband” nor was she able to register the births of her three children (born in South Korea and Hong Kong), and had thus reached out to KOCUN for help.¹²

Whether women ran away or were divorced, it was exceedingly rare that South Korean husbands would send over divorce documents to their wives. Moreover, because a woman must know precise identifying information about her husband in order to go through the complex procedure of obtaining documents, many returnee migrant women are left in an awkward halfway position. They must either start new families informally or pay out more money—even more than they paid for a marriage broker in the first place—to follow up on divorce proceedings and register

¹² A representative of the Vietnamese Women's Union - Hai Phong Branch stated that the biggest problem related to returnee migrant women is the issue of registering their children. In particular, the representative has said that while there is an economic cooperation memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Hong Kong and Vietnam, the lack of civil affairs coordination MOU has caused myriad issues. Based on information about the returnee migrants' Korean spouses, KOCUN runs checks for divorce processing in South Korea and helps women fill out necessary paperwork.

their children. Their awkward situation became a bigger problem when it came time to send their undocumented children to daycare or school.

The woman quoted in the preceding excerpt had migrated to South Korea for marriage at the tender age of 18 to 19, thinking merely that she wanted to change things up in her life and earn money to help her family at home. However, there was little that differentiated her marriage migration to South Korea from her labor migration to Hong Kong, in the fact that all the while she was chasing both love and work. Moreover, the motivation for her return migration to Vietnam was not so different; she returned after she had children and was no longer able to continue working while looking after her children on her own. Among women who returned to Vietnam and those who remigrated to South Korea, it was not uncommon to experience “illegal” sojourn and labor while endeavoring to lead independent lives within this “gendered geography of power” (Pessar and Mahler 2003) of transnational space connecting two families. Marriage migration and labor migration were interdigitated, along with the women’s complex motivations. Remarkably, the labor market that most runaway migrant women entered into was not the “domestic care work” that Hochschild (2002) and others underscored to introduce a gender perspective into research of migration within uneven globalization, but was in fact either the simple service industry of cleaning, doing dishes, serving in restaurants, or the manufacturing industry—auto parts, auto plating, electronics parts, plastics, shoes, garments, lighting, noodles, et cetera.

5. Who Are Returnee Migrant Women, and What Do Their Children Mean to Them?

Responses to the question of “Why did you return to Vietnam?” in KOCUN’s 2019 survey—which included 145 women who had either been through divorce or their marriage was over for all intents and purposes—were mixed. Surprisingly, a number of women (11 percent) said that they did not even set foot in South Korea due to their husbands cutting off contact with them after marrying in Vietnam; 7.6 percent said they ended up staying for the long term while visiting family in Vietnam. Others explained that they were cut off from contact with their husbands or were unable to be admitted to South Korea due to their husbands not sending an invitation for return. Overall, 50 percent listed reasons having to do

with the disinterest or irresponsibility of their husbands, surpassing the proportion of women who simply did not want to return to South Korea (37.5 percent). In short, these women were not kidnapping children from their fathers and going to Vietnam; they were far more likely to have been essentially abandoned by their Korean partners. However, most shockingly, 80.4 percent of returnees reported that they had not had any children with their Korean husband. Even if one takes into account the regional differences that could appear between Cần Thơ and Hải Phòng, the figure suggests that a standard, cookie-cutter view of returnee migrant women as always existing in a pair, with a Korean Vietnamese child, is far removed from reality. Likewise, because there are many cases in which, after splitting with their Korean spouse, these women meet a Vietnamese man who they either move in with or marry and start a new family, Korean Vietnamese children are not always living with only their mother or with their Vietnamese grandparents. Because they live with a Vietnamese father figure and, often, young Vietnamese siblings, there is a good chance that the children are unaware of the fact that they themselves are Korean Vietnamese. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to more deeply understand the diverse modalities of being returnee migrant women and Korean Vietnamese children, whom South Koreans have often only thought of as policy targets on the “Korean side.” A flexible, cautious approach should be taken, so that these individuals are able to choose the manner in which they carry out their lives. This prompted my realization that the very attempt to go beyond state-bound methodology of South Korean multiculturalism studies via examining the process of family formation, dissolution, and reformation in the transnational sociocultural system (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Glick Schiller 2015) was in itself already highly “Korean,” in that some intended survey respondents were nearly assimilated into local families.

So, what were these children in their mother’s eyes, and what influence did they have on their mother’s return or remigration? Faier asserts that Filipina migrant women who move to rural Japan to work in hostess bars and end up married stress “love” for their husbands to such a degree as a “tool for crafting a new self.” Making such a cultural statement is a vital performance for shedding the occupational disrepute of being a hostess and restoring one’s moral status as a “wife,” as well as for reestablishing the self as a cosmopolitan, modern woman who can speak English and has been around the world (Faier 2007: 149–150). This semantic analysis of

“love” as a point at which gendered subjectivity is formed in transnational migration, going beyond the dichotomy of power and resistance, showed up in the cases of many returnee migrant Vietnamese women, in the form of undying love for their children. Moreover, what precisely “love for one’s child” meant varied significantly by context. For some women, it was the desire for their child to be recognized as “family,” despite being deserted by the child’s father. To others, love for one’s child was a manifesto that they would, under no circumstance, part ways with their child—“I, a Vietnamese woman, am the mother of this child” despite whatever differences or similarities that may exist between motherhood in Vietnam and South Korea; and for other women, it was “my child solely to love, whom I gave birth to with my own body.” For returnee migrant women who had either broken up with their husbands or were emotionally estranged, the variegated declarations that materialized their love for their children enabled them to reestablish their own subjectivity and gave their lives new meaning as “working mothers.”

One returnee migrant woman (H10) only had duplicates of her Korean divorce papers, so she had paid a broker more than two million won (roughly 1,800 USD) to register her five-year-old daughter’s birth in Vietnam. When she requested help obtaining South Korean citizenship for her child as well, the broker asked for more than 15 million won. She abandoned the attempt until she came to KOCUN looking for help to obtain citizenship. Naturally, I asked why she wanted South Korean citizenship for her daughter.

She’ll have no problems living here, but when I think of her future, South Korea has a lot of good educational facilities and such. So, if possible, [I’d like her to] go to Korea and attend school there. My wish is that she at least lives a happier life than I. ... I want to take her with me to South Korea. Not to remarry. I want to go follow her and work. If she gets [South Korean] citizenship, I could get a child-raising F6-2 visa and [work on a] farm or work in a restaurant. I could do anything. ... Since the time she was three, we’ve had absolutely no contact with her father. Through a friend of my brother, I was able to talk over the phone with my mother-in-law, but she has absolutely no interest in the child. (Interview with H10, July 10, 2019)

But when I took this matter of “South Korean citizenship” at face value and offered to somehow get in contact with her in-laws and see if the father would register their child on the family tree, or failing that, see if the woman could pursue citizenship for her child based on gene testing, the

woman's family—who had been quietly sitting and listening to that point—began to speak passionately about what the woman and her Vietnamese family could and could not give up. In fact, the larger problem was that the child's father had deserted his family.

Family ties, the relationship between a father and daughter are something that cannot be severed. In fact, we too once had a person go missing, and our family went down to the southern regions ourselves to look for him. However far apart, a family is not something that can just be cut off. Since her father's Korean, the child's home (*quê*) is half Korea as well. If her father would just recognize this, he'd be welcome to come to Vietnam and see his daughter whenever. Even if [Korean] citizenship doesn't work out, we can send her to school in Vietnam. We just want her to meet her father even just once. As for her studies, we can send her to study abroad in South Korea down the road, but our wish is that she's able to meet her family over there, even just once. (Interview with H10's older brother, July 10, 2019)

It wasn't even a sham marriage, it was a real, proper marriage after all. (Interview with H10's father, July 10, 2019)

When this family said that they wanted South Korean citizenship for the sake of the child, what was most important was that the child, born of a proper marriage, be able to attain her proper status as “family” through the verification of paternity. It was also meant to reaffirm the verity and morality of the woman's previous marriage. While the legal status accorded by citizenship constituted, of course, a tie to South Korea necessary for certain benefits, the more pressing problem for this woman—who was divorced while pregnant and gave birth on her own after returning to Vietnam—was that after formally being wed and conceiving a child in wedlock, it was only right that her daughter be recognized by her father; but the reality was that this was not happening. The quest to secure citizenship may have been both a means of finding the child's father as well as a recompense for such aggrievement, but it meant that the mother was unable to give up on having her daughter being recognized as family by her former husband. For this woman and her family, love for the child constituted a remaking of the broken “family” (paternity) line; attaining citizenship and remigrating to South Korea were envisioned as methods for doing so. But for other women who (re)migrated from Vietnam to South Korea with their Korean Vietnamese child, motivations for transnational migration were different but still framed as “for the child's sake.”

The two women who (re)migrated to South Korea after living in

Vietnam with their Korean Vietnamese child (C4, C5), rather than those who remarried before returning to South Korea (C1, C2, C3), both reported that while they did not face financial problems, they long lived in fear under the thumb of their violent husbands. One woman (C4) married her business-owning Korean husband at the age of 18 and lived with him for five years, during which time she gave birth to two children. But from the very start of wedded life, she was subjected to severe verbal and physical abuse four or five times per month. Thus, she ran away and sued for divorce in South Korea. For this woman, her children were her very life and were a critical factor in her decision to migrate—whatever cost or difficulty she incurred—so as to maintain custody and give her children an education.

(In response to the question about the view that Vietnamese women “abduct children”) But, what about our side of the story, we who have no choice but to move out and bring our kids with us to Vietnam? My kids really liked their dad. But he brought home other women multiple times. He’d tell me that she was his younger sister, so I was prepping things, thinking she was [the kids’] aunt. But then I hear moaning coming from the tent I’d set up in the yard for the kids to play in! I was so shocked. I didn’t need a husband anymore! ... I was so stressed out. I was only living with him for the sake of the kids! There’s no such thing as abandoning your children, not for Vietnamese people! But he started to hit me, and it was getting worse and worse. ... One time I even escaped with the kids to a shelter. ... [People at the shelter] told me to think hard and make up my mind, but I had the kids, so I just ended up going back home. But not long after I came back home ... he suddenly grabbed me by my hair and started pummeling me again. There was really no reason, not at all! It was at that point that everything I had put up with for years came out. In a loud voice, I shouted: “Why are you hitting me?!” ... Right then, I decided to get a divorce. ... I packed my things, and while my husband was out of the house, I took a taxi to Cheongju, where my mother was at the time. [I] hired a lawyer and sued [for divorce], and went to court every month. ... Since the court ordered me to allow the father visitation rights, I had to give my address to him. When my husband came, he said he’d stay with the kids for the night at my house. I refused and told him to get a hotel. When he said he’d take the kids, I told him that maybe he could do that after the [divorce] case was settled, but not now. But my youngest wouldn’t stop clinging to their dad, so what could I do? I had to let him stay that night. When I did, my mom’s friend (“auntie”) was there, but [my husband] said he wanted to have sex that night. “It’s all over! Get out of my house, now!” I said, and then he started kicking me. When my mom woke up and grabbed him by the leg, he kneed her. My clothes got all torn up. My auntie stood there holding my youngest child back and said, “Hurry, call the police!” and my mom said, “Don’t worry about us, run!” so I just ran. (Interview with C4, July 30, 2019)

Having learned that suing for divorce did not necessarily mean protection for oneself or one's children, this woman considered taking her children with her to Vietnam and raising them there. When her lawyer told her that she could not leave the country with her children during divorce proceedings, however, she fell into despair. In 2015, she gave up on the divorce and went back to Vietnam. The problem, however, came when her husband filed a false report with the Vietnamese police, saying that she had stolen money from him. While she was able to explain her situation to the police and work things out, it was revealed in the process that her children—who are South Korean citizens—had overstayed their visas in Vietnam, resulting in a fine. Not only was she unable to retrieve the necessary documents for her children's visa reissuance from the South Korean consulate in Ho Chi Minh but, to make matters worse, her husband had at some point filed for divorce, and effective May 2017 had reclaimed parental and custodial rights from her. It was around this time that her husband went so far as to call in mobsters to shake down her family and even attempt to kidnap the children. But multiple times, the woman, who was working in Ho Chi Minh at the time, would come running and explain the situation, valiantly stopping what was happening. In fact, the gangsters would sometimes even say things like, "Is that so? Well then, I'll take care of him if you want, just say the word!" or even advise her, saying, "Your husband's out to kidnap your kids, so watch out." It was also around this time that the woman first came to KOCUN in Cần Thơ for counseling on issues related to her children and her divorce. In fact, after consulting with another expert in Seoul about the case, the center advised the woman not to go to South Korea for the sake of her safety. The husband's invitation for her to bring the kids to South Korea again, on the condition that she promise to completely cut contact with her Vietnamese family, was a red flag to the center. Moreover, the children's basic certificates indicated that custody remained with their father, while, strangely enough, the woman was not listed as having divorced her husband on her certificate of marriage, thus making the center even more suspicious of her husband's ulterior motives.¹³ Nevertheless, two months later, the woman said she was "putting things in fate's hands" and departed for South Korea with her children. Within three days of her return, her husband attacked her with a knife,

¹³ Sadly, among the 22 women I spoke to, this woman's husband was the only Korean husband who traveled to Vietnam to see his kids.

inflicting large wounds on the woman's head and face. She became separated from her children and went to a shelter.

Why had this woman attempted to return to South Korea despite attempts to dissuade her? While she had returned to Vietnam in order to be with her children, she said that she had been sad having to work in Ho Chi Minh, and bit by bit opened up about her reasoning.

I just wanted to forget everything and live a quiet life in Vietnam. I'm Vietnamese, so I can get by here. However, the kids are Korean! That's the first reason. The second reason is the problem of the kids' education. Vietnamese education, if you compare it with Korean education, South Korea is far better. Third, issues adapting. I sent the older kid to preschool in Vietnam, but he struggled a lot because he doesn't know Vietnamese. (Interview with C4, September 25, 2019)

My husband, he said that even though we're divorced, we should think of the kids, and I should bring them to South Korea and raise them myself. He kept telling me, "Wouldn't it be best for their mom to raise them, at least until they're out of high school?" Because I live for my kids, I thought about it a long time, and made my decision. (Interview with C4, June 30, 2019)

This woman, who currently is suing for custody and parental rights, made the courageous choice to remigrate to South Korea, knowing the risk of physical endangerment, because after the slightest hope for staying with her husband had been blasted away, her even more empowered identity as a mother propelled her gendered transnational migration. These women's love for their children could be a type of performance, expressing various complicated motivations and feelings—as demonstrated in statements like, "I always wanted kids more than a husband" (H17, July 14, 2019), or "In order to overcome the sadness of losing my husband, I wanted a baby, so I just lived with another man and had a baby" (H16, July 13, 2019)—showed just how much they needed someone to love truly and deeply. That someone was not a new spouse; instead, it was the child they birthed.¹⁴

¹⁴ In both of the quoted cases, the women returned to Vietnam without children, only to have a child(ren) with a Vietnamese man upon return. For more on the psychology of these women "asking for a child" (xin con), see Grillot (2016: 159).

6. Parting Words: Rethinking Korean Familism through Returnee Migrant Women

This article grew out of my personal involvement with a South Korean NGO that helps women migrate safely, as well as my realization of their problems; my participation in the pilot study KOCUN carried out to execute its mission; and my individual research that followed. All these happenings and more coalesced into a sort of activist or applied anthropology that resulted in this piece of writing. The experiences of these Vietnamese marriage migrant women, in returning to Vietnam and remigrating to South Korea, remind us once again that South Korea's experiments with multiculturalism are taking place within a global network of power, wherein the boundaries of "societies" and "nation-states" no longer correspond one to one. The inconvenient truth is that not only has a vast amount of policy data been far too Korea-centric and state-centric but that, regardless of migrant women's legal status, marriage migration and labor migration exist in a broadly interconnected and, moreover, multilayered manner. It is easy to think that categories such as "marriage migrant" or "labor migrant" are separate because national statistical data are generated based on those categories. But through in-depth research, one uncovers the dynamics of humans moving between these existing classifications. This calls for a more flexible understanding of "migration as a process" from a long-term perspective.

We must remember that when marriage migrant women choose international marriage as a "life-changing opportunity," their desire to find work does not automatically dent the legitimacy of their marriage. This is because these women—who must live as members of transnational families connecting Vietnam and South Korea within the gendered labor market, the gendered institution of family, and the global status disparity between countries—are merely living their truth, which includes complicated motivations for marriage migration. Choe Horim (2016: 36) stresses Vietnam's family customs that place an equal emphasis on both the maternal and paternal sides of the family, as well as Vietnamese women's increasing participation in economic activities after the reform and opening of the country. These points are crucial for understanding the subjectivity of returnee migrant women that this article encompasses. Each time one of these young returnee women came in for their interviews and quietly and

calmly told me their experiences of working while illegal, giving birth while illegal, and migrating illegally to third countries, or even sharing their awful tales of overcoming domestic abuse, it was always I who was shocked. Their stories reaffirmed the deep-running connection between labor migration and marriage migration and revealed the rapid bottom-up integration, which, without grandiose slogans, is quickly tying together the region. Moreover, they revealed that South Korea's experiments with multiculturalism, which were advocated for as components of a population policy, have, in consequence, not added to the appreciation of cultural diversity, but rather resulted in the excessive instrumentalization of migrant women's sex and love.

The 22 in-depth interviews and the Hải Phòng survey of 145 returnee women enabled us to understand the diverse modalities of being returnee women and their children. It was also invaluable to realize that although there is an increasing number of returnee women and Korean Vietnamese children, when one considers that not all of returnee women's children are Korean Vietnamese, it is best to avoid a needlessly Korea-centric approach that could be burdensome to a woman's current family. Likewise, the fact that there were at least four times as many returnee women who did not have Korean Vietnamese children than those who did proves that one would be mistaken to view returnee women and Korean Vietnamese children as a tied entity. However, the problems of so-called Korean familism and its utmost concern with patrilineal blood lines are most blatantly illustrated by the discovery that, in striking contrast to the framing of fathers as victims of so-called child abduction by these women, in Vietnam, there are many Korean Vietnamese children who want more than anything to be seen as "family," as well as countless women who were formally married but never set foot on Korean soil because their husband absconded before they could migrate.

So, what is a family? Is it something that can only be validated through a single country's laws, something that thus loses efficacy when a border is crossed? Korea's emphasis on patrilineality is a powerful cultural ideology, practice, and legal institution based on a cherry-picking of biological facts. However, if one crosses the borders of South Korea, does familism give way so easily just by cutting off contact? In Korean familism, where is the "mother"—the woman who is "supposed to be" fierce yet gracious, who would go to any courageous lengths for the sake of her child? Who are the real "Korean mothers" here? Is it the mother who requests that her daughter-

in-law cough up 300,000 won from every paycheck to avoid being served divorce papers? The mother who feeds her son “strange medicines” every night before nudging him into her daughter-in-law’s room? Or is it the mother who packs her bags and resolves to migrate so that her kids can receive a better education in their own country, even if it might mean being beaten to death by her husband?

Going forward, further surveys into matters that are not illuminated by statistics on labor migration would help paint a more detailed picture of gendered transnational migration. Matters such as marriage migrant women’s labor environments and their impact—that is, what types of work they do and how they do it, as well as what sort of impact that has on local social development in their home countries, and what sorts of impacts such effects have (or do not have) on the gender hierarchy in Vietnam and South Korea—should be considered for future studies.

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