

Mate Selection, Marriage and Social Change in Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has experienced prolonged periods of war, political unification, social upheaval, a shift from a central-planned to a market-based economy, and an extensive opening to the outside world over the past few decades. While speculation on the affects of these transformations is common, little systematic empirically grounded research has been conducted into the nature and extent of family change and the major influences on it. The goals of this study are to document changes in mate selection and marriage within the Vietnamese family over the last 40 years using data from an innovative and representative survey of three marital cohorts in the Red River Delta (North Vietnam). The three cohorts examined entered marriage during distinctly different historical periods in Vietnam's recent history, allowing us to use a life course framework to explore changes in mate selection and marriage by comparing the experiences of each cohort.

The earliest cohort examined married between 1963-1971; the middle cohort married between 1977-1985, and the most recent cohort married between 1992-2000. these three cohorts experienced vastly different social and economic conditions as they made the transition into marriage. Prior to 1975, the economy in the North was centralized and heavily subsidized. There were two main economic sectors, the state and collective sectors. At the end of the Vietnam-U.S. war, the country was unified and this economic model was applied to the entire country. The economy relied primarily on agriculture, characterized by low productivity. As a result, food insecurity was a substantial concern for many during the early 1980s. In response, the government

launched major reform policies in 1986 called “*doi moi*”, with the goal of revitalizing the country and improving living standards. In essence, *doi moi* called for the country to transition from a centralized economy to a market-based one. The impacts of *doi moi* are readily apparent—although segments of the population were experiencing starvation prior to reform policies, within a few years after *doi moi* Vietnam emerged as the third largest rice exporting country in the world. These reform policies are significant not only for the economy, but also for the social, political, and cultural aspects of society. Originally passed in 1986, the pace of reforms accelerated dramatically in the 1990s. Although several scholars have examined the political and economic impacts of these changes, few have focused on the impacts of Vietnam’s social changes on family life, such as mate selection and marriage.

DATA

We use data from the 2003 Red River Delta Family Survey, a representative sample of 1,296 currently married individuals. In order to measure changes over time and the influence of historical time on life course trajectories, three purposively chosen marriage cohorts were targeted for interviews. The first cohort married between 1963 and 1971, representing the period just prior to and during Vietnam’s War for Reunification when the country was still divided into two governments. The second cohort married during 1977 and 1985, the early post-unification period when economic hardship and social upheaval was most severe and when a centrally planned economy was pervasive. The final cohort married between 1992 and 2000, the years when economic reforms and the opening of Vietnam to global influences were well under way. The 1,296 respondents were equally divided between husbands and wives, rural and

urban settings, and the three marriage cohorts. The survey contains extensive information about mate selection and marriage, and also has considerable information on potential factors that could exert influence on the patterns and changes over time. These include information on the place of origin and place of residence (e.g., rural versus urban), educational background of respondents and their parents, and family of origin composition and size.

FINDINGS

Findings indicate substantial change in mate selection and marriage across the three cohorts, although the change is not always in the same direction. For example, the place and manner in which individuals meet their spouse has changed over the three cohorts. Marrying someone who lives in the same commune or ward was the norm for individuals in all three cohorts. However, in keeping with the removal of Vietnam's residency restrictions and the increased mobility of the population, those in the most recent cohort are the least likely to marry someone who lives in the same ward or commune that they do (64%, compared to 73% in the 1977-1985 cohort, and 77% in the 1963-1971 cohort). Those in the most recent cohort are also more likely to have met their spouse in an entertainment place or through friends, whereas individuals in the earlier cohorts were more likely to meet their spouse through parents or other relatives or by working with them. Marriages arranged by parents or other family is rare in Vietnam's recent history. Only 3.5% of those married between 1963-1971 reported a marriage decision that was made primarily by their parents. Marriages arranged by parents or other family accounts for less than 1% of marriages in the most recent cohort.

Although some aspects have become more 'modern' or westernized, other areas of marriage and mate selection have moved in the opposite direction. For example, the proportion of couples seeking the advice of a horoscope reader or fortune teller has become more common among the recent cohort compared to the earlier two cohorts. Among individuals marrying between 1992-2000, 22% sought advice from a fortune teller, compared to 9% marrying between 1977-1985 and 5% marrying between 1963-1971. Similarly, more than half (55%) of those in the recent marital cohort consulted a horoscope to set their wedding date, compared to 29% in the middle cohort and 20% in the earliest cohort. However, before thinking that social changes and the transition to a market economy have had no effect, a particularly strong finding, highlighting what some observers see as the capitalist spirit in Vietnam family life, is the nature of wedding gifts commonly received by Vietnamese couples. Most couples that married between 1963-1971 received wedding presents that were mostly in-kind gifts (73%); only 10% received gifts that were primarily cash. These percentages were very similar for the middle cohort. For the most recent marital cohort, however, the majority received primarily cash as wedding presents (83%) with only 10% receiving mainly in-kind gifts. Our discussion will focus on the social and economic changes experienced by each cohort and will explore potential mechanisms that can help explain these changes. Both gender and urban/rural differences in these changes are also examined.