This pioneering work traces the emerging trend of transnational marriages between Vietnamese men in the U.S. and women in Vietnam. Thai’s examination of marital ties grounds the personal, familial, and intimate dimensions of globalization. He also shifts away from the refugee model of overseas Vietnamese by highlighting their complex lives. He reveals the cultural struggles and material contradictions that accompany kin expectations, class differences, and gender negotiation in across-border family formation.

This is an engaging and clearly written book. In the first two chapters, Thai contextualizes the historical forces and kin networks that surround contemporary Vietnamese transnational marriages and the convertibility of capital across oceans. In each of the following three chapters, the author focuses on a theme and presents an exemplary story for detailed analysis. He navigates through matters concerning gender, socio-economic status, and matchmaking. In the following two chapters, Thai presents two contrasting cases of the “unmarriagables” (a low-wage man who marries a highly educated woman) and the “highly marriageables” (a highly educated man who marries a less educated woman).

Thai reveals that 55% the couples in his sample are the “unmarriagables.” He devotes most of the book to examining them. He emphasizes that the brides and grooms tend to have clashing expectations of each other. Most Vietnamese women seek an overseas partner because they assume that it is a passage to “modernity” – egalitarian gender relations and freedom from cultural norms. Their views are often shaped by higher education, exposure to foreign influences, and personal and family wealth. In contrast, most Vietnamese American men want a marriage that would maintain traditional household arrangements, patriarchal dominance, and socio-economic stability. Because of this marital view, along with their low income and education, they are unable to find and attract a suitable partner in their local surrounding. With advice from a close friend or family member, they decided to enter the marriage market in Vietnam.

Despite these discrepancies, Thai argues that an international marriage remains attractive. By going global, Viet Kieu men and Vietnamese women are able to convert their expectations and personal assets into a glimmer of hope for maintaining personal self-worth.
Thai’s creative and strategic method of inquiry deserves attention. (He details his reflections on methodology in Appendix A.) After a summer of initial fieldwork, he interviewed 129 brides, grooms, and their family members during the course of approximately a year. He intentionally selected couples who are still in the “migration waiting period” (when they have not been united) because this is the time when they “were just beginning to form expectations and opinions of each other and about what marriage might mean to them” (12-13). Unlike most transnational studies that begin with the overseas informants, Thai used contacts from the “community of origin” (mainly, Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta) for guidance and direction to connecting with grooms in the U.S.

The contextual history of politics and the flight of Vietnamese out of their country are briefly mentioned in the introduction but not in the following chapters. This is probably one of book’s greatest oversights. Thai falls short of seriously examining the politics that embed relations between the overseas community and their homeland. Nevertheless, traces of political history reveal itself in a number of cases, such as the “refugee buddies” (33) in Chapter 1, and underpins the possibility and motivation of creating intimacy between Viet Kieu men and women from their distant ancestral homeland. This analytical consideration could possibly explain why overseas Vietnamese men are disproportionately less likely than Vietnamese women to pursue an international marriage despite their needs, motivations, and expectations. (Only 55% of the grooms in the sample, as opposed to 27% of the brides, reported that they were hesitant to pursue an international marriage until they encouraged or suggested by their close friend or family member.)

Despite this drawback, this is a major contribution to literatures on migration, marriage, masculinity, and Vietnamese Studies. Thai’s commitment to his research is admirable.

With his cultural sensitivity and networks in Vietnam, he is also in a good position to examine the emerging and growing trend of international marriages between overseas Vietnamese men and Vietnamese women.