

# ‘Quiet Dream’: Vietnamese women and marriage migration

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## ABSTRACT

The photographic essay, ‘Quiet Dream’, by photographer and lecturer Oh Soon-Hwa, represents the culmination of years of work with young Vietnamese women during a “bride phase” in Vietnam, which refers to a period of waiting before leaving home and kin to travel overseas in order to marry foreign men, usually in Taiwan and South Korea. This series was taken on and around a small island in the region of the Mekong Delta (one of the poorest areas in Vietnam), nicknamed “Taiwan Island”, where many young women are pressured to marry foreigners for various complex reasons, which the author discusses. Oh’s photographic essay focuses on the beauty and serenity of the environment surrounding these women while they have to deal with diverse expectations, which includes leaving behind part of their identity, the familiar landscape, climate, language, family, friends, traditions, and way of living. Until recently, studies on marriage migration have tended to focus on remittances and the economic impact of migration. New studies adopt a more comprehensive social perspective, examining the effects of migration on the social fabric of the migrants’ home community. Placed in the context of these ongoing studies, Oh’s work is important in drawing attention to the lives and identities of these women (what they give up) before entering into marriage migration. My article focuses on two aspects of Oh’s photographs: 1) the technique of stitched photography; and 2) the composition of the photograph, particularly the choice of dress worn by the subject. Half of the portraits are stitched photographs, which is a technique that merges together several photographs to form a unique piece, with the aim of providing a wider view of the environment of the subject. This method of stitching also bears testimony to the stitched futures of these women; the hopes and dreams they harbour as foreign brides, as well as the familiar landscapes and identities they leave behind, all “stitched” together as it were, to constitute a hopeful, but also unsure, resigned and imagined future.

**Keywords:** cross-border marriage, ocular ethic, Oh Soon-Hwa, re-visioning, vision as critique.

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# Re-visioning Vietnamese women and marriage migration: Oh Soon-Hwa's 'Quiet Dream'

There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera.  
- Susan Sontag (2007:7)

These were not faces, not portraits but fantasy.  
- Griselda Pollock (2003:169)

The subject of intimate labour, defined by Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parrañas (2010:8) as work involving 'the personal and the daily praxis of intimacy' in the context of the South East Asian migratory movement has, in recent years, provided much material for critical dialogue amongst scholars of migration and gender studies. Much of this dialogue is focused on the transnational exchange of money and gifts for intimate labour, seeking to unpack the economic and material bases informing migratory practices on both sides of the exchange. Critical discourse on the subject has also seen interventions into the policies and ideological apparatuses that govern and regulate the practice, as well as assessing how such migration strategies contribute to the politics of multiculturalism and their impact on gender relations in both host and home countries. As noted by Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore (2009:9), critical interventions such as these, while important, tend to reduce the understanding of bodies and their experiences to simplistic auditing operations, wherein personhood and subjectivity are erased in the name of the collective. In cases where the subjects or persons of these exchanges are the focus, the discourse tends to be couched within the rhetoric of human rights and victimhood, particularly in cases involving abuse and violence. Oh Soon-Hwa's photo essay 'Quiet Dream' signals a refreshing critical entry, specifically a visual one, into this ongoing dialogue, and constitutes a re-vision<sup>1</sup> of dominant and stereotypical representations of a specific class of intimate labourers: the foreign migrant bride.

Arguing for the centrality of visual culture in displacing hegemonic forms of knowledge production is especially pertinent when we consider how the circulation of images produces meaning and establishes values and power relations within culture. Irit Rogoff (1998:15) surmises that, '[m]uch of the intellectual work within the framework of cultural problematics has to do with being able to ask new and alternative questions, rather than reproducing old knowledge by asking the old questions'. Oh's photographs open up a space for the articulation of these 'alternative questions' (Rogoff 1998:15), ones that challenge reproductions of what Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991:6) refers to as 'the sterility of the unitary subject and its monolithic construct'. Oh's work offers the possibility of vision as critique of, and political intervention into, 'old knowledge',

thereby producing a new cultural politics of difference, which constitutes what Cornel West (1990:19) defines as 'creative responses to the precise circumstances of our present moment'. Practitioners of this new cultural politics of difference, however, occupy an 'inescapable double-bind' in that their work represents a paradoxical gesture that is 'simultaneously progressive *and* co-opted' (West 1990:20, original emphasis) and is thus compelled to take seriously the responsibility owed the subjects of their work. As such a practitioner, Oh takes on the role of what Trinh (1990:328,332) calls the 'mediator story-teller ... at once a creator, a delighter and a teacher' who, in choosing to tell her story (that of the Vietnamese foreign bride), must effect a displacement by 'unceasingly introducing difference into repetition' so that the structures of oppression are not reproduced even as some of the old forms of representation seem unavoid-able. In doing so, Oh's images force us to pay attention to what lies beyond what we typically expect to see, thereby altering the structures by which we organise and inhabit culture.

'Quiet Dream' is a series of photographs of young Vietnamese women during what is known as a 'bride phase' (Hung 2008:15) in Vietnam, referring to a period of waiting before leaving their homes to travel overseas to marry foreign men, usually in Taiwan or South Korea. This photo series was taken on and around a small island in the region of the Mekong Delta, called Tan Loc, nicknamed "Taiwan Island". It is one of the poorest regions in Vietnam where the number of local women getting married to Taiwanese men and living in their husbands' homeland ranks among the highest across the Mekong Delta, which explains the island's nickname. Women in this region began marrying foreigners in the 1990s, when Vietnam opened up economically. Subsequently, many Taiwanese and South Korean firms set up operations in Ho Chi Minh City. Young women from families whose businesses have fallen apart, or young women from poor backgrounds with inadequate schooling, ventured out and married Taiwanese and Korean men. While many of these women self-identify as 'migrants for love' (Kim 2015:25), the main motivation for marrying out of Vietnam remains poverty, nurtured by a deep sense of filial piety. One of the ways daughters in Vietnamese families fulfil their filial responsibilities is through marriage migration, specifically through the remittances they send home. Although most of the men they end up marrying are middle-wage earners, these prospective husbands make enough money that remittances of up to a few thousand US dollars a year are sometimes possible. Besides the marriage broker's fee, the groom also pays the bride's family a sum of money up front, equivalent to a dowry. For this reason, these young brides-to-be are often referred to as 'Tan Loc's most lucrative export' for the pivotal role they play in stimulating transnational flows of money between their adopted and original home-lands (*The Star Online* 2017). Commercial marriage broking was outlawed

in Vietnam in 2002 because of concerns that the businesses might be a cover for the trafficking of women into prostitution. However, the practice of marriage broking still goes on illegally, underground, aided and abetted by village matchmakers and secluded meetings with suitors.

South Korea has, since the 1990s, begun actively to recruit foreign brides for farmers and urban working-class men who occupy disadvantaged positions in the domestic marriage market. The state-mediated context in which these cross-border marriage transactions take place is significant. The plight of men from the rural areas of South Korea who are unable to find spouses became a national issue by the 1980s. This was largely owing to local Korean women being unwilling to marry and settle down in rural areas, their own migratory strategies facilitating the migration of foreign women into Korea to fill the gap they left behind. Faced with a dwindling population, the Korean government regarded the mobilisation of foreign women as part of a national project to reproduce Korean families as basic social units, to the extent of offering substantial loans to middle-aged men working in the agricultural or fishing industries to assist them in finding foreign brides. Government support for foreign bride recruitment also extended to the protection of matchmaking businesses under Korean law and, in 1998, a new regulation was enacted that allowed matchmaking businesses to function independently of government approval. In 2008, the Korean government implemented the International Brokerage Act as part of an effort to redress the growing abuse and exploitation in the international marriage business market. The Act is, however, based on one of the clauses of the Consumer Law, and stresses the consumer rights of Korean men, thus positioning the women disadvantageously as commodities: products to be bought and sold (Kim 2015:30). The result is an institution of international marriage, created through collaboration between state policies and brokerage agencies' commodification of foreign women (Kim 2015:31). Accordingly, the image actively promoted by Korean brokers and internalised by prospective Korean husbands is typically that of the virginal, poor migrant bride. These young, docile women come to embody the opportunity for disadvantaged Korean men to fulfil their role as economic providers, and be restored to the proper model of what constitutes masculine identity and male heterosexuality.

'Quiet Dream' represents an intervention into this state-mediated public discourse surrounding the Vietnamese foreign migrant bride. Oh began her project as a response to the way in which public discourse (including academic and critical discourse) surrounding the migrant bride seemed to render the bodies of these women invisible. Oh explains the motivation behind her work as a desire to 'understand the women and to capture the dreams they told [her]' (*Lifestyle* 2013). Rather than

focus on the women's poverty, which would draw attention once more to the transnational economic gap and the pragmatism underlying their choice to marry abroad, and thus perpetuating their commodification as poor migrant brides and their status as victims, Oh wanted to draw attention to what these women leave behind in leaving their homeland to build a new life in a foreign country. Oh, a South Korean national, first learnt of the trend of local Korean men marrying Vietnamese women on one of her trips back to her hometown, the city of Jinju in the Gyeongnam province, in 2006. During her visit, she came across posters advertising Vietnamese brides; one imagines they were posters very similar to the ones shown in Figures 1 and 2.



FIGURE N° 1



Korean advertisement for Vietnamese brides (Kangjin Shinmun [sa]).





FIGURE N<sup>o</sup> 2

Advertisements that were launched on February 25 and March 14 in the Hankyoreh (From women's demeaning articles to racist commercials [sa]).

Translated, the script in the two posters (Figures 1 & 2) offer enticements such as:

- 'No deposit necessary, pay in full later';
- 'Make life happy with a Vietnamese woman';
- 'These Vietnamese brides are ready, you can marry them whenever you want';
- 'Marry a Vietnamese Virgin';
- 'Recruiting participants: A blind-date with a Vietnamese virgin';
- 'Enjoy free 7-day trip to Vietnam'.

The target audience of the advertisement (stated in bullet point in the second advertisement) includes

- old bachelors;
- men who want to re-marry;
- men who cannot re-marry because of children (single fathers);
- disabled men.

These advertisements are products of a Korean state-mediated public discourse that constructs the Vietnamese woman as a desirable female migrant subject, specifically of a 'more affordable and reliable model of the ideal traditional bride' (Kim 2015:29). The women are visually represented as being dressed in traditional Vietnamese garb, and while they represent models of modesty and docility, they are equally sexualised and reproduce the 'stereotype as fetish', explained by Homi K. Bhabha (1990:80) as that which gives the male subject – in this case the Korean male subject – access 'to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on

anxiety and defense'. Korea is described as a 'country notorious for its strong ethno-cultural definition of nationhood and its obsession with purity of blood' (Kim 2012:104), thus revealing a distinct colonial dynamic informing these constructions of the Vietnamese female migrant subject. The tension between the dependency on migrant women as a reproductive force (biological, economic, cultural and ideological) and fears of a weakened national identity following the influx of migrant women marrying into Korean society, leading to the dilution of its culture and identity, are partly alleviated by a discourse that constructs them as women 'who are purchased but may be returned should they fail to fulfill expected gender roles' (Kim 2015:31). According to Bhabha (1990:76), such constructions produce 'the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible'. As such, these women serve as a site of both 'fixity and fantasy' (Bhabha 1990:81), providing both the voyeuristic pleasure that comes with erotic contemplation of the female as object, in addition to facilitating the Korean men's sense of mastery over anxieties of being 'old bachelors' and men who 'cannot re-marry', and collective mastery over a weakened national identity rooted in a patriarchal national culture.

Dressed in traditional attire, thereby embodying the sign of Vietnamese-ness, these women also embody the feminisation of Vietnam as a colonised economy. By extension, Korea, as the consumer nation with the power to purchase, comes to embody the image of virile masculinity. The woman in the second poster (Figure 2) is also positioned against the iconic hills of Ha Long Bay, internationally famous and twice recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, touted by tourist sites and handbooks as a place of majestic and ethereal beauty,<sup>2</sup> and certainly impressive in its grandeur. Here, Ha Long Bay clearly serves as a prop to reinforce and complete what Griselda Pollock (2003:169) refers to as a 'fantasy of visual perfection', in addition to softening the transactional nature of these liaisons. This interplay of modesty, sexualisation and romanticisation thus creates the ideal subject, simultaneously inscribed, in Bhabha's (1990:72) terms, 'in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power'. It is with little irony, then, that a client enjoying his 'free 7-day trip to Vietnam' to pick out a potential bride, might also make a stop to take in the magnificent beauty of Ha Long Bay. Both the Vietnamese natural landscape and woman serve as signs of the feminine to be possessed and enjoyed at a price. It is precisely this inscription that Oh's photo essay re-vision. In what follows, I examine three aspects of her re-visioning that respond critically to and subvert fetishistic representations of the female migrant bride: 1) the challenges her images pose to the possessive gaze, particularly in her close-up portraits; 2) her choice to employ the method of stitching towards telling a (her)story; and 3) her ironic appropriation of certain gestures and performances of femininity that delineate the female subject who migrates because of marriage.

Situated within a state-mediated context of cross-border marriage, I find resonances between Oh's vision of female marriage migrants, and what Casper and Moore (2009:15) term an 'ocular ethic', which aims to 'reveal, resituate and recuperate' bodies rendered invisible or *affectively* missing: referring to the ways in which bodies that were at one time visible are *made* invisible by public discourse. Citing the work of Judith Butler, Casper and Moore (2009:7) remind us that positioning a particular body involves a 'process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface'. This effect of a body fixed in a particular time and space, in turn, informs that a body is made present or visible. Both these processes of situating and visualising bodies are thus semantic fields that determine the legitimacy of bodies, which, in the case of foreign female migrant subjects, constitute the reproductive function they serve. Oh's desire to tell the stories of these women is an attempt to 'reveal, resituate and recuperate' the subjectivities and personhoods of these women. As mediating story-teller, Oh, however, risks reproducing the very structures of oppression she attempts to subvert. On the one hand, visibility can mean legitimacy, as well as rescue from obscurity and other forms of exploitation. On the other hand, visibility can create further reification of the subject. Trinh (1991), who views privileging vision as a dominant way of knowing as hegemonic, cautions against glossing over the mechanisms that support any project of visibility, specifically the ways in which the medium risks reproducing apparatuses of oppression in its claims to reflect simply the authentic world of the native other. As Trinh (1991:6) notes, 'oppression can be located both in the story and in the telling of the story'. This caution, the weight of which is encapsulated in the following objection raised by Trinh (1991:37–38), is particularly relevant to Oh's project.

The silent common people – those who “have never expressed themselves” unless they are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts by the one who comes to redeem them – are constantly summoned to signify the real world. They are the fundamental referent of the social, hence it suffices to point the camera at them, to show their (industrialized) poverty, or to contextualize and package their unfamiliar lifestyles for the ever-buying and donating audience “back here”, in order to enter the sanctified real, of the morally right, or the social. In other words, when the so-called “social” reigns, how these people(/we) come to visibility in the media, how meaning is given to their(/our) lives, how their(/our) truth is construed or how truth is laid down for them(/us) and despite them (/us), how representation relates to or is ideology, how media hegemony continues its relentless course is simply not at issue (original emphasis).

Further drawing on Susan Sontag's insight into our modern preoccupation with photographs and picture-taking, we might ask of Oh's work: do her photographs signal an invasion of, an interference with, or indifference to, whatever is going on (Sontag 2007:11), for the sake of 'goad[ing] conscience' (Sontag 2007:24)? Sontag is quite cynical about the moral work photographs can do, going so far as to assert



that photography can only ever be an activity of non-intervention, having a stake in making sure that the status quo remains unchanged, 'at least for as long as it takes to get a "good" picture' (Sontag 2007:12). Ironically, what makes a subject interesting and worth photographing (even for the sake of doing moral work), is the pain and misfortune of the subject (Sontag 2007:12). Admittedly, Oh's work, which has a basis in the 'morally right' and the 'social' as understood by Trinh, is not free from bias. Indeed, the question we must ask is whose (her)story is being told? With this in mind, we need to consider Oh's relationship with the subjects of her photo essay. As a Korean national, Oh speaks from the centre of hegemonic discourse and runs the risk of being co-opted into that discourse, thus reproducing colonial power relations. However, as a Korean woman in a highly patriarchal culture, she speaks from the margins of that discourse. Further to this, Oh is a Korean woman abroad, married to a foreigner; her relationship with that hegemonic centre is therefore further destabilised. As a displaced female subject herself – albeit in terms different from the women she photographs – Oh is in a position to speak from what Trinh (1991:151) refers to as a 'different stance', to effect a 're-structuring of experience and a possible rupture with patriarchal [imagistic] codes and conventions', and to engage in 'the use of familiar words and images, and of familiar techniques in contexts whose effect is to displace, expand, or change their preconceived, hegemonically accepted meanings'. It is this subversive appropriation of the familiar and typical (which include acts of looking, gesture, dress) in order to displace that forms the critical grounding of Oh's work.

Oh began her project by capturing close-up portraits of the women, sometimes singly, sometimes in groups of two or three, but came to feel these portraits did not reveal anything of her subjects' lives or their stories. If anything, these close-up portraits heightened their status as enigmas. As observed by Mary Anne Doane (2003:61), woman as image connotes 'an indecipherable language, a signifying system which denies its own function by failing to signify anything to the uninitiated, to those who do not hold the key. [She] harbors a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness'. Laura Mulvey (1997:442) has similarly argued that woman as image connotes a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' intensified by the close up, which splits spectatorship (referring specifically to what feminist film theory understands to be a positional relationship established by the text) into desiring subjects on the one hand, and desired objects on the other. Oh's decision to abandon the close-up might have been prudent, given the risk of reproducing the hierarchical relationship that defines the looker and the looked at. In 2017, I presented a paper on Oh's work at the Australian National University. Not surprisingly, a member in the audience expressed his discomfort with the images, particularly of the close-ups, for reasons cited by Mulvey and Doane. How does an artist get around this double-bind of being both progressive and co-opted; how does one 're-create without recirculating domination' (Trinh 1990:329)? The strategy, for Trinh (1990:329), is to create 'works-in-progress',

understood not as a work 'awaiting a better, more perfect stage of realization'; rather 'works-in-progress' serve as 'doors opening onto other closures and function as ongoing passages to an elsewhere (-within-here) ... a way of letting the work go rather than sealing it off'. A degree of reflexivity on the parts of the artist and the work is thus necessary, and the issue becomes one of oscillating between the assumed truth revealed by the subjects of the photograph (the 'deepest interiority', 'the real world'), and the lie (Trinh 1990:328): the form, the way one tells, the *telling*. Truth, in this case, must give way to the lie; the story *told* must give way to the *telling*.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Oh, Soon-Hwa, *Daydream*, 2009. Archival inkjet print. 107 x 80cm. Courtesy of the Artist.



FIGURE **Nº 4**



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Oh, Soon-Hwa, *Three friends in a café*, 2009. Archival inkjet print. 147 x 80cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

I initially questioned Oh's decision to abandon the close-up for photographs designed to tell a story, as the latter runs the risk of reproducing a form of visual colonisation. This is especially so since the female subject is placed in relation to her "native" environment, moreover, one chosen by the photographer in a seeming attempt to access some sort of truth interior to the subject. Oh appeared to be playing the role of saviour come to "redeem" the subject, who in being 'summoned to signify the real world' functions as the vehicle by which an audience would overcome its own limitations through its encounter with 'the sanctified real' (Trinh 1991:37). As outlined by Trinh above, the way "they" are known to us, is precisely how "we" come to know ourselves. There is also the added consideration that while the close-up portraits say nothing about the lives of these women, the invitation (almost a compulsion on the part of the viewer) to read the image is preferable to already closing off possible meanings in placing the subject in a set narrative chosen by the photographer.

Despite Oh's own reservations about the close-ups, I venture to argue that her close-up portraits are in fact quite subversive of the controlling male gaze, and certainly self-reflexive in their treatment of acts of looking. The women in *Daydream* and *Three friends in a café* portray what Pollock (2003:174), in her analysis of Gabriel Rossetti's portraits of women, refers to as being a combination of both '*physical* loveliness and a remote *look*' (original emphasis). In her analysis, Pollock (2003:185) focuses on the 'almost blank' look of Rossetti's women, a 'remote gaze' she reads as a signifier of

melancholy capable of generating loss in the viewer; '[h]owever desirable, the figure is both lost and an embodiment of melancholy resulting from loss, a kind of mourning. The image is played across by conflicting possibilities of pleasure, fear and loss' (Pollock 2003:178). This certainly seems to be the case with *Daydream* (Figure 3) where the young woman, lying on her side, her right arm stiffly extended backwards, appears quite dead. While Edgar Allan Poe might have thought the death of the beloved to have been the most poetical topic in the world, we know too that dead women, especially dead beloved women, were often objects of anxiety.

Situating Rossetti's work in the literary context of the pre-Raphaelite movement, Pollock draws attention to the centrality of eye imagery in the lover's discourse, wherein the look of the female beloved at her male suitor functions as a call to love, and where acts of looking function as an articulation of desire, a point relevant to Oh's photographs. Framed within this context of the look of/in love, the blank and remote gazes of the young women serve less as an invitation to courtship than an invitation to loss, much like the siren's song. An image such as *Three friends in a café* (Figure 4) likewise resists a possessive male look that might afford the viewer pleasure. The photograph presents us with three images or 'face-signs' – a term Pollock (2003:184) uses to suggest that what we see are in fact not faces but signs or gestures that perform – a face turned away, eyes downcast, appearing to offer itself for our surveillance; a face poised to look directly at the camera, but whose gaze seems to avoid ours (the remote look); and finally a third face, softly blurred and off focus, whose look appears to hold ours in its gaze. Because the photograph captures only their heads and positions the bodies of the women in a way that obscures



FIGURE N° 5



Oh, Soon-Hwa, *Leaving Home*, 2009. Archival inkjet print. 200 x 100cm. Courtesy of the Artist.



the boundaries separating them, one is reminded of the multi-headed monsters in Greek mythology – Scylla, Chimera or Cerberus – and the fear and anxiety they incited in the men who encountered them.

Of Oh's landscape photographs, the ones that stand out are those created using stitching. Half the photographs in the series are stitched photographs, a technique that merges several photographs to form a unique piece, with the aim of providing a wider view, both literally and figuratively, of the environment of the subject. Oh's decision to stitch her photographs was initially pragmatically motivated: she had wanted to capture these women in a wider view, but did not have a long lens with her at the time to enable her to do so without compromising the visibility of her subject. A short lens, or wide-angle lens, might have been used to produce a panoramic shot, but this would come at the cost of drastically reducing the size of the subject. Because of this, the decision was made to take three shots and stitch them together. It is through this technique of weaving different shots together, much like weaving different parts of a story together, that Oh effects the displacement Trinh sees as necessary for an artist to challenge and undo hegemonic discourse. By means of stitching, Oh could begin to play with the composition of her photographs, to insert her story into history. *Leaving home* (Figure 5) tells a tale, through stitching, of flow and movement that not only alludes to the leave-taking of the migrant female subject, but also the systemic challenges faced by those left behind. In the photograph, a fruit seller in the foreground and a young woman donning a pink western formal dress in the middle ground of the photograph, appear to be exchanging looks. A group of men look on in the background. The girl in pink, who will soon leave Vietnam in pursuit of marriage elsewhere, is the focus of everyone's gaze, including that of the viewer. The fruit seller speaks of the life she will leave behind, but also, rather ironically and poignantly, of the life in agriculture she will look forward to in her adopted country.

The men in the background stand as a reminder of systemic poverty in rural Vietnam, which factors largely in the decision to marry abroad, one that raises other challenges in the home communities: marriage migration has meant a shortage of women for marriageable local Vietnamese men. Unlike their Korean counterparts, these young men, who are largely poor and uneducated, remain single for most of their lives. One might even say that these men, who visually seem to recede into the background of the photograph and the narrative, occupy a position of subalternity, who, in being left behind, become part of the rural male poverty cycle, where poverty is defined both economically and socially. Significant too is the poster cautioning against HIV looming ominously over the men. Sexually transmitted diseases are commonly contracted by young men who visit sex workers in the absence of women with whom they might have formed intimate relations. This photograph weaves a

powerful story of flow; flow of the migratory female subject leaving one place for another, in the pursuit of a better life and flow of money and goods that result from marriages under more prosperous circumstances. Their stories of movement do not, however, stop here but are, like Trinh's works-in-progress, 'doors opening to other closures' and 'ongoing passages to elsewhere' (Trinh 1990:329). They seep into the lives of those left behind, and those who have come before. We cannot forget the narratives of mobility of Korean women in search of better opportunities elsewhere, opening doors for Vietnamese women searching for the same thing. Although movement and mobility are usually associated with the male subject, in the case of Vietnam and many other South East Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, these characterise the lives of many young women who travel out of their home countries to seek better paying work. This role reversal is highlighted in the contrast between the motion-blurred image of the man on a bicycle whizzing by, and the sharp focus of the woman in pink.



FIGURE N° 6



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Oh, Soon-Hwa, *Children on a tree*, 2009. Archival Inkjet print. 275 x 80cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

*Children on a tree* (Figure 6) likewise employs stitching to tell a story, the *telling* (or the lie) exposed in the way the composition deliberately disobeys the rules of scale that define relationships between objects in a photograph, here between that of a young woman in a yellow western formal evening dress and a much younger girl in pink slacks and a blouse. At first glance, the young woman in yellow appears to be the focus of the photograph; yet, the girl in pink seems in competition for this focus. The spectator's gaze is drawn to both female subjects and oscillates between them. The image is suggestive of both 1) a mirroring and 2) a dialectical tension between the two female subjects. Over the course of her conversations with children she came across while in Tan Loc, Oh discovered that many young girls harboured aspirations of one day becoming migrant brides. This was a career path they felt was open to



them, a path that earned the support and encouragement of family members, and one where they felt success was possible. *Children on a tree* is, in a way, a self-reflexive piece about looking. The two types of looking identified by psycho-analysis: voyeuristic scopophilia and narcissistic identification. The latter is conventionally associated with women and, according to Mulvey (1997:441), entails a becoming, motivated by a desire to become the object one looks at. In this case, the looker (the young girls of the community) desires to become the image that is looked at (the migrant bride these girls hope to be one day).

This notion of a becoming is further accentuated by the way in which both figures are almost the same size. This narcissistic look, which entails a becoming, displaces the controlling gaze of the voyeuristic look so that, while a spectator is placed in a position to survey both the woman in yellow and the girl in pink, turning both into objects that can be possessed, neither one of these female subjects are reducible to object status. The narcissistic look is indicative of a subjective, autonomous desire on the part of the young girl in pink (and no doubt at one time the young woman in yellow), to *become*; precisely to *transcend* her present circumstances, and to claim her position as an agent of change. As agents of change, these women assert their difference from 'women in the past' who 'did not have the right to choose', that is women who were married off by their families to settle debt (Kim 2015:34). As modern women, they have the power to choose their own paths in life, including the path of marriage migration. This is further supported by what is perhaps the most arresting feature of the entire photo essay, namely the choice of the western formal dress worn by the women.

In the Korean advertisements, the women are dressed in traditional Vietnamese dress, in a push to represent the Vietnamese women as "authentically" as possible. As noted previously, these stereotypes serve to fix the female subject's identity, in addition to being suggestive of the Vietnamese woman as exotic fantasy. I suggested too that these women then come to embody a feminised Vietnam to be colonised by a stronger, more powerful, masculine and patriarchal Korea. The choice not to dress in traditional Vietnamese dress can be read as a choice to not be co-opted into this fantasy of the exotic other. According to Oh, the young women had picked their dresses out of a bridal dress rental shop. The choice of dress also places them in contrast with the other subjects in the photographs, like the fruit seller and the children that frame them. These brightly coloured frocks, ruffled and frilled, held up by thin straps, signify femininity; precisely femininity as performance, as masquerade. Doane (2003:66) argues that in flaunting femininity, the masquerade suggests that 'womanliness is a mask that can be worn or removed'.

As a strategy that resists patriarchal positioning, the masquerade destabilises the image by exposing the ways in which the habitual meanings and values we attach to femininity are not natural, but culturally constructed. This is seen in the way the female subject in the western dress seems displaced from the rest of her environment, but also in the way she seems equally displaced from the dress. No effort has been made to dress up the rest of her person (hair, make up, shoes), which widens the distance between the subject and her performance of femininity. One must, however, attend to the illusory nature of the women's perceived right to choose. There is a dialectical tension that belies the apparent agency the young girl in pink (and again the young woman in yellow before her) has in choosing to embark on this career path. This tension lies in the fact that while these young girls view marriage migration as a career path they choose, they have little choice given the lack of more desirable alternatives. As Hyun Mee Kim (2015:34) notes, 'their material conditions sometimes go against their modern sensibility based on gender equality. They have difficulty expressing the contradiction between their strong sense of equality and the longing for their husband's remittances as economically dependent wives'. If the choice to pick a western dress is symbolic of their freedom to choose, then the fact that the dresses are only borrowed points again towards the illusory nature of this freedom.



FIGURE **Nº 7**



Oh, Soon-Hwa, *Two girls on a bridge*, 2009. Archival inkjet print. 130 x 80cm. Courtesy of the Artist.



FIGURE **Nº 8**



Oh, Soon-Hwa, *Two girls on a river bank*, 2009. Archival inject print. 130 x 80cm. Courtesy of the Artist.

*Two girls on a bridge* (Figure 7) and *Two girls on a river bank* (Figure 8) are further examples of a distance created between femininity (signified by the dresses) and the subject, as well as a distance created between the woman and her “natural” environment, precisely because she, in her western dress, does not belong. Oh also appropriates a composition similar to the one we see in the first Korean advertisement – young women gathered in a group, seemingly oblivious to the voyeurism of the viewer. The poses adopted by the two women in each of Oh’s photographs mimics the pose of the women we see in the Korean advertisement. In the Korean advertisement, the women represent a monolithic exotic type, generalised in their homo-genised and romanticised difference from the spectator. Both the Korean advertisement and Oh’s photographs thus situate the spectator at a distance from the female subjects. The difference is that while in the Korean advertisement distance and exclusion work to enhance the voyeuristic pleasure of the looker, in Oh’s photographs distance and exclusion work against a form of looking that simply reduces the female subjects to objects for erotic contemplation. In Oh’s photographs, the girls appear to be deep in a conversation from which the spectator is excluded. Oh revealed that Vietnamese girls in the community would sometimes meet and speak amongst themselves of covert operations to set up bride viewings and arrangements to meet with potential husbands. Despite marriage negotiations with foreigners having been declared illegal in Vietnam, the girls would often have to speak in conspiratorial tones whenever word of such clandestine meetings got

around. The fact that these young women are engaged in conversation that deliberately excludes the viewer repositions the women as agents of change and autonomous subjects of desire. Unlike the second Korean advertisement, where the natural landscape is used to enhance the desirability of the women, here nature conspires to conceal the girls from both the viewer and the authorities as they make secret plans to meet their potential husbands.

Setting Oh's work against the state-mediated public discourse in Korea on Vietnamese foreign brides, we see that the interplay of different texts and contexts in Oh's work produces a complex set of meanings that make it impossible to construct a single, monolithic subject that is the foreign female migrant subject. Oh's photo-graphs are certainly interrogative in the way they attempt to insert her story into history. Furthermore, the self-reflexivity of some of the images also suggests that Oh is aware of how her own positioning in relation to the women she photographs impacts the way she tells their stories. Her photographs highlight the ways in which systems of representation have the effect of rendering bodies invisible, and the subversive ways in which visibility might be reclaimed and stories re-told in ways that lead to doors and passages opening up to other stories and narratives, past and present.

## Notes

1. This is Adrienne Rich's term for looking back at old texts with renewed vision.
2. A description on the *Lonely Planet* (2021) website reads, '[t]owering limestone pillars and tiny islets topped by forest rise from the emerald waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. Designated a World Heritage site in 1994, Halong Bay's spectacular scatter of islands, dotted with wind- and wave-eroded grottoes, is a vision of ethereal beauty and, unsurprisingly, northern Vietnam's number one tourism hub'.

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