The Fringes of Conjugality

On fantasies, tactics and representations of

Sino-Vietnamese encounters in borderlands

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Abstract

This thesis discusses changes in conjugalility in China through the lens of cross-border marriages between Vietnamese women and Chinese men in China’s Guangxi and Yunnan provinces. It draws on over fifty mixed couples’ narratives and conversations with numerous residents of borderlands localities in which such alliances occur. They were collected during nine months of fieldwork, conducted between 2006 and 2010, in four twin cities of the Sino-Vietnamese border and some neighbouring villages.

Against a backdrop of ongoing population movement between the two countries since the re-opening of their border and the development of their economic exchanges, cross-border marriages have become more critical in the local social landscape and constitute a challenge to contemporary migration policies. Many observers relate these marriages to human trafficking, ignoring intimate yearnings and the complex structure of human relationships in these borderlands. They also address these alliances through the lens of Chinese and Vietnamese post-reform era upheavals, i.e. as a direct consequence of structural dynamics such as demographic imbalance or economic migration.

This thesis, grounded in people’s experiences and perceptions, chooses a different perspective. It questions the determinism of state policies and the reductive view of human trafficking by arguing that the phenomenon of cross-border marriage is ultimately embedded in the articulation of various social issues that have recently emerged in both China and Vietnam. Competition over wealth amongst the Chinese population and internal migrations have increased social inequality. In the meantime, commodification of social relationships, and changes in conjugalility values and expectations have altered gender positions. These various factors have excluded some individuals from the marriage market and relegate them to the fringes of both societies. To some extent, such a new social context has driven them to develop survival strategies, and consequently to adjust their marital practices in order to fit their challenging environment. The thesis shows how contemporary social values shared by mixed couples’ hosting communities and revealed in a stereotyping social discourse on Otherness eventually lead many of involved individuals to face new challenges and stigmatisation once married, regardless of the circumstances within which they initially met.
The key argument of this thesis is that cross-border marriages in this region are practiced as an alternative pattern to normative conjugality that intend to serve as a springboard for excluded people who pursue social recognition. This objective is rarely achieved for new forms of stigmatization emerge from this marriage pattern. This thesis contributes to existing scholarship on cross-border marriages by highlighting how social marginality may impact the development of alternative patterns of conjugality, particularly in spaces that are perceived as chaotic.
Samenvatting


Sinds de heropening van de Chinees-Vietnamese grens en de ontwikkeling van het economische verkeer tussen deze twee landen is er ook een constante stroom van bevolkingsverkeer tussen de twee landen op gang gekomen. Chinees-Vietnamese huwelijks allianties zijn belangrijker geworden binnen lokale sociale landschappen en vormen een uitdaging voor het hedendaagse migratie beleid.


Op basis van de ervaringen en percepties van mensen in deze gebieden kiest dit proefschrift voor een ander perspectief. Het stelt het determinisme van het staatsbeleid en het versimpelde beeld van dit soort huwelijken als een vorm van mensenhandel ter discussie. Het beargumenteert dat het fenomeen van grensoverschrijdende huwelijken verklaard moet worden vanuit de recente sociale problemen in zowel China als

Dit onderzoek laat zien hoe hedendaagse sociale waarden van de gastgemeentes van de gemengde stellen in stereotype sociale vertogen over “anders zijn” er uiteindelijk toe leidden dat veel van de betrokken individuen in deze huwelijken opnieuw allerlei moeilijkheden en stigma ervaren onafhankelijk van de manier waarop ze elkaar hebben ontmoet.

Het centrale argument van dit proefschrift is dat grensoverschrijdende huwelijken in deze regio gezien worden als een alternatief voor de gangbare huwelijks normen en als een uitweg voor gemarginaliseerde mensen die sociale erkenning zoeken. Dit doel wordt zelden gehaald omdat deze huwelijken nieuwe vormen van stigma oproepen. Dit proefschrift draagt bij aan de bestaande kennis over grensoverschrijdende huwelijken door het belichten van de invloed van sociale marginaliteit op de ontwikkeling van alternatieve patronen van het huwelijk.
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Petite sœur de mes nuits
Ça m’a manqué tout ça
Quand tu sauvas la face à bien d’autres que moi
Sache que je n’oublie rien
Mais qu’on efface à ton étoile
A ton étoile.¹

Whatever English language abilities I have are self-taught, based on a French high-school level knowledge. It was years of life abroad, communication with native English-speaking friends, familiarity with Anglo-Saxon cultural products and a variety of work experiences that have slowly provided me with enough skills to consider using English as a tool for study. Still, using English to engage in academic research, especially writing a PhD dissertation, represented a challenge. Five years of academic reading and scholarly exchanges have eventually allowed me to reach a level of expression closer to academic standards. It has sometimes been painful, but it has become my working language in a way I now sincerely enjoy.² Nevertheless, this present dissertation would not have been the same without the patient and tremendous proofreading work of devoted colleagues and friends throughout the writing process and especially at the last stage of its production. The result, I am certain, will stand as a personal reference piece for future writing, and I am endlessly grateful to Estelle Dryland, Lisa Wynn, Victoria Loblay, Sheree Fisher, Paul Mason and Merriden Varrall for their generous help and support.

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² I remember in 2003 feeling terrified when the Program Officer with whom I was starting to work at the Beijing UNESCO office asked me to write an entire project proposal on Chinese migrants’ children schooling in ‘proper’ English, and how thankful I was for my Québécois colleague whose academic English was part of her college education: that was a milestone experience in my language training.
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This project would not have been possible without the trust of my informants
to whom I was – and perhaps remain, for some – a complete stranger. The months that
I spent among them certainly challenged a lot of my assumptions about two countries
I thought I was becoming familiar with. These men and women’s support and
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process. I especially owe many precious moments along the years to my friends Dung
from Hanoi, Li in Dongxing, and Tam in Hekou.

The achievement of this project has been a long and tiring process. Like the
people on whom this project focuses, during the five years of research to complete
this work I have experienced long distance migrations that brought me back and forth
to France, China, Vietnam, Australia and the Netherlands. These constant relocations
meant more than just flying from one airport to another. Each time, they implied the
search for a place to live, a school to enrol my son, a residence permit to obtain for
my husband, and endless paperwork and bureaucratic struggles that were not only
time-consuming but also stressful, but that also gave me, to a certain extent, an
empirical insight into what my informants experienced in their own life contexts and
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… And I almost forgot the material credits to:

My faithful MacBook that contains my ideas, library and memories of all kinds.

Dark 90% chocolate to which I have become addicted, which helped to channel tension and enhance concentration, and without which I would have not achieved in times this project (seriously) … and (why not?) the lovely ladybirds that spring in Burgundy brought into my room and wandered on my desk all day long to wish me luck.
Introduction

“Serendipity and anthropology are inextricably linked, because culture itself is an unending serendipitous process” (Pieke 2000: 148, original emphasis)

Crossing borders

My interest in China was triggered by the international coverage of the 1989 democracy movement, the Tian’anmen Square massacre, and a few weeks later by life-changing encounters with a Chinese anthropologist who fled to France after his involvement. These moments sparked my interest in Chinese independent thought and in communities on the fringes of the country, whether political, social or cultural. Five years later I had an undergraduate degree of Chinese Studies and I travelled for the first time to China to study at Shandong University in Jinan. In December that year, during the semester’s winter break, I first crossed the Sino-Vietnamese border. With a friend, I took buses all the way from Guangzhou (Canton) to Dongxing, at the very end of the eastern part of Guangxi province. Dongxing did not leave me any impression but the crossing of its bridge over the Beilun River that took us to the small Vietnamese town of Móng Cái did. It was a busy space where no one would consider to wander long but I took the time to stop and observe what was going on under the bridge: there were a few long and narrow boats still seen today, filled with cages where dozens of captured dogs awaited quietly their transfer from one bank to the other. Trucks were parked on the bank and young men were hurrying to load them with their lively freight. Nothing really proved that this was smuggling but I had a strong feeling that selling live animals under the bridge was not exactly part of the regular border trade. At that time, Móng Cái was nothing but a little Vietnamese town set along the river bank, with countless little wooden houses and mud paths leading to
small food-stalls where we ended for a cup of tea and a bowl of rice noodles. That
teight, we were invited to stay in the back of a little restaurant by a charming woman
who warmly took care of us, giving us her bed to share – a wood bed only covered by
a bamboo mat. She helped me with my laundry and even assisted me during a shower
by pouring water on me from her big sandstone jar with a plastic bowl. I cannot recall
any of the conversations we might have tried to have with her, I do however
remember her generosity, hospitality and large smiles in a time when it was forbidden
to host a foreigner in one’s home.

A month later, my friend and I were crossed the border on our way back from
Hmong villages in Lào Cai’s mountains. This time, we crossed at the Lào Cai gate,
next to Yunnan province in China, in the north-western part of Vietnam. We arrived
late in the evening from Hanoi and had to wait until the morning to proceed with the
border formalities. Unable to find a suitable place to stay, having been ripped off by
the owners of the only guesthouses in town, we wandered hopelessly at the bus station
while the locals looked on. Night fell quickly and we decided to spend the night at the
market and see what happened there. There we found an empty space on the floor
between closed shops and covered stalls, spread out a plastic cover that we had been
carrying to protect our bags from the rain and managed to create a sort of bed with our
sleeping bags. The few sellers who slept on the top of their stalls at night and drivers
who did the same in their pedicabs asked why we would do such a foolish thing.
Apart from the usual curiosity, they warned us that the market was a dangerous place
at night, and that we were likely going to be robbed. They also warned us of the dirt,
possible rain, rats and cockroaches that own the market at night. We did not speak
Vietnamese well enough to understand to what extent what we planed was a risky
adventure though. We were determined and found this challenging enough to stay and
observe as much as we could. The market was not quiet even during the night and movements of people and goods kept going on all night long. We slept in turns and made it through dawn without incident. An hour later we crossed the old bridge over the Red River, following the narrow path along the railway, up to Hekou and the rest of China.

Years of Chinese life later, I trailed after my memories, crossing borders and visiting in the same order the small cities of Dongxing, Móng Cái and then Lào Cai and Hekou. And so did I, again, several times the following years. I never managed to connect the initial images of my memories to the new landscapes. Neither the wooden houses of Móng Cái nor this particular market in Lào Cai exist anymore. At least I was not able to locate them when I returned there. Concrete and sometimes impressive buildings have replaced them, border trade has reached another scale, and the bridges that officially link the two countries changed as well. No evidence of what these places looked like fifteen years ago remained but I felt there was definitely an invisible identity of these places that needed to be explored.

Where are the victims?

In 2005, I worked several months in Phnom Penh, building a research library on human trafficking in Southeast Asia in the research unit of a Non-Governmental Organization. I started to relate some documents I was reading with a few intriguing stories heard during my last journey in Vietnam. In remote little towns, casual acquaintances mentioned local Vietnamese young women who suddenly went to China or Taiwan to get married. In early summer 2006, determined to question the significance of marriages across Chinese borders, and their possible link with human
trade, I went in Hekou, the first of the four border twin-cities on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier I had decided to visit, in order to conduct preliminary research on the phenomenon of women trade for the specific purpose of marriage. I knew it would not be easy to find informants but I was confident that many cases existed in the area, and that patience would reward me with enough data to sketch a realistic picture. My notebook was wide open to collect life-stories, likely of the dramatic kind. I interrogated my first contact there:

— I heard there was a lot of mixed couples in this border, is that true?

— Yes, a lot! I know a few of them.

— Could you tell me what you know about coerced marriage in the area?

— What coerced marriages? Do you mean Vietnamese women? You’re wasting your time, they won’t talk to you!

— Why? Is it too painful or risky for them to talk?

— No, but they will make up stories for you to cry, most of these women are cheaters.

The answer confused me. I tried with another person without meeting much enthusiasm or concern, and then I insisted with a third one. But I received similar dubious comments. Day after day, I realized that the reality might not be as I expected it to be. If in local Chinese residents’ eyes, Vietnamese women were not the victims I was told they would be, who were they? Why did nobody seem to really care about them?
This is how, from an original research question framed around coerced marriages involving ‘victims,’ ‘perpetrators’ and ‘traffickers’, contested categories I became familiar with through previous readings I had been through during my pre-fieldwork literature review (Doezema 2002; Lyons 1999; Molland 2011), I gradually switched to a new approach, guided by my informants’ voices on the matter. These various voices have conducted me to abandon institutionalized stereotypes, and to apprehend a distinct social reality through, unexpectedly and almost ironically, another set of representations.

The in-betweens of research on cross-border marriages

Engaging with research on a cross-border social phenomenon has inevitably put me in a delicate intellectual position, reflecting the in-between position my informants often cope with on a more pragmatic level. Situated between well-known scholarship and unexplored perspectives, I have constantly tried to find the right balance between disciplines as well. Addressing a social phenomenon that involves both Vietnamese and Chinese people imposed to step equally in Chinese Studies and in Vietnamese Studies in an attempt to set up complementary perspectives. But it also meant positioning myself as a researcher between area studies and social anthropology, as well as finding my way between various field such as demography, migration, gender, and family studies. Eventually, along my own path of research on marginalized groups, I had to become familiar with a new borderline population, just after having focused years on the sub-culture of Chinese rock-musicians (Grillot 2001), child prostitution (Grillot 2005), and before heading towards future research on Chinese itinerant bee-keepers. This was a difficult although fascinating task.
Balancing between all these disciplines and areas of research was even more challenging since the subject of my research and its related topics developed faster than the writing of the findings. As I am writing the last sentences of this thesis, I realize how typical it is of Chinese studies today, to be updated but already outdated, needed but already lacking. This is one fascinating aspect of Chinese Studies. Things are changing so fast that unexpected upheavals regularly come to light in every corner of Chinese society, requiring our appreciation of these moving realities to constant re-interpretation and new grounds. Almost every month throughout the last five years, new publications have emerged on one or more topics to which I refer in this study, hence constantly challenging the relevance of my conclusions.

But despite a local situation that also rapidly evolves, this research still stands between early academic works that examined Sino-Vietnamese cross-border marriages without focusing on the Mainland border or without mentioning their sociological aspects on one hand, and media reports describing the emerging trends in Mainland Chinese social landscapes, namely Sino-Vietnamese marriage arranged by broker agencies. Therefore, my approach intends to fill an existing gap in the scholarship, and to initiate a closer attention on these alliances by pushing further the general assumptions of cross-border marriages phenomenon and examining closer its recent manifestation.

**Core ideas**

My approach to cross-border marriages has originally drawn inspiration from the dichotomies found in various sources: academic literature, activist agenda, journalistic investigations, local beliefs and practices, and preliminary fieldwork
findings that gradually revealed an existing and cultivated misunderstanding on certain forms of border relationships. Dichotomies exist at several levels, though they start in portraying the marriage protagonists. A widely spread picture portrays Vietnamese women as victims needing rescue, deceiving women or regular migrants building their economic life along with her personal life. Facing them are disadvantaged peasants in need, cruel Chinese husbands, pragmatic businessmen or pitiful cheated partner. And the voices of women (or the voice given to women) rarely meet the voices of men (or their silence), which add the confusion on each party’s role. When it comes to identifying the forms of the phenomenon, one can only choose between data on proper international marriage involving a bureaucratic procedure and rural forced marriage. Contextualizing these marriage is also an issue: Are they part of an ongoing historical trend or are they an emerging phenomenon? To elucidate the question, one may find responding elements in demographical imbalance and economic disparities that motivates marriage migration, including international marriages. But if one also wonders about the impact of cultural compatibility, personal strategy and communities’ role, answers are uneven. In the past decade, even though some works on either the ‘human trafficking’ phenomenon at the border (Wang 2005; Linh 2005; ActionAid International Vietnam 2005; Molland 2010; Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre 2011), including deception for marriage (Anh 2003; Sun & Li 2006), or local romance and pragmatic relationships (Chan 2005a, Zhou 2002, Luo & Long 2008) were published, few of them have effectively resolved the above dichotomies. Rare were the attempts to bring together the two groups of people and to analyse what they might have in common despite differences grounded on the socioeconomic context that underlie their migration.
My purpose here is to fill this gap and to contribute to addressing a more perceptive picture of a phenomenon that has often been studied in frameworks that did not reflect its entire complexity. Cross-border marriages at the Sino-Vietnamese frontiers are not necessarily the result of human trafficking, are not necessarily similar to other international marriages involving either Vietnamese or Chinese singles, are not necessarily the consequences of demography imbalance and economic dichotomy (Duong, Bélanger & Hong 2007), hence poverty, and are not even necessarily known as ‘marriage’ at the local level. Once this distinction is assessed, I will identify explanations of mixed alliances that were underestimated, to show what makes them emerge as the results of social changes in both countries, and to stress the strategies of certain fringes of their respective populations revealed by these marriages. The final picture of such unions and their various perspectives will challenge the widely held view that contemporary cross-border marriages on the Sino-Vietnamese border mainly stem from poverty and demographic crisis.

What facts are we talking about?

The majority of the Vietnamese women I have met in Chinese borderlands arrived in China during the 1990s and the 2000s, though a minority arrived earlier. In the 1990s, Vietnamese women came and tended to stay in borderlands, Yunnan, Guangxi and even Guangdong provinces, while later, another generation of Vietnamese women slowly immigrated further up to inner China. Some of these women have moved back and forth over the borders before and after they settled with a husband in China. Chinese men can be divided into two main groups: the local men
who were already living in these borderlands before the frontier re-opened in 1991, and the migrants who came by for a period, and stayed, or left with a new wife.

Before even considering the precise circumstances under which these individuals actually met, there are different ways to approach these marriages. One can see them as a historical phenomenon occurring for decades, even centuries in border areas without attracting much attention until recently with the new qualification, ‘human trafficking,’ and an agenda spearheaded by international agencies brought them to light. One can see them as a sign of border control dysfunction that emphasises the illegality of many of these marriages: the women involved are illegal migrants, their alliances are not registered and their offspring become non-citizens. Simultaneously, one can also consider them as a political issue that preoccupies policy makers and local communities: illegal migration jeopardises the stability of Chinese and Vietnamese border areas in countries that signed cooperation agreements and has implemented serious immigration/emigration policies. Consequently, one can think of these marriages as a legal case study, and focus on the question related to integration of mixed couples and families into China, and to Vietnamese policies on international marriages. But one can also regard them as a rather recent popular local response to some crucial contemporary social issues in both China and Vietnam, and analyse the emergence of a new frame of interpretation. Finally, one could focus on the emotion, psychology, life commitment and personal strategy that these alliances are based on, whatever their articulation/interpretation at the macro level might be, and see them as a distinguishing and particular aspect of matrimony/conjugality in Asian societies on the move. Although I will review most of these different perspectives in the course of this work, I will predominantly engage with the two last approaches as these perspectives have been largely neglected by the
Theoretical framework

My intention is not to engage with the debate on human trafficking but to step away from it, returning to actors and individuals involved in cross-border relationships, and analyse the phenomenon through their own lenses. Rather than contributing to an already existing large body of academic literature on mail-order brides, human trafficking or international migration for marriage in Asia, in which Vietnamese women occupy a rather privileged position among researched target groups, I would like to position this work within two fields of scholarship. The first one is kinship, understood as “an active process of becoming that is always situated within wider, historical-political, economic and sociocultural relations – in other words, a metamorphosis” (Brandtstädter & Santos, 2009: 10, emphasis added). Following the examples of the essays published in Brandtstädter and Santos’ 2009 volume on Chinese kinship, my intention is also to explore one aspect of Chinese kinship “through a focus on … what has been ‘traditionally’ perceived as marginal in the ‘official’ kinship ideologies: women, children, non-standard families and same-sex relations, or class, violence and work” (Brandtstädter & Santos 2009: 10-11). The recent upheavals that have changed the face of Chinese and Vietnamese societies engaged into modernity being a source of kinship transformations, my work will be grounded into scholarship on social and identity construction in this region, notably within the framework of migration. Secondly, I wish to situate this study in the field...
of liminality/marginality versus normality, both in a concrete and a symbolic sense. I will explore how borderlands represent a liminal space that transgress rules and provide a social space to marginal groups, and I will demonstrate how the position of subalterns or stigmatised individuals on whom this research focuses, leads them to adopt non-conventional marriage patterns as a tactic of the marginalized. This will illustrate, in the words of Coutin, how “borders between existence and nonexistence nonetheless remain fuzzy and permeable” (Coutin 2003: 186).

Field, sources, methods and implications

Although my focus concerns marriage, I have never witnessed any wedding celebration and will not base my analysis on accounts of ceremonies. Marriage here is understood as the relationship shaped by conjugal experience rather than the institution, and thus encompasses not only formalised unions but also what in other contexts might be labelled ‘common law’ marriages. Indeed, the various meanings of marriage for men and women will be the core of this dissertation. In order to capture the micro/local perspective on cross-border marriages in Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, this thesis will confront two corpuses of narratives: life-stories of couples and individuals, and the accounts of their surrounding communities.

By exploring these different points of views I aim to re-establish a balance between what is believed to be and what is actually practiced and experienced. By listening to local voices, this work intends to keep some distance from the gender paradigm, the human trafficking concept, or the economic determinism interpretation, and it will provide new insights such as social representations, marital expectations, individual stigma and marginalisation on cross-border marriages.
Besides extensive fieldwork data, my analysis relies heavily on Western academic publications that sketch the general framework within which this phenomenon is inscribed, and specific studies that support my findings. This includes the work of many Chinese and Vietnamese scholars published in English. I also consulted Chinese languages sources that directly relate to my research focus and provide additional data and perspectives. Media reports and non-academic literature also constituted relevant sources for this study.

On a pragmatic level, choosing to study a community scattered on two sides of a frontier represented another significant challenge. To reach the optimal conditions of objectivity during such fieldwork, the ethnographer should ideally observe what forms a given phenomenon takes in each borderland, master and take notes in two languages, interview an equivalent number of informants here and there, and make sure to spend enough time among each community to capture their specificities. But aside from some methodological issues that I will address in the first chapter of this thesis, an unavoidable reality prevented me from providing a comprehensive picture of cross-border marriages in two countries. The majority of Sino-Vietnamese mixed couples meet, live and work in China: women move towards men. Therefore, even though I managed to collect relevant data in Vietnam as well as China, my approach and the local perceptions translated here mostly stands on the Chinese side of the border. Being obviously bound to reflect women as men’s perspective in the matter however, I also made a point to collect life-stories and opinions within each sex group as fairly as possible.

Approximately fifty Sino-Vietnamese couples figure among my informants. When it was possible, I met husbands and wives separately, but sometimes I interviewed them together. In many cases, only one spouse was available or agreed to
talk to me. Hence, I did not collect complete data on each couple. Also missing are perspectives of family members such as children, parents and in-laws since many of the latter were living too far away to be interviewed. Work, school and family schedule as well as the mobility of these families did not always allow several meetings and a follow-up during the three years of my fieldwork was only available for some individuals or couples. Besides couples, I also talked to countless community members, whether related or not to the mixed couples, like neighbours, shop-keepers, business associates, friends, local personalities and casual acquaintances. The stories collected ranged from in-depth confidences to timid account of personal stories, mixed familial life, voluntary and non-voluntary marriages, temporary alliances or long-term relationship, happy or sad memories, ongoing relationships that highlight different moments of a life.

Fieldwork took place between June 2006 and September 2010, mainly concentrated in summer 2006 and in fall-winter 2008-2009. I spent an average of two to three weeks at a time in four border towns that I will describe in Chapter 2.

As an itinerant ethnographer travelling from town to town, often leaving my family behind in China, I gained a sense of the emotional context of such travel that led to a greater degree of connection with the people whose subjectivity I sought to understand. The initial experience of spending a night on Lào Cai’s market floor impressed me because it made me realized how a place like this could generate feelings of insecurity, whether or not they were justified. Years later, constant warning from my local acquaintances on both side of the border twin-cities, and evening sights of social activities on the banks of the frontier’s rivers, raised the awareness of local dangers. In a similar manner, being separated from my baby during long periods of fieldworks increased my sensitivity to the narratives of women often
separated from their own children, and whose life’s material and emotional precariouslyness was sometimes so difficult to articulate. Hence, fieldwork conditions provided an unexpected insight into the anxiety of some of the women I was going to meet and who, during the course of their complicated life, had been caught in a difficult and disturbing situation, without being able to rely on a responsible husband, a helpful mother or compassionate acquaintances to cope with challenging predicaments. This leads to the issue of the ethnographer’s position in certain circumstances, the unlikely distance with those whose feelings we ought to translate.

We cannot (nor would we want to, I think) deceive ourselves into believing that our presence leaves no trace, no impact on those on whose life we dare to intrude. We are, after all, human, and we can hardly help becoming involved in the lives of the people we have chosen to be our teachers … So although I reject as ‘unreasonable,’ perhaps, the monastic demand that ethnographers leave the sands on which they trod without a trace of their sandals, what may never be compromised are our personal accountability and answerability to the other (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 24).

During fieldwork, I was to a certain extent shaped by a psychologically vulnerable position due to frequent exposure to the emotional torments of my informants. Hence, out of empathy, I have sometimes overstepped the role of an observer and data collector by helping people to solve issues related to their vulnerable positions. For example, by upsetting a fragile person who stirred up old stories meant to remain in the past. Hence, the research findings will reflect the ambivalent position of the ethnographer in a field where emotions constitute a core material, i.e., an acknowledged sympathy for the plight of the silenced (Spencer & Davies 2010).

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¹ For instance, I committed myself in helping Tam (cf. Appendix 6) finding her biological father, a French-Moroccan soldier who left her 35 years earlier in Vietnam. The whole and complex process of this search has been one of the most moving human adventures of my fieldwork that I will elaborate in a forthcoming publication.
**Problematic and organization of the thesis**

This work aims to explore the way in which marginalized subjects create or recreate their own social space. This space is materialized by conjugal relationship interpreted as the site through which they can live out the daily life they yearned. Most specifically, in the particular context of two trade-related border societies in constant transformation, how do changing values and social environment affect local individual’s expectations in their private life and how do Vietnamese women and Chinese men on the margins act to fulfil ideals of conjugality, while searching for an alternative to conventional marital conditions?

This dissertation will be organized accordingly to the above problematic. After addressing the questions of methods (Chapter 1), each chapter will focus on one thematic according to the following framework. In a border setting already conditioned by historical background and defined by unconventional activities (Chapter 2), one can observe some specific marriage patterns that seem to translate into some remarkable social and kinship changes in Chinese and Vietnamese societies (Chapter 3). Therefore, these alliances become the site of fantasies, yearnings and pragmatic demands. However, due to the social representations to which these alliances are subjected (Chapter 4), the involved partners face degrees of stigmatization that prevent most of them from completely getting out of their original predicament. Indeed, the recent socioeconomic upheavals have lead to the emergence of an increasing number of ostracized individuals who adopt alternative forms of conjugality in order to obtain a recognized social position, resulting from of strategies that they use to cope with the remaining obstacles to reach normality (Chapter 5).
Chapter I

The ‘hows’ of a delicate approach

From the perspective[s] of the people who give or deny us access to the field in China, the facts of everyday life, no matter how trivial, therefore matter a great deal.

That normal life is such a powerful secret in China ought to make anthropology particularly dangerous. Anthropology, more than any other discipline, makes it its business to understand in detail what happens at the grass-roots level. That we do not meet more suspicion than we already do is probably because most people in China either do not know what anthropology is, or have an understanding of the discipline at odds with the self-perception of Western anthropologists. In China (as in many other parts of the world) anthropology either draws a blank, or conjures up images of colonial exploitation and the investigation of the physique or queer customs of primitives by members of a dominant group or culture (Pieke 2000: 132).

1 Dealing with Big Brother in China and Vietnam

My intention in this chapter is to reflect upon my fieldwork experience and to clarify through empirical examples the reasons why I opted to directly search for and contact those among the local population I intended to study, rather than proceed through the official channels requested by institutions and host countries to conduct research in China and Vietnam. As well, I explore the ethics of undertaking research in this way, and, in the process, draw out some recurring issues that many local and foreign ethnographers have likewise encountered at some point during their fieldwork in China and Vietnam, issues which have recently been summarised elsewhere (e.g., Heimer & Thøgersen 2006; Scott et al. 2006) but which appear even more salient when it comes to inquiry into a sensitive issue.

I initially set out the arguments developed in this chapter during the bureaucratic ethics application procedure at Macquarie University at the time I started to plan my overseas research. Before receiving approval of the manner in which I
intended to conduct my research several exchanges took place between members of Macquarie University’s Human Research Ethics Committee and myself regarding issues that the conditions of this project raised. After a long discussion, it was eventually accepted\footnote{I am very grateful to members of the Ethics Committee, who listened to and acknowledged my arguments and allowed me the relative freedom to deal with local issues relying on earlier practices.} that some adjustments and compromises to the formal way of approaching the research environment in the above two countries were, in my opinion, both necessary and inevitable.

During our exchanges, the main issue discussed concerned my official status during my research. I explained to the Committee that I had no intention of applying for research visas in both countries and that I would not insist upon obtaining institutional affiliation in the event that my informal personal request failed. This means that it was agreed, in accordance with normal procedure, that I would contact some relevant departments in the main social sciences institutions of the areas I intended to stay in and request assistance. But, in the possibility that I received no encouragement to pursue my project in collaboration with them, I would opt to conduct my research informally without any local supervision. This pragmatic decision was based both upon my previous experience and upon an assumption that not only would it save me time and trouble, but it would also benefit the quality of my data collection. In China, as well as in Vietnam, conducting academic research requires official affiliation with a local institution, a procedure ostensibly designed to help foreign researchers with logistical matters such as providing letters of invitation, obtaining ‘research visas’, acquiring recommendation letters for local contacts, obtaining permission to conduct interviews, and accessing internal documents. Proceeding through these official channels may be considered by some to be the
'proper way’ of approaching informants; that is, the host institution is in charge of supervising the researcher. And, while this procedure may prove very useful when the topic or field of research raises few, if any, sensitive issues, it can become very restrictive when one seeks direct and non-monitored interaction with the target population.

Given the sensitivity of my research subject, I knew that this would be a very difficult strategy to implement in China and Vietnam, i.e., that it would take time and could prove a frustrating experience even if ultimately successful. I was reluctant to consent to perceived impositions such as escorted research trips, a research assistant, the submission of questionnaire samples and research plans for approval, the disclosure of lists of interviewees and names of places to be visited, regular field reports to the host institutions and registration with local authorities that academic engagement of this type usually implies.

Several previous empirical examples made me hesitate. In 2006, prior to commencing this doctoral project, I spent a few months as a Research Fellow with the Institute of Research on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC) in Bangkok. During this time, I started to conduct preliminary investigations into some Sino-Vietnamese border towns. At the time, in an attempt to organise my research properly and hoping that research conditions had improved since my last experience in the area (1998-2000), I decided to contact a few scholars in Hanoi and Kunming. But, my position

1 I conducted my first fieldwork research in China in 1998-1999 in a Miao village (Xijiang, Guizhou province). Between 1999 and 2000, I undertook a second period of research, this time into a musicians’ community (Chengdu city, Sichuan province), for my Master’s degree in Ethnology (Nanterre University, France) and for an academic essay on underground Chinese artists, respectively (Grillot 2001). I remained institutionally independent during both periods of fieldwork.
as an independent researcher gave rise to some confusion and unease and I soon detected signs of discomfort among those whom I hoped to consider colleagues (both Chinese and Vietnamese scholars). From the replies that I received via phone calls, email exchanges and/or informal meetings, it became clear that to date no one had undertaken any specific research into cross-border marriages in Sino-Vietnamese border towns, that it was “difficult to advise any specialist to contact,” that “the border zone is not safe but rather chaotic,” that “locals will not talk to you,” that “human trafficking was not a front-line topic phenomenon,” that “research cannot be conducted without official permission,” and that “the topic is too sensitive.”

Participant observation was also problematic given that it implied spending a certain amount of time in the border area and required organised supervision. In sum, local academics – or those who spoke on their behalf – stressed the difficulty of my project and the challenges it would represent in a politicized context and scrutinised area. As I did not want to attract unwanted attention to my project, I did not insist upon others’ co-operation. I ended up conducting my investigation alone on the Chinese side of the border, and in the company of a friend from Hanoi on the Vietnamese side.

As Frank Pieke maintains:

\[E\]xplaining anthropology in terms that make sense to Chinese social scientists and officials is nevertheless essential to gain access to informants and field-sites. When doing this, one is often faced with suspicions born from the secrecy of everyday life. There is little one can do about this apart from stating one’s methods and objectives in very general terms. This suspicion is, after all, not a matter of some misunderstanding of what anthropologists are up to but, quite on the contrary, an acutely accurate understanding of our work. The problem is rather that what to us seems unexceptional comes across as subversive to gatekeepers steeped in the game of information hoarding (Pieke 2000: 132).

Herein lays an ethical issue that was not only of concern to the investigated countries but also to Macquarie University, which is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of all of its PhD candidates during their periods of overseas research. Not
only was I putting myself in the position of a researcher who, according to Chinese and Vietnamese regulations, conducted research informally (i.e., without informing the local authorities and without any referential local institution as recommended), but I was also disregarding the usual ethics requirements of Macquarie University. Adopting this approach meant that I risked being discovered conducting ‘illegal activities’ in my host countries:¹ I could be deported, fined or charged. I could also jeopardise the research projects of potential future colleagues in the area, something I was fully aware of.

However, by not revealing any official documentation explaining what my purpose really was, there was less likelihood of my informants – that is, people I looked upon as friends and from whom I never requested identification – becoming concerned. To the onlooker, they were simply friends having ‘chats’ with me. Conversely, choosing to identify, interview and focus upon informants under some form of supervision by an official assistant may have meant exposing others to unwanted scrutiny. Their names may have been disclosed and recorded and interested parties may have investigated them further after my departure, seeking to clarify their status according to the law. In other words, my official presence among them may have jeopardised the already precarious existences of some. This was indeed delicate to handle and required discussion with members of Macquarie University’s Ethics Committee.

I was preparing to study people, some of whom may have been in an illegal position regarding national and international laws. Being openly affiliated to

¹ It is illegal for foreigners to conduct research in China and Vietnam without first gaining official permission.
authorities or institutions could prove a hindrance to gaining future informants’ trust. This had the potential to prove especially difficult in Vietnam, for example, where informing is still part of the political culture and remains stark in the memories of those Chinese who experienced Maoism. Attempts to build intimate relationships with couples and households would only succeed if my activities remained outside of official surveillance. Certain words have the same effect upon people as voice-recorders: after an uncomfortable smile, a potential informant may quietly slip away. Faced with the choice between two ethically valid but somewhat contradictory attitudes, I opted to minimise risk, thus lessening the likelihood of potential trouble for my informants. Any imprudent choice could lead to lack of accuracy of data or lack of information.

However, it is not only one’s connections with institutions and authorities that can drive a wedge between researchers and informants. Being seen as a journalist, in some contexts, may also arouse suspicion. “At the beginning, because of my vague claim of interest in rural life, people conceived of me as a journalist or someone whose purpose was deliberately hidden for some reason” (Liu 2000: 18). And, the fact that my interest did not concern ethnic groups or local customs could very easily generate misunderstanding.

Numerous social sciences scholars have undertaken research in China’s Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, areas famous for their ethnic diversity and relationships with the rest of Southeast Asia. Anthropologists, human geographers and historians alike have favoured this region. Clearly, my research did not fit into the usual framework of ethnographic research in Yunnan as locals understand it. I explained to them that I had no plans to study any ethnic minority groups, neither there nor in Guangxi. In fact, I had no particular scholarly interest in the peoples of
the area at all. I did not plan to study a particular group of Han Chinese, nor did my interest lie in any of the region’s rural communities. Rather, I sought to explore the lives of foreign women, who are officially regarded as ‘illegal immigrants’, and the social positions of their families. This was of some concern to my interlocutors, i.e., scholars and others, who did not consider such enquiry the usual task of an anthropologist. In the words of Dru Gladney:

Anthropology (*ren lei xue*) in China, until very recently, has been almost exclusively limited to physical anthropology. Ethnography (*minzu xue*) was devoted to the study of minorities and was generally carried out in the nationalities institutes (*shaoshu minzu*) and nationalities research centres, rather than in the universities. … Ethnography and anthropology, though later criticized, were in general more protected than sociology as a tool of the state in dominating the minorities. In China, anthropology became the “people’s anthropology” because it concerned itself exclusively with the cultural study of the monitory peoples, generally ignoring such issues as political economy, social structure, religious authority, and socioeconomic change (Gladney 2001: 109-110).

In China, as well as in Vietnam, restrictions and constraints are still the lot of researchers. Improvement is unevenly palpable in the field and, in the main, depends upon uncontrollable factors such as connections, policy changes, political sensitivity and the institutions involved (Nojonen 2004; Guiheux 2009). As Heimer and Thøgersen note in their recently edited volume on fieldwork practice in China, the three themes that have emerged in the social sciences disciplines over the last two decades go beyond the extant “official control data collection and … general lack of autonomy” (Thøgersen & Heimer 2006: 11). These themes include: the less visible but still efficient presence of the party-state despite signs of openness; the still limited access to the field that requires data collection from alternative sources and the practice of short-term investigation and multiple field sites;¹ and, on a more optimistic

¹ When permission to conduct research in one place is accorded for a limited time, the practice of multiple sites helps to cope with any resultant lack of data and can also provide a comparative perspective.
note, the rise of collaborative research projects between Chinese and foreign scholars (Thøgersen & Heimer 2006). This evolution has culminated in a new intellectual attitude that emphasises the unexpected and encourages improvised strategies into the project design. In other words, we must change as China changes, adapt our empirical research methodologies according to our host practices when needed, and learn from our informants, who are continuously required to cope with their own obstacles within a system in which complexities still disclose various interstices and which tolerates action taken between rules and control. ‘Surfing the wave’ but remaining cautious, I came to rely in the main upon a rather flexible version of the ‘guerrilla interviewing’ method that Thomas Gold practiced in the 1980s in China (Gold 1989), at least in the initial stages of the fieldwork I undertook in both China and Vietnam. Under the circumstances of unauthorised or unaffiliated research, this ‘method’ simply consists of collecting data by picking potential informants. By ostensibly engaging in idle conversation in any possible environment, one sets the stage “to create the conditions to encounter the unexpected, and when it happens, to pursue it (Pieke 2000: 145, original emphasis).

From the Chinese and Vietnamese scholarly viewpoint, my project looked more like a sociological study: a task for investigative journalism perhaps, as national media reports had regularly focused on the issue of human trafficking and cross-border migration. The perplexity extended to my local acquaintances, some of whom had an idea of what constituted the work of an ethnographer but had difficulty connecting my subject of interest to the conventional work of a national researcher, not to mention the methods employed. As regards the local institutions and authorities, my interest in cross-border marriages translated as research into illegal migration and human trafficking. Due to an assumed connection between a particular
social phenomenon and legal and human rights concerns, the topic was simply too controversial to invite systematic exploration without risking possibly adverse consequences for my informants. I will now illustrate this difficult positioning between a non-existent official status and proximity with informants with two examples.

Handling the connections

I visited Wanwei in May 2009, nearly three years after my first stay in this little village located by the seaside in Guangxi province. Wanwei is mainly inhabited by a few thousand residents officially labelled Jingzu,¹ one of China’s fifty-six officially recognised Chinese minority ethnic groups. According to the official history, the Jing are descendants of Vietnamese fishermen, who arrived on the Chinese coast around the fifteen\(^{th}\) century AD (Ma 1994). Once back in the village, my intention was to meet some of my former informants and to update their situations (depending, of course, upon whether I could find their homes again). However, unlike in the other border areas I had re-visited after a long absence, nothing seemed to have changed much in Wanwei. Because it was the off-season, the beach was not very crowded and movement in the only main commercial street was quiet. Business was not good, everyone kept saying. My local female acquaintance A Fang’s business entails renting tables and chairs for use under the roofs of the shopping area or on the beach itself; as well, she sells refreshments and fruit. A Fang explained to me how she had to extend her economic activity from her beach refreshment stall – which her

¹ Jing, the Vietnamese translation of the ‘Kinh’ term, designates the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam: the term ‘zu’ means ethnic group.
husband was still taking care of – to evening barbecues to help raise a little more income for her household.

In Wanwei, I also planned to meet the local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary: a Chinese researcher back in Nanning (the capital of Guangxi province) had earlier given me a contact number. Following a phone call I made during my stay in Dongxing, the main local town in which I was staying, the official agreed to receive me. By chance, when I mentioned his name to A Fang, I discovered that the secretary was her cousin. In order to make this meeting more successful, I asked her to accompany me to the CCP office, presuming that her presence would ease the interaction. The whole building, the headquarters of various government offices, appeared sleepy and quiet. The secretary welcomed me politely; then, he invited A Fang and me to sit on the modest wooden bench that served as seating. According to regulations, he asked for my references. Unfortunately, I could only tell him the name, the official title he used at work, and the phone number of the Nanning researcher who had referred me. I realised I had made a grave mistake, arriving to meet him without a formal name card – written in Chinese – showing my official status as a foreign Ph.D. student. Vaguely dubious, he carefully wrote down the information in a large notebook, saying that he did not recall the researcher’s name. Had it not been for the presence of his relative in the office, he could easily have declined to meet me due to my lack of official documents or any kind of formal introduction. But, my private relationship with his cousin urged him to consider my request even though I lacked the appropriate ‘keys’ for accessing the field. I simply hoped he could introduce me to a few mixed couples living in his village so I could interview them. I did not expect a great deal of support from him, not that I doubted that he could provide me with cases to inquire about; but, I realised that as an official
he had to limit his involvement and attract the least official attention possible. He did, however, provide me with the address and name of the Vietnamese wife of a local resident – A Hua – and a ride on his motorbike to her house albeit his demeanour suggested that he would rather have distanced himself from everything concerning my research. He half-heartedly attempted to prevent me from carrying out any further investigations by stating that the cases I was looking for were rare in his village. At the same time, he was faced with taking the responsibility for what he had done for me. I assumed that it was for this reason that he situated himself alongside the young woman when I started to interview her in a more formal way than I usually adopt. The interview proceeded in the way I expected it would: the informant was told (in the local dialect so that I could not understand)\(^1\) “to say what has to be said and to remain silent about what needs to remain unknown,” which is what she did, restricting her information to general and positive comments about herself, her family background and marriage.

It may be that the CCP secretary found this interview either innocent or boring or both because he left before the end, wishing me a nice day as he departed. I managed to meet A Hua on several other occasions. Li, my Vietnamese friend and main informant from Dongxing, who often helped me with language issues, accompanied me. On these occasions, A Hua talked to us informally while she was

\(^1\) A Hua told this to the Vietnamese friend who accompanied me from Dongxing to Wanwei during my second trip to Wanwei. She asked her not to translate his words for me… a promise my friend opted not to keep as she was well aware of my research context and wished to help me. We both interpreted the female informant’s reaction as fear that I might seek to learn more about her later, or that I would return to the CCP secretary asking for an explanation as to why he limited my research, which would have put at risk A Hua’s delicate and tolerated position within the community (as an illegal foreign immigrant).
busy working by the roadside at her little sewing shop. It was only then, when our relationship had become sufficiently friendly and trusting, that she started to disclose some events and aspects of her life that she had previously not mentioned. I believe that she opened up for two other reasons apart from the absence of an official or local supervision. One was my close friendship with Li, who was also Vietnamese, married to a Chinese, and not only very well-informed vis-à-vis the cross-border marriage issue herself but also loquacious and happy to share her experience with her fellow ‘sisters;’ and, above all, with an outsider. Li’s experience, compared to those of many other women, had been very positive. The second reason was that I personally knew a Vietnamese researcher from the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, who had spent months in Wanwei a few years earlier, was interested in mixed marriages as well, and happened to have interviewed this very same person. These two personal, familiar Vietnamese people acted as guarantors for the sincerity of my approach. The secretary passed me by several times in the area, always greeting me with a smile and showing no obvious concern over the fact that I was still chatting with A Hua.

Positioning the researcher: to be or not to be affiliated

As long as I felt free to build a network of acquaintances without being controlled, there was hope to conduct effective research. But, in China, there was another pragmatic reason why I preferred to avoid connections with bureaucrats. At

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1 I should mention here that my local friend helped me as a translator during our first meeting. A Hua can only speak Vietnamese and the local baihua dialect (the Guangxi dialect of the Cantonese language).
the beginning of my fieldwork in Hekou, one of my research colleagues from Macquarie University’s Department of Anthropology introduced me to Qiuxia, a local, well-connected cadre. I went to her office where this dynamic, middle-aged woman was happy to receive my visit. After she asked a lot of questions about me (from my family situation to my research interests), she admitted that she knew very little about cross-border marriages although she would try her best to find me some acquaintances and contacts who might help me to find relevant informants. But, over the next weeks, her efforts did not produce the expected results. She was variously trying to please me as an obligation towards a common friend, as a way of gaining my sympathy, and as occasional entertaining company. Indeed, as I was a foreigner and perceived locally as a ‘prestigious friend’, she very quickly started to invite me to dinners, night drinks and shopping sessions, irrespective of whether these activities were carried out during her business hours or free time. The way in which she presented herself in the street whenever I was with her reflected the importance she attached to being seen with me. She insisted upon taking me into every shop of which she was an old customer, to walk in the main streets arm-in-arm, constantly looking around to check if there were any acquaintances she could introduce me to. I soon realised that this performance of friendship, although based on a sincere will to become close to me, was also meant to benefit her reputation. On several occasions, she phoned me to say that “she had found someone for me to interview” and urged me to join her for an introduction, no matter what activity I had already planned. Feeling obliged, since it was I who had requested her help, I usually consented and was duly taken to various meetings, which invariably involved not just Qiuxia, myself and a third person, but a dozen of her acquaintances, colleagues or high school classmates to whom she was proud to introduce me. Qiuxia insisted on introducing me as ‘Doctor
Ke\textsuperscript{1} despite my repeated denials. This was immediately and publicly interpreted as a mark of modesty, which was actually adding value to the ‘attributes’ of the *Faguo meinü* [pretty French woman],\textsuperscript{2} who was researching ‘border love affairs.’ Through her actions, Qiuxia actually provided me with a particular space wherein I could enjoy performance of the art of *guanxi* [social connections/relationships] by extension ascertaining the position and characteristics of each person in the community, i.e., work position, power and nature of activity, for example. However, since I was not in Hekou to engage in this type of study, I quickly became very bored with these meetings. By now, I could see that I was not amusing my hosts as much as they expected. I was not drinking alcohol, and I did not have much to say about romanticism\textsuperscript{3} or about my own country, which I had left years ago. I was interested in issues that were considered either too commonplace to be questioned, too boring, or too cumbersome to elaborate upon while enjoying a good meal.

These rituals were organised to give Qiuxia ‘face’, to enhance her social position much more than to introduce me into a debating space or to broaden my own network. At that stage, after years of experience of being considered ‘added value’ to social gatherings in many different contexts – like most foreigners’ experimentation

\textsuperscript{1} Ke is my Chinese family name.

\textsuperscript{2} Here, I only wish to emphasise the way women are categorised according to their nationality in China in general: the stereotype of the ‘pretty and romantic’ French woman (*Faguo meinü*) is as widespread as that of the ‘dutiful’ Japanese woman or, at the local level, the combined ‘beautiful and dutiful’ but somehow ‘ambiguous’ Vietnamese woman. This form of stereotyping will be discussed in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{3} ‘Romanticism’ is the first concept that comes to Chinese people’s minds when the subject of France is evoked. The term has a wide range of meanings about which there would be much to write. It becomes a subject of enquiry and a fruitful recurrent ground for discussion whenever a French person enters into conversation with a Chinese person.
in China — I was prepared for the content of such meetings. However, although it brought me the opportunity to informally meet some of the very people I was trying to avoid by remaining unobtrusive in Hekou, I propitiously chose to depart these relationships while they were still in their embryonic stage. This proved an easy task because some of the seemingly enthusiastic persons Qiuxia initially introduced me to were either too busy — or too cautious? — to keep their promises to expand my informant network.

I believe that Qiuxia gradually realised that I was not very fond of these regular ‘colleagues and friends’ dinners, nor was I interested in luxury shopping. She gradually stopped calling me. Instead, she sometimes invited me to meet a few of her close friends in a more intimate space such as in the evening tea stalls along the Red River. There, we could talk openly, free from the hidden burden of polite obligations, performative actions and financial input, areas in which she had become expert over the years but which “made her so tired.” Only then did she confess to a few intimate issues that she was facing in her own marriage that implied her general ‘woman’s position’ in this border society.

My concern was not only with the close attention I risked attracting from the local authorities, which would have been outside of my friend’s control: I cared much more about the perceptions of the local people, who could easily see me fraternising with such company, and about the misunderstandings surrounding my real status and purpose these activities could generate. Hekou is a small town: the variety of spaces in which these dinners were held was limited. I knew I would be seen in these local up-market places where public money was freely spent on food and alcohol. The sort of social life that Qiuxia was trying to draw me into was not compatible with the image of the social status I sought to project. My purpose was to build a good
relationship with local acquaintances, based on my own disclosure, a modest attitude, and the expression of my true concern for the socially marginalised. Since I was not officially associated with any of these local power and institutions’ officers, I felt free to extract myself from these binding obligations. Qiuxia eventually stopped calling me: I believe she understood my position.

The two above examples illustrate how personal connections can change the ways in which Chinese officials handle the presence of a foreign researcher in a field where sensitive issues are assumed to attract curiosity and unwanted attention. It also reveals another concern related to a particular subject that I have encountered in both the Hekou and Dongxing areas. Only rarely have Chinese researchers (He 2003) and a few journalists investigated human trafficking as a social issue in these areas. But, on occasions when they have, they have had to gain some form of official support. This meant involving local administrators as part of the official procedure they had to first request – then cope with – in order to carry out their investigations. Unfortunately, according to the locals, the resultant reports have revealed a very unpleasant picture of the two cities and ambiguous evocation of the authorities’ behaviour regarding certain social issues such as Vietnamese forced brides or open prostitution. Subsequent to these embarrassing incidents, the local authorities have remained very suspicious of any outsider whose inquisitiveness regarding local ‘specialities’ has lowered the images of those involved. This includes, a fortiori, foreigners. It also shows how uncomfortable relying on official introductions to informants can become, not only for the researcher in search of comprehensive data, but for local informants, who may not welcome the authorities’ unwanted focus on their private lives. Even though in some cases there may exist a sincere will to help on their part, this would be very
unlikely with topics such as illegal migration and human trafficking of which cross-border marriages are locally understood to be a part.

The problem with contemporary anthropological ethics is not merely that the boundaries of what is defined as ethical are too narrowly drawn, but more importantly, that ethics can be subject to rigid, righteous interpretations which place them at loggerheads with overarching human rights concerns. How does one investigate power relations and fulfil the researcher’s obligation to obtain informed consent from the powerful? … It is much more difficult – if not impossible – to satisfy the discipline-bound anthropological/methodological code of ethics if we attempt to research marginalization and oppression, than if we focus on the philosophical aesthetics of cosmology. Can we address the urgent problems faced by our research subjects and still obey our discipline’s interpretation of methodological ethics? (Bourgois 1990: 45).

And, this may be the most important point: this experience – among others of its kind – confirmed the doubt surrounding the obtaining of accurate data for this specific subject through formal channels. It needed a very personal approach to potential informants to be able to comprehend the reality, not in the form that the community leaders sought to express and expose it, but in a form which the concerned individuals, in circumstances of being given an open choice, hoped and agreed to share. Having lived in China for years and often encountered this type of dilemma during earlier periods of research, and having talked to scholars who too have found themselves in the same delicate situation, I decided to avoid any formal contact with officials. I was sometimes reluctant even to talk to them when opportunities came by chance, preferring to remain cautious and to adopt an anonymous position in the interests of objectivity and access to fieldwork research. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that some relationships with the authorities, well backed-up, could have provided me with interesting access to data and may have given me a different insight into the phenomenon. The field reality demanded that I make a choice between following a formal trajectory or risk encountering other sorts of difficulties due to my lack of guidance in this project.
Discussion

In a long tradition going from Claude Levi-Strauss and Alain Touraine to Marc Augé and Pierre Bourdieu, ethics was considered to be embodied in the anthropologist or sociologist, whose moral integrity and scientific rigor were sufficient guarantees of respect for ethics. Social scientists were the best judges of the rules and limits they had to impose themselves. This self-defined and self-referential accountability was their ethical code, which did not have to be written, certified, and assessed (Fassin 2006: 522-523).

Because I was trained in France where ethical issues are – still – rarely openly formulated in the practice of ethnography (at least in the lecture rooms), and where intuition and a ‘common sense’ of moral integrity act as sentinels during the research process albeit perhaps insufficiently, it may be that the ‘ethics application’ at Macquarie University was a new procedure to me. But as Didier Fassin suggests: “… Participant-observation … is characterized by its informality. It blurs the boundaries between research and life. Fieldwork is everywhere” (Fassin 2006: 523). In this regard, I felt that my daily life was made of observations. In China, I was both an ‘insider-outsider’ and an ‘outsider-insider’ since I had been living there with a Chinese husband and Chinese friends for long enough to feel part of the local social life and to have become familiar with most aspects of the Chinese daily lived reality. Was this not this enough to enable me to flexibly move the line between the ethically correct and the actual possible? Was it really feasible to expose a clear outline of the limits of fieldwork interaction involvement? Bosk and de Vries attempt to address the dilemma that most ethnographers face when they feel compelled to defend their discipline’s methodology regarding the risks it may pose for informants before members of institutional review boards, who retain the power of veto over their research projects:

We cannot inform our subjects of the risks and benefits of cooperating with us for a number of reasons. First, the risks and benefits for subjects are not so different from those of normal interaction with a stranger who will become a close acquaintance, an everyday feature of a lifeworld, and then disappear, after observing intimate
moments, exploring deep feelings, and asking embarrassing questions. There is the risk inherent in any fleeting human relationship—the risk of bruised feelings that come from being used, the loss when a fixture in a social world disappears, or the hurt of realizing that however differently it felt in the moment, one was used as a means to an end. This risk is magnified by a certain unavoidable deception in every ethnographic investigation, a certain pretence that comes from trying to have both researcher and informant forget that what is going on is not a normal, natural exchange but research—not just everyday life as it naturally occurs but work, a job, a project—“No really, I'm interested in what you have to say, think, feel, and believe for more than my own narrow instrumental academic purposes.” To some degree, we cannot specify risks because we do not know what we will find, what interpretive frameworks we will develop for reporting what we do observe, and how the world around us will change to make those findings seem more or less significant. Finally, we cannot define risk because few of us believe that being an ethnographic informant is a risky business. We believe this despite considerable anthropological and sociological evidence to the contrary (Bosk & De Vries 2004: 253).

On a more pragmatic level, Scott, Miller and Lloyd (2006) reflect on how engaging with state-sponsored research in Vietnam requires the handling of various challenges such as monetary compensation for the participants (including officials), over-control of information access, or negotiation in the field-site. Because the Vietnamese centralised and authoritarian system is almost identical to that of China, similar methodological concerns surround social sciences research there as well. Another issue alluded to in the above authors’ account is a certain disregard for qualitative research and autonomous management of fieldwork practices. Cooperation with local institutions not only involves constant monitoring, but often means coping with local colleagues’ own limitations such as tight schedules, limited budgets and the need for fast and efficient results, all of which combine to obstruct the conduct of proper ethnography in its classical sense. The search for a compatible research assistant is another example of this complicated situation. Most of the candidates to whom Vietnamese scholars introduced me experienced difficulty understanding my particular approach to my research topic and my fieldwork methodology. Obviously, none of them was trained to simply ‘sit in a market’, that is, to spend the whole day conversing with shop owners and clients, observing the Chinese and Vietnamese passers-by and debating daily life concerns. Likewise, not one of them would have
thought of spending a few days with some Vietnamese women married to Chinese men, to participate in their daily lives, observe their daily practices, listen to their grief and play with their children. I had no prepared questionnaire, no special contacts among the local cadres, and no idea how long it would take me to obtain interesting insights. And, perhaps worst of all, I had no real expectations as to what the results of my observations and interviews would be nor of the outcomes they would have apart from contributing to a better knowledge of the subject. In a country where applied anthropology remains dominant for it should serve the institutions, my approach sounded somehow challenging. The field was wide and unlimited; but, the topic of my research was blurred as far as the three candidates I met were concerned. They were all intrigued: they all found the research project “very interesting;” but, a couple of days later they all said “Sorry, but I won’t have time to accompany you.” It may be that they were disturbed by my unusual, unconventional and deliberately independent way of practicing field research, i.e., without following any conventional protocols and without providing any safety-net (Turner 2010).

Moreover, I noted a certain lack of interest in my topic. Discussion was often arrogated by saying that many reports on human trafficking were already available, that these women were “poor, uneducated women most of the time,” and that there was not much to say about them. In addition, my topic concerned rural women and I could sense a sort of urban disregard for rural population concerns, especially in the realm of intimacy. This gave me the feeling that because it was unquestioningly accepted that women had a hard life, there was not much else to say about it. At best I raised some interest in the approach I was trying to explain; at worst, I amused my interlocutors, who preferred to ask questions about how on earth I (and my institution)
had become interested in such a ‘taken for granted’ matter. A male informant, surprised to see me again after my two years of absence in Hekou, commented:

— Long time no see! Why did you come back? What are you studying this time? What? Still these marriages? What else do you need to know? It’s very simple. These Vietnamese women are poor, their men are useless, and so they come here to make life easier. Some men here think they can make a deal with them. What else do you want to know? Ha! ha! Welcome back anyway!

In China, this feeling was emphasised by the empathetic tone some men employed when they mentioned Vietnamese women. “They have a hard life there,” they would say, in a tone of voice that not only lacked sympathy but, somewhat more straightforwardly, expressed explicit contempt for Vietnamese men.¹

2 Disclosing oneself to the communities

But, negotiating potentially free access to a research site is not sufficient to gain access to its people.

Before taking the standpoint of those with a particular stigma, the normal person who is becoming wise may first have to pass through a heart-changing personal experience …. And after the sympathetic normal makes himself available to the stigmatized, he often must wait their validation of him as a courtesy member. The self must not be offered, it must be accepted (Goffman 1986: 28-29).

Having lived in China for more than a decade, and having been familiar with the language and social practices for even longer, approaching a Chinese community does not require tremendous effort from me. As in many other parts of China, the Hekou and Dongxing peoples are always curious about foreigners, who, in their

¹ I will develop this aspect in Chapter 4.
opinion, travel to apparently insignificant localities instead of following the numerous and famous tourist tracks that their fascinated countries advocate. Although the objects of their fascination might be vastly different for each visitor, and the degree of interest may depend upon what the locals agree to impart about them, unusual choices often lead to interesting debates. Hence, casual conversations are generally easy to start; as soon as the language barrier is eclipsed, questioning starts. But, visitors to China sometimes feel uncomfortable answering personal questions that may not be considered appropriate to ask in so-called ‘open-minded’ western societies. However, for foreigners who live in China, this has become common practice: they no longer attempt to hide anything personal as this is part of a ‘first-time-interaction’ ritual that allows each interlocutor to establish her/his appropriate position; and, this is also common practice among Chinese and Vietnamese people. In my own experience over the years, I have become used to disclosing ten times a day my identity, age, marital status, residential location, activities, income and my general opinion of China or whatever place I happened to be in at the moment. Occurring as it does in public, i.e., in buses, shops, streets, neighbourhoods and social gatherings, this tiring ritual represents the first step of a routine that often requires back and forth questioning that hopefully leads to more balanced interaction albeit not always. Some people’s requirement to satisfy their curiosity does not necessarily extend to engaging in real dialogue, allowing strangers to learn as much as possible about them. In brief, my personal experience has shown me that in China and Vietnam one cannot learn anything crucial during a conversation before revealing significant personal information. However, there are some circumstances in which performance of this ritual becomes a methodological strategy employed by fieldworkers, who seek to
discern certain sensitive issues such as private matters, details of which are usually left undisclosed.

In the case of Chinese and Vietnamese people who engage in conversations with foreigners, particularly in places where this is not the customary thing to do, topics such as a mixed marriage with a native of the country, parenthood, and the proposed length of stay of the foreigner in the country arouse considerable curiosity and interest. In my case, the answers and comments I provided to my interlocutors generally created a sense of familiarity and ease with each other. My life experiences in their societies meant that I had become used to certain cultural and social practices, and, that unlike newcomers, I would no longer be surprised or become disoriented when confronted by unfamiliar surroundings and practices. This relative but assumed adaptation to the local environmental conditions was similar, in some respects, to the ways in which locals accept an outsider’s presence, including outsiders from the same country. This is often the case with internal migrants, who come from very different backgrounds and find themselves having to cope with even more difficulties than a foreigner would with a new climate, new food, new dialect and/or new setting.

The sensitivity of the topic I was planning to research, learn about and comprehend in any possible way gave me little choice but to compromise with my interlocutors’ inquisitiveness. Since I could not approach mixed-marriage couples in a formal way, I had to attempt to identify and approach them by myself. During my first encounters, I had to reveal the reasons why I had such an interest in these seemingly unusual life choices. But, I quickly came to realise that in the local perception, the cross-border marriages phenomenon was linked to human trafficking. Thus, it became necessary to make these marriages appear a non-sensitive, interesting and familiar social reality, at least as far as I was concerned. And, since my personal details were
constantly solicited, the simplest way to achieve a result was to disclose my personal private situation in even more detail than usual. What could be more legitimate than an enquiry about something I was experiencing myself?

After a few days in Hekou and Dongxing, my narrative soon became well-known among the little circle of acquaintances with whom I had started to interact. However, the few differences that distinguished my first stay in those cities from my second stay three years later revealed the importance of being straightforward about my personal situation, even more so than providing details of my professional status.

In 2006, I “had lived in China for eight years with my Chinese boy-friend in Kunming, had a good relationship with his family and was a writer while he was enjoying his musical career.” In 2007, we welcomed our first child and then we got married.1 So, when I returned to Hekou and Dongxing in late 2008, I could claim that I “had spent one decade of my life in China, still lived in Kunming, was officially married to a Chinese husband, had a young child, still had a good relationship with my in-laws, had become a Ph.D. student in an Australian university, and was conducting fieldwork research while my husband took care of our son on an almost full-time basis – meaning he did not work.” Even though many details of this new account required long explanations since they may have sounded somewhat unusual, these basic circumstances made people feel more comfortable talking to me, debating issues about which they were happy to exchange opinions. Nowadays, I enjoy a more stable, clarified and recognised status in Chinese society. I am a Zhongguo xifu [Chinese wife].

1 In the case of Chinese people, I had to introduce these two events in a more logical order to my informants (marriage followed by child-birth), who otherwise may have had difficulty understanding this unconventional way of settling a couple’s relationship.
I should add here that I used slightly different introductions in Vietnam and China respectively, especially in 2006. ‘Living together’ or cohabitation is now quite common in urban China; and, even though it is not accepted by everyone – not by new couples’ families, for example – it has become a form of tolerated emancipation for some young people, a test of compatibility before a couple actually becomes engaged and marries. For them, taking the decisive step to marry tends to occur when a woman falls pregnant. As I have witnessed so many times among my Chinese acquaintances, the arrival of a baby (if it is subsequently kept) requires its registration by the parents in order to satisfy both sides’ families and to comply with the law.¹ Apropos of my own case, whenever I explained that ‘I was cohabiting with my partner’, Chinese people in general assumed that besides following new urban trends pertinent to conjugal practices, I was also a foreigner from whom unconventional actions – according to Chinese standards – could be expected. However, in Vietnam, cohabitation remains far from being ordinary, far from being socially tolerated. Candid explanation of my situation, a line I pursued in China, could be perceived as provocative and would not necessarily work in my favour. In Vietnam, ‘older’ unmarried women² lose community respect; and, cohabitation with a single man is socially unacceptable (Thi 2008). Hence, by 2006, I found myself referring to my partner as my ‘husband’, which automatically explained why we were living together. However, the intriguing thing for Vietnamese people was that we had been married

¹ According to the current laws in China, a child born out-of-wedlock has very limited rights. Without household registration, the child will face difficulties accessing state-provided benefits and services such as public education and health care. In order to gain his/her household registration, the unmarried parents have to pay a social compensation fee.

² In the northern rural areas of Vietnam, for example, 23 years of age is considered ‘too old’ for an unmarried woman.
long enough to have a baby, which we were still missing. Three years later, when I updated the same informants on the birth of my son, this appeared to be the key event. I had eventually become a mother!

To give birth to and raise children is the right of women and also an ability they are blessed with. A child is a mother’s joy and hope, and a support when she gets old. When a woman has a child, she has to overcome many hardships in raising her child and she is ready to do so. For her to have a child is to have everything; that’s her joy and her raison d’être (Thi 2008: 81).

Lê Thi observes that according to local beliefs and practices, a couple only become unified in order to produce children, who are meant to provide comfort and affective satisfaction to women. Such unquestioned statements in Lê Thi’s academic work may appear as a conventional and politicised appraisal of women’s function and expectations in an ideal Vietnamese socialist society, i.e., as a glorification of womanhood and motherhood. The author appears not to reconsider the assumption that womanhood ‘naturally’ implies motherhood, nor does she challenge the association between motherhood, joy and sacrifice. To the detriment of a broader anthropological perspective on the position of Vietnamese women, Lê Thi – as one among them – reflects in her analysis upon how deeply this discourse is rooted in the Vietnamese people’s beliefs.

My translator, Loan, was engaged to be married when she accompanied me on the Vietnamese part of my fieldwork in 2006. A well-educated young Hanoian woman raised in a Buddhist family, she dated Binh, a man from Hanoi who was well liked by her family. She confessed to me once that they had never kissed, not even held hands. Their relationship was totally platonic. Given youth romance and the sexual trends in Hanoi today, one could not take this behaviour for granted (Nguyen 2007). Yet, Loan and her fiancé had already decided that they were meant for each other and had received their families’ approval. Since she and I talked all day long
about marriage during the fieldwork, I once asked her to elaborate upon the subject of pre-marital and marital relations.

— I know my fiancé Binh for a long time. We like to go out together sometimes. We respect each other and want to get married. I think he is a good, sincere and reliable man. We will probably marry this year and have a baby. My father is very sick and he also wishes that I get married before anything happens to him.¹

— Don’t you want to spend some time with Binh and enjoy your newly-wed couple’s life before that?

— [looking surprised] No, why?

— Well, you could wish to enjoy some romance and happiness or you could wish to continue your work, even travel a little with him?

— But we want to get married because we want to raise a family. That will make us happy. I don’t see why we would get married otherwise.

What this lengthy introduction has tried to emphasise is how disclosure of privacy attracts comparisons. As soon as I became situated within a meaningful frame as far as people of potential interest/value to my work were concerned, the search for relevant informants could start. My personal life served as a stepping-stone to

¹ In 2006, I compensated Loan financially for the time she spent with me, and for her impressive help and the translation work she did for me that contributed to the success of this fieldwork. The amount I paid her, which was part of a research budget I received from IRASEC, the institute for which I was then preparing a book, was substantial according to the local salary standard for an educated woman. Loan intended to use all of this money to pay for her sick father’s expensive treatment.
approaching *others like me*. Here, people did not spend their time discussing how western couples were living and the huge differences that supposedly exist between western and Chinese couples. They instead related my personal experience of international marriage to those of the Sino-Vietnamese people they knew at the local level. Yet, I was far from the model of a conventional local marriage. While I was constructing my personal introduction narrative according to people’s initial reactions – quickly structured since I had to repeat it several times a day – I soon learnt to deliberately highlight, even to elaborate upon, a few significant details that had proven relevant to my interlocutors. In the main, my narrative drew immediate comments and discussion, and contrasting perspectives. No matter how I articulated it, my personal life challenged the local standard of conjugality; e.g., marriage at a young age, husband or both parties as breadwinners, child/children taken care of by grand-parents or relatives, and possession of properties, fields or business. I once had the following conversation with a Vietnamese woman married to a Chinese man.

— [informant] You say you have a baby at home: who takes care of him when you are away?

— [me] My husband.

— Your husband? Are your in-laws there to help?

— No, they live too far away: he manages to do it by himself; this is not so complicated.

— You could send your child to your in-laws, so you both can have time to work. How can your husband work if he takes care of your child?
— Well, he does work, but at home. That’s why he can look after the baby. And, we want to raise him ourselves.

— How lucky you are! My husband doesn’t even dare to take our baby in his arms, so I can’t imagine leaving him alone with her. Men don’t know how to take care of a baby. He wouldn’t accept that I go away and leave him with such a burden… But, at least my husband works. Generally Vietnamese men don’t even work. They just expect their wives to raise the children, work hard and care for the house, while they are having a good time with their friends. How much does your husband earn a month?

— He doesn’t have a regular income, so it is difficult to say.

— But you said he works?

— Yes, but as a musician, an independent artist, which means he’s quite poor [a usual and still true assumption].

— So, what do you rely on to make a living?

— I am a student; I receive a scholarship, that’s enough for us.

— So you are also responsible for your family, you have to work too if your husband plays music?

— True, but at least, he takes care of our baby…

Even though I anticipated that some of the more unusual aspects of my life would limit the possibility of comparison, I realised how fascinating or disturbing they could appear to some persons and how this led them to express their own general points of views and specific empirical understandings of the meaning of marriage.
This will be one main point I discuss in this dissertation. However, as the dialogue also shows, when viewed in a certain way, there was space for possible empathy (the husband playing versus the wife working). Herein were several issues that women as well as men liked to debate with me: my late-age student status, my husband’s activities, and our personal way of handling family life which saw us at odds with common practice. Most of the conversations I had with local people (casual encounters, friends or informants) centred upon issues initially raised by the explanations I provided regarding my situation: they were especially required since my marital situation did not make much sense in the usual frame of thought of these people. If I had initially not been sure that this was the right methodological choice, the results that such a degree of self-disclosure brought were convincing enough to dispel any reluctance I still harboured to deliberately open my private life to curious or inquisitive ears. I was prepared to be truthful about my personal life with people whose privacy I wished to intrude upon; and, in order to achieve this goal, I needed to use private information as an attractive lure for others (a shop owner, my favourite noodle shop waitress, a local guide I met in the street, the friend of a friend who stops by for a cup of tea, for example) who could potentially introduce me to their acquaintances. Looking back, I am convinced that I would not have met the people I interviewed, and I would not have heard so much about conjugality expectations and ideals, had I remained strictly discreet regarding my own personal conjugal relations. This is probably true in other fieldwork contexts as well; but, I found the process significant enough to be mentioned here as a methodological strategy, especially among communities whose cultural mores inhibit discussion of personal and intimate matters, not to mention sentimental and marital choices and lives (Yan 2003; Cauquelin 2000). My informants appreciated the fact that I freely shared my
experience: they reciprocated by offering their own accounts of the challenges posed by mixed conjugality. In the end, it proved extremely productive to openly discuss personal issues.

Yet, disclosing and debating my own subjectivity was certainly not enough to identify the individuals whose lives I sought to explore. The sensitivity surrounding cross-border marriages was real: everyone was clearly aware of this. My own international marriage experience would not pass the comparison test when issues like coercion, illegality or stigma were raised. I personally had no objection to satisfying others’ curiosity as long as I deemed it appropriate; but, it became obvious from the first days I spent in these border towns that local mixed couples were generally not willing to expose themselves more than they already were. Deep ethnographic understanding would require much more than simply providing a stage for discussion.

3 Approaching the invisible

My access to the field-sites was achieved without official involvement and without attracting undue attention. The local communities became used to my presence among them on a daily basis, and I disclosed only enough of myself to assuage their curiosity. I wanted them to accept me (at the very least as an entertaining acquaintance). But, it was then that my major challenge emerged. How would I be able to identify the men and women whose lives I sought to observe, hear about, learn about and understand from among these large and eclectic crowds of busy, moving people when nothing, \textit{a priori}, would distinguish them visually from their fellow individuals? And, without any form of guidance? It would be like trying to find a needle in the proverbial haystack. What options did I have when people’s
help and connections did not always prove reliable and lacked the grounding required to reach a scientific research standard? I needed a fair and representative sample of informants; but, how was I going to convince them to share their life experiences, their secrets with me? Here I will cite a few cases to illustrate the difficulties I encountered during my attempts to identify informants, to their stories, and to prevent putting at risk their fragile neutral position in a community where they are often known for what they are or what they represent but are ignored and tolerated as long as they do not create trouble.

Identification in the crowd

The invisibility of informants arose first from their self-perception. In some cases, individuals did not know how to identify themselves in regard to their past conjugal experience or current situation. Generally, some considered that they did not belong to the target group I was looking for because they were not officially registered as married couples. Conversely, others considered themselves to be legitimate couples, despite the absence of documentation. Everything depended upon the length and stability of the relationship, the degree of acceptance and recognition by the community, the couple’s adaptation to local informal rules, their living practices, and on what people assumed vis-à-vis my definition of marriage. It also depended upon how legitimate the individuals themselves (men and women) perceived their relationships to be. In sum, gaining access to such mixed couples required specific conditions. In the case of Vietnamese women living in China, for example, they had to be recognised as ‘Vietnamese’ where they lived, as I mostly relied upon their acquaintances or neighbourhood to identify them. They needed to
acknowledge their own identity or their family history publicly to be identified as potential informants.

- Chau and Tuan: “suan bu suan [do they count]?"

I met Chau and Tuan one afternoon in Lào Cai. This meeting happened after days of wandering around, during one of several periods when I felt hopeless. Everyone who learned about my research tried to convince me that there was nothing to find in Lào Cai, that all of the mixed couples lived in China, that none of the Vietnamese fiancées’ families lived in this little town because the women originally came from remote rural places where I could not go, and that I should go back to the Chinese side of the border to find them. These claims were so pervasive that I had started to believe them. Maybe it was pointless to search for people who were not actually domiciled in Lào Cai. However, although I had only a short experience of fieldwork research in Vietnam, I had stayed long enough in the country to know that discouragement could well stem from fear that my scrutiny could cause trouble for – rather than benefit – the community. But, that afternoon brought some hope. As we had to maintain low-profiles during our inquiries within the communities and consequently had to rely upon personal networking, Loan and I had to call upon almost all of my Vietnamese connections in and out of Lào Cai, all of Loan’s direct acquaintances, and all of my Hekou contacts in town in order to identify some local informants. There was only one left to contact. Binh, Loan’s husband-to-be, had a cousin named Hue, who worked for a trading company in Lào Cai. Although she had never met her, Loan considered Hue a family member; therefore, when Loan solicited her help, Hue felt it her duty to provide us with any modest knowledge or clue she may have pertinent to our research. We invited Hue for a drink one evening; she came along with her colleague Mai. Luckily, the meeting was fruitful. Hue agreed to
introduce me to Yen, whose story I will recount later. Mai also had some possible connections. I had become used to hearing this type of encouraging response from well-intentioned persons; but, the next day invariably brought disillusionment when they suddenly changed their minds. However, this time, somewhat unexpectedly, Mai took us for a short motorbike ride up a narrow, muddy street behind the train station area’s market to meet a couple she knew. But, she worried for fear that Chau and Tuan were not exactly the informants I was looking for.

Luckily, not only did we manage to identify one couple, but they agreed to talk to me, despite the fact that the immediate neighbourhood had already started to observe us from their doorways or windows. Apparently, the couple felt they had nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Tuan, a middle-aged man who spoke Chinese and had worked for many years as a tourist guide, offered us some strong green tea and what seemed to be a complete account of his family background and marriage circumstances. But, we were interrupted several times during our conversation so had to arrange a second meeting the following day.

— I was born in 1956 in China. My grandfather and father migrated from Vietnam to Yunnan before the war [i.e., before 1945 but during the French colonization] to participate in the building of the Yunnan railway1 and they settled there. My father met my [Chinese] mother in Yunnan and stayed. She was doing some business. In 1972, when the Vietnamese government called the overseas Vietnamese back to defend their country, I ‘came back’ to Vietnam with my mother to combat the Americans. I was sent to the south of Vietnam to fight. I was injured and came back in 1974 to Lào Cai with my

1 The French built the Kunming-Hanoi railway between 1904 and 1910.
mother and my two elder brothers. I also have a young sister. Meanwhile, my father and my younger brother stayed in Kunming where they still live. My family has always maintained a Chinese life style. Before 1978, my family had a house in Lào Cai but we had to leave because of the Sino-Vietnamese war and we moved to Yên Bái until 1990. From 1979 to 1991, while established in Yên Bái, we did not speak much Chinese because it was not advised to express our Chinese identity at that time. When I moved back to Lào Cai in 1991, the family house had been destroyed but the government has allocated us new land.

While we were waiting for Tuan the next day, his wife Chau gave me an account of her marriage.

— My family comes from Vĩnh Phúc province but I was born in Yên Bái in 1962 since my father was working there that year. Because I have some cardiac problem, I had to leave school early; my bad health prevented me from pursuing my studies. I met Tuan in Yên Bái at a friend’s wedding when I was 20 years old. At first, I didn’t like Tuan because I found him too old. He asked me out for six months before I accepted to date him, and it took him six more months’ efforts before I eventually agreed to marry him a year later, in 1983. I am the youngest girl in my family. My father didn’t ask for a bride price and we celebrated our wedding according to Vietnamese tradition. After our marriage, Tuan worked as a mechanic while I was selling vegetables at the market. In 1991, when the province split into two provinces,¹ we moved to

¹ Before 1991, Lào Cai and Yên Bái formed one unique province: Hoàng Liên Sơn.
Lào Cai. In Yên Bái, he attracted more attention within the community but here and now, he’s considered as a Vietnamese man.

He never insults our children, or even me; he’s not violent and never screams at us. In that sense, he’s very different from most Vietnamese men. He never shows his feelings for me in public; we love each other discreetly. For our 21st marriage anniversary, we took a series of romantic pictures. Tuan has dreams and ambition for a better life. Before, we were poor but we wanted to improve our life, and to raise our incomes. We haven’t suffered from discrimination because we are just an ordinary family. At home, we cook Vietnamese food but there are some Chinese influences and ingredients.

We have a 23 year old son and a 16 year old daughter. She is asthmatic. Our children don’t talk much about China. They went to visit their grandfather and youngest uncle in Kunming. Our daughter learned some Chinese language but not long enough to be able to speak. I don’t speak Chinese myself, but Tuan is bilingual.

This example highlights the sensitive position of some individuals, who live in the border areas and whose complex family backgrounds impose an identity upon them to which they do not necessarily feel closely connected but which their community will refer to. Should Tuan be considered a Chinese husband or a Vietnamese husband? What aspect of him should be representative of his relationship with both countries? Were Chau and Tuan representative of the quintessential couple I was looking for? Yes and No. ‘Yes’ because they – both and together – experience a dual identity and probably, despite what they have chosen to emphasise, forms of ostracism in Vietnam. This may be due to Tuan’s ambiguous position that renders him
‘Chinese’ when this ethnic group’s presence in Vietnamese society has been periodically threatened over the last decades. As well, Tuan remains connected with Mainland China through his family, some of whom live in Yunnan, and through his work as an interpreter and a go-between between the communities. This puts him in a similar position to some Việt Kiều (overseas Vietnamese) from Europe and North America, who have resettled in Vietnam to conduct their business or reconsolidate their family links (Thai 2008). But a ‘no’ response may be accurate as well given that Tuan has fought for and lived in Vietnam since he was young, has adopted a Vietnamese life-style in his adult years, and is considered Vietnamese by his community. In reality, there is no clear perspective of couples, of two individuals who change their identity claims according to political circumstances and economic priorities.

As regards identifying informants, the issue was to distinguish individual self-identification from the community perception, and to establish how a particular marriage experience either reflects or does not reflect this identity’s ambiguity. Further to the nationality or ethnic group standpoint – Han or Kinh – the question of self-identification was more relevant when it came to deciding whether a couple could be considered party to a cross-border marriage or not. From a multi-cultural perspective, these married couples provided an enlightening insight into understanding the extension of some representations these families encounter in their society.

The process of identification of informants invariably depends upon how they are ‘labelled.’ The vernacular expression jiehun le [being married] encompassed various situations that demanded clarification from/for those who agreed to introduce me to mixed couples. The meaning of the term ‘marriage’ was also subject to some
ambiguities that needed to be constantly resolved during interaction. What does it mean to be married? If ‘marriage’ means being officially registered as a couple, I probably would not have met most of my informants. If marriage means living together as a married couple, with or without children, then most of them fitted this definition. And, if marriage means personal engagement (based on a sentimental affair or not, and involving sexual life or not) in a relationship that aims to become a documented union, then most of my informants met this criterion. But, ‘marriage’ can also mean a temporary relationship perceived and experienced as a conjugal form of association; or, ‘marriage’ can refer to a past relationship that does not show evidence of sustainability but remains a state to which some may refer when stating their personal status and position. The terms of address that an informant uses to refer to his/her spouse/partner/lover are as much indicative of the degree of involvement two persons experience as a document that could actually confirm its legality. Individuals directly involved in cross-border relationships do not necessarily define themselves in the same way that their acquaintances and social networks or communities define them, and this makes the overall picture of mixed marriage even blurrier than the simple legal/illegal alliance dichotomy initially suggested. For example, a Vietnamese woman can consider her partner as her husband if she is romantically involved with him, the two have a child, and she lives with him, irrespective of whether she is considered a second wife, a lover, a temporary partner by her ‘husband’, by one or both families, or by the community.¹ The following are a few examples illustrating how different interpretations of ‘marriage’ at the local level complicate the identification process as well affect the researcher’s position and informants’ feelings of safety.

¹ By ‘community,’ I mean acquaintances, friends, neighbours and, to a larger extent, city dwellers.
Van: the suspicion issue

In 2006, when I conducted my initial fieldwork research in Dongxing, a young Vietnamese woman, who was engaged to a Chinese man (one of my informants) introduced me to Van. Before even talking to her, I had already learned that her maternal aunt sold Van to a farmer in China when she was 17 years old. Determined to escape her harsh life, she eventually managed to return to Vietnam with her son. When we met, Van was working in a shop in Móng Cái market. She was welcoming the first day and opted to tell me her story in detail. But, her behaviour slowly and unexpectedly changed. In an attempt to respect her privacy and allow her to speak to me quietly, several times I proposed meeting her outside the market as it was too noisy and busy. Although she initially agreed with this arrangement, over the next five days she kept asking me to come back and change the locations and times of appointments. She tested my patience to the limit. And, on the eve of my departure from Dongxing, she used some unexpected workload as an excuse to cancel our interview. This case could have resulted in a failure; but, she had already exposed enough of her past the first day to arouse my curiosity. So, I decided to find out what the real problem was. That day, I met one of Van’s friends by coincidence. This woman, who I had previously interviewed, eventually exclaimed: “Van believes that you are trying to buy her child!” After my initial surprise, I sought further explanation. In my first conversation with Van, we had exchanged general information about our respective personal situations: Van had found many intriguing facts about me. I had been ‘married’ to a Chinese man for several years, I was relatively ‘old,’ was still to produce a child¹ and spent some of my holidays in the city

¹ I used the Vietnamese term Chưa, which literally means “not yet,” as the appropriate answer to the question “Do you have children?” It indicates that the question is actually not so much about the wish
– a fact that did not represent the interests of those not involved in commercial activities – if not at the nearby beach of Trà Cổ (which I had not visited). In addition, I sought to learn more about women like her, women who despite being beset by financial and family difficulties, were trying to rebuild their lives after their return from China. For Van, whatever my problem was, my hope to adopt a child could be the only genuine explanation for my long stay in a borderland where it is acknowledged that one could purchase anything – as she has learned to her cost.

What the above story primarily reveals is Van’s loss of trust in others; in her friend, who had – indirectly – introduced us, her step-mother who had indicated her store, in my assistant Loan, who had struck up a friendship with her when she first gained her confidence and, lastly, in me, the person who tried to understand her life and regularly brought her fruits to express my concern and empathy. Her suspicion may have been attributable to the marked impact of her living environment where all daily activities revolved around trade and ensuing benefits that allowed some to eat and to live more comfortably – the Vietnamese – and others to bring home some capital – the Chinese, whatever the object traded. Her youthful naivety had cost her too much: living in such surroundings had made her extremely cautious and protective of her one unique treasure: her child. In her shop that same day, reassured about my to have children but more specifically about his/her expectation according to the date of the marriage; as proof, it is often immediately followed by “How long have you been married” and general comments on the contradiction between the information disclosed. “How come? Several years of marriage and still no child?” Whether or not a woman genuinely desires to bear a child, to delay a pregnancy on purpose in order to prioritise other activities is not even considered. The purpose of a marriage is procreation.
intentions and despite her discomfort, Van told me her story. She never admitted to me personally that she had doubts about me.¹

In most cases, my own subjectivity helped me to attract the attention of my research/target groups or individuals: it motivated some to engage (and not engage) in dialogue with me. But, I underestimated how my presence in such an unusual context could be misunderstood in a society wherein people are accustomed to various forms of deceit. Here, my ‘foreign’ subjectivity proved its limits. My face and behaviour were no longer sufficiently convincing enough to validate a presumption of innocence from the perspectives of others. I left myself open to being suspected of having bad intentions, using tricks such as seduction, buying friendship and approaching family members in order to establish a familiarity that would empower me over vulnerable persons. In addition, I may have been suspected of working for a government agency seeking to identify illegal migrants. But, such misinterpretation of my actions was rarely expressed overtly. On the contrary, a conflicting figure emerged from the form of activity I pursued in the field: the social worker. In Vietnam in particular, where the presence of international NGOs is on-going, some interpreted my concern and research as part of a project related to migrants. I was sometimes asked how to improve a given situation or what sort of help and advice I could provide. The challenge here was to explain how I needed to distance myself, how unlikely it was that my academic research would prove of benefit to their personal issues, to a people struggling daily to make a living and to individuals who have a strong conception of fate.

¹ Since then, Van has become one of my most faithful informants. We have managed to see each other several times in subsequent years.
A Hua: the safety priority

I briefly met A Hua in 2006 at her apartment where I spent an evening in the company of our common friend Li, who was living in the same building. A Hua, who was in her bedroom busily playing mah-jong with some acquaintances, left us in her dark living room, paying little attention to us. There, a Vietnamese woman and her mother were resting on a large wooden couch covered with bamboo mats. They had just returned from Thanh Hóa province (northern Vietnam) and were waiting in A Hua’s apartment until the next morning when they would make their way back ‘home’ to Guangdong province. These women did not seem to be close friends of A Hua; as with us, she paid them little attention. The place looked like a transit room. By coincidence, the Vietnamese woman was married to a Chinese man and agreed to tell me her story. I left the place content with what I had mistaken for serendipity.

During dinner at Li’s place that evening, and after she started to better understand my interest in cross-border marriages, she asked if I would like to visit her neighbour A Hua without being particularly specific about the reason for her offer. I did not ask: I simply accepted and followed her; but, I could feel that Li had been hesitant about doing this earlier. I had only known her for about a week: we had both enjoyed spending time together chatting and building a new friendship. Li was very keen to talk about her Chinese husband, emphasising how their relationship was based on love “compared to other mixed couples.” I had asked her on various occasions if she would introduce me to the latter. Somewhat intriguingly, she always preferred to satisfy my curiosity with numerous accounts, explaining that she could tell me much more about these couples than what I would learn from interviewing them. But, that evening, she seemed to change her mind.
The next day, Li suggested to me that she was not sure whether or not it would be a good idea to introduce me to A Hua as she was involved in illegal activities. A Hua was a local key-person, who facilitated illegal border crossings and helped to organise extended travel within China. Consequently, the possibility of meeting migrant Vietnamese women in her apartment was rather high, including those married to Chinese men. Although Li admitted that she wanted to let me know about the place, she was reluctant to take me there on a regular basis. She was concerned about our visibility, any consequences for her own relationship with A Hua, my own position in the community, and the influence my presence could have on A Hua’s business if I started to interview people there. Obviously, there were some connections that I should avoid even though they might be relevant. I decided not to pursue the matter further.

In March 2009, when I returned to Dongxing and met Li, she and her Chinese husband had moved out of the building to another place. She mentioned that A Hua had gone through some trouble the year before: she had not seen her for a few months. As I still wished to meet her and find out more about her social role in the cross-border community in Dongxing, Li agreed to take me to her place. By chance, A Hua was just returning home and was climbing the stairs of the dark building up to her apartment. She welcomed her former neighbour’s visit. When she unlocked and opened the door, the sight that the light exposed was intriguing. Three Vietnamese women were resting on a couch: they turned and considered the newcomers with some curiosity. A Hua was not looking at anyone; but, her face clearly revealed some recent burn-marks. We sat politely and Li started to chat with her while I observed the scene. Slowly, the reason for my presence became clear. A Yong, one of the three women, isolated herself on the balcony and slowly told me her complex story, one of
a wife divorced by a Chinese man. Later, I learned from Li, who enquired about the other two in Vietnamese and Cantonese, that they were all in the same situation: unofficially married – or divorced – mothers illegally settled in China. While A Yong was talking to me, a shaven-head man appeared on the balcony to remove the clothes that were drying there. Unexpectedly, he did not greet me or even look surprised to find me there although he clearly noticed me. Soon after, Li discreetly suggested to me that we should leave. While the man was in another room of the apartment, A Hua eventually said her first direct words to me: “I could tell you my story too, there’s a lot to say! Come another day!” On our way back to her place, Li confirmed that A Hua had been brutally attacked with acid a few months earlier and that she did not dare to socialise. Although feeling sorry for A Hua, I still felt curious about her story and her activities and was keen to meet her again, since I was welcome to go back. Unfortunately, despite our repeated phone calls over the following days and attempts to arrange another meeting, A Hua remained silent, reacting the opposite way to what we had expected of her. It was three days later, after A Ying – A Hua and Li’s common friend – told us the background story of the accident, that the real issue emerged.

According to A Ying, A Hua\textsuperscript{1} had attracted the fury and jealousy of her Chinese partner’s wife. Her partner, the man we saw in her apartment, was from Guangzhou: he was married and the father of a son. Li said: “He is a former black person” indicating that he was formerly engaged in illegal activities and was once charged with falsifying identity cards and sent to prison. When he was released a few years later, he headed alone for the neighbouring Guangxi province and became established in Dalu village (which was also Li’s husband’s native village), close to

\footnote{\textsuperscript{1} A Hua’s full story will be depicted in another chapter.}
Dongxing. It was here that he met A Hua and started a relationship with her although she soon learned that he was already married and a father. They soon had a son together; but, his Chinese wife learned about their relationship and tried to end it. Her husband calmed her down by sending her some of the money that A Hua was making and sharing with him. It was not long before the wife decided to come regularly to Dongxing where the couple lived together. She rented a place above their apartment and harassed A Hua for maintaining a relationship with her husband. The threat became dire when the cheated wife asked her nephew, a young man who occasionally stayed with the couple, to make a move on her behalf. The husband had given him a key to the apartment. One morning in July 2008, before dawn, and while the husband was out picking up some customers at the border, the nephew entered the couple’s room, threw acid on A Hua’s face, and ran away. Some customers, who were also sleeping in the living room, saw him come in so he was easily identified. Luckily, A Hua was sleeping and her eyes were not injured. She managed to go to the bathroom and wash her face; but, the damage to her skin was severe. When her partner returned, he took her to the river (the border) and sent her back to Vietnam where she spent months receiving treatment in Hanoi without any financial support or even a visit from her companion. Instead, he stole all of her personal savings from a metal box she had kept secret and gave it to his Chinese wife. The nephew burned all of A Hua’s belongings. Around the end of 2008, A Hua returned to Dongxing and resumed living with her Chinese partner, whose wife had eventually decided to go back to Guangzhou and whose nephew had vanished. According to A Ying, her only cautious act, considering her new vulnerability, was to send her son to live safely in Vietnam. When we met A Hua, Li did not know all of the details of what had happened to her former neighbour but, probably based on earlier observations – upon which she opted
not to elaborate – Li had already warned me: “This man is not good, I don’t like to be around him.” Li had been perceptive enough to feel that the Chinese man had a powerful influence over A Hua and that his cold behaviour was a clear sign that we should stay away from his intimate realm. He made it quite clear that we were not welcome.

Approaching A Hua seemed easy at first: it provided me with a ‘chance’ to understand the migrating process of many Vietnamese women through the main actors’ insights. But, the consequences of this first step were intricate considering the drama A Hua had gone through and the personal position in which she found herself at the time of our meeting. Li stressed that insisting upon meeting her could render her even more vulnerable to her husband’s brutal behaviour. The man’s coldness during my previous visit was a signal, a warning that I should stay out of his life and home. He had probably asked A Hua who I was and what I wanted, since a visit from a foreigner staying in such a remote place, accompanied by an ‘insignificant’ local friend, was to say the least unusual. Li was neither an official nor even a tourist guide any longer; nor was she rich. Thus, our connection was surprising in itself. Considering his personal background, A Hua’s husband’s cautiousness was justified. He certainly did not want to put his position at risk by allowing his partner to enjoy a friendly relationship with a foreigner he had every reason to suspect. It could be that I was a journalist, who would publish details of A Hua’s plight, someone with influential connections among local organizations; or, an over curious tourist. In other words, I was a potential threat to his established business and his private power. Moreover, as we were aware of the violence that he – either directly or not – would be prepared to use to protect his interests, we needed to avoid putting A Hua into harm’s
way that is, putting her in a more difficult social position, at the same time threatening Li’s personal safety and even my own.

A Hua welcomed me twice into her home, albeit in a somewhat apathetic manner. But, she was willing to disclose more about herself and I was persuaded that gaining the trust of such an informant would enable me to extend my knowledge of border migration. A Hua’s home could have been the perfect ‘fieldwork site.’ However, it became a potentially hazardous place to frequent due to the ominous presence of her male companion. This raised ethical considerations and required the making of an appropriate choice. Li and I decided to stop trying to get in contact with A Hua, and to avoid the area she was living in for a while. A few months later, during my last stay in Dongxing, we heard from A Ying that A Hua had returned to Vietnam; but, we failed to learn in what precise circumstances she left. Was it temporary? Was she forced to leave? Did she make a decision on her own? The questions remain unanswered.

4 Collecting data despite impediments

The angle of approach: negotiating the intimacy realm

Yan (2003) and Jankowiak (1993) have both conducted extensive research into the realms of marriage, sexuality and intimacy in China. While Yan was a native of his fieldwork, Jankowiak was a welcome foreigner. Their challenge was to establish a trusting relationship that would enable informants to communicate with the researcher about subjects that would otherwise remain in the bedrooms and in domestic life’s space. The sites and peoples of the Sino-Chinese borderlands represent
a challenge as far as discussion of mixed marriages is concerned. But, an additional issue lies in the fact that the foundations of the involved couples remain controversial. Hence, in my case, in the interests of remaining inconspicuous and keeping social face, most of them found it difficult to open their doors to my inquiries. They needed to articulate their relationships in what they considered to be an acceptable form before even thinking of disclosing any ‘in-depth’ material about their intimate lives. Fortunately, several men and women agreed to provide – sometimes for the very first time – straightforward and/or detailed accounts of their experiences. There were rare cases where I was able to collect the narratives of both wife and husband, to compare them and distinguish each one’s perspective. However, I also heard different viewpoints regarding the one marriage, either from family members or acquaintances. Anticipation of this difficult process required me to compromise regarding the collection of accurate data on cross-border marriages. Since first-hand life-stories were rare and failed to provide a comprehensive picture of numerous aspects of the phenomenon, I opted to take a closer look at second-hand stories, which were essential for completing the primary information. In Hekou, Dongxing, Móng Cái and to a lesser extent Lào Cai, some regular informants provided me with accounts of friends, neighbours or acquaintances, who had related their experiences or whose stories were widely told and commented upon among the community. Analysis of these various sources required extreme caution and distancing, information exchange and a degree of perspicacity. But, as I demonstrate in Chapter 5, the aim of the study slowly varied from attempting to ascertain the exact circumstances of each marriage in order to understand the relevance of the human trafficking discourse to the whole phenomenon, to revealing forms of social exclusion through an understanding of the foundation and consequences of specific marital choices. In this regard, focusing on
first-hand stories, as well as on collective accounts of well-known stories, proved more complementary than contradictory. The case of A Hua, for example, showed how sensitively one must approach individuals involved in illegal activities and vulnerable to potential threat. Due in the main to her acquaintance’s account of a story she could not tell me herself, A Hua’s reality emerged so eloquently that I became interested in second-hand stories, rumour, and accounts of individuals who I sometimes never met, never interacted with nor even saw. Wynn (2007) has also reflected on the relevance of exploring multiple viewpoints of a social fact or specific story, including the most dubious ones, in order to identify any hidden aspects:

I came to realize that I did not need to develop and administer some sort of quantitative survey that would reveal the actual activities that Gulf Arab tourists engaged in and break them down according to percentage of tourists who engaged in each act, thereby proving or disproving Egyptian stereotypes about the association between Gulf tourists and prostitution. Rumors, gossip, and urban myths do not have to be proved or disproved to qualify as social facts. It may be true that some Gulf Arabs come to Egypt for sex, drinking, and other activities prohibited in their own countries – though it is also certainly true that many do not come to Egypt for such purposes. But their actual activities are almost beside the point, since the vast majority of Egyptians who talk about Arabs coming to Egypt for sex and prostitution have not actually seen any proof of this themselves. So the question then becomes: in the absence of proof or even evidence that this is what Arabs come to Egypt for, why do these rumors circulate and why are they so widely believed? (Wynn 2007: 134, original emphasis).

Drawing on Wynn’s findings vis-à-vis the role of imagination in the process of account production, I argue that while first-hand stories tend to present an acceptable or somewhat partial version of certain facts, second-hand stories may reveal social core issues, stigma and certain main elements that may be concealed by concerned individuals. These are social facts, irrespective of whether they come first hand, are second-hand, personal accounts or an amalgam of hearsay and interpretation. Yet, the methodology concern lies in the value that should be attributed to accounts reported by a third party on an individual to whom specific stories or circumstances call attention. Further discussion will follow in Chapter 4 where I will explore how these
endlessly transmitted tales translate hidden fears and the actual confusion surrounding the various changes of society.

**Playing cat and mouse: into the snowball game**

When I explained that I was conducting *tianye kaocha* (fieldwork research), the local people interpreted it as *shehui diaocha* (social investigation), an activity they were more familiar with since it remains a tool of the bureaucracy (Pieke 2000: 147). But, since I was unaccompanied by an official, I had to respond to inquiries by diminishing the bureaucratic activity that the above terms imply and emphasising the almost casual observation of daily life that it actually meant for me. Although this situation made some informants more disposed to talk, others became more reluctant because they were uncertain of what would happen to their confidences. Various attitudes depended upon each person’s legal position, on their degree of connection with the local authorities, their familiarity with the person who introduced us, and the extent of their trust in me. For all these reasons, the sample of informants as representative cannot be fully guaranteed, although I believe it remains significant enough to represent a community, a goal very difficult to reach for the very reason that it hardly constitutes a clearly connected community.

Due to the sensitivity of my research topic from the perspectives of local authorities, communities and my own positionality, I found it convenient to adopt the snowball sampling method to identify mixed couples. Women’s connections proved the most reliable and effective, although in most cases this required the taking of many steps in the process of establishing trusting relationships, as indicated in the sample previously mentioned. However the difficulties encountered in establishing
the relevant network reflected the will of many to remain anonymous, disengaged from public debate and invisible as far as local scrutiny was concerned. This resulted in confounding attitudes. There were those among my contacts who initially claimed to know numerous cases and promised to introduce me accordingly but who gradually ‘forgot’ the details, lost the people’s phone numbers, or felt awkward contacting them. There were also those who initially claimed not to know any couples of ‘this sort’ but who gradually recovered their lost memories and took me to interesting informants’ homes telling me numerous stories en route. These forms of behaviour may indicate how involved a person can become in others’ eyes when revealing community embarrassment or awkward issues. “You are stirring up local scandals!” a Chinese man from Daxin village, Guangxi once warned me: he started helping me but suddenly changed his mind, rejecting any further enquiry.

Even though after almost a year of fieldwork research and life-stories collecting I had covered several crucial aspects of the phenomenon of local cross-border marriages, there were still missing data that only other channels would allow me to access. Due to this limitation, I sought recourse to non-academic sources that provided me with additional stories with which to evaluate and compare ‘mine.’ Cases of human trade in the border region have regularly attracted Vietnamese and Chinese media attention over the last two decades, attention that continues to persist.¹ News agencies’ articles also afford some alternative insights into the phenomenon of cross-border marriages, even though the dramatic gaze that these stories emphasise often leaves social complexities out of the equation. Nevertheless, given that they

¹ One of the latest cases was reported by the Xinhua agency in August 2011: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-08/21/c_131063406.htm; http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/102780/7575827.html
translate the official interpretation of these marriages and nourish their image with 
public discourse, I have included some of these accounts in my sources. Various 
reports issued by governmental and non-governmental agencies on the issue of human 
trafficking also provide significant insight into issues that various cross-border 
exchanges bring to the realm of human rights, legality and social stability.

5 Taking off the mask: words and emotions

Once I identified someone who had viewpoints on mixed marriage that she/he 
was willing to share or who agreed to articulate a lifetime narrative or a short 
experience, sometimes the emotion factor emerged making it challenging for both the 
informant/s and myself. In some cases, the revealing of details of a controversial 
intimate life brought an awkward feeling to the emergent dialogue. This was 
particularly the case with Chinese men when asked to talk about their marriages, 
partners or families. Conceptualising intimacy is not something that they do ordinarily 
in a society wherein expression of a man’s personality is projected through his 
qualities, work ability, economic power and social connections rather than through his 
familial position or personal fulfilment.

In contemporary China, as far as masculinity is concerned, actions prevail over 
words. The disclosure of inner feelings and personal emotions does not really comply 
with such a normative model of manhood. When a man confides in someone, his 
disclosure tends to remain in the intimate realm: it is not talked about in 
acquaintances’ circles or in the public space. This model emphasises the articulation 
of masculinity in performative social settings wherein one’s sexual services 
consumption, drinking and smoking ability have become the means, and networking
skills – or the ability to manage both professional and familial responsibilities equally – the results.

In other words, as far as my informants were concerned, their inconspicuousness and reluctance to elaborate on any topic related to intimacy – even though they were encouraged – revealed a general lack of the communication tools required to achieve this in a sincere way under unusual circumstances. Whereas young migrant women, e.g., those described in a recent article by Ma and Cheng (2005), learn new ways of talking about intimacy and sexuality in the experimental environment that cities and their practices provide them with, rural and newly urbanised men are not necessarily exposed to such explicit language. Thus, they experience difficulty learning, articulating personal yearnings, frustrations, pleasures and/or any other intimate feelings. Smiling, joking, changing the discussion topic, and sending me to their wives or friends were tactics employed by all of my male informants to avoid disclosing their personal lives, especially to a Western women, and, in many cases, in the presence of their fellow males. Sharing his innermost thoughts would have embarrassed the man whose face was already exposed by his conjugal choice. Hence, concerns such as social face, shame or modesty also interfere with the fluidity of emerging confidences vis-à-vis persons’ private lives (Yan 2003), things that people do not ordinarily and easily reflect upon. As a result, more often than not, my male informants remained either extremely vague or positive: “Everything is normal, just like other couples;” “My wife and I have a good relationship;” and, “We experience a few cultural differences but we adjust to each other.” Another reason for lack of detail or a more subjective articulation of feelings lay in the fact that my own identity gave me easier access to the women’s sphere, excluding me at the same time from the world of males where I was perceived as
more obtrusive. “My wife has told you everything about our marriage, what else can I add?” “You’d better talk to her, she has more to complain about” or “Women know how to talk about these things. I don’t know what to tell you.” Thus, while men were more inclined to provide facts, dates, places and information about the material aspects of a relationship, women were more discursive and tended to let the flow of words – to let their emotions dominate their narrative. A story telling could then become a long and chaotic process wherein bringing up memories or current issues involved self-censorship, disruption as well as suffering.

Every day during my time in Dongxing I spent hours in a small street coffee shop owned by my local friend Xiao Fang. Her shop was located at the entrance of a shopping hall in which Vietnamese tourists purchased Chinese goods during their visits to Dongxing. This was a spot from which I could observe Vietnamese tourists’ behaviour, Chinese sellers’ responses, and the general interactions between the two groups while sipping on delicious handmade Vietnamese coffee. Xiao Fang, who defined herself as a huaqiao [overseas Chinese], can speak Vietnamese, the Eastern Guangxi Cantonese dialect baihua¹ and the standard Chinese putonghua. Apart from knowing how to make proper Vietnamese coffee, she also knew about Vietnamese tourists’ tastes and financial limits: many found her shop an attractive place for their morning rest.² Our exchanges were always very informative. One night, through Xiao Fang’s motivation to help me and share some of her numerous acquaintances with me, I met Nguyet, a middle-aged Vietnamese woman, who willingly recounted her

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¹ Although sharing the same appellation, the spoken Cantonese dialect baihua is not to be confused with the written Chinese baihua, which is based on vernacular Chinese and was adopted in the early 20th century to become modern standard Chinese.

² Xiao Fang’s shop and the shopping hall are no longer there.
marriage experience (cf. Appendix 1). In the evenings, when the shopping hall closed, evening life activities transformed the space. Street sellers, who were usually devoted to parking tourist mini-buses during the daytime, turned it into a *shaokao* [barbecue] night market specialising in seafood. Nguyet, and a female Vietnamese friend, worked for their local boss at one of the stalls. When the latter understood why Nguyet had been spending so much time talking to me, in a somewhat emotional way she spontaneously introduced herself when I arrived at Xiao Fang’s coffee shop the next evening. I was waiting for Nguyet to continue our earlier conversation, but we were constantly interrupted by clients’ arrivals. Nguyet’s friend said:

— My name is Quy, I am Vietnamese and I was sold to China when I was young. I want to write a book on my story [she apparently knew what I was doing]. I can tell you about my life, and I can also tell you about many other Vietnamese women in this case.

Although I felt that there may have been a hidden motive behind this sudden expression of trust, such a spontaneous offer was indeed welcome after weeks of searching for informants in different places around the border which invariably proved fruitless. I asked her to go on. I was – for once – openly taking notes. She was talking rapidly.

— I was born in Haiphong; I was sold in Lạng Sơn, and then resold at Pingxiang, then again in Nanning. Eventually, a man from Guangdong bought me. It was in 1989, I was 23 years old. Now, I am 41.¹ After high school

¹ Like most Vietnamese people, she added one year to her actual age. In Vietnam, the year of gestation counts: a child is already considered to be one year old when he/she is born. She was then 40 years old and was probably sold at the age of 22.
graduation, I joined the army and became a bô đạo [soldier] for three years.

Then I married and had two children, a girl and a boy. But, my son died at the age of five from pneumonia. I then left my husband and spent ten years in Nanning. Today, I am remarried.

She was recalling facts in the same order as they came to mind. Her code-switching from Chinese to Vietnamese made it difficult to follow her narrative. Fortunately, my local friend Li (mentioned earlier in this chapter) accompanied me that night and was sitting at my side listening. She later completed Quy’s account of her life:

— Quy had a fiancé in 1989. She came from a wealthy family in Vietnam and her family did not agree to her marriage: he was apparently too poor. So, she decided to come to the border to do some business.¹ But, she had been cheated – she didn’t say how – and she became married with a Chinese man in Guangdong. The man was poor and couldn’t find a wife. She had two children. Her son died, so she abandoned her daughter and fled to Nanning where she worked ten years at her gugu’s² restaurant. Then, she came back to Dongxing from where she returned to Hải Dương province for six months. There, people laughed at her, disregarded her. So, she left again for Saigon [Ho Chi Minh city] to trade before she came back to Dongxing to make some money. But, she missed her daughter left in Guangdong: she loves her a lot. Her husband wanted her back too. But, she found another husband. She said

¹ The year 1989 saw the reopening of the border between China and Vietnam (although the official agreement was signed in 1991) and border-trade start to recover from a few inactive decades.

² Gugu is the referral term for one’s father’s sister. This suggests that Quy had some Vietnamese family members settled in Nanning.
“Zhe shi wo de ming, suan le ba [this is my fate, whatever]!” This man is very jealous and she doesn’t like that. Her daughter is 16 years old now.

Quy agreed to meet me again to provide me with more details of her story. But, a week later, when she saw me at Xiao Fang’s café, she opted not to come over to greet me. She obviously had no more interest in talking to me. Xiao Fang shared her opinion of Quy’s behaviour with me as follows:

— Quy knows that Nguyet came to you several times to tell you her own story. It was not easy…. she cried, you remember? But she didn’t ask for anything in return. Quy is different. She has understood that disclosing her past won’t bring her any money, so she just ignores you now. She’ll never find time to talk now!

Sometimes, emotion seemed easier to express in the narrator’s native language (mother tongue) and in the context of an interview, which was so tense or emotional, it required letting the narrative flow in the native language. Nguyet and Quy, both in their own way, spoke rapidly, inferring a state of urgency; in other words, in ‘one go.’ Often, an interview would commence in Chinese, then continue in Vietnamese, a form of code-switching facilitating ease and intimacy that made translation easier. I had few opportunities to interrupt: and, I knew that there was no possibility of recreating the setting and atmosphere of an encounter. Hence, loss of information, the accuracy of some accounts, the detailed use of language, and the choice of vocabulary were difficult to collect and/or evaluate. The bias that accompanies these particular types of life-story accounts was unavoidable. Attaching an equal degree of importance to these portrayals as one would to those collected in a more participant-observation way over time proved sufficiently valuable for they revealed much more than simply
the actual background of a person. To various degrees, they all portrayed fear, stigma, sorrow, loneliness and a search for understanding. Therefore, many of the stories I gathered during my fieldwork lack numerous details that could have helped me better understand these individuals’ life building. What I wish to emphasise with this particular example is how some stories were difficult to explore since they relied so heavily upon the specific context in which they were told. However, the shady zones can also be taken into account as reflective of what the informant him/herself felt important to disclose or not to disclose; that is, what makes sense in a life process. Therefore, lack of accuracy, far from being an obstacle, becomes a source of information about the untold, the hidden, the sensitive and meaningless according to the local approach of the subject.

The emotional aspect of this fieldwork places it in line with other works in the field of anthropology of emotion. In their introduction to a collective volume on marriage in Asia, Cauquelin and Choron-Baix (2000: 13) sketch its outlines by arguing that giving a voice to the intimate world of individuals and acknowledging the complexity of their articulation contribute to the construction of the anthropology of emotion, especially in this region of the world. Like the contributors to this volume, who coped with silence, restraint and ideological pressure when establishing dialogues with their informants, I too experienced that keeping alive certain degrees of emotional closeness between an informant and ethnographer helped surmount these obstacles. Importantly, such intimacy was easier to create with women due to cultural codes that limit inter-gender connection. In addition, as suggested earlier, language was an obvious limitation. The requirement to articulate feelings in Mandarin Chinese posed a considerable difficulty for some Vietnamese women and even for some Chinese men. In Hekou, Vietnamese women were more familiar with the local
Yunnan dialect, while in Dongxing and its surrounds they mostly spoke baihua. Mandarin was only a secondary Chinese language for them. For those Chinese men who were not originally from the area, or whose mother tongue was baihua or an ethnic language such as Zhuang, communicating on such a level of privacy in Mandarin represented an additional challenge. Hence, even with the help of a Vietnamese translator or a local Chinese friend, limited vocabulary and lack of subtlety resulted in a simplified narrative, rather different from what the informants could have produced had they, in their own opinion, been able to talk in their native language.

Apropos of the snowball networking that exposed a sensitive context and questioned social positionality, I argue that a combination of language, emotiveness and psychological obstacles revealed a mask that many of those involved in mixed marriages tend to wear. What looked like a cat and mouse game between the ethnographer and informants emerged as a particular form of reciprocation that limited one’s ability to conduct successful fieldwork; but, these strategies eventually served my analysis of the phenomenon by revealing the untold and the awkward, the things that people wanted to keep secret at the same time as they revealed other details about themselves.

6 Dealing with hindrances: the ‘tools’ of the improvised tactics

Finally on the subject of methodology, addressing the emotional aspect of this fieldwork experience leads me to the role of the interpreter. He/she represents a key-person in the process of identifying informants and building reliable relationships
with them. Scott et al. highlight the relevance of the interpreter’s positionality when carrying out research in Vietnamese rural communities:

The significance of positionality and status is sharply revealed in the researcher-interpreter relationship. The literature on ethnographic fieldwork has become increasingly sensitive in recent years to issues of the researcher’s positionality. Yet, to the extent that an interpreter is used … most accounts of researchers working in cross-cultural contexts brush aside the positionality of the field assistant or interpreter. This is a serious omission, since factors such as age, gender, regional and class background, and prejudices such as attitudes towards women, the poor or ethnic minorities, can play a huge role in shaping interactions between the researcher, interpreter and research subjects, and the nature of the data obtained. …When working in rural areas or with disadvantaged communities we realised the importance of having interpreters who have some understanding of, or empathy for, research participants (Scott et al. 2006: 36-37).

I have mentioned earlier in this chapter the presence of my Vietnamese translator during parts of the fieldwork. Loan’s engagement with my research project was invaluable inasmuch as it allowed me to approach informants. She was not afraid of border areas, was interested in these women’s life experiences and had not received any training in the social sciences. She maintained a very neutral position and was very respectful of each person we met. Furthermore, she also built some trusting and friendly relationships with some of them, transforming this effort into a social experience that she admitted she would not have enjoyed otherwise. I was lucky to have known this young person, who possesses high human values and sensitivity which, in my opinion, are much more valuable than any formal ethnographic training. She paved the initial path that I was to follow alone during the additional fieldwork I undertook in the area. It was because most people remembered and trusted her that I was able to approach them again. Her presence and her way of establishing a connection between some of the women and the two of us helped to assuage the difficult positions we sometimes found ourselves in. But, when disclosure meant exposure to distress, when recalling memories led to tears – a disguised call for empathy/help – Loan acted as a buffer.
Here the interpreter became the necessary intermediary between the narrative structured by emotion and the need for objectivity and distance required by the researcher. As Spencer observes, emotion retrieved from the margins of the practices of ethnography might help scholars to better understand the experiences and emotions that they try to capture through empathetic listening. Anthropologists “explore emotions in terms of how we might develop an understanding, a sense of the people and the field and learn through them” (Spencer 2010: 16). However, emotional engagement in the field affects the researcher: I personally found the presence of an interpreter shielded me from excessive and disturbing emotion that had already influenced my seeking of a fair balance between detachment and involvement. Informing a reality with emotional reflexivity was certainly inevitable; but, in some cases, an intermediary between the articulation of intimate pain and the ‘appreciation’ of it through words helped as a safeguard for analysis. Breaking the rhythm of word flow with necessary translation allowed some informants to momentarily step aside from their own emotions, to pause, and to ease their articulation of a coherent account from which interpretation could emerge. Informant-assistants and empathic interpreters often act as ‘sponges of emotion.’ In that sense, I argue that their involvement should not be merely acknowledged for the communication they allow us to establish with the subjects we plan to examine. Beside the linguistic and social skills they provide us with, and in cases of emotionally charged exchanges, they also prevent us from being affected because their personal commitment enables them to capture the nature of a narrative, to buffer emotions, and to release the narrative to our ears in a way ‘delivered’ from its affective envelope. A story, experience or feeling is not only a substance; the way it is eventually disclosed counts as much as what it says.
The core methods I used when collecting the above life stories included crosschecking, external and participant observation of domestic and public interaction, guided interviews and/or informal discussions on a specific topic. But, on a more pragmatic level, it proved nigh impossible to take notes openly during conversations, except for a few exceptional cases in which there was either ‘nothing to hide’ or enough trust between the informant and myself to pursue this particular – and sometimes delicate – process. This seemingly haphazard method turned out to be less intrusive and more respectful of the familiarity people allowed us to enjoy, even though it led to the loss of certain elements when my memory failed to record all of the details of an exchange. Most of the discussions and interviews occurred in semi-conducted mode. Due to the difficulty involved in talking about ‘intimate’ subjects – and my use of this term does not necessarily imply sexuality but simply feelings – I let each person choose to tell me what seemed important or relevant about the marital relationship in which he/she was involved or the one he/she had something to say about. This made our communication easier and less inquisitive: it induced some to confess much more than they initially intended to. But, this ‘presentation of self’ also revealed what should be hidden or avoided in relation to the image each wished to preserve. Hence, as mentioned earlier, the very core of the stigma and uneasiness engendered in the public’s imagination by these cross-border marriages arose from narratives including those not spoken aloud. Notwithstanding, in-depth data related to intimate practices, relationships between spouses and children or in-laws, and domestic life details are missing from these accounts and observations. Although my primary focus is not upon describing intimate spaces’ lives, I acknowledge that this would have brought some crucial elements of understanding to the discussion. In his recent studies of young migrants in Vietnam, Hy Van Luong (forthcoming) underlines
the implications of differences in the narratives of family members for research methodology. He emphasises that the ways in which a family or a young person explain the choice of migration often reveal how “…[The] hiding of moral failures or under-reporting of morally questionable behavior in the presentation of self to the public is common in numerous societies.” Parents may explain the choice of migration as a solution to their child’s idleness or to their economic difficulties while at the same time omitting the same child’s yearning for emancipation and his/her own private circumstances. In addition, these factors, which are ignored or dismissed by elders, may as well be understated by a youth, for example, who may prefer to emphasise filial piety/duty and the sacrifice he is prepared to make for the sake of the whole family’s wellbeing. Unfortunately, even though Hy Van Luong stresses that “research only with migrants or with their family members at home runs a high risk of oversimplifying reality,” accessing the whole range of individuals connected with a marriage decision, a couple’s life, or a family’s position was not a realistic option under the conditions surrounding my fieldwork. However, following Hy Van Luong’s approach, my work seeks to call attention to the diversity of discourses that surround one’s migration, marriage or decisions regarding one’s household. It will underline the distinction between individual narratives and community discourse and the importance of taking them both into consideration when attempting to achieve a fair analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter provided insights into the constraints I found myself facing in two authoritarian countries both before and during my pursuance of this research
project, which focuses upon a particularly sensitive subject. Drawing on other researchers’ experiences when undertaking fieldwork research in China and Vietnam, I explicate how I took advantage of the perceived lack of interest and lack of expertise of the local research institutions to negotiate my access to the field through personal connections. While doing so, I also emphasise the possibility – and necessity – to avoid official protocols when studying a politically-charged social phenomenon. This chapter also stresses the approach of the research topic. This study of cross-border alliances focuses less upon the nature of mixed marriages, cross-cultural couples and their life experiences (domestic, intimate and sexual – given that my informants and their communities did not always ease my access to these very personal spheres of their private lives) and more upon the reflections and controversies these alliances generate. Thus, taking advantage of unavoidable obstacles, this thesis will describe this social phenomenon by including an innovative perspective; that is, focus is upon public discourse rather than on the facts themselves. These various voices will lead to representations/perceptions of mixed-couples’ lives and will enlighten/complement the narratives of individuals, who often reflect the frames of belief to which they adhere, either compulsorily or constructed.
Chapter 2  
Borderlands: A chaotic shore for castaways

Introduction

Map 1: The Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, and the Hekou/Lào Cai & Dongxing/Móng Cái border gates  
(United States Central Intelligence Agency 1988)

The cities of Hekou and Dongxing, which represent two of the three main Chinese entrances to Vietnam, are both located on the Sino-Vietnamese border from where they face their respective twin cities of Lào Cai and Móng Cái. Because they function as international border gates, local residents have become accustomed to seeing foreigners on a daily basis. Since I became familiar with both places during earlier journeys, choosing these sites over others was deliberate on my part. Pingxiang, the third international gate of this border, had already attracted the attention of anti-human trafficking activists and journalistic investigation during the first decade of the 2000s. I was curious to explore the reported phenomena and related topics such as cross-border marriages: this meant extending my investigation further.
east to the coast of Guangxi and further west to Yunnan. I intuitively believed that eschewing the infamous reputation of Pingxiang and focusing more upon the reality would help me to obtain a more realistic, less biased picture of human trafficking, a paradigm my research initially began with (cf. Introduction).

Border towns have a particularly significant position in terms of migration and transition. People come, return, end up, exchange, pass by and/or settle in these places, irrespective of whether they originated from rural or urban regions or of the purpose of their initial projects. In order to understand how borderlands and border towns have become the theatre of specific human exchange and how they condition the perception of cross-border marriages, in this chapter I will first sketch the historical and sociological backgrounds of the four sites wherein the phenomenon evolved and gradually became visible. Then, I will outline how border towns are perceived as chaotic and challenging because of their changing nature. This portrait will highlight the trajectories of those yearning individuals who activate, participate in and contribute to such places’ reputations.

1 Geographical background: the location

Towards Hekou: 10 September 2008, ambiance and acquaintances

There are two official ways of travelling to Hekou: one – from China – is by road and requires driving all the way from Kunming, through Mengzi, down to the Vietnamese border; the other – from Vietnam – is by foot, and requires crossing the bridge that separates Hekou from its Vietnamese twin city of Lào Cai. Either way provides the visitor with the same entry sights of this ancient, fluvial port, a very
active albeit somewhat small place clearly a hub of cross-border trade. Hekou includes various districts apparently delimited by their main activity, either devoted to international trade, local shopping, habitations, new development areas, administration or to a mélange of all of the above.

Although I had visited the area two and a half years earlier, this was my first fieldwork trip to Hekou. I decided to make it a daylight trip so that I could observe any changes in the region as I travelled along the Kunming-Hekou road. It took ten hours of non-stop Hong-Kong movies, pop-music and a packed public bus to eventually arrive at dusk at the little bus station, following a long wait at the ‘Border Control Post’ located approximately ten kilometres from the city. There, border officers checked every passenger’s ID and registered every foreigner’s passport data. Relieved from the omnipresence of the loud fighting sounds and unbearable dialogue
of poor quality movies that managed to distract me from my initial aim of quietly enjoying the landscape, I collected my bag from the boot of the bus and walked with some relief through the bus station gate. The familiar main street, the warm, humid air and the electric lights brought back flows of memories of my previous stay. My sense of orientation has always been somewhat poor; but, my hours of wandering in the narrow streets of this little town two years earlier helped me to find my way to the guesthouse I used to stay in, which was located thirty metres away. The dynamic nature of China’s cities sees them change so rapidly that one can never take for granted finding a place again, even after a few months of absence. Still the first of its kind along the long Shangmao Street, the guesthouse offers small, very basic and very cheap accommodation for local travellers. Its neon sign standing on the pavement explicitly provided details of day-rent or hour-rent rooms tariffs. This is one among many similar private hotels available to local tourists and businessmen – “not suitable for foreigners, especially women” I was often warned – mostly occupied by men, and closely connected with local brothels. I had no idea if this guesthouse would still be there, given the constant changes occurring today in virtually everything in China, particularly business. But, it had remained open; nowadays, a mah-jong salon occupied the ground floor. The Sichuanese boss greeted me warmly and loudly and, without even asking, took me straight to ‘my room.’ It was in exactly the same condition as it was the last time I occupied it: maybe six square meters, a small bed, an old colour TV, an electric fan, an open window that does not close, vaguely covered by a dirty curtain that would not protect me from the mosquitoes, an even smaller bathroom, as clean as it could be, the same old broken tap and the occasional cockroach as a roommate. But, the sheets were clean; it was as much as I needed. As before, it was never quiet at night. And, as the guesthouse is located adjacent to the
customs building, it became even noisier in the mornings. Around daybreak, some Vietnamese women, who found the space just below my window convenient for loading all their goods onto their bikes, regularly woke me up. The only difference from my former stay was the atmosphere. A local drama had occurred on the spot: a Chinese man had killed a Vietnamese man. A neighbour told me later that: “The Vietnamese guy was stabbed because he tried to cheat his money-exchange customer.” These things happen in Hekou: it was not the only time I would hear about murders, fights or people disappearing.

It was already late: I needed some exercise after such a long journey. So, embarking on a food-hunting trek, I decided to see if Lien, one of my former Vietnamese informants, was still in her shop. When I go back to a known place in China, it has become a sort of ritual to first check what has or has not changed. As expected, the main street along the local market was very lively; shops were still open, and guesthouse managers were waiting for customers’ glances at their prices advertised on the numerous neon signs. But, someone else now occupied Lien’s former shop. However, her neighbour recognised me and invited me into her shop for a chat. A Mei, a young woman from Guangxi province, had just delivered her baby when I met her in 2006. She briefly updated me regarding her personal situation: a very turbulent – sometimes violent – relationship with her husband from Zhejiang, a missed three year old daughter, who lived with her grand-parents far away, a not-so-good garment business in Hekou, all-in-all a boring life. Obviously very happy to complain about all of her tribulations to fresh and compassionate ears, she asked if I was looking for Lien and gave her a phone call. While we were waiting for Lien to collect me, A Mei brought me up to date with the latest news:
— Lien doesn’t make any business next-door now; she opened a new shop in the market. It’s a business like another you know, everyone has to earn a living! She is still living with her boyfriend A Long, but I don’t know why they haven’t got married yet. With money, you can obtain whatever you want though; they have some, but their situation is still the same. She doesn’t have children either.

Figure 1: The ground shops of the Vietnamese Market at night (Grillot 2010)

The elegant Lien finally arrived, smiling as she sat astride her new electric-bike. She was surprised but seemed happy to see me. I had lost contact with her, as was the case with many other informants. People in China often change their mobile phone numbers according to the latest phone company best deals, their migration and their own needs, especially in terms of ‘relevant connections.’ Thus, unless one adopts the popular habit of regularly calling each other for no particular reason but to keep in touch and to update contact numbers, it is hard to sustain a distant relationship with anyone long-term. When Lien asked me if I had already eaten – the customary
way of greeting an acquaintance – I politely lied to avoid an invitation to a nearby night restaurant, which would have delayed the satisfaction of sating my curiosity. Reassured, she took me for a very short ride to her ‘new shop’ inside the only space I had never before had the chance to explore: the notorious and infamous second floor of the Vietnamese market. Without any transition other than a long and tiring bus journey and a quick chat with a young frustrated business woman, I had translocated from a morning cuddle with my one year old son – who, for convenient reasons I opted to leave behind in Kunming with his father – to the very different kinds of embraces that I was to observe around me that night. Lien and A Long were now running a brothel. Pretending that I had not noticed – or at least was not surprised by – the difference between selling hair slides and young bodies’ sexual services, I sat on the wooden sofa inside the shop, had a discreet look around, and then started to chat with my friend, all the while being observed by several curious young, dressed-up ladies. I explained to Lien that my reasons for not keeping contact over last years were because I became a mother; as well, I had returned to my studies. I showed her a few pictures of my beloved son and said that this time I intended to stay longer in Hekou to learn more about mixed couples. Lien updated me on her life with A Long:

— A Long and I are still together; this hasn’t changed. Only our business did. The former one was not doing so well and we opened this place two years ago. Business is not that good either but everyone has to try something, right? I would like to run another business though, sometime soon, we’ll see. Do you remember A Luo? He also got married with a Vietnamese woman; he runs a shop over there now [she pointed at another brothel ten meters away]. Now, you can interview him as well.
I had not forgotten A Luo, the couple’s ‘good fellow.’ Two years ago, he was still wondering what sort of business he could invest in. He told me then that he was not interested in managing a hotel or a brothel because “it’s too much trouble and not really moral;” but, he had a vague idea of selling solar panels. The point was that he had no funding. But then Lien became distracted. She was talking but at the same time keeping an eye on her ‘girls.’ I had arrived at the busiest time of the evening: the appearance of potential clients at the top of the stairs next to her shop constantly interrupted our conversation. Her brothel, like most of the others, consisted of a small salon, with an even smaller bedroom, a tiny kitchen, a narrow bathroom at the back of the shop, and an inner mezzanine room for receiving clients. The brothel was located on a privileged spot, right at the corner where visitors emerged from the ground floor, ready to be ‘captured’ and literally pushed inside a parlour, almost straight up the hidden stairs and into bed by one of the attractive and reckless Vietnamese women, who waited all day long in the inside balcony of the building. I noticed how at ease my friend was interacting with the male passers-by. She eventually asked:

— Why don’t you come for lunch tomorrow? I’ll have free time then…

As I left the place, promising I would come, I almost ran into customers who were being firmly pulled into the fake ‘hair-salon’ by one of Lien’s girls.
 Aware that I sometimes visited her former neighbour and not-so-close-anymore friend A Mei, Lien confided a few months later:

— Did you hear about A Mei’s lover? Did she tell you? He was an old Chinese man¹ who had a lot of money and who used to date her regularly in hotels. Well, he died from a heart attack recently, in mysterious circumstances. He was found in his hotel room with A Mei. Everybody knows about this. Her husband was so ashamed, he was afraid of gossip, so he escaped and returned to his hometown. Don’t believe what she says! Her husband has been very good to her but she openly disrespected him and… See what happens now?

These forms of relationships, which are marked by fragility and confusing impermanence, are quickly palpable in such an atmosphere. These first encounters

¹ The man was in his forties, an age that Lien considered old given the fact that A Mei was only in her twenties.
illustrate several aspects of my fieldwork. It was not unusual that within a few months, even weeks, people who used to meet on a daily basis, to work together or to regularly share home meals, were no longer close acquaintances. Thus, in this context, it was ‘normal’ that the delicate Lien chose to manage a brothel to earn money, it was ‘normal’ that A Luo contradicted his claimed values by his act, and it was ‘normal’ that friends became suspect neighbours. I often learned more about individuals’ personal stories from people on the side than from the informants themselves. This gradually induced me to reflect more upon social aspects such as face, dignity, pride and shame, which framed and limited any interaction I had with those who obviously occupied a rather marginal position within their communities. It also demonstrated how various types of public discourse – including gossip – reveal widespread assumptions, i.e., what social representations mean in such a unique setting of competition for social and economic position wherein individuals continuously manage life-style choices and temporary alliances that sometimes seem to occur regardless of what their society would consider as *daode* [moral] in a different setting.

When I had a chance to talk to A Long after I visited Lien’s brothel, I asked him:

— What do your parents think about your new activity?

— Of course they don’t know! They would never accept that! We told them we changed our activity but we didn’t say what it was, just ‘business.’

Two years later, when I visited my friends Lien and A Long, I realised that the latter’s mother was taking care of their newly-adopted child on a daily basis within the brothel:

— Now that your mother understands what your business is about, what does she think?
— Well, at first, we called her, we explained we had a baby, and she wanted to come. We said it would not be very suitable, and she asked why. When we explained about the girls, she was not very happy but she wanted to come anyway. We did not discuss this after she arrived, but she fits into the environment now, she accepts, she knows it’s temporary. She doesn’t know much about Vietnamese people anyway…

A Long’s mother came from Eastern China, which today is a developed and opened-up area; but, she belonged to a generation who had experienced Maoism and sexual repression (Zhang 2005) and this had certainly not prepared her to accept seeing her only son managing a brothel. For A Long, however, this was easier than asking her to accept considering an even more sensitive issue: an adopted baby. A Long’s intention to hide this fact from his mother reflects the new hierarchy of values created in a marginal environment such as Hekou. To his family, A Long may sell foreign women’s sexual services to make a living; but, he may not adopt an abandoned child.\(^1\) The *daode* [social morality] value thus becomes flexible according to context.

The realities of borderlands

In her research, Turner provides an historical account of border trade in the mountainous areas surrounding Lào Cai and Yunnan. She emphasises how

\(^1\) According to Lien, her ‘girls’ found the baby on the way to breakfast one morning. She had been wrapped in a blanket and left lying on the ground next to the Vietnamese Market’s garbage spot. The ‘girls’ brought the baby to A Lien who, after long discussions with A Long to get his agreement, decided to adopt the baby.
“borderlands residents have relatives, friends, and acquaintances on either side of the borderline and regard the line itself as an artificial separation of their countries-old trade and social networks” (Turner 2010a: 267). One thus needs to consider Sino-Vietnamese borderlands as spaces shared by peoples of relatively similar cultures, customs and practices, and relationships with their environment, all of which are embedded in a long and common history of exchange regularly interrupted by conflict. Today, the governments of both Vietnam and China look to the future. Focus is upon their Mainland border activities and economic development rather than on political disputes. They realise the importance of smooth relationships and cooperation to the implementation of the Great Mekong Sub-region. Local populations have chosen their own way to benefit from an a priori encouraging environment for trade and economic level enhancement, i.e., on various scales and levels. Besides trading centres such as the border towns in which this study is set, people, goods and ideas keep communicating between both sides, demonstrating how the unlimited ways of crossing a border reflect its concrete and abstract porosity.

On the level of border-trade practices in particular, Turner observes that “a number of contemporary small-scale cross-border traders have continued to avoid the intensity of the state’s gaze. They work via minor crossings, smuggling goods if necessary, to surreptitiously take advantage of the Chinese and Vietnamese states’ lack of interest in such small-scale livelihood means, while these states simultaneously plough ahead with their own visions of modernization” (2010a: 287). Whereas local smuggling goes on, several authors have suggested that more consequent exchanges occur through other channels of trade (Hai 2000; Xie 2000; Hutton 2000; Chan 2005a, 2005b; Womack & Gu 2000). Drawing on such depictions of border realities and complex trade dynamics, Peter Hinton emphasises how, in this
particular region where Southern China meets Southeast Asia, the economist way to
distinguish a ‘formal’ from an ‘informal’ economy lacks relevance:

This conventional way of reckoning is deficient in two respects. Firstly, in developing
countries the ‘informal sector’ may comprise a very large proportion of total
productive activity: to omit it from calculations builds in significant distortions.
Secondly, it is erroneous to make a sharp distinction between the two because they
are intertwined in complex ways. (…) In our region, much of the cross-border trade
would fall into the informal sector. At major crossing points there are customs
stations and transactions are monitored by the authorities. However, borders are so
long, and so porous, that many transactions are neither recorded nor taxed. But the
conventional informal/formal dichotomy does not stand up because the two sectors
are seamlessly integrated (Hinton 2000: 22).

In this debate, van Schendel and Abraham, having noted the inconsistent
definitions of terms such as ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’ across different countries, and the
absence of a consensual definition of crimes across borders on the global scale, have
chosen to remain closer to the national and local perceptions of the ways in which
certain goods are exchanged and certain practices are embedded in local trade. They
argue that “when we shift our nomenclature [from ‘legal’ or ‘illegal’] to the
distinction between ‘licit’ and ‘illicit’, we refer less to the letter of the law than to
social perception of activities defined as criminal” (van Schendel, Abraham 2005:
18). Hence, the authors define borderlands as a “‘third space’ [that] becomes the site
for activities that can only be called (il)licit: legally banned but socially sanctioned
and protected” (2005: 22), a definition that perfectly fits Dongxing and Hekou’s
economic activities. For example, numerous gambling-machines parlours and cards-
and-mah-jong game rooms have appeared in the back streets of both cities; in
addition, there is a karaoke venue next to each hotel, not to mention the infamous
buildings dedicated to prostitution and sex-toys in Hekou, and the Vietnamese street-
vendors of Dongxing, who sell smuggled products such as tobacco or medicine from
Vietnam. In border towns wherein an informal economy is integrated as part of daily
life, these are just a few examples of illicit activities that residents call feifa [illegal]
but *zhengchang* [normal], an economy in which the various actors’ roles seems redistributed for the functioning of the whole system. A Long explained as follows:

— What happens if a customer mistreats one of your girls?

— My role is to protect them; so, if a client is forcing her to do what she doesn’t want to, I talk to him and arrange things. If he persists, I simply call the police. We [brothel’s owners] all have some connections and agreements with the police. We don’t need to worry. If things happen when the girl is at the customer’s hotel, the manager will also call me. When official visits are planned, the police inform us and ask us to close our shop for a few days. No problem.

A Long’s explanation illustrates how intertwined invisible but effective connections ‘make things work.’ The tolerant – even supportive – attitude of the local authorities regarding the various illicit activities annihilates the official policies of the upper power sphere that ban prostitution, gambling and the smuggling trade. As one of Zhang’s informants suggested, there is a difference between *fanfa* [breaking the law] and *weigui* [violating the rules] that impels the dichotomy between illegal and illicit that van Schendel and Abraham emphasise (Zhang 2011: 225). This subtle distinction explains the perceived ambivalence of the authorities’ position regarding border activities. Nevertheless, just as the notion of *daode* [social morality] becomes challenged by activities such as open prostitution being suddenly considered part of the local ‘normality’ in the residents’ viewpoints (Zheng 2009), a certain flexibility is still required to allow the development of a border trade economy, flexibility that favours practices and arrangements over strict respect for laws and regulations. As long as this façade is maintained during crucial encounters between the inland-central
and borderland-local policy implementers – evident in the sudden erasure of wall inscriptions and temporary shut-downs of brothels – this balance between two conceptions of people and goods flows remains relatively stable. As Xiao Sun, one of my friendly hosts in Hekou put it: “Mei you ren guan, dajia dou you liyi [no one cares, everybody benefits from this].”

One day, I noticed a group of traders – acquaintances of mine – sitting together drinking tea and playing Chinese chess. I was familiar with most of them and their daily activities but I noticed how lately they gathered together more than usual. Lao Liu, one trader from Jianshui (Yunnan) explained to me:

— We cannot send our goods these days. In Vietnam, they [border guards] are becoming more severe lately because of the recent argument over the [Paracel and Spratlys] Islands. We have nothing to do with this, but what happens at the central government prevents us from trading. Everyone becomes tense. So we drink tea and wait for things to get back to normal. It’s such a waste of time… Business is more and more difficult to conduct these days. Not to mention the economic crisis.

Lao Liu was referring to what others had already told me: the degree of laxity exercised by the border guards on both sides regarding activities related to smuggling goods not only depends upon their understanding of legality: it also reflects the political situation at the government level and how it is interpreted by local traders as a sign for either action or caution. Willem van Schendel confirms what Lao Liu was complaining about by emphasising how

… the permeability of borders is forever changing. The power of neighbouring states waxes and wanes, and the relationship between them is always in flux. At the border, changing interstate relations combine with the varying demands of cross-border labor and commodity markets, as well as
with trade and migration policies, to produce complex patterns to which those involved in illegal flows need to be attuned (van Schendel 2005: 52-53).

In the case of the Sino-Vietnamese border, political disputes over the control of the strategic Spratlys and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea have – according to my informants – considerably impacted upon the illicit flows of goods, which need to rely on the goodwill and flexibility of duty of the Chinese and Vietnamese border guards. And, because many traders refuse to comply with the formal channels’ rules and taxes pertinent to the importation and exportation of goods, this situation is conducive to frequent albeit often unexpected fluctuations of exchange, and a certain precariousness of business irrespective of whether it is petty or voluminous trade. In sum, although borderland residents, traders and power holders like to claim that conflict between China and Vietnam is part of their past history, and that they have all moved on towards cooperation in the interests of economic development, they still live under the shadow of high political level matters, manifest in the on-going arguments that regularly arise at the level of their daily lived reality.

The Sino-Vietnamese twin cities

- A land between South China and Southeast Asia

According to historian Bruneau, the Vietnamese border with China has long been a simple administrative border within the Chinese Empire and stayed this way until 938 AD when it started to mark the line between two distinct states. When the French establish the Indochinese Union in 1887, they inherited an almost unaltered historical and geographical border despite centuries of conflict mainly due to the
territorial ambitions of the Chinese Empire.¹ According to Bruneau, the area “has a unique character in Southeast Asia since it brings together two States issued from the same Confucian civilization, even though it is located in an area of multi-ethnic and ‘non-civilized’ (man dân [in Vietnamese]) minority peoples” (2001: 39, translation by thesis author). For centuries, the dominant Han, Mongol and Manchu dynasties of the Chinese empire, the successive Kinh dynasties in Vietnam, and, in more recent times, the Communist Party in China and in Vietnam have always endeavoured to civilise the mountainous and marginal parts of their territories, areas mainly populated by minority ethnic groups. In China, this assimilation process started to become more systematic following the classification of the Chinese population in the early 1950s in order to administrate strategic but rather uncontrolled areas such as Yunnan and Guangxi. Nowadays, the ethnic dimension of the borderland societies still constitutes an important background when studying migration flux in the area. Members of ethnic groups who do not share the same nationality join members of other ethnic groups with whom they share the same nationality. For example, the Yao from Hekou County are as well connected with their relatives in Lào Cai province – regardless of the international border in between – as they are with the Yi and Hani,² their immediate neighbours in the Honghe prefecture’s mountainous areas. When all these people tend to speak in various languages, one understands how easy it becomes to blend in with the borderland crowds, regardless of the administrative frontiers and actual citizenship. Today, the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands that stretch over 1300 kilometres constitute a rather porous frontier through which thousands of people

¹ For a detailed account of the Sino-Vietnamese border history, see Lafont (ed.) (1989).

² The Yao, Yi and the Hani are three ethnic groups who compose an important part of the population of Honghe prefecture wherein Hekou is located.
continuously cross every day, even though modern state control monitors them more closely than in earlier times. During her research into Vietnamese border traders, and in line with the Chinese official documents she consulted, Sarah Turner identifies four types of border gates in the area:

Chinese documents list four contemporary border-crossing categories: first, foreign economic and technical cooperation in the border region; second, border crossings purchased through tours; third, small-scale border trade; and fourth, those undertaken by border residents. The last of these categories relates directly to local residents crossing the border for small-scale trade and to visit relatives, or ‘trade by those living within twenty kilometers of the border, in government-approved border crossings or designated bazaars, not to exceed officially regulated values and quantities’ … (Turner 2010a: 281).

Movement, fluidity and human diversity characterise these borderlands in constant metamorphosis since the Vietnamese and Chinese central governments systematically planned the economic development of their marginal zones – margins related to the rest of their territories. The formation of the Greater Mekong Subregion in 1992 included Lào Cai and Hekou. In the words of Hensengerth: “An area often characterized by the activities of military forces, revolutionaries and secret societies was beginning to be turned into one characterized largely by peaceful economic activity” (2010: 65). For two decades, government policies have encouraged new settlement along the border to enhance economic activities and development. Hence, the area attracts many migrants in search of work and business opportunities.

- Dongxing and Móng Cái: the lively and the busy

The border gate between the extreme southeast of China and northeastern Vietnam serves the twin cities of Dongxing (Chinese) and Móng Cái (Vietnamese). Dongxing, which is located at the southeast end of Guangxi close to seaside, now enjoys a special attention that has allowed it to become a local trade turntable for routes between international ports such as Haiphong or Beihai, Chinese and
Vietnamese islands (e.g., Hainan or Hạ Long Bay) and southeast China’s coast and land (Canton, Hong Kong and Guangxi province). Its position makes it significantly more important than the Yunnan-Lào Cai border given that:

[T]he intercourse (invasions, incursions, trade) across the land border between China and Vietnam, recorded for over two thousand years, was only occasional and irregular. The real intercourse between China and its southern neighbours took place via maritime routes, not via a land border (Lary 2007: 183).

However, its status as a preferred trading area is not new: it existed even before the French establish the Indochinese Union in 1887. During the colonial period, it may have been easy to observe the various trade and smuggling operations along the border. Historical accounts reveal that Dongxing had long been devoted to trade of all kinds, including human trade. A document written by historian Baudrit (Baudrit 2009), in which he makes reference to material from the French colonial period, throws some light on the specificity of this border gate. In former times – less than a century ago – handicrafts, manufactured goods and agricultural products were not the only objects of transaction between the Vietnamese and Chinese. ‘Human livestock’ was openly negotiated as well:

It is interesting to indicate how these sales take place either in the border towns and villages or in the islands that border the two countries. Sales in Tong-hing [Dongxing] were and are perhaps still done according to very odd customs. … Before the Chinese Republic, the Tong-hing market where the Yellows [Asians] are traded, displayed a barbaric and grotesque spectacle. Girls, boys and women for sale were brought to the market the night before the sale to avoid being seen by the public. The next morning [at a time when the market was about to open] they were made to sit on a stool. One covered their entire upper body, up to their knees, by a sort of large conical basket, showing in an apparent manner the price, age and sex of the person to be sold. The buyer, therefore, only relied on the legs to get an idea of the ‘goods’ he wanted to buy. … It is conceivable that with such limited assessment, buyers could easily be mistaken about the quality of the man or woman they wanted to buy. … Mostly, these markets of Tong-hing are self-supplying at the deposits of Cat-ba [Cát Bà] and Kê-bao [Kê-Bào] islands. The Chinese come with their junks and choose the most beautiful subjects who are stored in the caves and in the forest dens. The price is negotiated after the selection (Baudrit 2009: 138-139, translation by thesis author).

This account, although more factual than analytical, has nevertheless proven extremely valuable for examining the above phenomenon from an historical
perspective. It allows some distancing and completion of the rather narrow perspective that pervades many of the contemporary documents dealing with issues of human trafficking and human rights in the region. Human interaction, including extreme forms of exchange such as slavery – as part of a conflicting relationship or as a relatively common trade activity – can be considered a pre-existing condition to what is nowadays referred to as human trafficking, an activity deeply rooted in the local trade history.

Figure 3: The *Assemble Esclave* shop in Dongxing. Somewhat curiously, in 2009, the proprietors of a newly-opened garment shop (a self-proclaimed ‘famous French brand’) on Guizhou Road, one of the main shopping streets of Dongxing, seemingly unwittingly chose for its name *Assemble Esclave*, which in French literally means – regardless of syntax errors – ‘gather slave’

(Grillot 2009)

Facing Dongxing, Móng Cái city is a very active trading city where Chinese and Vietnamese goods are exchanged, thus restoring to this small port damaged by history its role of intermediary. Destroyed during the 1979 Sino-Vietnam war, Móng
Cái recovered its original position as an economic centre after the reopening of the frontier. The soldiers left, and locals who had relocated to nearby localities during the war slowly came back to benefit from Móng Cái’s promising future (Hutton 2000: 264). Following Vietnam and China’s signing of various agreements on economic exchange (Hensengerth 2010), local people, along with recent migrants, have enjoyed at best, albeit unevenly, the available business opportunities in the newly-established districts for economic cooperation. Today, Móng Cái and Dongxing together constitute one of the areas known as cross-border economic cooperation districts officially named the ‘Dongxing - Móng Cái-Free Trade Zone’, strategic keys of regional economic development and transnational integration common to several countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Womack summarises the new configuration of this sea and land intersection, a symbol of cooperation between two previously warring brothers:

The first is the Beilun River economic cooperation district. This district would include Dongxing and Móng Cái, with an area of approximately 1,000 sq. km and a population of 160,000. Dongxing and Móng Cái are the largest and closest pair of border port cities, separated only by the relatively narrow Beilun River. The cities lie on the coast of the Gulf of Tonkin. The terrain is level, the district covers a vast area, transportation on both land and the water is convenient, and the proposed district is rich with fresh water resources. The conditions are right for the creation and development of a truly international metropolitan area. … China and Vietnam attach great importance to constructing and developing the two cities, both of which were upgraded from town-to city-level administrative status in the late 1990s. The economies of both cities are developing quickly and they are being transformed by construction projects (Gu & Womack 2000: 1051-1052).

In this context of openness, that has enhanced the activity and success of these Sino-Vietnamese border areas, display and evocation of historical legacies have become discreet so as to provide expression space for the official and somewhat overdone optimism, and to encourage new investor/actor involvement in this promising development. For example, the Sino-Vietnam Trade Network¹, a Chinese

¹ http://www.sinoviet.com/sinoviet/index.shtml
website that reflects the official Chinese orientation, offers an enthusiastic vision of the potential economic activities of the Dongxing region, including the tourism industry. Official figures, however, tend to minimalise the diversity of businesses that thrive in Móng Cái, which mainly concern Chinese goods transiting from Dongxing. According to many local traders, the reality on the ground renders implausible any attempt to assess the quantity and value of the traded goods. A De, a Guangxi trader settled in Dongxing, volunteered the following:

— Taxes are high on exportation to Vietnam. It is not worth to export our goods to Móng Cái through customs, especially for individual traders who sell low quality manufactured goods. Big companies have means to negotiate or to deal with taxes, but we don’t. Otherwise nobody would do business here and the city would not develop. So, all in all, it’s worthier to bribe the border guards we know to let the boats deliver our goods on the other side. A little money from here means a lot over there, they know how to take advantages from this business. Go further east along the Gelong River, you can see by yourself how active the shores become in the evening.

Like many of his fellow traders, A De acknowledges that the majority of the clothing and home appliances sold at the central market of Móng Cái – a large and lofty hexagonal architectural structure along the river – is the result of smuggling. There, traders are mostly Chinese: many of the employees in their shops are young, bilingual Vietnamese women. The clients are mostly Vietnamese tourists passing through Móng Cái to shop, or sellers from neighbouring towns, who come to stock up with new supplies, mainly ‘affordable items’, a term that translates readily into cheap and poor quality goods. Just behind this market – the largest but not the only one in the city – lies the small port with its incessant comings and goings of boats filled with
sacks of goods that move between the two shores of the Gelong River, a tributary of the Beilun River that marks the border. Surveillance seems very lax: people conduct their business as if everything is perfectly legitimate as indeed it is in their eyes; that is, until a foreigner comes to take a closer to look at the river activities. Then, uniformed officials show themselves conspicuously. The dockers move away after being advised to leave.

Business practices do not always endorse the extant regulations and generally do not welcome outsiders’ questions. In the past, I have witnessed discussions between newcomers and older traders wherein the latter have deliberately provided vague answers to curious enquiries in a way that sounded protective of certain unconventional practices. In their attempts to justify the extent of illegal trade in an economic zone which benefits from advantageous measures, the economic actors of Móng Cái and Dongxing easily evoke the high official tax that makes border trade less profitable when it is already becoming increasingly difficult to conduct due to escalating competition. But, they also blame the complexity of customs formalities and controls that unnecessarily slow down transactions.

Hence, despite the display of official optimism and the state’s encouragement of border trade development, inequalities – in terms of nature, quality and quantity of goods – in the economic exchanges between China and Vietnam persist. The ‘good old days’ of border opening periods and the trader pioneers of the 1990s seem to have vanished.

Trade, tourism, and investment on both sides of the border area produced a golden era of high-speed development in the 1990s. However, the gold has not been distributed evenly on both sides of the border nor within each region. In general, the Chinese side has been developing more rapidly than the Vietnamese, and urban centres with national transportation links likewise are advancing more rapidly than relatively poor and isolated places (Gu & Womack 2000: 1053).
For many local commentators as well, China is taking advantage of Vietnamese resources more than the other way round (Eng 2000, Hai 2000). The local people deplore the fact that the local economy is already ‘running out of steam’, Chinese merchants' complaints are multiplying, traders’ financial difficulties are real – especially since the economic crisis of 2009 – and malls and factories under construction are conspicuously left unfinished. However, the impressive casino that the Chinese built in Móng Cái remains successful, according to local guides who often take their clients there. Groups of Chinese visit the region – the Vietnamese are not allowed to enter – to gamble because gambling and casinos are officially prohibited in China. Here, as well as in many border areas of the Greater Mekong Subregion (Van Schendel & Abraham 2005; Evans et al. 2000), parallel economies and illegal activities are flourishing.

In Móng Cái, small business offers Vietnamese migrants some work opportunities. Many are young and single, from the province of Quàng Ninh and other provinces in Northeast Vietnam. Young men become carriers or motorcycle taxi drivers while women work as vendors in shops, markets or streets. Through their work, they often sustain their family economies, a situation that reflects the continuation of the proletarianisation of rural society in Northern Vietnam (Gironde 2004). It is within this segment of the population that one may find young women who are likely to cross the border to become partners of Chinese men, either on arrival or after a period of professional activity that familiarises them with the frontier community.
Hekou and Lào Cai share a similar status to that of the twin cities of Dongxing and Móng Cái, the former two having combined to establish an area called the ‘Hekou – Lào Cai economic cooperation district.’ The capital of the homonymous province of Lào Cai, Lào Cai city is somewhat small and peaceful: few travellers stopping to enjoy its sights; most simply pass through its railway and bus stations. The main attraction of Lào Cai is Sapa, a favourite destination of national and international tourism, famous for its landscape and human change of scene. As well, there is the casino,¹ which primarily attracts Chinese customers who come to risk their fortunes. Destroyed during the brief but bloody border Sino-Vietnamese war in the winter of 1979, the city has slowly rebuilt, supported by recent investment; but, it still seems to suffer from the departure of the majority of its Chinese community in 1978-1979, and its relative geographic isolation. There seems no doubt that Lào Cai has benefited economically from the opening of the border with China; but whereas new districts evidence large-scale investment, Lào Cai has not undergone the same dazzling transformation as its neighbour Hekou. The malls being built in the immediate vicinity of the bridge that leads to Hekou showcase Vietnamese products among which the famous Bitis² sandals have become a symbol. Connected to Hanoi by rail and to neighbouring provinces by regular bus lines, Lào Cai still supports a large moving population. Thousands of migrants come to this city in search of jobs, especially jobs related to border trade.

¹ While the official Lào Cai city casino, the Lào-Cai International Casino, does not admit Vietnamese customers, it does not exclude the existence of private game venues.

² Bitis: a brand of Vietnamese shoes famous for its latex sandals.
A long bridge above the Nanxi River separates Lào Cai from Hekou. Located in the prefecture of Honghe, the town of Hekou occupies the downstream part of the Nanxi River, which feeds the Red River that runs into Vietnam. The area enjoyed its first substantial development during the nineteenth century economic exchanges between Vietnam and China. These exchanges accelerated at the beginning of the twentieth century with the activities of the French-built railway line that connected Hanoi with Kunming. Trade continued to grow thereafter, despite the conflict (the Independence War, the Vietnam War and the Sino-Vietnamese War) that regularly closed the border and prevented crossings throughout the twentieth century. The year 1992 saw Hekou reopen to the outside world, officially becoming a transit port for international trade and an international border gate for travellers. Today, Hekou is a rather small city mainly dedicated to commerce. Thousands of migrants from inland provinces in China have settled there, hoping to make their fortunes from cross-border trade. Among them, many goods wholesalers come from the factory centres of Shenzhen, Guangdong, and Zhejiang. Hekou also welcomes individual traders, who specialise in ready-to-wear garments, groceries, catering, and low-range accommodation. Similar to Dongxing, a micro society has settled there over the last fifteen years, members of which engage in trade activities with the Vietnamese.

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1 Hekou County shares 193 kilometres of border with the province of Lào Cai in Vietnam.

2 Today, for security and profitability reasons, this line is no longer in service on its Chinese section for passengers, although it is still used for the carriage of goods (since 2003) from Kunming to the border. In Vietnam, the line remains very active between Hanoi and Lào Cai for transporting passengers.

3 The second part of this chapter will provide a more precise picture of human settlement in Hekou.
merchants who flock daily or seasonally to Hekou to obtain supplies of manufactured goods which they find sell more cheaply in China\(^1\) than in Vietnam.

Clothing, household appliances, bedding products in bamboo or fabrics, and building materials were all on display in dozens of shops measuring only a few square metres each. These shops, which line the main street and were devoted to wholesale trade in the south part of Hekou, constitute the visible part of the city’s business. The main streets and the bridge (China-Vietnam Highway Bridge) that indicate the border gate were constantly crowded with bikes and trailers loaded with goods carefully packed and mainly ridden/driven by women. Larger firms dealing with bigger customers (He 2003) dominated the remainder of the transactions. The city is divided quite clearly between the wholesaler districts, a small commercial zone, guest-house areas and the Vietnamese market, all of which surround the border gate area and the Red River, and two rather off-centre administrative and residential districts. Population movements remain important; nowadays, some 103,000 people officially live in Hekou County.\(^2\) This number includes the original inhabitants of the city, migrants from rural or urban localities of the county or Yunnan, and traders from further afield (cf. later in this chapter). There is also a Vietnamese community living in or operating there during the daytime: the people return to Vietnam in late evening.

\(^1\) It is important to note that compared to the average quality of this product category available in other Chinese cities, goods sold in Hekou are of very average, even bad quality. Chinese traders argue that they are “appropriate to the limited budget of Vietnamese customers.” Therefore, the local market tends to sell unmarketable stock – the results of the bankruptcy of factories, for example - or already out-dated items in inner China, notably from the East Coast, where all modes are created.

and come back early the next morning. These persons are mobile and cooperate with the Chinese business owners as carriers, money exchangers, and street-vendors selling Vietnamese fruits, drinks or snacks. Some live in Hekou illegally under the rather indulgent eye of the local authorities. Finally, there is the visible presence of hundreds of young Vietnamese prostitutes living mainly in the small brothels on the second floor of the Vietnamese market, brothels like Lien’s ‘hair salon.’

Hekou is host to a heterogeneous population that originates from diverse ethnic, regional and social backgrounds. As in most cities of recent migration in China, traders opt to gather according to their province of origin; the Vietnamese, on the other hand, are found in their ‘street headquarters’: a cheap restaurant, a refreshment stall, shaded spaces at strategic crossroads and the main market. Every community benefits from a shared historical heritage and enjoys a specific degree of interaction with others. This, in turn, influences neighbourly relations and cooperation while at the same time maintaining mutual perceptions, the specific impact of which is probably underestimated in analyses of border phenomena (cf. Chapter 4).

Although these four cities, i.e., Dongxing, Móng Cái, Hekou and Lào Cai share a lot in common in terms of economic and social settings, I have acquired distinct knowledge of each of them regarding my research topic. In Dongxing, I learned more about identity issues, cases of trafficked women, and the viewpoints of local residents on migration trends. Irrespective of whether they were local Chinese or Vietnamese, all of these people seemed to me to have blended into each other’s communities, regardless of the border line. In Móng Cái, compared to other fieldwork sites, cross-border marriages were easy to identify among traders and translators, and tales about trafficked Vietnamese women were equally easy to collect. In Hekou, where I spent a comparatively longer time, I became familiar with cross-border
trading practices. Through conversations with economic actors, I came to realise how controversial social representations on cross-border marriages were heavily spread in public discourse. I was not successful in establishing a network of informants in Lào Cai: I found very few cases of mixed couples, people were reluctant to talk, and I believe I was to some degree monitored. As regards this sensitive topic, this city was probably the most secretive of the four sites. Yet, Lào Cai provided a perspective on the stigma attached to Vietnamese women, who cross the line between trading and marrying Chinese. Also, I sensed the Vietnamese authorities’ weight on the communities. I want to stress that all of these perceptions are solely mine. Even though they do not reflect the actual realities of the four cities, they show how complex these realities are to apprehend and explain how my initial research interest has slowly changed over months of encounters.

**Spaces of exception and sites for imagination**

A whole series of comparisons would be necessary to account for the magical powers proper names enjoy. They seem to be carried as emblems by the travellers they direct and simultaneously decorate (de Certeau 1984: 104).

Borderlands are renowned for providing work opportunities and creative spaces for ambitious people. Vietnam and China are no exception. Their border towns continue to attract those who find themselves caught between two periods of their lives: “I decided to come here just to see what I could do;” “My friend told me there were many opportunities here, many needs to fulfil for new customers, so I came to study the market;” and, “I had nothing to do in my home-town, unemployment is everywhere, I heard about border-trade and I thought I could give it a try.” And, while these spaces are perceived as spaces of transition at the edge of the possible, they are
rarely considered/foreseen as sites of permanent stay. They can simply be stopovers for many yearning individuals. But, for many others, the image of flexibility that borderlands project encompasses blurrier and darker aspects. As regards Lào Cai province, for example, Sarah Turner notes how “[f]or some young upland residents in Vietnam, the border has become a rather terrifying linear entity, … they fear being smuggled and sold” (2010a: 269). In effect, places such as Hekou and Dongxing inspire: they appeal and give rise to fear and suspicion; but, they also offer hope and ambition despite all the uncertainties that emerge from contradictory accounts and popular representations (cf. Chapter 4) as well as economic circumstances.

Nevertheless, despite the on-going difficulties encountered when attempting to establish harmonious economic exchanges between China and Vietnam, the attractiveness that border towns represent for investors, migrant workers, and tourists invariably contributes to creating a unique social space. Lào Cai, Hekou, Móng Cáí and Dongxing have become attractions mainly because they are evolving rapidly. Their development benefits from the special official attention reflected in specific local policies and promising investments. At the peoples’ level, they represent a certain transitional space wherein one would spend some extra time during a trip, would work in for a certain period of time prior to departing for another place, or would transit to move from one country to another and from one village to another, even from one life to another. One always comes back to these places because they become benchmarks in the course of individuals’ trajectories. The cities’ residents not only become observers of the daily movements of people: they participate in their orientation, their integration, and their perceptions. Locals and passers-by coexist, gather information, communicate and exchange.
Thus, symbolically and concretely, border towns represent a more or less sustainable transition zone for their residents, liminal places where choices are made. Situated as they are between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, they are sites of movement and instability, which frame and echo the life trajectories of cross-border couples, particularly those of Vietnamese spouses. At the time of our meetings, the majority of those who confided in me vis-à-vis their experiences were in just such a state of transition, in a more or less sustainable way. They were positioned between two women or two men, an ‘already lived’ and a ‘soon to live and enjoy’ life that gave their testimonies a particular psychological dimension, closely linked to the unique spaces they occupied.

- *Luan: a chaotic nature*

The conception of the world by the temporary or regular residents of the above four cities was very specifically articulated. It illustrated how a seemingly insignificant place conveys a whole range of concepts and reveals an even larger set of ideas, prospects and symbols. For example, according to those who visit Hekou, the little city can variously suggest pleasure, Otherness, business opportunities, freedom or chaos, insecurity, boredom, abnormality or stalemate reaching. Viewpoints easily emerged in conversations between the ‘experienced’ and the ‘ignorant.’ The local residents’ comments on the perceptions of the newcomers often captured this contradiction. In the next section, focus is upon the widespread notion of *luan* [chaotic] that defines borderlands in general according to observers and local residents.

Wang Tao is 40 years old and has lived in Hekou for twelve years. A tattooist by profession, he runs a parlour on the second floor of the Vietnamese market. He
also runs a shop on the ground floor where he sells a whole panoply of soldier/camper equipment ranging from army knives to training uniforms, swords and army shoes. This is where a local acquaintance introduced him to me. Wang Tao, a native of Kunming, arrived in Hekou at the age of 21. Already involved in a gems business in Kunming, he had spent some time in South Vietnam trading rubies. Wang started to expound a cogent point of view about the instability of local cross-border marriages and the lack of genuine feelings between partners, an eventuation he illustrated with his own case. He has had two Vietnamese wives. The first one stayed with him for seven years, followed him to Hồ Chí Minh ville, and bore him a daughter who he has not seen for years. Soon after their dispute and separation, he met his second wife, a 30 years old Hanoi native who had also lived in Hekou for twelve years. She was engaged to him for nine years and bore him a son. Neither relationship was documented. Wang did not feel very satisfied with his second wife: he could not guarantee that she would stay with him. ‘I have already said to my wife: ‘If you ever feel unhappy, you can go!’ You know, I have seen so many Chinese men being cheated.’

The evening we first met, Wang Tao offered me a few insights into his relationship with his Vietnamese wife. But, he was happy to divert our conversation from the uncomfortable sphere of private life to a more inspiring topic when I provided him with what was intended as a nonchalant comment¹ about Hekou after he asked me what I thought of the place:

¹ I have often used this ploy during conversations to stimulate people’s confidence. After I noticed how Hekou’s residents complain about their city, I intentionally gave them straightforward comments (good or bad) so as to provoke a debate and find out more about each object of complaint.
— [me] Hekou is so small, there is nothing much to do here [as a visitor]: it is far from everywhere and it looks quite chaotic.

— You’re right, this place looks small but believe me, Hekou is a place where a lot is going on. You just can’t see it. When you have spent a certain time here, you will understand. In fact I could tell you many things about this place. I once had the idea of writing a book about it, you could help me doing this; I could tell you so many stories. It’s very complicated.

I expressed my interest in knowing more about his insights into Hekou and he enthusiastically agreed to meet me another evening to talk. This conversation took place while we were sitting on plastic chairs on the busy sidewalk facing his shop at the bottom of the Vietnamese market. One of his friends was listening and I noticed him nodding ironically. Surprisingly – or maybe not surprisingly? – I was never to meet Wang Tao again, despite my calls and two failed attempts to arrange an informal meeting. I also passed by his shop several times during my numerous stays in Hekou but never managed to see him again. Was it a coincidence or not? Was he warned to avoid revealing too much to a foreigner, possibly a journalist? Notwithstanding, I found it quite strange that he suddenly seemed to have disappeared completely when his enthusiasm to provide material for my ethnography had sounded totally genuine to me. As I did not want to draw too much attention to myself or land him in trouble, I decided to stop insisting and resorted to fantasising about the fascinating account he could have offered me of his adopted city. As is the case with many other border spaces in the region, Hekou is run by various economic flows, including money, sex and all forms of smuggling. Officially, it is ruled as any other place in China; but, in reality, power relations are much more ambiguous on the margins of the state (Horstmann & Wadley 2006) and create a liminal space where, in the words of Wang
Tao, “everything can happen, everything can be found, everything is possible.” This range of possibilities is articulated by the frequent use of the Chinese word *luan*. In the Chinese language, *luan* has a large range of meanings depending upon the context, the moral values that locators adopt, and the acknowledgement or experience of actual facts. It is usually translated as ‘chaotic’, ‘full of disorder’, and/or ‘instability’, with the embedded suggestion that this combination distorts the general well-being of society since the tools of control are corrupted. Zhang notes how the term *luan* has almost become the definition of Hekou. She explores this notion in the context of openness of borderlands.

I evoke the notion of *luan* [...] and argue that its tension, disorder and chaos render it *kaifang* [openness]’s irreducible double. Just like *kaifang* is an ambivalent yet powerful force of production, *luan* does not take on any concrete form and derives its potency through ambivalence. As *kaifang* is exalted to be a process that enables renewal and self-improvement, *luan* always follows as its shadow that threatens to jeopardize every progress. In other words, *luan* is *kaifang*’s inchoate Other, generating both fear and desire of domination through its ambivalence. To give *luan* any corporeality or concrete form (e.g. crime, illegal offence) is to immediately reduce it to something ‘known’ and potentially manageable. Because of its incorporeality, *luan* always remains ‘unknown,’ ‘unseen’ and refuses to be categorized. It thus becomes an object of paranoia, which at once incites even stronger desire of domination (Zhang 2011: 255).

*Luan* thus represents the exact opposite of the ideal harmony that (Chinese) society is seeking to live in; furthermore, as a colloquial term, it also expresses a popular fear of disorder. It is an easy yet blurred description, one that allows avoidance of explanation: everyone is supposed to understand what it means. At the national level, it generally refers to the state of Chinese society since the reforms and the tremendous consequent social changes that have been imposed (Yan 2009). It generally encompasses public complaints and grievances that cannot be expressed openly. Nowadays, saying that a place is *luan* is implicitly criticising a lack of state engagement in resolving social issues. Furthermore, in the border context, *luan* characterises the recent evolution that remote places like Hekou or Dongxing have...
experienced additional to that which the whole of Chinese society has had to endure in the process of ‘modernization.’ Among these problems we find population growth, business insecurity, safety issues, uncontrolled transactions and behaviour, Chinese mafia, prostitution, the involvement of local authorities in illegal activities, general corruption, and absence of physical or legal protection, to name but a few. As A Luo once said: “Shenmeyang de ren dou you [there are all sorts of people].” Outsiders are the first to attract blame: people often emphasise how borderlands supposedly attract social margins from everywhere. In this environment of anxiety, some individuals are referred to as hunzi or xiao hunhun, depreciative colloquial terms widely used locally to embody the luan state: their significance ranges from ‘small fry’, ‘petty thief’ to ‘vagrant’ and ‘dropout.’ But, derogatory meanings hide beyond concrete forms of chaos – an ‘incorporeality’ that newcomers are usually left to find out empirically.

During the first days of my stay in Hekou and Dongxing, people kept asking me what business I was engaged in there, a question to which I could only reply “none” and then briefly explain my research interest. When my interlocutors realised that most of the time I was alone, they issued warnings about the luan nature of border places where I should better not go unaccompanied: “Don’t go out at night, don’t carry your bag this way, avoid the Vietnamese market, beware the river-side in the evenings.” These pieces of advice were exactly the same as those given to me by various people in China over the last decade. Wherever I was staying, when people realised that I was travelling by myself, they issued these warnings. However, in Hekou and Dongxing, these words of warning were often illustrated with vivid examples of dramas, accidents or acknowledged issues that all reflected the residents’ daily experiences, common fears and imagined dangers that they wished to share with passersby rather than actual disturbances. The reality is that both Hekou and
Dongxing are tourist gates and international trading zones where security issues remain a major concern of the local authorities. However, what was not described in such detailed terms were the reasons for such a reputation. When asked “Why is this place luan? How different is it from elsewhere?” embarrassed answers tried to disguise the real features and activities of the city that could generate all sorts of disorders. “Nevertheless, just be cautious…” would generally close the debate before people later became more explicit. Whereas in other places, discussion surrounding rulers’ lack of ability to guarantee the safety of a place would be debated, one could feel that in Hekou and Dongxing this was not just a security problem but a let-it-be if not an intentional state policy that should not be interfered with. The cities’ existence actually relies on such an absence of strict control of every aspect of people’s life and activities. Reality slowly emerged through casual conversations with locals, observations and understanding of individual trajectories.

- Underground activities

As in most cities in China, it is not unusual to observe public walls covered with inscriptions. It is generally admitted that these indicate the degree of corruption of the local authorities as well as the scale of the black market. In Hekou in particular, this could not be truer. Phone numbers connect those who are willing to take the risk of dealing in all sorts of illegal transactions: credit, ‘black’ [smuggled] cars, fake certificates and permits, guns, drugs, prostitutes, even virginal women. Along the banks of the Red River, on every public and any remote portion of wall that can catch the eye, hundreds of numbers and temptations overlay each other, inducing a strange, mixed feeling about the place. A Min, a young smuggler who shared his time between his brothel and poker sessions in the tea-houses along the Red River shore, explained to me the underground market system:
— If you want, let’s say, a gun, you just call one of these numbers. The person you deal with will first make sure that you are a serious buyer. It’s a process. Then, when you both agree on item and price, you are asked to deposit money in a bank account. Only when money is received, the gun will be discreetly delivered. There’s a high risk of being cheated, but some people are ready for that and they feel thrilled by all these opportunities. You can find anything here…
I had already noticed elsewhere that within the space of a day all of these numbers would be painted over with thick layers of grey paint, clearly demonstrating that something shameful needed to be hidden. Special attention was given to the main roads’ sidewalls; but, the back streets were left untouched. A Min explained that:

— When officials come from above [district or provincial level authorities], the city needs to offer a healthy face of successful economic development. Roads will be carefully cleaned, brothels will be advised to close. Everyone will pretend that the city is ‘clean.’

To me this illustrated the Chinese concern for ‘saving face.’ One could see the obvious traces of the phone numbers on the wall, roughly covered by layers of grey or light yellow paint. Everyone knew what was underneath, but the face of the city was saved due to the effort made by the authorities to erase all evidence of illicit activity.

Figure 6: A rather strange statement from the propaganda bureau in Hekou: “Secrecy is to ensure safety/security and development” (Grillot 2010)
This concept of moral cleanliness, however, was if anything ideological, as illustrated by slogans on large red banners that hung high over the streets calling for economic development, defence of the frontiers, the elimination of feifa [illegal] acts and the promotion of daode [social morality] in the city. But, the banners were only a public reflection of what the authorities wanted to convey – of what the local propaganda bureau sought to create; that is, an invented image of their border cities fit for consumption by outsiders’ eyes. This all occurred on a different level from that upon which real action was taken, far from the centre’s scrutiny, by both the population and the power holders. My personal impression was that illegal activities, along with calls for their banishment, resulted in nothing but the general apathy of borderlands residents towards these matters.

Another intriguing feature of Hekou, a supposedly dynamic trading city, was the constant presence of idle (mostly) men and women, who spent their time playing mah-jong or cards in small, private, open places dedicated to games found in almost every street, in the tea houses and small spaces rented along the river.¹ More than just a leisure activity widely encountered in Southwest China, this public expression of relative idleness suggested that some of the city’s inhabitants relied upon easy incomes derived from profitable businesses.

¹ However, when I last visited Hekou in September 2010, most of these places along the Red River had just been moved away. The city developers were building a long row of shops along the riverbank and renovating the ground, depriving locals of the natural scenery and of the convivial spaces where they used to gather for tea, cards and a chat.
Most of these players, people said, were landlords of Hekou’s buildings. The majority of the original city-dwellers chose to rent their properties to migrant traders since the demand for rental properties had increased in tandem with the economic development of the city. According to my informants, these Hekou residents did not need to work: they could spend their time gambling their easily-earned incomes on games. Initially I found it difficult to verify to what extent these allegations were reliable; but, discussions with some of the idle tended to confirm the impression that landlords counted among the luckiest people in the city. But, the players, tea drinkers and chatting street observers themselves were representative of a somewhat unusual image of businessmen. In Hekou, trade is essentially with Vietnam. As the locals explained me: “You don’t have to worry or do much: clients call or come to order goods, they come and pick them up, transport them to Vietnam, and all you have to do is make sure the process is smooth.” However, others were much more secretive about the activities they engaged in. They mentioned irregular trading, the uncertainty of current market trends, and alluded to the specificities of border-trade to explain
their lack of precision: “I sell what’s on demand. If my Vietnamese clients suddenly need this or that, I will manage to find some and sell [it to] them. I adjust to new trade directions; I can do different things every year.” Many so-called ‘businessmen’ were actually intermediaries between a Vietnamese clientele with whom they were familiar and networks of suppliers from Yunnan. They helped the latter to sell stocks or surplus. Cell-phones constituted their main working tools; and, once their networks were well established on both sides of the border, and as long as they kept an eye or an ear on the most recent good bargains, almost everything could be achieved while playing cards with fellow players. In this way, the traders made themselves easy to find, to deal with and to socialise with. But, even some of my best acquaintances in Hekou seemingly remained confused regarding the content of their business activities, referring to the economic crisis that had tremendously impacted upon their affairs, and explaining that they might have to change their options… without clarifying the precise nature of said options. Although this lack of transparency may have worked to veil the actual dealing difficulties some traders had to contend with, the tendency to remain silent and vague vis-à-vis the kind of business they were actually engaged in was common among Hekou’s economic actors, especially among those in the informal parts of the sector. Two main reasons account for this: the prevalence of smuggling and the parallel major economic activity of prostitution. A comment one hears repeatedly regarding the city’s dynamism suggests that “everyone is involved to a certain degree with one or the other of these lucrative incomes’ generators.”

In the pornographic city – the glittering and horrible spatial hallucination [that] smut creates – no one is unscathed. All spaces are fouled, all who touch are tainted. The pornographic city is a bacchanal of illegality, wrongdoing, unjust consumerism, waste, corruption, immorality, despoiling, human uncaring, unkindness, frustration and criminal waste. Husbands get drunk and have sex with other women. Good women are turned out as prostitutes. Sexually transmitted diseases pose a chronic danger. Undisciplined children terrorize their parents. […] A bleary, indistinct or luminal kind of specialty, the pornographic city is repetitive, violent and brutal; its
social imaginary is all about theft of virtue, duping, tricksters and cheats, human inability to survive the chaotic environment (Barlow 2005: 190).

The above depiction of the pornographic city in Barlow’s account of smut readings in China could very well apply to what a border town like Hekou inspires in many of its residents and visitors, the main difference being that smut readings, as a source of narrative, are replaced with daily encounters with traded sexuality and deviant economic activities in a more mundane way than in the imagined smut city. In many ways, it is this particular atmosphere that makes Hekou a border gate and liminal space.

- **Prostitution**

The diversity of the population makes borderland society *luan*: the unpredictable nature of the relationships between individuals is defined as *luan*; and, even intimate life suffers from this pervasive atmosphere. In Hekou, *luan* also infers the city’s highly sexualised environment. Prostitution is illegal in China; yet, it is found in every corner of the country, in more or less disguised forms, usually practiced by Chinese and foreign women. Regular venues for this activity include hotels, massage parlours, hair salons, discotheques and Karaoke bars. Hekou is a place devoted to business, any kind of business. So, one could expect, given the acknowledged link between business, entertainment and the sex industries in China (Liu 2002; Zheng 2006, 2009; Jeffreys 2004), that Hekou would be a place where sexual consumption is included as a feature of local trade. But, as one Hekou resident explained, it is not so much the case that business supports prostitution but that prostitution actually supports business. It does not just help it to flourish. This is the difference between a regular city in China and this little border town. As A Wei, a trader from Hunan observed:
— Who would like to come so far, in such a remote place, make a ten hours’ trip from Kunming to end up in such an insignificant place? Who would do that, just to learn in the end [from business fellows] that Vietnamese traders are not that efficient, are hardly trusted, and that business is not easy to make, if a certain compensation was not offered on the spot for those who consider making the effort to invest time and money here? That is the real success trade in Hekou: sex industry is the only thing that drives men to come and eventually settle here. No one will tell you that frankly but I know this place. Believe me, brothels are the real support of international trade here (emphasis added).

As A Wei suggested, while locals rarely concede to outsiders that the core of the local economy is prostitution, many suggest that tourism, as well as moral and legal flexibility, allow its continuous spread (Chan 2005a). Sex is, as with many adventures and entertainment activities in China, something that can be experienced in groups. The search for suitable opportunities, the renting of rooms and the sexual interaction itself are more than often a shared enterprise. I have witnessed male brothel customers arriving in groups of two or three, choosing girls from one or two salons, and going ‘upstairs’ together where intercourse would be engaged in on-site. Because I have stayed in one of the many little guesthouses nearby the Vietnamese market, where rooms are not particularly isolated from each other, on occasion I heard customers (two or three men at one time) renting the room facing mine, where they would pass a whole night with two or three prostitutes. At any time of the night, these men’s sexual activities were far from inhibited or discreet. They talked loudly, turned on the television (either from habit, or to avoid the discomfort that silence can create between unfamiliar partners, or to ‘drown out’ personal noise), made phone calls,
flirted loquaciously with their exotic companions, took showers, and all of this sometimes without even considering to fully close the ‘bedroom’ door. This very ordinary behaviour not only demonstrated how Hekou’s population (the owners of guest-houses, for example) and prostitution’s actors (prostitutes and clients) approached this illicit business, but also attested to assumptions regarding the openness of any visitor to and customer of these places wherein sexual activity is openly engaged in (Grillot forthcoming). In a similar way, staying overnight in Hekou, engaging in border trade or chatting with Lien about her new business as if it were a garment shop, implicitly required some – often feigned – degree of tolerance. In reality, this whole situation did not disturb me personally. And, I knew that showing signs of discomfort or disapproval at some point would probably have limited my access to these places. So, I adopted an attitude of general indifference towards the activity. Many unusual activities occur in Hekou, and prostitution is one of them. The indifference that people tended to exhibit in public spaces implied that “everything is just normal,” even though some informants confided in me that, in fact, they did not approve of such displays of luan – in the sense of immorality – and had to overlook their inner feelings regarding prostitution in the interests of their business. As far as I was concerned, visiting Lien’s brothel on a regular basis implied a certain position that was sometimes questioned by those who saw me there. First of all, brothels (especially their impressive numbers) did not reflect a positive image of Hekou. And, since being a foreigner implied that I would take home certain impressions of the city, people hoped that they would be more flattering. Second, in the views of many of my acquaintances in Hekou, the Vietnamese market was not a suitable place for a foreign woman: it was a site of lust and shame, translated by their frequent use of the words zang [dirty], luan [chaotic] or simply bu hao [not good]
when referring to the marketplace. And, since I was neither engaged in any particular action to change the situation (I was neither a social worker nor an NGO activist, nor was I conducting research into this activity), there was a certain incompatibility between these regular visits to people widely despised for exploiting young women and my claimed concerns for Vietnamese women’s wellbeing. For my friends, herein lay a certain contradiction. But, the mere fact that most of the prostitution venues involved Vietnamese women only discharged Chinese people from feeling too concerned: hence their tolerance. In sum, due to this somewhat overt tolerance of lust, my ‘moral’ position – as it appeared from outside – as well as that of Hekou’s population, remained equally ambivalent in many ways.

On a metaphorical level, border towns represent the margins of both societies and countries in terms of politico-economic and social practices. At the individual level, these social spaces symbolise close access to the foreign, to the elsewhere, the unknown, the border of conventionality, the limits of conjugality, the no-man’s land; in sum, the liminal space. In a very significant way, Hekou and Dongxing are separated from their twin cities in Vietnam by two rivers\(^1\) on the banks of which both local authorities have decided to create leisure spots, grassy areas, and walking paths so that people may enjoy the scenery. Visitors spend time observing and commenting on the ‘other sides’ activities, their degree of economic development, their infrastructure performance, all observations drawn from the mere landscape and human sights they can actually view – or their imaginings – of the other side’s activities. Hence, most of the local guides canvass for clients on these riverbanks which are considered perfect spots for enhancing people’s imagination and igniting their spirit of adventure.

\(^1\) The Beilun River in Dongxing and the Red River in Hekou.
Mr Guo was one such guide. When he was not accompanying his clients, he spent his days around Hekou’s border gate, waiting for phone calls, chatting with tourists, and selling fantasies to potential clients who he approached for a trip to Vietnam: “Qu bu qu Yuenan [do you want to go to Vietnam]?” One day, as he watched the Vietnamese bank of the Red River while we sat sipping coffee together at our favourite ‘street-refreshment-stall’, Mr Guo described his activities as follows:

— Do you see the Casino over there? A Chinese from Malaysia built it. It’s only for Chinese customers, because Vietnamese people are not allowed to enter. Many Chinese laoban [boss] go there to play their money, they don’t need [a] passport, they toudou [cross the border illegally]. I can arrange [a] boat for them. I also take them to Sapa to have fun. You can find foreign prostitutes there: Japanese, Korean, and Russian. They are all available. I know where to find them because you don’t see them in the street. You can order kuaican [fastfood: a ‘short pass’], guoye [whole night] or baoyue [a one month reservation: rent a woman for a month]. People are very open-minded
in Sapa. I sometimes follow my clients for two or three days and then we come back. The price of a pass with a foreign woman is around 600 to 700 yuan [around 60-70 euros in 2010]. But, I need to be careful because prostitution in Vietnam is very tightly controlled. It’s less flexible than in China.

The first time Mr Guo talked about foreign prostitutes in Sapa, he mentioned French women. I have been visiting this Vietnamese hill-station regularly since 1993 and even though I have observed significant changes due to the development of tourism activities there, including the growing number of foreign tourists and a corresponding rise in prostitution activities (Michaud & Turner 2006), I have never encountered or heard about ‘foreign women’ – i.e., European – engaging in sexual services in Sapa. On numerous occasions, Chinese people in Hekou emphasised the high numbers of French people living in Sapa. However, many of these people had never actually been to Sapa, or had only been once. In addition, they were not sufficiently familiar with western languages or physical features to be able to accurately distinguish a French person from a German or a Swede, for example. But, as Sapa was a former French resort during the colonial period – a well-known fact – and has retained some architectural legacies from the past, this shortcut to identity was easy to take. Many residents in Hekou assume, given the high number of Western people visiting Sapa and the regular presence of those who actually live there, that the French are back in Vietnam.¹ Hence, narratives about French women selling their

¹ On various occasions, people asked my acquaintances ‘Is she Vietnamese?’ not that I looked Asian or Chinese but because I looked ‘foreign’ and the closest ‘foreign space’ was Vietnam, a place where population is imagined to be very diverse due to its colonial and migration history.
bodies in Sapa are easy-to-sell fantasies\(^1\) to those adventurous albeit naïve Chinese bosses, who are discovering the place without proper knowledge of it. The thought of sleeping with an allegedly ‘French woman’ may have a more significant impact upon men than sleeping with women of other ethnicities – ‘Russian women’, the ‘poor yet beautiful westerners’ for example – but, the term ‘French’ certainly embodies meanings of status and hierarchy that are worthy of their esteem. As Zhang writes:

> The ‘yellow’ man’s masculine potency is revitalized and embodied in their cash power and foreign women’s willing submission to their desire. But it was precisely this excessive style that the ‘yellow’ man needs to demonstrate that betrays his vulnerability and paranoia that his self-esteem and power might not be recognized or desired (Zhang 2011: 298).

Crossing a border to spend money on entertainment activities is also a way for Chinese tourists or businessmen to show their economic power, especially in a country they evaluate in terms of its economic backwardness and alleged cultural reliance on China. In the Chinese gaze, enjoying Vietnamese women’s company, exploiting Vietnam’s resources, and enhancing cultural and economic hierarchy with contemptuous behaviour during interactions with Vietnamese people (Chan 2005a) has become a metaphorical way of re-exercising a powerful influence over a former suzerain. In Southeast Asia, each person – and by extension each power-holder and entity such as a site or country – is positioned according to a given hierarchy ruled and sustained by the elder-younger principle (Condominas 1983). This principle governs general relationships between Chinese and Vietnamese and will have strong implications for the rapport established between mixed couples, a subject I will

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\(^1\) The presence of foreign prostitutes in borderlands seems to be taken for granted. On several occasions during my visits to Lien’s brothel, some of her regular customers asked ‘Is she a new girl?’ and insinuated some propositions. They were surprised to see me not because I was a foreigner but because they did not know that Lien proposed ‘special’ girls.
examine later in Chapter 5. The dominating relationship briefly alluded to in the tourism and prostitution fields also finds illustration not only in the ways in which many Chinese people behave with their Vietnamese neighbours, but also in the reducing process of subjecting people to narrow stereotyping.

2 Residents: old and new migrants

We may describe a borderland as a zone or region within which lies an international border and a borderland society as a social and cultural system straddling that border (van Schendel 2005: 44, original emphasis).

Who are the people who live in the border areas nowadays, especially on the Chinese side of the Sino-Vietnamese frontier? What make these border-gates specific in terms of residency and of involved human activities? In order to understand how they have become the active but ambiguous places they are recognised as today, it is important to trace the nature of the different waves of migrants, who constitute the roots of the contemporary population.

Transition spaces for people in transition

In the introduction to their edited volume on Southeast Asian borderlands, Horstmann and Wadley highlight the difficulty they encountered when attempting to define ‘borderlands’ in the region:

Rather than assigning a definitive character to border landscapes in Southeast Asia, the empirical assumption underlying our research is the border’s inherent ambiguity. … In these places, where identity and culture are vague and shifting, local powers and social forces negotiate national intimacy, which may either fragment or become reinforced (Horstmann & Wadley 2006: 7).
The urban residents of the particular setting which I will now describe were mainly members of the Kinh and Han ethnic groups. Although the collected data presented in this study reflect the situation of mixed couples living in border towns, many of the informants I met there actually came from rural areas where they had lived for years during their childhoods, early adult lives or former marital arrangements. Thus, an urban setting will not necessarily condition the nature of the sample of population studied because migrants composed most of it. But, those living in the borderlands share a few other features besides belonging to a shifting population.

In Southeast Asia, often the most vulnerable local minorities are found in border regions, and in those remote corners the politics of homogenization play out in terms of language, religion, and way of life. Border regions have developed highly specific cultures, with things as they are because of the border (Horstmann & Wadley 2006: 7, original emphasis).

Drawing upon Horstmann and Wadley’s conceptualisation of border space ‘cultures’, I suggest that Hekou and Dongxing are imbued with particular characteristics that make them special in many senses. As far as their populations are concerned, these cities have indeed become the repositories of vulnerable people; but, rather than limiting this population to minority groups as the authors suggest, I include people who may be temporarily vulnerable, who are in a transitional state and who yearn to change their status. As I will explore further in Chapter 6, many of the male and female migrants inhabiting the borderlands initially had no specific plan in mind. They sometimes gravitated towards border towns in an attempt to find serendipity. In such cases, they often had little social capital to lose and were ready to experiment with anything that could help to position them both in life and their particular societies. The specific culture that is developing in border spaces is not only a ‘product’ of minorities in the ethnic and political sense as suggested by Horstmann
and Wadley, but also in the social sense. The way of life pursued in these regions, especially in the border towns, attracts those looking for exoticism and serendipity. As most of my informants stated when attempting to define borderlands, they are “places where everything is possible. But during the adaptation process, with little support and mainly dependent upon their networking skills, migrants remain vulnerable. Hence, border gates such as Dongxing and Hekou represent not only a passage for the physical, but also, in the abstract sense of the term, going to the border symbolises a certain passage from one state to another in the course of a life. This form of temporary stopover can be defined as a liminal space-time between two countries where one encounters flows of diverse and moving populations, who activate individual projects. In these experimental sites, migrants endeavour to implement projects and potentially to prosper; they can challenge one’s capacities and skills and invent a life, processes that could prove more difficult to invent elsewhere.

However, for those who have nowhere else to go, these places might serve as shelters. Border areas are inevitably places where individuals end up when their situations prove to be fragile on both sides of the frontier. These spaces offer them some flexibility of movement, action and meeting in an incomparably extended way. Individuals attempt to blend into the anonymity of moving and active peoples, who use these spaces for their own economic development (prosperity) and for social emancipation. It is here that people come to see, to try, to enquire, to experiment: it is here that they end up scarred with uncertainty, crisis or failure from a former existence in their original hometowns. Some see these spaces as wonderful opportunities to be creative: others simply seek to be more competitive in their field and to expand their potential.
As Horstmann and Wadley maintain, the “[s]tudy of borderlands should thus pay attention to boundary-producing practices and to narratives of inclusion and exclusion” (2006: 3). This emphasises how, in border settings, social boundaries become as significant as geographical frontiers. In this regard, during my sojourns in Móng Cái, Dongxing, Lào Cai and Hekou, I met and heard of numerous individuals who had settled in these borders spaces ‘by default’, unable to find their own position within their societies or precisely because these spaces offered them the anonymity and freedom of action they needed to build new lives. There, among an ordinary population composed of a majority of economic migrants and ambitious traders, ex-convicts, ex-prostitutes, the ruined, relocated, ‘losers’, misfits or the confused can attempt to establish experimental businesses and personal projects that would prove more difficult to implement elsewhere. The relative flexibility of the local authorities regarding migrants, their status, purpose and activities, informally allows the latter to be more ‘adventurous.’ In some cases, failure due to lack of financial means, experience or connections, or perhaps due to fierce competition, may be conducive to individuals feeling ‘marooned’ in these spaces, which become symbolic shores for castaways. Then, a different dynamic starts: the appeal of illegal activities emerges from the urgency of survival. To this end, I distinguish three types of migrant profiles in borderlands: those who have a project and believe they can implement it there; those who do not have a project but are eager to seize any opportunity to build one; and, those who have neither project nor ambition but who let serendipity guide their existence, using whatever means necessary to survive.

Van Gennep, in his seminal *Rites de Passage* (1969: 27), distinguishes three phases of initiation: (1) the preliminary rites that mark the separation from the anterior world; (2) the liminary rites executed during the marginal stage; and, (3) the post-
liminary rites of aggregation to a new world. Transposed into this business-oriented setting, I believe that the ways in which many migrants settle in border-towns reflect just such a process in regard to their integration with the Chinese commercial economy. I now propose to examine the recent trajectory of Xiao Sun.

Xiao Sun came originally from a small town in Hunan province. Born in the 1970s, he married very young, having been introduced to his wife by go-betweens who knew both of their families. Xiao Sun used to be a soldier and often recalled his service in the army as a tough period of his life. A few years ago, he decided to quit his secure position and convinced his wife to go to Yunnan where they would start a business. As partners in the project, Xiao Sun’s in-laws also moved to Kunming where they opened a shop selling sewing machines. Xiao Sun had no prior experience of this particular business but he was willing to learn. Then, a well-intentioned acquaintance gave him a few tips about the current needs of Vietnamese customers. When I met him in 2006, he was renting a three-storeyed building in Hekou and reselling old sewing machines that came from Chinese factories that had closed.¹ It took him a few months to establish a network through which to resell his machines to Vietnamese private clothing factories. But, ultimately he became an established business-owner in Hekou. In 2009, as a result of his ability to take advantage of his various connections and of lessons learned from his various collaborations with Vietnamese business partners, he started to travel regularly to Hanoi in search of future business opportunities, his aim being to diversify his activities and to increase

¹ His ‘work’ actually consisted of receiving these old items and stacking them in his store where his Vietnamese business partner would spend hours on a daily basis confirming their functioning capacity and packing each machine. Once ready, Xiao Sun would call Vietnamese carriers to load the heavy machines onto their special bikes and then cross the border to deliver the goods in Lào Cai.
his economic power. When I last met him in 2010, Xiao Sun had bought a car, was renting a house in Hanoi, and had decided to spend most of his time in Vietnam, developing his new business there and leaving his wife to manage their Hekou store.

Somewhere between the business-blinded young soldier and the ambitious businessman he became, Xiao Sun has gone through stages of experience that only the prospect of a flexible environment in terms of business opportunities and informal border trade practices enabled him to persist. Xiao Sun started to deliver his machines through illegal channels to Vietnam, in this way avoiding tax fees and registration. Slowly, when his business became effective and profitable by employing such means, he opted for the ordinary – thus taxed – border crossing on the bridge. Lately, Xiao Sun confided to me that selling old sewing machines from his little shop in Hekou had become an anecdotal activity compared to more attractive business prospects in Hanoi on the other side. So, one can easily identify the three stages of his trajectory: the ‘apprenticeship’ in Kunming and his early stay in Hekou (alone); the ‘establishment’ of a rather stable business and position over a time in the marginal space that Hekou represents (with his wife who came with him); and, the ‘projection’ into the future in a new territory (alone, but with the intention of taking his wife and daughter to Hanoi).

Xiao Sun’s trajectory is representative of that which traders generally experience in Hekou and Dongxing. This general pattern of moving also translates as the general movement of Chinese ambition over a land that possesses the necessary resources and provides an extended market to supply with Chinese goods. Borderland economic actors, e.g., Xiao Sun, tend to follow this form of business trajectory where the role of the border town is to provide a site wherein they can experiment with trade with an ‘Other’ and overcome any obstacles before going on to conquer Vietnamese territories. It is significant of the transitional nature that border towns symbolize in the
context of a dynamic, developing area vitalised by a constantly moving and growing population. Above all, living at the border implies concrete participation in a public life closely connected to another environment, another society, an ‘Other.’ This particular context intensifies the feeling of liminality already created by a lived experience at the farthest geographical limit from one’s own country. Chinese migrants experience a genuine attraction, albeit an attraction tinged with some caution, for Vietnam and its economic potential, whereas for the Vietnamese, Chinese border towns represent easy access to a perceived modern world that will provide them with work and personal opportunity. Hence, migrants from both sides gravitate there to experiment with the attractive unknown, and to endeavour to realise personal ambition.

Migration waves and population structure

Hekou serves as an emblematic example of the human complexity of the area. This little city used to represent no more than just a passage between China and Vietnam; but, the setting has changed in the course of the twentieth century. From a small port mainly populated by Yao villagers on its highlands and by Yunnanese Han on its lowlands, Hekou has become a form of refuge for outcasts from contemporary history. Migration of ethnic minority people in this mountainous area occurred along the latest centuries, together with the back and forth movements of Chinese merchants and rebels on both side of the border (Lafont 1989). But from local memories collected among Hekou’s dwellers, it is during the Chinese revolution that the demography patterns changed in a durable manner, when the Republican Army soldiers established themselves in this village of petty traders, thus initiating one of
the most noteworthy massive migration of Han settlers to the Hekou lowland area and beyond the border (Marr 2010). Later, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, new settlers started to arrive. One of the main goals of foreign policy at the time was to protect China’s frontiers (Hansen 2005); to this end, large groups of young people from Yunnan and Guangxi were sent to remote places along the border with Vietnam. During the Cultural Revolution and its ‘Xiaxiang [down to the countryside] political movement (1966-1976)’, increasing numbers of people from all over the country settled in the area. Although these migrations mainly took place during the 20th century, these different layers of residents came to compose the ‘local’ peoples of Hekou. This majority of Han people and minority of urbanised ethnic group members still make for a certain human diversity.

However, in 1978-1979, before and during the armed conflict between Vietnam and China, sudden migrations again changed the local demographic, this time in a different way. In response to a patriotic call from the Vietnamese government, Vietnamese people, who had been living as long-time residents in Hekou, as well as those in the whole of Yunnan – the Việt Kiều [Vietnamese overseas] – opted to return to Vietnam (Chan 2005b). Conversely, on the other side, the Hoa (a Chinese ethnic group in Vietnam) were ‘encouraged’, then forced to resettle in their ‘homeland’ of China. Many of the Hoa ultimately became refugees, whose status remains partly unresolved thirty years after the conflict (Lam 2000; Hai 2000). They also account for a significant proportion of Hekou’s inhabitants, especially in its suburb of Nanxi. Others obtained Chinese nationality and decided to stay in the vicinity of Vietnam to maintain family links. Today, these two communities continue to live together in peace despite smouldering resentment: each
plays a crucial role in establishing communication between Hekou’s traders and their Vietnamese business partners. Their language skills make them ideal translators.

When the border gate of Hekou officially reopened in 1991, new waves of immigrants arrived in response to the official call for the development of Hekou as a new ‘Border Economic Cooperation Zone.’ Entrepreneurs from the surrounding cities of Yunnan and Guangxi, started to visit – then settle – in the city, establishing a new and promising border trade business. The acceleration of these new settlements coincided with the first decade of the Greater Mekong Sub-region’s economic corridor that emphasises the Kunming-Hanoi trading route. As soon as news of business opportunities spread among the traders’ networks, increasing numbers came from Zhejiang, Guangdong, Sichuan, Hunan and even further north to engage in border trade activities. Some brought their families with them: others came alone. In the meantime, the procedures for entering China had been simplified, allowing significant migration of Vietnamese workers to Hekou. The prospects of work in prostitution, tourism, transport, construction and small trade lured thousands of men and women into town, either on a regular or permanent basis.

Nowadays, Hekou’s population is composed of an admixture of people representative of the continuous waves of migration that have transformed the local human settlement over the last century. All of them have different perspectives of – and have had different experiences with – their Vietnamese neighbours and generally maintain pragmatic relationships. The complexity of the settlement in Hekou, which shares many similar patterns with Dongxing, is testament to how modest human

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1 For border residents, obtaining a ‘resident entry & exit permit [bianmin tongxingzheng]’ allowed unlimited border crossing: it replaced the classic combination of passport and visa to enter Vietnam.
settlements on the Sino-Vietnamese border have undergone unprecedented and
tremendous change over the last decades, mainly due to rapid economic development
and cooperation between the two countries. The marks of history are still easily
detectable in the diversity of their populations and identity discourses, although they
are not very obvious to unfamiliar eyes.

However, what differentiates the current situation from the past are the ways
in which migrants need to negotiate with the states in order to continue enjoying the
permeability of borders that only recently became the object of specific policies.
Crossing this border used to be no more than a simple journey over the hills or a
passage over the rivers that separate the two countries. As Willem van Schendel
observes, “[t]he state’s concern with controlling the movement of objects and human
beings across space is a recent development in human history. It is characteristic of
modern states to claim the exclusive right to authorize and regulate movement […]
(2005: 59). Today, the need for a passport, a visa, or at least a permit for crossing the
border imposes control over human movement and notions of legality on an action
once tolerated as part of daily life in the borderlands.

**Personal trajectories**

Margin areas and borderlands in China have seen their populations structured
and changed by various waves of migrants. One notable change in contemporary
times, however, is that recent migrations have been the result of individual agency
rather than state or communal projects. Scholarship on border settlements in China
(Gladney 2004, Hansen 1999, 2005) describes how over the last decades, Chinese
authorities have either forcibly relocated or encouraged millions of people to regions
such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Yunnan to secure the state frontiers, educate and control the local ‘backward’ populations and develop their economies. All of these migrations were organized by work units, the army and local governments, all driven by the conviction that protecting, controlling and developing the margins of China would guarantee security against inner strife and outsiders’ invasion ambitions (Olson 1998, Gladney 2004, Hansen 2005). Even though these migrations were not always the result of a deliberate choice by the migrants themselves, their duty to serve the state required a certain commitment to establishing stable relationships with their new social environment. In the contemporary period, individuals are not migrating to borderlands in the interests of local populations or state politico-economic plans, but precisely because they provide direct access to other countries wherein they can project their personal investment and effort.

Under such different circumstances, the main characteristic of the border towns lies in the commonly acknowledged and claimed purpose of the populations who recently settled there – *zheng qian* [making money] by whatever means available to them. According to some of my informants, this context generates artifici ality in social relationships. Each party tends to primarily serve his/her own – economic – interests when engaging with another. More than elsewhere, for a large section of the local population, the specific transitional nature of settlements in border towns calls for pragmatic connections that will serve immediate purposes. I have met groups of business partners and friends who seemed very well acquainted but who, when I inquired about their whereabouts a few months later, had already lost contact with each other. Many conversations reflected the fragility of some personal situations and thus, of local residents’ relationships. This precariousness revealed the pragmatism of local, social relationships and tended to frame the private interactions I will soon
explore. As a way of approaching the core protagonists of my research topic, I will now introduce some of the characters encountered by the side of the mixed couples, who illustrate the particularity of border communities.

Hang, a charming woman in her mid-thirties, arrived in Lào Cai approximately three months before I met her in June 2006. She was not a native of the city but had just opened a Café-kem¹ on one of the main streets of the old centre. Hang had married very young and produced a daughter when she was 18 years old, followed by a son with her husband. But, her marriage was unhappy. Somehow, she managed to leave her husband and go to Berlin where she spent two years illegally selling smuggled Polish cigarettes. After she was arrested,² Hang spent a year in prison where she was well treated. She then went back to Vietnam and opened her business, living a single life. When I tried to find her two and a half years later, her Café-kem had closed and no one could tell me where she had gone.

A Luo, about whom I wrote earlier, originated from Beichuan in Sichuan province. In his mid-thirties and unemployed, he was searching for business opportunities in Hekou when I first met him on my very first research day in 2006. At the time, he had been living in the city for two years with friends Lien and A Long. He liked to extrapolate on his future projects although he admitted that he had no money. A moody person, he spent his days wandering around the area, smoking and passing time in his friend’s shop. Somehow, according to his claims, he was familiar with the prostitution business at the Vietnamese market and his extended social

¹ These are places where one hangs out with friends to drink soft drinks and eat ice-cream.

² Hang did not specify if she was arrested for selling cigarettes or for being an illegal migrant. But, since she was not immediately repatriated to Vietnam, and served time in a German prison, I would assume that her illegal activity was the cause of her arrest.
network ranged from police and customs officers to petty vendors, Vietnamese translators and Chinese businessmen. Initially I did not understand how or why he maintained such a network, since he always seemed idle and unprepared to engage in any (visible) activity. But later, he appeared to me to be a typical embodiment of what Chinese people call a *xiao hunhun* or *hunzi* [wangler/schemer]. A Luo was always very discreet about his past and current activities; but, he knew enough about the realities of the city to be a reasonable informant at the beginning of my fieldwork, especially on the topic of Vietnamese women. He was single and eager to find a girlfriend; but, he insisted on avoiding Vietnamese woman, claiming they were ‘too complicated.’¹ When I met him two and a half years later, he had opened a brothel three months earlier, which he was managing with his partner, a twenty-two year old Vietnamese ex-prostitute. Considerably less loquacious than before, he still spent his days smoking, waiting and worrying.

— I have just lost my mother in Beichuan’s earthquake,² she just vanished under her house. My brother took care of the funeral. I didn’t go back, what for? She died, that was it. Here, I didn’t have enough money to start a real business, so when A Long and his wife opened their brothel, I followed them for a while. Then I met my wife and I decided to open one too. I rent [*sic*] two girls,³ both 18 years old, but the business is not good. Look at this one, she hasn’t started her day and it is already mid-afternoon…

¹ I will elaborate in Chapter 5 upon what A Luo and other Chinese men mean by this, i.e., how Vietnamese women are often perceived as shrouded in ambiguity (Grillot forthcoming).

² Beichuan city was the epicentre of the deadly Sichuan earthquake, April 2008.

³ In Hekou, Chinese brothel owners always use the Chinese term *zu* [to rent] to designate the relationship between themselves and a prostitute. Lien explained to me that Vietnamese prostitutes are
When asked about his views on the future, A Luo remained silent, only stating that his current business was just a temporary activity he pursued in order to survive. He appeared much more worried about his wife’s weak health and her recent miscarriage. In 2010, the couple separated. His ‘wife’ returned to Vietnam and his brothel closed. As for A Luo, he was still wandering around.

Xiao Yu, a man in his mid-thirties from Henan province, graduated in Chinese language studies from a University in Luoyang and took a position teaching Chinese language and literature at a university in Guangzhou. Disappointed by the mediocre level of his students and a bureaucratic/academic system he could not support, he resigned and opted for a new life in business. He had heard about border towns so decided to relocate to Hekou. For the first five years, he made a living selling (smuggled) computers from China to customers in Vietnam. Independent, single and interested in Chinese contemporary writers and thinkers, he spent most of his time surfing online in search of various reports, literature and business opportunities. During this period, he made very few friends. Until 2009, he lived next door to Xiao Sun and his wife, sharing time with them and cooking meals together, always saying that he might not stay very long in Hekou. But, in 2010, he moved into a new, large office-apartment with his recently-acquired Chinese girlfriend. After that, he no

‘bought’ by a pimp who ‘rents’ them to a brothel. Brothel owners have to pay rent to exploit these women. This means that pimps (who are often Vietnamese women who find and buy young women in Vietnam and are always on the move) are not directly involved in brothel activities. They own and rent women like property, but remain ‘invisible’. Some brothel owners may also own prostitutes if they buy them from a pimp. For brothel owners, renting a woman allows flexibility. If business is not good, they simply send the woman back to her pimp without arranging other engagements. Vietnamese prostitutes function as commodities in these various levels of transaction.
longer saw his former friends and neighbours; instead, he concentrated upon significantly expanding his computer trade.

Mr Ruan¹ had just opened a restaurant when I met him in Móng Cái in June 2006. One of the rare Chinese restaurants in the small city, it was easy to find; a large board written in both Vietnamese language and Chinese characters identified it on the sidewalk. Mr Ruan, a Yao² man from the Dongxing area, was married to a Han woman with whom he had two children. He explained to me that since the Yao of the area had been living in the plains for four generations, they – including him – could no longer speak their own language.

— I opened this restaurant three months ago. Before that, I was a cadre in the Chinese bureaucracy.³ I belong to the intellectual class of my generation. I

¹ The surname Ruan, the Chinese translation of the widespread Vietnamese surname Nguyễn, signified that Mr Ruan probably had some kinship links with Vietnam.

² The Yao of China are called Dao in Vietnam (pronounced ‘zao’) and call themselves Mien. The Yao now total more than 2.6 million people in the Chinese southern provinces of Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan and Guangdong (Source: China Statistic Yearbook 2003, http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/ statistical-data/yearlydata/yrbook2003_e.pdf) and approximately 620,000 in northern Vietnam (Source: http://www.gso.gov.vn/-default.aspx?tabid = 503 & ItemID = 1841). The appellation Yao includes several branches of a population with diverse dialects and cultures. This is true of several other of China’s ‘national minorities’. These categories, which were created in 1950 by the Government on the basis of research conducted by teams of ethnographers, are more of a political classification system than a faithful translation of a complex human, social, and ethnical reality. I use them, despite their irrelevance to this work, by convenience, since my intention is not to discuss ethnic identities here.

³ He did not specify what his former position was.
graduated from high school. I just decided to leave my position to the young graduates who are more qualified and I established here.

Mr Ruan was not a good cook his choice to open a restaurant signalled convenience (or opportunism) born of a sense of failure, the frustration of a man who felt disqualified from occupying an ‘intellectual’ position that had evolved with time and required new knowledge he did not possess. Even though he did not mention it, another explanation may have been that being a cadre, he lost his position after the birth of his second child.¹ This relegated him to the outcast position of those who had lost the security and guarantee of state employment.

Hang, A Luo, Xiao Yu and Mr Ruan, and many others I met, were all migrants trying to make a living in a town they had no particular relationship with prior to settling in it. All had in common the burden of previous dissatisfaction or failure in their private or professional lives. All arrived in border towns driven by the expectation that such a place might provide them with a solution to their dissatisfaction but without any intention to really engage with the local society. They mostly came single, rented places, and their social lives were/are built upon pragmatic relationships rather than long-term friendships or partnerships. They spend their time thinking about better ways to make more money rather than enhancing their current activity, which they view as a temporary step to better opportunities. Not one of them seemed to give anything back to the cities that had welcomed them, anything that

¹ The application of China’s One-Child Policy was more severe for state employees. In general, they were not fined for an accidental second pregnancy and birth in the way other citizens were fined. Instead, they stood to lose their positions and advantages if they decided to keep the second baby. As a member of a minority group, Mr Ruan had the right to have a second child; but, his wife was Han. For this reason, he was not entitled to keep a second child: it cost him his cadre position.
would reinforce a sustainable relationship with the local population. Although based in Móng Cái, Mr Ruan mainly received Chinese traders at his restaurant. As far as A Lien was concerned, despite all the young and active customers she encountered daily, she remained – in their eyes – a migrant. She said she had no friends among the locals (no one knew where she went after she left Hekou); Xiao Yu rarely left his apartment and did not trust anyone. A Luo’s attempts to actively connect with the Vietnamese brothels circle were not meant to facilitate his integration in Hekou’s society. Like their fellows, these migrants were often unable to articulate a feasible future plan for their lives and activities when I first met them in 2006. Three years later, Xiao Yu unexpectedly extended his business clientele in Vietnam without becoming more social: Mr Ruan still ran his restaurant despite its obvious lack of maintenance; Hang had vanished, and A Luo’s brothel failed as did his intimate relationship that could have settled him down.¹ It is within this particular environment and social setting that the cross-border alliances I will describe in the next chapter occurred in a manner than illustrates the general lack of engagement and perspective of migrants and the somewhat indifferent attitudes of the locals regarding these outsiders’ intentions.

As representatives of the crowd of migrants, one cannot deny the efforts of these four characters to recreate a certain social space out of their relationships with acquaintances (from the same province or town) and out of the serendipities that borderlands offer them in terms of main and extra activities. Xiao Yu, Hang, A Luo and Mr Ruan still aim to reinvent themselves via a new life despite identity issues, uncertainty, and/ or a degree of stigmatisation.

¹ A Luo’s Vietnamese partner fell pregnant; but, due to health problems, she miscarried. The couple split up a few months later.
“Ni zuo shenme shengyi [what is your business]?” The shapes of interactions and connections at the border

If we think of spatiality as an aspect of social relations that is continually being reconfigured, borders become much more significant (van Schendel 2005: 45).

The diversity of ethnic groups, geographical communities, cultural identities and economic entities characterising the Sino-Vietnamese borderland render invalid an appreciation of the cross-border matrimonial exchanges phenomenon merely according to linguistic distinctions, official ethnic classifications, local mores, geographical or national specificities.

Nga, Lan and Thao, three of my Vietnamese informants, are married to Chinese businessmen and share their lives between the two shores of the Beilun River. They are young, fluent in Chinese, and have known each other for a few years. They usually work in Móng Cái, live or shop in Dongxing, spend their holidays in Haiphong, are familiar with Hanoi, and visit their in-laws in Nanning or Guilin (two Chinese cities in Guangxi). Holders of border resident permits that allow them to travel back and forth between Móng Cái and Dongxing unhindered, their way of life seems not to distinguish between here and there. In both places, they have Chinese and Vietnamese acquaintances among long-term residents as well as migrants, can enjoy their favourite food and have places to stay. Their social space seems to be set in a unique space inscribed with various characteristics between which they navigate instinctively. Spending time in their company requires a certain familiarity with particular spots and streets names in their Vietnamese and Chinese translations given that they talk about them without referring to the city’s name. Like many other
migrants, Nga’s, Lan’s and Thao’s experiences of these cities is inadequately translated by the state’s definition of border, citizenship or nation.

Therefore, comprehension of how individuals and communities conceptualise and practice the space within which they live and pursue their activities helps to sketch a more genuine map of the borderlands, a map grounded in social relationships and activities rather than according to geographic boundaries. Irrespective of whether they are Chinese or Vietnamese, business associates are also neighbours, gambling partners, former schoolmates or spouses, peoples all intertwined into extended social networks. For example, a network of Chinese clothing wholesalers and their Vietnamese customers compose a group that does not occupy a clearly delimited geographical space in Hekou or Dongxing but links Guangdong and Zhejiang manufacturers to many garments shops in Hồ Chí Minh ville. Sino-Vietnamese travel agencies cooperate to organise tourist tours, creating a very active branch of the cross-border economy. Fluvial carriers work following interaction negotiated with both Chinese and Vietnamese customs, border control patrols and regular customers, all of which works to blur the boundaries. Complex, moving and changing, border societies compose and activate various dynamic networks that make sense mainly due to the economic links that bind them together. An individual can be the partner of several other individuals involved in common projects while at the same time being a member of several large networks. This implies evolving in various social spaces in and out of the individual’s living area, city or country. And, while this form of organisation does not fundamentally differ from that of Chinese provincial or national commercial networks, it has the particularity to associate people from widely diverse backgrounds with a transnational set of connections, which includes an even larger diversity of profiles appurtenant to the specific composition of border societies.
Hence, when engaging with border trade, one may encounter and collaborate with people one may have never considered working with otherwise; translators, smugglers or wangleers, for example. Moreover, as I have already suggested, the reunion of such a large range of individuals finds justification in the degree of participation in a business and a collective purpose, i.e., wealth. This is so obvious that the first question ever asked of a newcomer concerns his/her activity and proposed commercial project in the city.

In sum, in the perceptions of those who pass by, live and work in Hekou, Dongxing or their twin cities of Lào Cái and Móng Cái, spaces are not simply demarcated by their geographic boundaries but are experienced as a much larger tangible and imagined – because in the process of construction – social space, a turntable for networks of exchanges of any kind which enhance the impression of constant metamorphosis of each side (although this is more obvious on the Chinese side which tends to be more dynamic in terms of development). The nature of the relationships established between the various segments of borderland residents, especially among the Vietnamese and Chinese migrants, relies upon their empirical appropriation of a space that they tend to conceptualise either as whole or as clearly demarcated: a space that may or may not include the ‘Other.’ These boundaries are shaped by lifestyles, cultural influences and social representations, a consequence I examine in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

It is in these very unusual yet dynamic social spaces that the phenomenon I will now describe is taking place. Cross-border relationships, irrespective of whether
they are business partnerships or private unions, cannot be examined without taking into account the exceptional context within which they were matched, built, and kept alive, often leading to further involvements in two neighbouring communities.

As van Schendel contends, “[i]f we want to understand how [borderlands] ‘scale’ the world, we must start from their cognitive map – their organized representations of their special environment and their own place in it”¹ (2005: 55). The ‘cognitive maps’ or ‘social spaces’ of borderlanders are all underlying elements that must be taken into account when exploring a social phenomenon such as cross-border marriages. They shape its contemporary manifestation in a context of intensive human mobility set in a continuously changing region.

Cross-border marriages may be seen as a significant way of reconciling with Otherness, the former enemy, the economic partner, the peaceful neighbour – the ideological brother. But, as Zhang maintains, border areas are “usually seen as … site[s] of transgression, controversy and disorder” (2011: 11). In a certain way, the bias directed towards mixed alliances could limit any possibility of normalisation of a relationship. Because the comments and perspectives of the locals regarding particular marriage arrangements mostly engage with more general debate on any ongoing political argument, these marriages tend to embody the recurrent sensitivity of Sino-Vietnamese relationship at the diplomatic level. Unsolved issues find their illustration in local marital experiences. However, before analysing the impact that both context and public discourse have on mixed marriages, it is time to introduce the specificities of the Sino-Vietnamese cross-border alliances.

¹ Van Schendel, citing Downs and Stea (1977).
Chapter 3

Marriages without weddings: A typology of cross-border marriages

Introduction

Now that I have reviewed the methodological issues related to data collection and described the geographical and socio-economic backgrounds of the two border areas of Hekou/Lào Cai and Dongxing/Móng Cái, it is time to turn to the core object of this study; i.e., the matrimonial alliances occurring in this particular setting. All along the 1306 kilometre land border between China and Vietnam, deep into the provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan and as far as the Northern provinces of China, Sino-Vietnamese marriages are occurring at a significantly visible albeit unquantifiable level. While the variety of cases encountered and heard about required cautiousness when sketching an average profile of the spouses involved, outlining some of the recurrent circumstances within which such marriages occur has proven useful to the analysis. In this chapter I propose a typology of the different cases encountered in the two field sites. I considered this a prerequisite to examining in subsequent chapters what they actually mean and reveal about the communities and

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1 Various reports and local estimations mention tens of thousands of unions, but without much explanation on the methods employed to gather these data. Hence, it is hard to appreciate how extensive this phenomenon is nowadays compared to what it was in the past, given the illegal nature of many of these unions and the absence of historical data. This is mainly due to its association with local practices, which had no real impact in times when control of both population and frontiers was not as crucial as it is now.
societies to which they belong. This chapter will be divided into three main parts; in the first part, I will situate the contemporary forms of Sino-Vietnamese cross-border alliances I encountered in the historical tracking of social exchanges at the local level, and within the phenomenon of international marriages in the East Asian region. Following this I will detail the life stories of several of the persons and generations involved in these marriages and the unions they have created. Further descriptions will include the various trends, legal aspects and common features of the seemingly different trajectories of the couples. These extensive ethnographic accounts reveal how normative categories fail to adequately provide room for the alternative matrimonial practices that re-emerge when dramatic social, economic and political evolutions challenge traditional kinship rules and marriage customs.

The marriages I address in this thesis challenge the normative structure of marriage in Southwest China and Vietnam. For example, the administrative rules are defied: many Sino-Vietnamese couples choose not to register their marriages, thus failing to comply with the policy of both the People’s Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Local practices are often ignored for despite customary practices, Sino-Vietnamese marital exchanges do not necessarily require the payment of a bride price or dowry. So, what does this say about these two societies that notwithstanding share coherent and similar – although delayed in time – changes at the socio-economical level? My aim in this chapter is to illustrate how despite these perceived discrepancies, mixed marriages highlight the significant variations in the Chinese and Vietnamese societies’ evolution during their transition from socialist revolutions to liberal reform eras, specifically in the domains of family life and gender roles within the domestic and public spheres. I will also begin to
demonstrate how normative categories fail to adequately account for individuals whose trajectories and yearnings lead them to transgress social rules of conjugality.

Issues of love and conjugality will be discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 3, I frame the structure that may have resulted from love, may indicate the standing point for its development or mark the end of the personal yearning for it. In an attempt to provide clarity, I will offer extended ethnographic accounts of some of these marital relationships, as they are experienced now before delving further into the affective states they create. And, since my argument revolves around the word ‘marriage,’ it is crucial to define precisely what I mean by this term, and more importantly what the informants meant when they employed it to describe particular individuals’ situations or to contest its relevance.

1 Historical continuum versus global trends: “cross-border marriages”

There is a need here to assess the historical roots of various marginalized forms of conjugality and the specificities of their current forms linked with the Chinese and Vietnamese contemporary social context. Cross-border marital exchanges do not represent a new phenomenon: their roots are deeply embedded in the region’s history. In this section, I will review the main aspects of historically observed cross-border alliances by tracing the slavery patterns and internal marriage migration in China, the human trade, the commercial exchanges and the “industry of marriage” (Phùng, 2006) in Vietnam.
The need for historical perspectives

Historical records provide evidence of marriages between Chinese men and local South East Asian women. Sources generally describe the alliances formed between the various waves of Chinese men who travelled to countries that needed them as a work force, many of which encouraged their immigration by allowing them to marry the local women. These measures contributed to Chinese establishment/settlement and assimilation. Historians of Southeast Asia have long noted the ease with which wealthy Chinese, for example, married into some Southeast Asian ruling dynasties and upper classes (Andaya 1992; Loos 2008; Stoler 2002). However, exploration of lower class Asian immigrants to Southeast Asia during the colonial period reveals the existence of different kinds of relationships (especially informal unions) that have only infrequently been monitored by states (or by scholars). Historically, lower class intra-Asian intimacies fell off the colonial state’s bureaucratic grid because their unions did not threaten the state as long as they ensured a continuous pool of labour and promoted economic growth (Loos 2008: 28).

Nowadays, the term ‘Sino-Vietnamese marriages’ may also refer to Chinese men who enter Vietnam (and its market) through their romantic affairs with the local women. However, as was the case in earlier history, these men were often traders who enjoyed an advantageous economic position compared to that of the local men (as was the case in Siam, as Loos discovered). Few of them became really established in Vietnam given that the contemporary marriage migration path that unites the Vietnamese and Chinese people generally starts from Vietnam, then goes to China. And, because most of the migrants are Vietnamese women, who cross the border not as needed workers (Loos 2008: 35) but as temporary illegal migrants, the Chinese authorities definitely do not encourage them to stay. Questions of direction, purpose,
gender nature and scales of migration, and the ways in which they have changed throughout history, represent crucial factors to consider in the analysis of cross-border marriages. Most of the cases upon which I focus belong to the invisible category of international marriages that constitute the majority of the “landscape intimacy” (Loos 2008: 29) in these border regions; in other words, those that do not appear in official statistics and do not reflect local realities. And, even when examining the various estimations of the scale of the phenomenon, it becomes clear that the modern tools born out of various political concerns (like the control and measure of border crossing) create the illusion that the current practice varies tremendously from that of the past.

Placing contemporary studies of intra-Asian unions within [an] historical context may attenuate implicit claims of absolute increases resulting from ‘globalization.’ In other words, a historical view would see fluctuations in international marriage rates that are tied, in chronological order, to early modern trade patterns, imperialism’s massive demand for labor in its public works projects and plantations, war (WWII, the Korean War, and [the] US-Vietnam War, for example) and most recently the demand for labor that has arisen from low birth rates and uneven economic development (Loos 2008: 28).

In reality, as I mentioned earlier, the statistics for Sino-Vietnamese marriages remain somewhat unreliable due to factors considered as valid for estimating marriage migration. Nevertheless, this is probably less important to assessment than the relevant motivations hidden behind the phenomenon’s continuity. “The point is that depending on how one defines who counts as an ‘international’ subject and what counts as marriage, one will draw radically different conclusions about the size and significance of populations and state policies regarding ‘international marriage’ in colonial-era Southeast Asia” (Loos 2008: 36). When Chinese merchants opted not to register their marriages to Siamese women until the early 20th century, for example, they were simply following their own customs, as well as local customs. And, being Asian men, their marital status was of less concern to the Siamese rulers than that of
Western men married to local women, unions that had hierarchy connotations and implied the need to protect the national interest in a colonial era.

In contemporary China, mandatory registration of marriage – national and international – with Chinese legal authorities only started after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949), when legal procedure became a condition of being officially recognized as a new family. Weddings, on the other hand, varied considerably in the extent to which they followed tradition. Since 1950, the Chinese government has encouraged very simple, civil weddings centred upon registration at a government office. The 1980 marriage law states: “Article 7. Both the man and the woman desiring to contract a marriage shall register in person with the marriage registration office. If the proposed marriage is found to be in conformity with the provisions of this law, registrations hall [will] be granted and a marriage certificate issued. The relationship of husband and wife is established when a marriage certificate is acquired” (Engel 1984: 959).
Figure 9: Freedom of marriage, happiness and good luck, 1953 (Source: http://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-594.php). The idea that marriage should be synonymous with happiness and free will was sufficiently new to justify a mass educational campaign among the Chinese population.

Figure 10: In marriage, keep an eye on your own interests, and return radiant after registration, 1953 (Source: http://chineseposters.net/themes/marriage-law.php). This propaganda poster was intended to convince Chinese newly-weds to register their marriages for official recognition.
Despite these early measures, and their enhancement throughout recent history, coerced and arranged marriages still exist (McLaren 2001); and, registration still represents an obstacle to those who find themselves trapped in an awkward or complex situation. This would be the case with informal international marriages, which in the case of Vietnam are no exception but simply the extension of an already existing process.

**Historical trends during the colonial period: human trade/exchange background**

Baudrit (1943, republished in 2009) in his time, and Lessard (2009) very recently, are among the few historians who wrote on the topic of human trade or slavery during the colonization of Indochina and especially in North Vietnam – in Tonkin – documenting the widespread practice of selling Vietnamese women to China for purposes of prostitution, marriage or domestic work. The incredibly detailed information that these accounts provide finds a strong echo in contemporary Vietnamese women’s stories, especially concerning the ways in which they reached China (as some of my informants’ narratives will demonstrate).

On the Chinese side, recourse to the work of several European observers of Chinese society under the imperial regime, prior to the contemporary period marked by civil wars and the socialist regime, reveals a trade in women within as well as without China’s frontiers (Cooper and Gallieni, cited in Baudrit 2009). In South China, for example, slavery was practiced until the middle of the twentieth century as James Watson’s research into the Cantonese region (including Guangxi) has shown (Watson 1980). Watson writes: “Until the foundation of the People’s Republic in
1949 China had one of the largest and most comprehensive markets for the exchange of human beings in the world. In many parts of China, notably in the south, nearly every peasant household was directly or indirectly affected by the sale of people” (Watson 1980: 223).

More than a century later, the attention given to this phenomenon still errs through its presentation. The term ‘slavery’ faded in favour of ‘trafficking,’ a still reprehensible reality that embeds a political meaning. But, nowadays, an often de-contextualized Manichean vision, associated with a condemnatory position and supported by moving testimonies, has become a conjectural interpretation, forged under legal and political terms.¹ A rather consensual and scandalized discourse, along with some associated repressive measures (including repatriation programs for ‘victims’), reflects the desire of nations to apply the concepts of universal human rights and justice, often irrespective of the specific approach that some complex realities of human exchanges rooted in local history would require. Among these exchanges, some extreme forms have followed the vicissitudes of contemporary history enacted in countries like Vietnam and China to reify control over their population movements. But, a categorical vision of migration, that readily classifies some cases as ‘illegal migration’ or ‘human trafficking,’ reflects the course of the new

¹ Indeed, some activist, non-governmental organizations and institutions such as the Department of State’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, that annually releases its report on human trafficking in the world, tend to generally adopt and disseminate a rather judgmental position that separates the world into two assumed clear categories regarding this matter: the victims and the perpetrators of human trafficking. Although my purpose here is not to engage with increasingly complex discussions on human trafficking between activist and academics, I notice from this debate that such framing of a ‘black-and-white’ picture of certain forms of human exchange remains questionable because it often ignores individual agencies, local contexts and historical backgrounds.
international order, which makes the fight against any forms of goods and human smuggling one of the prerequisites and understandable conditions of the establishment of harmonious relations between the countries bordering the region, and their integration – and, by extension recognition – with and by ‘respectable’ nations.

But, beyond the slavery/trafficking debate one finds other realities that are somewhat difficult to label. Although not exactly an ethnographic account, *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* (Phùng 2006), for example, represents a local investigative journalist’s report about mixed marriage practices in Saigon in the 1930s. This report remains one of the liveliest, historical indications that in contemporary Vietnam, besides colonial exploitation, there has long been an ambiguous association between marriage with (any) foreigner, prostitution and/or opportunist partnerships. This perception relegates love stories to a secondary level in the decision-making process surrounding two individuals’ plans to settle down and start a family. Here, using the term ‘industry’, the author implies “that the marriages of the local Annamite [Vietnamese] women and the European men were mechanical and businesslike matters. The term ‘industry’ in Vietnamese encompasses places, like factories, that employ many workers. As a hired worker, a man or woman works for a price, and the length of one’s employment depends implicitly on the monetary value of one’s service” (Thúy 2006: 12).

From the point of view of Chinese residents of Hekou and Dongxing, contemporary examples of mixed marriages do not differ much from those of earlier times that Vũ Trọng Phùng describes. Their comments – which will be the subject of Chapter 4 – suggest that many of these marriages result from the conscientious strategies of individuals who wish to improve their original unsatisfying situations, despite the vulnerability of these types of relationships. Popular viewpoint also entails
that Chinese men provide their Vietnamese female partners with certain forms of material and financial compensation for their availability, a position that renders blurry the distinction between long-term cohabitation and prostitution. Other sources document forms of free alliances in pre-revolutionary Vietnam that attest to the possibility for some individuals to experiment with non-conventional alliances, driven by the given circumstances and pragmatism. More often than not, contemporary informal unions reflect the earlier absence of any public ceremony to seal the alliance between two families, the consequent lack of gift exchange and neglect of immediate administrative validation. These historical accounts provide examples that reveal very similar standpoints vis-à-vis my own ethnographic data:

A young man, tired of dragging along a life of misery in his village, tempted by adventure, or [in a] hurry to escape from the mandarins’ investigations, emigrates, and reaches the red lands’ rubber plantations, or some public construction sites. There, after some time, he meets a girl who is more or less an expatriate like him. They get along, and live together, without organizing any of the ceremonies that usually accompany the celebration of marriages. Is there marriage or not? The future will tell. The reality of marriage, or the lack of conjugal bond itself, will be proved by the state of affairs after a few years. If after a short or long-term try, living together is not possible, one separates amicably, or with a few blows [to] each other, and all is said. This temporary union turns out, in the eyes of both spouses, as [in] the eyes of everyone, to be a youth entertainment, choi-nhôi. And it should be noted that this cohabitation could last several years, and that children might be born. Neither time nor the offspring do make the marriage actual. There should be continuity. If, indeed, the man and woman continue to go along, to cohabit with each other, they will look at each other, and will be seen by their neighbours, as genuine husband and wife, as forming a real family. And when, later, they will return to their villages of origin, everyone, relatives and fellow citizens, will regard them as truly united, albeit none of the usual ceremonies were held. But can one tell, in the early days of the union, before the separation has disjointed or before the continuity of life together has strengthened the bonds of this union, how both partners view themselves, and why are they considered by their neighbours, whether \textit{ad tempus} partners or regular couple, as husband and wife? The answer is not easy. These cases occur in environments where living alone is so difficult, where consciousness is so broad, and free union so close to regular marriage, that in most cases, individuals do not know exactly in what condition they are, and they do not care to pursue this matter of conscience, whereas their neighbours, mostly in the same situation from the marital standpoint, are in the same uncertainty. I believe that their condition can be defined
by the reflection that they may be doing, or at least could do: we live together for
now, we will see for the future (Cadière 1992: 44-45).

These observations from the beginning of the last century enlighten the
contemporary situation. Even though Cadière specifies further that these “abnormal
unions” remained rare in the old Vietnam, they nevertheless attest that besides
customary marriage, alternative forms of conjugality have coexisted in Vietnam for a
long time. These unions also mean that despite the modern registration and framing of
what ‘marriage’ is supposed to legally mean (cf. Marriage Law(s) in socialist
Vietnam), these pre-existing figures, along with earlier practices such as polygyny
and new practices such as pre-marriage cohabitation in urban settings, have endured
and even reappeared as common in the Sino-Vietnamese border zones. But, to what is
this attributable?

In the context of extended exchanges with Chinese populations, under the
frame of trading collaboration in most cases, Vietnamese women may experience
marriage without the absolute commitment required by their communities’ males (a
proper and exclusive marriage), and without necessarily being exposed to social
judgment. Yet, when accepting the terms of common-law marriage with Chinese men,
Vietnamese women still expose themselves to social criticism and judgment since
their communities regard their choice as disrespectful of customs and of parents’
expectations (cf. Chapter 4). However, unlike the examples provided by Cadière,
contemporary cases do not refer to Vietnamese men, only to Vietnamese women who
choose Chinese men and, in doing so, abandon their communities. Such a choice
might challenge the masculinity and pride of the Vietnamese males, who in most
cases respond with contempt; but alliances with ‘foreigners’ do not directly threaten
Vietnamese men’s domestic position. Therefore, by extension, given the low position
of Vietnamese women in Vietnamese society, these alliances are less likely to attract
the scrutiny of the male-oriented Vietnamese authorities (Luong 2003). This reminds us of the attitude of the past colonial powers in various parts of Asia toward the white women (usually single, widow, poor and discriminated) who were settled there and who engaged in intimate affairs with local men. Most were regarded as offenders of the moral standards established by the ‘white’ colonial supremacy and manifested in unequal treatment of taboo relationships or mixed unions between Europeans and indigenes. According to their gender, such couples were the object or tolerance or rejection. In Stoler’s words, such sexual prescriptions based on race, gender and power hierarchies illustrate a “defense of community, morality, and white male power…” (Stoler 2002: 60). In these two situations, male chauvinism of both white men in Asia and Vietnamese men illustrates two points. First, it expresses a basic disregard toward women who challenge their power by openly yearning for emancipation from their conjugal position and role at a time and a place that allow them to challenge conventions: single white women in the colonies, and Vietnamese women in an opening society. Such emancipation may as well be associated with national betrayal. Secondly, male chauvinism also illustrates how these women, perceived as defiant, easily become the site of animosity toward an Other whose control conditions male domination: white men needed to control the potentially rebellious native male, and Vietnamese men nowadays wish they could control the economically ‘invading Chinese’. In that matter, mixed conjugality embodies a wider social and ideological challenge than private affairs would initially suggest.¹

¹ One should note that this argument is also true in other countries in Asia where native women entering cross-border marriages give rise to the wariness of their compatriots (Constable 2003, 2004; Kelsky 2001).
International/cross-border marriages in Vietnam nowadays

Recent scholarship on cross-border marriages compiled by Minjeong Kim (2010) tends in general to locate contemporary mixed unions as part of the globalization process: they are mostly interpreted as ‘commodified marriages.’ This may be due to the objectives of these studies wherein analyses are of ‘male-order brides’, the relatively new trend of female migrants from developing countries who marry husbands abroad. Such women embrace an imagined future through a broker agency, implying rupture from their own affines and the adoption of a new life in an unknown environment. Hence, the absence of an historical background to most of these instances leads to interpreting these marriages within frameworks such as globalization, human trafficking and/or governmentality, often from a post-feminism perspective. As Kim observes: “[G]iven the persistent stereotypes as either victims or opportunists, women marriage migrants are still marginalized in their society and objectified in academic writings” (Kim 2010: 727). Although some changes have appeared in the scholarship’s approach (Constable 2009; Jones & Shen 2008; Kim 2010), these studies reveal a tendency to confine women who enter into international/cross-border marriages to a category that ignores their past reality and the social backgrounds they actually come from, both of which elements complicate their status.

For example, when Vietnamese brides are the objects of a particular research, they only appear in terms of how they are studied for: marriage migration. Yet, evidence from the field suggests that social categories are often blurry and can influence the image of a phenomenon based on certain stereotypical cases, even when the latter do not constitute the majority. But then, what should we call a Vietnamese woman, who has been deceived and sold to a Chinese man but escapes and officially
marries a Vietnamese man, then divorces the latter and becomes a prostitute in China solely as a means of survival, enters into cohabitation with a Chinese client who becomes her boy-friend, becomes the long-term unregistered spouse of a Chinese migrant, before returning to Vietnam as a regular worker, ultimately single? Should we classify her as a victim of human trafficking, a prostitute, an illegal migrant, a marriage migrant, a returnee or a regular rural migrant within Vietnam, or all of the above? Many of the women who confided their stories to me had experienced such complicated life journeys that prevent any simple categorization. Hence, the complex image that emerges from these alliances forces one to initially locate them in an historical context, then in a social context. Only then can one understand the heterogeneity and blurriness of their status, their social position, even their image/credibility as seen by the community that is host to them (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4). Again, the same limits apply when interpreting the men’s position, since most of them have a background of disruptive life experiences that have rendered them receptive to cross-border marriage, a non-normative marital choice (discussed further in Chapter 5). Nicole Constable (2006), arguing for a new approach to these migrants categories, warns researchers against quite the opposite tendency from that which I have just mentioned: “Instead of arguing that the three separate literatures on what I prefer to call domestic workers, sex workers, and correspondence brides are too separate and would benefit from being combined, I am concerned with the potential for unwarranted blurs—or fuzzy shadow lines—between the three categories” (Constable 2006: 1, original emphasis). Here, Constable refers in particular to the ‘trafficked women’ discourse that tends to assume that these three categories are different names for a common profile of women. Keeping with her argument, I suggest extending her warning to the fact that categorizing people into
one of the three categories Constable identifies may be more convenient than relevant. For instance, many of my female informants were neither domestic workers nor prostitutes when I met them. Yet, they could all have been engaged at one time or another in their lives in one of these activities. While in some cases people had undoubtedly deceived them, in others they had decided themselves to cross the border and work illegally. None of them had gone through a process such as correspondence to meet their husbands; yet, they were all involved in various forms of cross-border marriage at some point in their trajectories, not necessarily as a consequence of a coerced match. I was personally confronted by difficulty when trying to fit my informants into neat categories: I had to ask myself were they trafficked women, regular foreign spouses, or migrant women in long-term relationships with Chinese partners? At the individual level, life experiences blur categories intended to differentiate one case from another, until terms themselves lose their initial meaning and purpose. Depending upon what period of an individual’s life we consider, his/her profile would require different frames, assuming that these very categories do make sense to him/her, or that they reflect the ways in which people articulate their own experiences and their ongoing lives. Identifying informants according to blurry categories that do not enclose the same realities for either the Chinese or Vietnamese people particularly by outsiders like myself, tends to create more confusion than that which already exists in the field. Hence, as Constable suggests, “[i]dentifying whom we are talking to and about by the labels they would recognize and respect, would seem be a fundamental step in the right direction for scholars, activists, and policy makers” (Constable 2006: 21-22).

As far as Vietnamese international marriages are concerned, however, two recurrent images emerge. The first shows cohorts of educated women, who cannot
find suitable matches within their communities but find among Western-based Vietnamese men a possible satisfying life-partner (Thai 2008). A second image displays lines of young Vietnamese women patiently waiting for potential husbands in the obscure bars and hotels of Hô Chí Minh city. Sponsored by semi-legal broker agencies that arrange their departures for Taiwan, Singapore or South Korea, they clutch bunches of wedding pictures and a few gifts to share with their families before their flights depart. These commercially arranged marriages, which are considered one result of the globalization of – and transnationalism patterns in – the Asian region (Yeoh, Huang & Lam 2005; Williams & Hampshire 2010) supported by new technologies, have been both extensively reported by the media and observed and studied by contributors to activist and academic literature (Hugo & Xoan 2007; Wang 2007, Tam 2003). Some findings tend to oversimplify – even forget about – international marriages that do not involve, for instance, an administrative procedure and the following-up of the brides’ socio-economic and legal position in their host societies. In order to travel abroad, these Vietnamese brides are required to submit to a medical examination, must be in possession of a proper marriage certificate, a passport, a visa, a flight ticket, and various (reliable or not) guarantees from their prospective husbands (via brokers) that they will indeed embark upon married life immediately after arriving at their destinations. Taken as a whole, the process offers very little space for coincidence and personal initiative. Unlike their southern sisters, Vietnamese women from the northern parts of Vietnam tend to look towards China when they have marriage in mind that cannot be satisfied locally. Even though brokers’ agencies have recently emerged in Hanoi and Haiphong to match Mainland Chinese with local Vietnamese women, most alliances occur across the border, without any ‘professional’ intermediaries and most of the time without any initial
plan. As a consequence, most academic discussions about Vietnamese brides tend to omit the specific issues that the existence of Vietnamese brides involved in ‘cross-land-border’ marriages have created over the course of history and in particular in contemporary times.

The study of ‘international marriage’ requires us to understand the process of recognition which divides various intimacies according to the ethnicity, gender, religion, class and nationality of the parties involved. It was not until the introduction of the passport as a method of surveillance and regulation that such ‘international marriage’ unions could be effectively monitored and categorized. Thus, the very notion of the ‘international marriage’ is itself a product of the modern twentieth-century state (Toyota 2008: 2).

These marriages are technically/theoretically international since they bind together individuals from different nationalities. But, they are also local because they are inscribed in a social space that links China’s Yunnan and Guangxi provinces to the Southeast Asian region and occur in societies linked by a complex hierarchy, all of which tends to change following similar dynamics. Unlike other international marriages in the region, personal and business-oriented alliances between local people still rely on personal networks. In the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, for example, women and men do not meet within a structured and organised frame such as that provided by a broker agency. In fact, a larger space is left for interaction between coincidence, calculation and individual strategies which distinguish every case from the next and, above all, make relationships evolve in different directions despite their similar beginnings. Each stage of a marriage sees various factors influencing the relationship between a man and a woman: one union may fit different models during different periods of time. A woman forced to marry a foreign man might accept her situation when she realises she will be well treated. After bonding with her husband, the passage of time sees her rejecting the label of coerced union. Thus, analysing a precise moment of a marriage can never accurately capture the full experience of a
relationship or the way it transforms over time: nor can it define into which category
it should enter. Only longitudinal, qualitative ethnographic research can begin to
encapsulate the complexity of these couples’ conjugal reality. Therefore, the
classification proposed here is merely an attempt to distinguish the main tendencies of
marriage forms, according to how they begin and how they become a reality in the
lives of both spouses.

2 Today at the Sino-Vietnamese border

My research intends to respond to Constable’s call by proposing a broader
perspective that accounts for the various ways in which people’s lives inhabit multiple
categories and cannot be reduced to simplistic typologies. Thus, in the interests of
clarity, drawing on the life-stories I have gathered and followed up and upon the
details offered by the individuals’ backgrounds, I will now outline the various
profiles/patterns of cross-border alliances that are commonly found in the borderlands
of Northern Vietnam and Southwest China.

What do all Sino-Vietnamese couples share in common?

What does a Vietnamese interpreter who marries her former Chinese employer
with whom she fell in love have in common with a woman from a rural area in
Vietnam who finds herself trapped and sold to a Chinese farmer? What makes two
very different women, one from a rural area with only primary school education, and
the other an urban dweller and university graduate, occupy a rather similar social
position in China? What does a young enthusiastic businessman from Zhejiang have
in common with a middle-aged peasant from Guangxi? The second part of this chapter aims to provide a few answers to these questions by addressing the context in which these unions occur nowadays in the border areas, and to examine the types of marriage that emerge from both national context and individual situations. I argue that the main commonality between these very different patterns of conjugality resides in the interpretations that communities reach regarding them, and in issues related to the social status that their marriages actually reveal.

One characteristic of these alliances is that in most cases they challenge the commonly accepted notion that marriage, in particular in Chinese and Vietnamese societies, unites two families, and that this is more relevant than the feelings that exist between the two main protagonists involved, more important than their own agency. Here, not only are the two families rarely if ever involved in the choice of each partner, but they are usually the missing link, overwhelmingly absent from the whole arrangement. Sino-Vietnamese alliances in the borderlands tend to be mostly based upon common interest and/or personal attraction of two adults rather than the result of two families’ negotiations that bind their children’s lives together. Alliances are settled irrespective of whether both partners have a say in the process or not. Because they often occur in a context of migration that isolates individuals and puts them in a specific position due to immigration rights, these mixed marriages generally embody the union of one family with one individual – at best – or the union of two independent individuals regardless of their relatives’ advice – at worst. This is, among other reasons, why the English term ‘alliance’ seems more appropriate to define these unions than the word ‘marriage’ that entails implications of a large range of actors, rituals and projects.
Contemporary terminology: How is marriage defined today at the Sino-Vietnamese border?

In her contribution to the *International Conference on International Marriage in Asia* (Singapore, NUS, 2010, October 14-15\(^{th}\)), referring to the lack of clear definition of ‘marriage’, Lyons regretted that “we [researchers] recognize legal stated view of marriage and ignore others.”\(^1\) The conclusion reached at this conference deplored the lack of consensus regarding the terms used to describe marriage by each of the attending scholars. What they failed to ascertain was: is there any difference between international marriage, transnational marriage, cross-border marriage or cross-cultural marriage? Lyons’ review of the academic literature on the topic demonstrated that there was no clear distinction between – or explanation of – the use of one term rather than another. My personal choice was to follow the local definition which embedded many meanings that English terms such as marriage, union, alliance and arrangement could apply to without exhausting its content.

- **Jiehun [married]:** a blurry definition

So in contemporary times, at the local level, what exactly does the word ‘marriage’ mean or evoke? What is a marriage? I recall the difficulties I encountered when first trying to identify informants because use of the words *hunyin* [marriage] or *jiehun* [married] was not necessarily appropriate in the eyes of local population to describe the domestic arrangements of the couples I was looking for. But, while the locals do not always use the word *hunyin* when referring to the relationships of mixed marriage couples, most of the latter refer to their relationships as *hunyin*. From their viewpoint, they are married, irrespective of whether or not they have performed the

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\(^1\) Leonore Lyons, unpublished presentation, Singapore, 14 October 2010.
requisite public rituals and registration that allow society and state to recognize their unions.

To date, the anthropological definition of marriage remains the subject of ongoing debate. Since the Royal Anthropological Institute defined the institution of marriage as a “union between a man and women such that the children born to the woman are recognized as legitimate offspring of both partners” (RAI 1951), much has been written on the topic. The difficulty to agree on an updated universal definition of marriage – at least for anthropologists – mainly lies on the attention to pay to factors such as sexuality, gender and identity, reproduction, economic exchanges, inheritance rights, or relationships with kinship. Each attempted definition tends to cover many but not all aspects of marriage. All fail to be applicable to every society of this world, and create more debate than they reach any consensus. The diversity and exceptions found in many social groups nowadays make the task even harder in a contemporary world that evolves at an unprecedented speed. However, as Lyons notes, the legal definition generally validates what one should regard as marriage. The contemporary marriage laws of Vietnam (1986, revised in 2000) and China (1980, amended in 2001) enforce monogamy, equality of men and women, and choice in marriage. If a union meets the criteria of marriage, the state sanctions it with civil registration. However, my use of the term ‘marriage’ in this thesis extends to include a large variety of cases which, while not considered as formal legalized marriages according to the law, were nonetheless experienced as marriage by my informants, according to their personal interpretations of the institution. I have chosen to use the terms of address that men and women use when referring to their partners as a means of assessing the particular circumstances of their relationships. In China and in southern China in particular, the Chinese terms laogong [husband] and laopo [wife] mean ‘life
partner.’ They are also used to refer to fiancés/ées (i.e., boyfriends and girlfriends respectively) when a relationship is thought to be stable and may culminate in official registration. Individual, family or community member usage of the terms laogong or laopo signals that the couple’s relationship is socially recognized – at least by their given circle of acquaintances – and regarded as a form of marriage, irrespective of whether official paperwork supports the fact. Full social recognition comes with a series of rituals organized between the two families and a final ceremony that gathers family and friends together at a banquet.

Following the approximate definitions provided by the available vernacular terms to describe locally known versions of conjugal relationships in Hekou and Dongxing, there are additional ways of classifying these marriages. The first classifies a couple’s relationship according to the spouses’ places of origin and mobility. A marriage may be variously identified as tong minzu [intra-ethnic], bendi [local], waidi [outsiders], or kuaguo hunyin [cross-border marriage] in cases where the man and woman are from China and/or Vietnam. The last mentioned category constitutes the subject this thesis. Even though a marriage is identified as ‘having occurred across the border’, this informs little about its characteristics from the community viewpoint. The background and circumstances of an alliance provide much more relevant information. A marriage may variously be attributable to a business arrangement, escape from prostitution aided by an understanding client (or not), a forced marriage, an arranged match, a love story, or a family’s interference in their children’s personal affairs. Based upon the circumstances a couple has to contend with, the marriage evolves and constitutes a labelled reality. The status of the relationship comes first: a registered or tolerated cohabitation. The form that their union takes comes next: coercive marriage, an agreed-upon union, a pragmatic association or a precarious
romance (in the case of the woman, as a second-wife/lover). Eventually the temporality factor defines whether or not a relationship between two individuals constitutes a serious commitment: short arrangement during a temporary migration, a non-affianced romance, or a long-term union that may include children. Additional criteria, e.g., whether or not a couple live together, help to define their relationship’s stability. When the Chinese community, who are host to the majority of Sino-Vietnamese couples, do not recognize two persons as married, they refer to their relationship as tongju guanxi [cohabitation] or hezuo guanxi [collaboration]. The most ambiguous albeit meaningful term, pin le [living as de facto spouses], designates a man and a woman as sharing a life together when at least one of the two partners is already married (although away from his/her family). However, use of pin le is in effect judgmental: it suggests that local communities, irrespective of their outward display of tolerance and indifference vis-à-vis local unconventional conjugal practices, continue to regard them as problematic. And, once a relationship is classified into one of these frames, individuals become the focus.

- **Yuenan laopo or Yuenan mei:** Vietnamese brides/wives/partners

I have found that foreign brides have little reason to identify themselves as a group on the basis of how they met their spouses. If we listen carefully, we may hear the voices of immigrant wives, but most have little reason to identify themselves as or to reply to the name of ‘mail order brides’ or trafficked women (Constable 2006: 19-20).

Despite the social debate they have sparked in Taiwanese, Singaporean and South Korean societies in recent years, Vietnamese women, along with Chinese and other foreign brides in general (Lu 2005, 2008; Lu & Yang 2010), are now recognized as a category of specific immigrants with specific issues (Xoan & Xuyen 2010). Media and civil society have together played a decisive role in recognising and creating a platform from which to discuss the recurrent issues that Vietnamese
women’s existence in local society entails in terms of integration, education, civil rights and social security. In the public culture and discourse spheres, Vietnamese women constitute a category known as *Yuenan xinniang* [Vietnamese bride] or *Yuenan mei* [Vietnamese younger sister], terminology that broadly refers to the phenomenon of young Vietnamese brides matched with local, disadvantaged husbands, often in a very organized and efficient way, but also with a strong commercial orientation. This includes all the deviant affairs linked to dubious profitable business, as Figure 11 below reveals.

In Hekou and Dongxing, *Yuenan mei* and *Yuenan laopo* [Vietnamese wife] are the terms most commonly used for Vietnamese women, although their meaning differs slightly. In these two cities, *Yuenan mei* can mean either a young fiancée or a prostitute: *Yuenan laopo* (or its shortened version *Yuenan po*) refers to a Vietnamese
woman who is actually sharing her life with a Chinese man, *laopo* being the colloquial term for wife in this area of China. But, none of these terms explicitly indicates the real position of a Vietnamese woman in her relationship with a Chinese partner. *Yuenan mei* and *Yuenan po* are simply generic terms that when translated are of little relevance to the conjugal reality. Xuan, a Vietnamese woman living in Dongxing observed: “When my husband is angry and insults me, he calls me *Yuenan po.*” According to some of my Vietnamese informants, use of this term implies a certain sense of condescension, usually conveyed via Chinese interlocutors’ facial expressions. This seems certainly to be associated with the diversity of realities that such terms cover, a topic that I will now explore further.

Cross-border marriages in Sino-Vietnamese borderlands involve various patterns of migration of one or both partners, on a temporary, regular or long-term basis. Since the majority of Sino-Vietnamese couples tends to settle in Chinese territories, the migration process mostly involves Vietnamese women, who move out of their country and establish themselves with their new families in China. Some Chinese men may move to Vietnam, although my data suggest that such relocation is usually undertaken on a temporary/regular sojourning basis without actually settling. Some Chinese men maintain a second residence in Hanoi or in one of the Vietnamese border towns, from where they conduct business and share a part-time family life with their Vietnamese partners. However, marriages between Chinese women and Vietnamese men are rare\(^1\) and for this reason are not included in this research.

\(^1\) According to my Chinese informants, some Chinese women used to marry Vietnamese men in the past. That was before the advent of the reform era which created an economic gap between the two countries and made such marriage prospect gradually less advantageous to Chinese women. Another explanation of the rarity of these marriages nowadays may be found in women’s position in the
Sino-Vietnamese marriage and women’s mobility

Sino-Vietnamese marriages would not occur if Vietnamese women opted not to migrate at some point in their lives. Migration, for their part, means following an acquaintance or boyfriend, or may simply be attributable to a deep-seated yearning for change. Hence, migration patterns tend to define the type of marriage that sees them settle in China. Below are the main cases that I encountered during my research, cases that are frequently mentioned locally in terms of Vietnamese women’s mobility in the area.

First, in the context of regular encounters with their Chinese neighbours, for example at rural markets, many Vietnamese women from border localities cross the border via mountain paths and small border gates. In the frame of local social and trading exchanges, they sometimes find a match with male partners from China: they stay on in the border Chinese villages following the marriage. And, while this type of marriage prevails among ethnic groups who share a common social space (Zhou 2002: 229-230), they also mix with individuals from the majority groups. Daxin village, which borders Vietnam, has become a small tourist spot for those interested either in viewing the remains of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict (tunnels) or a lovely waterfall that marks the border. The village leader told me that thirteen out of fifty local families were composed of mixed couples (according to data I collected in

Vietnamese family and society, which Chinese women perceived as ‘too low’ to meet their personal yearnings and social expectations.

1 I will discuss the issues of ‘pushing factors’ and outcomes, agency, strategy and expectations in Chapter 6.
Go-betweens introduced ten of them, while the three others chose their partners themselves. Most of the Vietnamese women arrived during the 1990s, after the re-opening of the Sino-Vietnamese border gate. Once a poor village, today Daxin benefits from tourism activity, which started to develop the area post 1999. Since then, according to a Vietnamese woman selling Burmese jade in the market, the village men have grown richer; as a consequence, now they attract Chinese women from neighbouring villages and are no longer looking for partners among their Vietnamese neighbours. The few couples I met in the villages of Wanwei, Shanxin and Wutou, near Dongxing, constituted another case that conformed to this first pattern of cross-border marriages. These villages are locally known as the Jingzu Islands.¹ According to the Fifth National Population Census of China (2000), the Jing (as suggested in Chapter 1) are a Vietnamese-speaking ethnic group of China totalling approximately 22,000. Many men from these villages meet their wives through regular exchanges with the Vietnamese during visits to border towns. Unlike their Han Chinese fellows, they encounter no major difficulties with language (although the form of Vietnamese spoken in the village is mixed with elements of Cantonese and not exactly the same as the standard Vietnamese spoken in Vietnam). One day, I was wandering in Shanxin village when a friendly secondary school girl engaged in conversation with me on her way home. I explained the purpose of my visit and she enthusiastically offered to introduce me to her uncle who, by chance, was married to a Vietnamese woman. Mr Long briefly acknowledged:

— I married my wife in 1990; she was much younger than me. She came from Haiphong. We met while I was doing some business in Móng Cái, because I

¹ Nowadays, although the original islands are connected to the land, the villages are still called ‘islands’. 

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was staying in her family’s house. She already had an elder sister married in Shanxin. We were introduced to each other. Before her, I had a Chinese wife, a crazy woman who gave me two daughters. I didn’t want her anymore. My Vietnamese wife gave me a son.

One of his acquaintances, Mr Peng, invited me to stay for tea in his comfortable home. I understood from the pictures he showed me and from the explanations he gave that under the cover of being a ‘guide’, Mr Peng smuggled Russian cars from the northern Sino-Russian border down to the Sino-Vietnamese border:

— My wife comes from Thái Bình\(^1\) province. I was on a business trip when I met her there. I had to go back three times to her family before her father agreed to let his daughter go. We are about the same age – only two years apart – and we now have two children. She is registered at the Village Committee but this doesn’t give her the right to register on my *hukou* [household registration book].\(^2\) Most Vietnamese women here are in this case. But our marriage results from our love for each other. This is rare in this village where many have bought their wives. Even Mr Long! But my wife was a high school teacher in Vietnam and a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party; she’s educated, she’s not [just] anybody.

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\(^1\) Thái Bình is a northern littoral province in Vietnam.

\(^2\) To provide me with more precise data, Mr Peng took out of a drawer the registration form he filled in 1993 to register his wife with the local authorities. Living together marks the beginning of an alliance rather than a proper marriage registration. In some places, local authorities may display some degree of tolerance towards free unions and allow Vietnamese migrant to stay, or at least live openly in China.
Mister Su, a fisherman in his fifties who was the third man I met within this network of acquaintances, shyly spoke to me after some hesitation:

— My wife arrived in Shanxin in 1989, brought from Vietnam by her elder sister who was already living in our village. I only married her in 2001. In Vietnam, she was married to a man who drunk and gambled, and she had a child. She left him to come here and find a new partner. At that time, I was very poor. Before knowing her, I… had a Chinese partner for five years, but it was a long time ago… I had no intention to marry a Vietnamese woman though. I used to see Vietnamese people as lazy people who want to enjoy life. We speak the same language, that’s true, but some differences subsist, especially in the terms of address. Most Vietnamese women arrived after the opening of the frontier, voluntary, for economic reasons. Anyway, there are too much women over there [Vietnam]. My wife is… [he takes some time to think about it] 32 years old. Now we have a child together.

A second pattern of cross-border marriage resulting from migration of Vietnamese women to China concerns members of communities who are historically spread between two countries, have learned to make use of their mixed identities and cultural knowledge, follow their communities’ traditions, and extend their family and trading networks to a new and promising context of cross-border trade (Chan 2005a). These communities include the Huaqiao/Hoa kiều overseas Chinese (in Vietnam), and the Yueqiao/Việt kiều\(^1\) overseas Vietnamese (in China). Since the re-opening of

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\(^1\) This term usually refers to members of the Vietnamese diaspora settled in western countries. Informants in the border areas used it to refer to Vietnamese settled in China. In general, being Việt kiều also suggests Vietnamese enjoying a higher economic status than their counterparts residing in Vietnam.
the border and economic exchange between the two countries, traders from both sides have made use of their connections to find their life partners. They usually share a common identity; but, in some cases, they can only openly proclaim their identity through marriage.

One young Vietnamese Huaqiao named Li (cf. Chapter 1) used to be ashamed of the Chinese background she inherited from her mother’s family. But, since her marriage to her Chinese husband in Dongxing, Li can now make use of her language ability – even pretend that she is Chinese, not Vietnamese (in terms of citizenship). Even though she is officially married to her husband and does not need to hide her natal identity, she sometimes chooses to introduce herself as Chinese to people she meets for the first time (whether they are Vietnamese or Chinese). When I asked her why she chose to lie about her ethnicity, she explained that she did so for two reasons: (1) She feared the stigma attached to Vietnamese women living with Chinese men; and (2) She was proud to reveal a part of herself that her parents used to deny and hide when she was growing up in Móng Cái. Li learned the Chinese language by secretly watching Chinese TV when she was young. Thanks to her language skills, she had managed to find various jobs in Dongxing, as guide, interpreter or salesperson.

In Hekou, Kim spent her entire childhood torn between Vietnam and China, due to the conflicted relationship of her separated parents (a Vietnamese father and a Chinese-Vietnamese mother) who made her the object of recurring custody negotiations between two families (cf. Appendix 4). Upon reaching adulthood, she

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1 Li’s mother was born in Hainan province, China

2 Li speaks Chinese Mandarin, the Hainan and Baihua Chinese dialects as well as the Vietnamese and Zhuang (an ethnic group) languages, all of which are commonly used in and around the Dongxing area.
chose her identity and decided to become a guide. This meant living on the Chinese side of the border, independently from any members of her family. A few years later, Kim accepted her Chinese boyfriend’s (a former colleague) proposal. The couple, who are now well established, manage the bar of a government-owned high standard hotel in Hekou. Through their work and leisure activities (mah-jong and gambling), they are constantly enmeshed in a new business network built around their relatives in Vietnam and China and new customers/acquaintances. Although not always benefiting from their involvement in such a connecting dynamic, Kim and her husband have participated in creating a transnational community moved by similar economic goals.

Vietnamese women from the rural localities of Northern Vietnam, who have migrated to border towns such as Lào Cai or Móng Cái for trading and/or working purposes, constitute the third group of ‘marriage migrants.’ Many of them initially had no intention of becoming involved in intimate affairs with Chinese men when they first came to the border in search of a new life or possible working opportunities. They regularly cross the border, in the process becoming acquainted with Chinese people among whom they may possibly find potential partners (migrant workers, business owners or traders). Months or years later, depending upon both partners’ ages, education levels, family opinion, material conditions and feelings, the above couples emerge from the social dynamics and activities of border towns. Frequently, Vietnamese women relocate into various types of Chinese localities in the borderlands – even all over China – after marriage. But, while they may have left a previous household in Vietnam, they do not necessarily turn their backs on Vietnam. Some, however, due to complex issues related to the recognition of their marriages, fall into the category of ‘illegal migrants’ in China.
Close to this group are the Vietnamese women who originate from the inner provinces of Vietnam, who are deceived and lured into obscure (often nefarious) deals. Relatively ignorant of the border reality, they cross the frontier, often being unsuspectingly coerced into prostitution or arranged marriages with eager men from various places in China. These women tend not only to vanish from their place of origin, but to disappear as well from their new environment. In effect, they become ‘non-existent’ This particular category of marriage includes cases of ‘trafficked women’, a subject to which I refer at various stages throughout the thesis.

Related to this group of Vietnamese women are the deceived/trafficked women, who have lost their social and legal existence in Vietnam and cannot acquire new legality in China. For reasons that I will detail in Chapter 5 they cannot – or do not want to – re-integrate with their own communities, and often end their trajectories in border localities where they hope to ‘benefit’ from the flexible/chaotic environment that the border towns (seem to) provide them with. Where “everything is possible,” they hope to find partners with whom they can build new lives out of what is left of their dignity, bodies, health, strength and flexibility.

Probably smaller in number but consequent in reputation are the specific cases of Vietnamese prostitutes, madams and/or procurers. Sometimes, with the compliance of a compassionate client, they retire and become engaged to Chinese partners. They may remain either in the border towns where they work, or anywhere in China as long as they follow their husbands. They spread out among the Chinese

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1 All my informants referred to madams (as for brothel keepers) and female procurers in their accounts. Therefore, in this thesis, I will generally use these terms to designate the persons who control Vietnamese prostitutes, but I will use the gender-neutral word pimp when these persons are unidentified.
population, where some pursue their activities as brothel madams or procurers. Lien and her partner A Long, who own a brothel in Hekou, are among these couples, even though they opt not to acknowledge the actual circumstances of their initial encounter. Although rather easy to identify, these various patterns of Sino-Vietnamese marriages are not exclusive. Some couples fit into more than one category, according to the evolution of their marriage status over the years. Cases of women who have experienced various forms of marriage remain difficult to classify.

Migratory movement and marriage trajectories in the case of involuntary first migration

An acquaintance from Lào Cai introduced me to Yen, a vegetable seller at the market behind the train station. Yen was living in a small, simply built, ground floor wooden house outside of town, modestly furnished with only the necessary furniture. But, we first met at her sister’s place, a modern-style house in the suburbs of Lào Cai. She welcomed us (my interpreter Loan and me) with a smile. She had just showered and eaten dinner after a long working day. She sat on a bed, and, when her sister was busy with her children, Yen started to quietly talk. Our conversation was limited by time restrictions, so, we agreed to meet the next morning. Yen’s Vietnamese husband welcomed us, then left us alone so Yen could continue her narrative (cf. Appendix 2). Yen went to China, came back, intended to go again but eventually stayed in Vietnam, all the time wishing she could return to China one day to see the son she had to leave there. Such comings-and-goings occur frequently among Vietnamese women, who did not plan to cross their country’s border in the first place, and who seem to experience psychological difficulties during the process of settling. Not far away, on
the other bank of the frontier, Tam was selling lemon juice in one of Hekou’s little refreshment stalls for Vietnamese people. When I met her, she immediately trusted me because we had something in common that no one around could share with us: a ‘French’ father.¹ This is how our friendship started. Later she confided in me the whole complex trajectory of her life, which involved several marriage experiences between China and Vietnam (cf. Appendix 6). Drawing on the lives of women like Yen and Tam as examples of deception that led some Vietnamese women into marital life with Chinese men, one can trace a somewhat typical pattern of migration. A first step takes them from their communities and brings them into China. Some Vietnamese women cross the border and end up with living with Chinese men due to deception, disobedience and human trade circumstances. It may be a few days, a few weeks or years before they are able to seize a chance to return to Vietnam. They experience life in a Chinese family and in a Chinese community on both emotional and material levels. A second step brings them back to their country. Somehow, they return to their communities to visit their families, to escape abusive husbands, all the time yearning for comfort and understanding. After a certain period of recovery and exchange, raising awareness of their respective plights and searching for support for a new start, they begin to face suspicion, pity, mockery, discrimination and/or rejection. Finding themselves trapped in difficult circumstances, they invariably take the third step which takes them away once more, but this time on a more voluntary basis; because, once they realize that there is little chance of resettling in Vietnam due to their problematic legal status and social ostracism, they are left with no other option

¹ Tam’s father was actually a Moroccan-French soldier who fought with the French army in the 1950s but had rejoined the Việt Minh during the First Indochina War (1946-1954). Following the independence of Vietnam, he had since lived and married in North Vietnam.
but a second migration to other places in Vietnam or to China. Ultimately they hope to establish themselves, find work, a partner and a home. This is how their trajectory often leads them to border towns where their ‘nonexistence’ appears more like a permanent status.

The above migratory movement patterns of Vietnamese women say little about how they and their husbands experience their relationships; that is, whether they were sealed on a voluntary basis or not, and for a short or long period of time. Yen and Tam had already pointed out how feeling emerged in marriages and might take a favourable turn. And, while migration and the instability of both partners may possibly be attributable to external factors, taken together they neither define the nature of a marriage, nor the strength (or weakness) of a personal connection. Yen misses the family she did not choose initially; Tam trusted the Chinese men she maintained affairs with, despite her dramatic experience with her first partner in China. Other couples developed affection for each other regardless of their initial feelings and behaviour. In their talks with me, both Yen and Tam expressed some nostalgia about life in China among the Chinese people that revealed more about their marriage experiences than a trajectory – a before and after – could after positioning them in a given fixed category.

**Frequent patterns of cross-border alliances**

Drawing upon the variety of cases I encountered in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, I now propose classifying the marriages according to the Vietnamese women’s mobility and to highlight the role of coerced migration in their subsequent relocations. But, regardless of how they actually occurred in terms of circumstances
that allowed two strangers to meet and settle together, I now suggest classifying these marriages into three other categories, according to the nature of the spouses’ relationships. This classification represents both the ways in which border people define the cross-border marriages they observe in their social environment and the way the protagonists themselves articulate them.

- Forced relationships

When I first met Mai a woman from Haiphong, she was working as an interpreter for a couple of Guilin shop-owners in Dongxing. The mother of two teenagers, she was still living with the man who bought her from a broker. It was only after weeks of silence during which she observed me interacting with other Vietnamese women at her neighbour’s refreshment stall that she eventually disclosed her identity and past to me. She recalled how she met her husband in 1989:

— I had a girlfriend, Thanh, who spoke baihua. We had a small business selling vegetables together. One day, with another friend, Nan, we decided to go to Móng Cái to buy fresh supply. A male friend of Thanh came with us. But, once [we] arrived there were no cucumbers. Then, Thanh suggested crossing the border to see what might be available on the Dongxing side. An old Vietnamese woman joined us to take us all to her married daughter in Qinzhou. From there, we went to Fangcheng to have lunch with one of her friends. This is where the suggestions of our guests and guides to find a local husband made us realize that we had no money and didn’t know our way back to the frontier: we found ourselves trapped. Much later, I realized the bottom of the story: the man from Haiphong was Thanh’s lover whose wife had threatened to disfigure Thanh with acid if she didn’t disappear. So Thanh
asked her lover to take her to China where she would find a husband; he was
her accomplice… it was the easier [this] way to rebuild her life. But, she
couldn’t leave alone and therefore, she cheated Nan and me. It was the son of
the old Vietnamese woman who found us our husbands. He first introduced
me to an old man who had a three-storey house, and tried to convince me that
it was his son that I could marry. But the son was away, working in Shenzhen
[in Guangzhou province]. So the proposition could be a trick. Then the old
woman’s son took the three of us to a village near Qinzhou where he
introduced me to my current husband. But I refused the same way: I didn’t
want to get married! But the guy was young and my girlfriend convinced me:
“If you don’t want him, I'll take him!” So it was this young guy or the old man
I had met earlier. Anyway, the people who had brought us to this village
refused to take us back to town, leaving us at an impasse. So I finally agreed,
thinking the situation would be temporary. My two girlfriends and I asked to
stay together. They both agreed to marry two other men from the village, and
then things turned out right. I learned from my husband’s family that I was
sold for 1200 yuan.1

If it took Mai a period of time to acknowledge (to me) that she had been
forced into marriage with her husband, it may be because twenty years after the fact,
her perspective on her personal life had changed. She was still married to her Chinese
man, had two teenaged boys and said she was rather satisfied. And, so it was with
many similar life stories I have collected. Even though the category of ‘forced

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1 Mai did not say who received the money but according to all testimonies of this kind in the region, the
money never goes to the bride’s family, as would be the case were it bride price. The money is simply
shared between the various intermediaries who brought a woman from Vietnam to a groom’s village.
marriage’ seems relatively easy to identify in such stories, the temporality factor and the phenomenological experience emerge and raise doubt about any attempts to conveniently classify these cross-border relationships.

- Performed relationships

For many local border town residents, cross-border marriages occur because at least one of the two parties sees an advantage in making the troublesome choice of marrying a foreigner. To the onlooker, a couple’s adherence to the required registration of marriages suggests a romance-based relationship that promises a life commitment, whatever the benefits each party may find in the marriage apart from family-oriented projects. But, from a community perspective, unions that are not (or not yet) registered – that is, the majority – only find justification in hidden interests. This is why whenever I asked people what they knew or thought about a particular mixed couple, judgmental comments would immediately follow, indicating that there was some form of pretence in the relationship, i.e., that the marital arrangement was simply a cover to conveniently achieve certain concrete projects while enjoying each other’s company without sentimental commitment. Assessing the subjective experiences of such marriages first relied on my primary sources, that is, on community observers’ accounts. It was unlikely that anyone would admit to being engaged to a foreigner for pragmatic reasons only. However, a few Vietnamese women admitted to feeling some disappointment: some suspected that their companions showed little or no interest in engaging any further in the relationship; they were only interested in any immediate benefit it would bring. One afternoon in Hekou, Tam’s young friend A Mei sketched a rather neutral portrait of her personal life:
— I am Yao (cf. Chapter 2) and I come from Yên Bái. I am 26 years old. My *laogong* [husband] husband is a nice man, he likes to gamble but he’s nice to me. He was a worker in a factory but he had an accident and lost three fingers on one hand. Since then, he receives a monthly pension from the factory. Now he’s a *sanlunche* [cyclo-driver] which is less demanding. I met him at the market. He is 48 years old. We have been together for less than a year, and we get along. We live comfortably here, even though this is a lent apartment.

When I came back a few weeks later, A Mei was alone at home and confided her sorrow over some fruit that we ate together in front of a television program we were not really watching:

— I don’t trust men, neither my father, nor my brother nor my husband. We never know what they really think about. My family is very poor, my mother isn’t a smart woman, my father is rude and I have many siblings. I am the only one who studied up to secondary school. Then I studied medicine during six months; I couldn’t finish the three years studies because I had no money. But with my knowledge, I could sell drugs [medicine] and heal people in mountainous areas in Yên Bái. I liked it, you know. But, when I was 22 years old, my father forced me to marry a man because I was getting too old. I left him a year later because he was beating me and I didn’t want to accept this. I felt it was wrong that a man beats his wife. I stayed at my mother’s with my baby but since my husband never tried to visit me, we divorced. I have a five years old daughter who lives in Vietnam now. Then, my brother and his wife tried to sell me as a prostitute once. So I came to Hekou to sell vegetables at the market. And now I am here, I spend my days cooking, washing clothes, and taking care of this apartment. My husband’s son also lives here with his
girlfriend. He doesn’t like me very much. My husband is nice to me but he
doesn’t help me, and I don’t think he loves me… I am his third wife. After he
divorced his Chinese wife because she was cheating on him, he had a
Vietnamese wife who left him: he beat her and broke her arm during a fight. I
don’t know what will be the future.¹ If he decides to go back to his hometown
[another place in Yunnan] I won’t be able to follow him because we are not
really married.

Was it to preserve her dignity or was she concerned about what she would tell
a relative stranger? A Mei avoided mentioning all of the last details when she first met
me. But, the anecdote she imparted to me this afternoon translated her disappointment
and her awareness of being maintained as a convenient housemaid/housewife destined
to fulfil the needs of several individuals: A Mei’s husband, his son and girlfriend and
couple of friends who regularly stayed at their place. A Mei explained that she did not
have any income or money of her own. She was totally dependent upon the money her
husband gave her to buy food; but, she never dared to ask for money for other needs,
fearing the son’s reaction.

Whether some couples are seen as ‘performers’ of a romantic union by
community members, or are themselves performing a marriage for the sake of social
face through attitudes and narratives, their relationships’ images all reveal the
vulnerability of mixed couples’ social position. Adding to an already complex
distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ marriages, unscrupulous individuals tend to
behave controversially. As Chan observed during her study of tourism and trade in

¹ When I returned to Hekou two years later, I tried to contact A Mei, but she had vanished. The
apartment she used to live was unoccupied. When I called her cell-phone, a man answered and said that
A Mei was in Guangzhou province (China) but that he did not know her new phone number.
Lào Cai, some Vietnamese women set out obtain favours, in a bid to enhance their economic status. What may simply be a common strategy of social climbing through marriage may lend itself to harsh interpretation as ‘commodification of ganqing [feeling]’ (Chan 2005a: 220). Lifestyles that fit the category of ‘performed’ relationships include those of Vietnamese women who are local concubines of Chinese men. Publicly, their ‘husbands’ pretend to enjoy a stable marital life with them while still being officially married to another woman in China. China is no exception when it comes to adultery, although maintaining a mistress usually implies notions of prestige, manhood and wealth (Lang & Smart 2002). In the case of Vietnamese concubines/second wives, an issue I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, such practice is more a question of commercial strategy and convenience – as well as personal feelings – one that proves a man’s ability in trade. Locals also emphasise that a Vietnamese concubine costs a lot less money than a Chinese mistress.

According to my informants, a further form of temporary and pretended alliance, which people refer to as fang gezi [stand someone up], is practised in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. This colloquial expression literally means “liberate/free the pigeon.” In the specific context of cross-border alliances, as confirmed by some media reports,¹ this refers to wives who suddenly disappear from the households to which they belong in China, along with the family savings and sometimes the couples’ offspring. This category constitutes women who are commonly referred to as ‘scheming fakers.’ In Hekou, I met several men who complained about their former Vietnamese wives’ attitudes upon which they had earlier based their understanding of

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¹ http://law.anhuinews.com/system/2005/02/24/001141779.shtml;
http://news.sohu.com/20101215/n278312051.shtml
certain forms of intimate business. Typically, a woman would pretend to be party to a romantic liaison with a Chinese man; she would stay with him, gain his trust, and then abscond with his fortune once she had achieved her purpose. According to the locals, such a performance can last for years before the true nature of the woman is revealed.

Mr Hu, who was born in 1947, originated from Sichuan. He settled in Hekou during the 1960s as a single man. Now retired, he stays there, playing cards most of the time on the Red River banks where he conducts some obscure business he did not wish to talk about.

— I have been married to a Vietnamese woman; well, let me tell you about her. She had left her Vietnamese husband because he was a drug-addict. She had three children. I stayed with her and I raised her children as mine during eleven years! And one day she just left. I have been cheated. Look at him [he said, nodding at his game partner]: he experienced the same thing! These women are like that, no heart, no feelings.

The man to whom he referred simply agreed with Mr Hu without offering any personal details. He was obviously embarrassed. On other occasions, I tried to raise the subject again in conversations with Mr Hu, but he did not want to comment further on the affair. Such marriages generate so much mistrust in the local population that they are easily categorized as ‘pretended unions’, at least pretended by one of the two partners. I found many Chinese residents eager to report such stories. Facts, assuming they are impartially presented, are often difficult to interpret; but, what are worth noting here are the marks that these episodes of local intimate life leave on the discourse surrounding Vietnamese women.
Romantic but pragmatic relationships / business-driven relationships

Wang Litao, a businessman established in Hekou, originally came from Sichuan where he served in the army as a soldier for 12 years. In 2008, I met him in his shop/office from where he sold Japanese construction/building equipment and machines.

— When I left the army, I was appointed a job, but I refused it because I wanted to be free. It’s harder this way but it’s better. I am married for three years now. My wife Xiao Hu was born in Vietnam from an overseas Vietnamese family who returned to Vietnam in 1978. Her family lives in Lào Cai. She has spoken Chinese since her youth. She has also spent three years in Japan to study and work, and now she runs this business with me. [Our conversation is interrupted by Xiao Hu’s arrival and the couple spend a few minutes on accounting issues before returning to our dialogue]. Xiao Hu is five months pregnant. We already know it will be a girl, because Xiao Hu had an ultrasound in Vietnam.¹

A few months later, I met Wang Litao again. He had just bought a smart Toyota car and an apartment in Hekou. To diversify his business activities, he had also bought a piece of land with a plantation of eucalyptus. He explained that eucalyptus wood was used as construction material for building structures inside mines. The exploitation of mineral resources in the northwest provinces of Vietnam aims to fulfil the Chinese need for natural resources; thus, demand for such equipment

¹ During an ultrasound in China, the doctor is not allowed to reveal the sex of the baby. This policy aims to avoid selective abortion. In practice, however, in many cases it is possible to bribe medical staff. In Vietnam there is no restriction.
is rising. Xiao Peng, the young local wheeler-dealer who initially introduced me to Wang Litao, expressed his scepticism as follows:

— Actually, what Wang Litao doesn’t tell you is that he leaves all the business to his wife. She is the one who has contacts in Vietnam; she cares about everything, all the details. Wang Litao only gets busy with searching [for] new business opportunities.

Sang, the couple’s Vietnamese assistant, took the opportunity to engage in idle discussion about Xiao Hu’s pregnancy and the early stages of motherhood:

— Xiao Hu has become very Chinese in her life-style. Have you seen her luxury apartment? She has everything! She became lazy and she relies a lot on her mother for her childrearing. Her mother has always spoiled her; Xiao Hu never had to do anything at home.¹ She could lose some weight if she made some efforts [she smiles]. If she were in Vietnam, she would have to do everything by herself. Vietnamese mothers do not help or spoil their daughters as much as in China when they have children on their own. When I had my children, my mother didn’t have time to help much. Vietnamese women are too busy, they are still young and they still work when they become grandmothers, they don’t have time. Xiao Hu still complains she doesn’t have time to deal with all her tasks and she would like to hire a baomu [housekeeper/babysitter]. Actually, this is also a suggestion from Wang Litao. Being a father, he does not help her a lot, he does not know how to take care of a baby; he is a typical man!

¹ Sang, who has known Xiao Mei from childhood, is a personal friend of her family in Vietnam.
Xiao Hu’s mother-in-law lives in Sichuan province (China) while her own mother lives across the Red River in Lào Cai. This is why the latter is more available. And, while this situation reverses the roles traditionally attributed to grandparents vis-à-vis childrearing, it also signifies contemporary family transformations. Nowadays in China, due to the large numbers of people emigrating, grandparents from both families contribute to the childrearing and education of their children’s offspring, sometimes fulltime and up to an advanced age. This often occurs when parents live too far away to take care of their own children. A year later, during my last visit to Wang Litao, Sang added a few details which to her signified Xiao Hu’s embracing of a typical yet questionable contemporary Chinese way of coping with early childhood.

— Xiao Hu is still very busy with business. After a few months of care in Hekou, she sent her daughter to Kunming [capital of Yunnan province]. Her mother lives there now so she can take care of the baby while Xiao Hu conducts the business here. She doesn’t want any other child because she says it’s too tiring. .. Like many Chinese women do, she sends her kid away. But I see it as marks of laziness. When I had my children, I had to do everything as before, and so do most Vietnamese women. It’s hard but we can work and take care of our children ourselves.

Here, no one openly questions the romance uniting Wang Litao and Xiao Hu. The couple are officially registered and belong to the quite respected fringes of business-oriented marriages (mainly due to their established success and cohesion), whereas many other mixed couples simply accommodate each other as long as their association remains financially reliable and beneficial for both. But border towns are special places where everything relates to business, where competition is fierce, and where many conversation topics (including assessment of other’s business affairs) are
discussed through the lenses of the economic climate. Like Wang Litao, most migrants’ purpose when settling in Hekou or Dongxing was to earn money and to participate in the development of cross-border activities. Hence, some men find it difficult not to link their business ambitions with opportunistic alliances with Vietnamese women. From the local residents’ standpoint, nowadays, “romance-based but pragmatic relationships” are the most common form of cross-border alliances in border towns, domestic relations which invite the most extensive and controversial comments from the community (cf. Chapter 4). But, as I have already suggested, evidence of these short or long-term alliances can be traced down through the region’s history (Loos 2008; Phùng 2006) and are a contemporary version of what Barbara Watson Andaya, describing trading strategies during seventieth century Southeast Asia, calls ‘temporary marriage:’

Such arrangements were typical of the temporary marriages that were a feature of Southeast Asian economic life. Southeast Asian men always preferred to trade in places where they already had relatives who could furnish companionship and assistance, and assumed others would feel the same. By recognizing a woman as the wife of a foreigner, be it a few days or months or even years, temporary marriages helped create the kinship networks critical to the whole commercial structure. The female ‘promiscuity’ that displeased early Chinese observers thus reflected not merely relaxed ideas regarding interaction between men and women but the use of sexual relationships to welcome traders into the community ... Temporary marriages were indispensable to successful trading, not merely due to the kinship connections they created but because throughout Southeast Asia it was women, not men, who controlled the retail trade. A relationship with a foreign merchant gave a woman a clear advantage in access to desired goods either as sole seller or as agent (Andaya 1998: 12 & 14).

Although historical documents lack the phenomenological perspective of those particular married couples, they attest once again to the fact that contemporary cross-border marriages occurred in line with the old pattern of trading alliances that involved personal commitment to the populations of the localities that were trading partners.
State intervention in and flexibility regarding local marital practices

Such arrangements were tolerated in the borderlands because there, as many informants put it, anything is acceptable. “Mei ren guan [no one cares].” Apart from the regular duties related to city management and social organization, the main concerns of the local authorities were: regulating trading flows, controlling migration, and scrutinizing underground activities. Without stating that individuals’ private practices were left out of social policies, practices show that tolerance and understanding defined the Chinese local authorities’ attitudes towards the lifestyles – and, by extension, their compliance with the legal registration of the marriages – of the communities they supervised. “Tamen tai mang [they are too busy]!” the Hekou and Dongxing residents used to say about the authorities. Some even ironically suggested “Tamen tai mang zhuan qian [they are too busy making money],” implying the rampant corruption and the privileged site that the border represented for additional income. Meanwhile, flexibility regarding the people’s private life patterns reached its limitation as far as the children were concerned. Control is still exercised over the population as the investigations into Family Planning attested. Even though the status of the Vietnamese wives of Chinese men is not legally recognised if they fail to register their marriages, their fertility still falls under the control of the government health workers. Xuan, an unhappy Vietnamese woman and a motorbike taxi driver in Dongxing once told me:

— I had my first son with my laogong [husband]. Soon after, I was pregnant with my second child but the Family Planning discovered me during a control. They forced me to abort at seven months pregnant. I was so sad, it was a boy… I felt so bad and my husband was so mean with me… I wanted to die, and as I cried in the street, he yelled at me, “If you want to die, do it at home,
not on the street!” He said I should have waited for five years, that it was my fault. When I fell pregnant again, I had to leave to escape the health workers … I gave birth to my second boy in Fangcheng.¹

Chi, a Vietnamese migrant, spent some years working in Taiwan after she ended an unhappy marriage in Vietnam and left her children in her husband’s custody. She re-married to a Chinese man in Hekou after settling in China (cf. Appendix 7). Their marriage was not registered. After an abortion she underwent without telling her husband (the pregnancy was unexpected and she did not feel their relationship would last), she fell pregnant again and decided to keep the baby in accordance with her family’s advice and because her husband yearned for a male heir. In 2008, at 42 years of age, Chi gave birth to their son. Speaking in her unusual Taiwanese Chinese accent, she recalled her experience:

— During my pregnancy, I underwent two ultrasounds in Vietnam and everything was fine. My baby was healthy. But, when I went to Hekou’s hospital … there the doctors told me that the baby was too small, that he missed one ear and his mouth. I was really worrying. But I delivered and nothing was wrong with my son.

Although I was not able to check with authorities regarding their motive, I argue that one possible reason for the intimidation exercised by the hospital authorities, and the strict application of state policies to the specific case of unregistered mixed couples, was that parents of a child born out of wedlock are required to register the baby’s identity on his/her Chinese father’s hukou. If the

¹ Fangcheng is a neighbouring city district under the same administration as Dongxing.
newly-born infant is a second child of a family who has the right to one child only, his/her father will be fined and the child’s rights will be subject to restrictions. In addition, too many extra births may urge the authorities to sanction the local health officers for their inability to control the population’s fertility. Circumstances such as these complicate the fragile, artificial balance that the Family Planning authorities attempt to establish among the Chinese population. Yet, in many other cases encountered in Dongxing and Hekou, mixed families produced two or three children without incurring the same strict measures. The usual gap between policies that justify state intervention in marriage and local practices in terms of implementation explains the variations in the rules regarding the registration of marriage and children, and the difficulty in obtaining genuine information about what the rules really imply/stipulate.

Among a large majority of *de facto* married Sino-Vietnamese couples in China, explanations concerning marriage recognition differ from one case to the next. However, the blurring of the administrative procedure pertaining to international marriage registration, apparently well maintained by ignorant, unskilled or reluctant local authorities, is responsible for the illegal situation that most of these mixed couples are compelled to endure. Only a few of my informants were able to explain the different stages of the necessary procedure to legalize their union. And these informants were representative of the most stable, love-story-based responsible couples who wished, dared and struggled to proceed through -and comply with - official channels. From the information I gathered (up to 2009), and from my personal

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1 Some families, for instance those from minority ethnic backgrounds, are permitted to have two children. This is also true in Han [the main ethnic group] rural households when the firstborn is a girl and a boy will ultimately prove of more value in a work sense to the parents.
experience that confirms most details, in order to register a marriage in China a mixed couple needs to meet the following official principal requirements:¹

- Being single or officially divorced and providing the following documents as proof: (a) a marriage certificate (*weihun zheng*), or (b) a divorce certificate (*lihun zheng*). In the first case, the document can only be provided by the place of *hukou* registration. This can be far away from the border, and usually requires the person who intends to marry to request it in person. This alone posed several problems. If one tries to conceal a previous marriage (is not divorced), the requisite document is impossible to obtain. The inability to afford a long trip can also prevent one from obtaining the required document. On the Vietnamese side, a bride-to-be needs to be registered as a resident in her original place of living. But, if she embarked upon long-term internal or international migration without notifying the Vietnamese authorities, her legal existence may have been erased from the local records.² If she was previously married but was abandoned by her husband – or if she abandoned her household – and failed to obtain a legal divorce, then again her ‘single’ status may be undocumented. For these reasons, the compulsory documents might become impossible to obtain through ordinary channels (i.e., without bribery/corruption).

- Each of the documents has to be certified by both Chinese and Vietnamese Foreign Affairs Ministry representatives. The closest office for Vietnam is in Hanoi and the closest for China is in Kunming or Nanning.³ Again, this may entail a journey that the concerned parties cannot afford (including the cost of staying in the cities during the proceedings time).

¹ This information may be subject to regular updates.

² These are the household registries (*hộ khẩu*) and the government census reports (Peters 2003).

³ Kunming is the provincial capital of Yunnan: Nanning is the provincial capital of Guangxi.
- The Vietnamese bride needs to provide valid documents approving her stay in China. These include a passport, a visa, a local border-pass if she is a native of one of the border provinces, and a registration form provided by the Chinese authorities if she lives in China. The latter is rarely the case as many migrants either live illegally in China or on short-term stays to avoid paperwork, control and fees.

- In cases where all of these steps can be completed, an interview is scheduled for each couple so that the authorities can verify that the projected marriage is in compliance with the consent of each spouse-to-be and that there is no evidence of coercion.

- Then, a marriage certificate can be issued in one of the applicant’s original place of registration and needs to be certified by the other country’s authorities, i.e., consulate representation.

Su Yong, a trader from Henan (Northern China), was born in 1976. After he graduated from a university in his hometown, he moved to Shenzhen (Guangdong province) in search of work. There, a friend introduced him to Hekou, a ‘land of business opportunity,’ where he eventually settled in 2003 and opened an electrical appliances shop. He soon met Nhung in Lào Cai where she was working as a shopkeeper. They started to live together in Hekou the next year, married in 2007 and had a baby. Su Yong, commenting on the opacity surrounding the international marriage procedure, stated:

— People are left on purpose in this confusion. Authorities don’t provide any clear and consistent answers to their questions and practices can differ from place to place, especially on the Vietnamese side. People ignore the formalities or they don’t know where to get information. They also believe it
is a very expensive process to get an official registration of their marriage. In fact it is not supposed to cost money, but the corruption is very severe in Vietnam. At each level, you need to pay amounts of money to get a certificate, a stamp, or a medical examination, and to get it fast. But, many Chinese men in Hekou are already married back home: they just want a local concubine. In that case, they find excuses for not registering their relationship. It’s the same for Vietnamese women.

As Su Yong eventually noted, individual narratives may also protect intimate realities and blur the picture even further for those seeking information from other mixed couples in a similar situation. His own relationship relied on Su Yong’s general knowledge, his use of the Internet and reliable sources of information. Both Nhun and he understood that legalising their relationship was necessary to ensure that their child would be granted status. But, requesting legal recognition of a marriage required determination, a certain familiarity with bureaucratic procedures, being in close proximity to the concerned departments, and having sufficient financial means. In both countries, informants stressed that corruption and connections could either help or delay the resolving of these issues; but, since maintaining open door access required financial input, it was unlikely to prove a viable solution for everyone. In practice, very few of the concerned individuals manage to gather precise and reliable information on international marriage procedures. A surfeit of stories circulates, disinformation is widespread, and discouragement is the norm. Many couples opt to avoid the hassle, to remain in a de facto relationship as long as they do not get into trouble. They usually articulate their fear or annoyance using the colloquial expression “tai mafan [too troublesome]!”
But often, contrary to expectations, officers show some signs of laxity. In China, it is generally acknowledged that the state is highly regulatory and does not hesitate to intrude into the private lives of individuals. However, border town authorities tend to be less inclined to target people who choose inconspicuous albeit deviant ways of conducting their private lives, especially where *waidi* [migrants from other provinces] men and illegal (i.e., mobile and uncontrollable) Vietnamese migrants are concerned. The fact that some Chinese men have children with illegal migrants in practice seems less problematic than Chinese couples having children out of wedlock or exceeding their allowed quota. As far as Chinese citizens are concerned, the Chinese state remains intrusive. But, when foreigners, e.g., neglected, poor, borderland Vietnamese engage in non-normative practices in the sphere of conjugality, the Chinese state tends to adopt a ‘let-it-be’ attitude at the local level. Most of my informants acknowledged that although it also signals a lack of support for genuine victims of abuse, this apparent flexibility has always represented a convenient reality for men and women whose relationships will ultimately benefit from lack of control. In addition, one must remember that Family Planning and the Migration Office are two separate entities of the Chinese state: they do not intrude upon their respective domains of competence. In particular, at the border, which is a sort of enclave in which many illicit activities take place and require the special attention of the authorities, deviant practices of conjugality seem to benefit from state laxity. And, while Chinese citizens in general have to comply with the uniform regulations imposed throughout China, at the border Chinese state representatives seem less concerned with enforcing marriage laws as long as no social disruption (chaos) results from the unions. As proof, the only occasions on which media report cases where Vietnamese immigrants are subjected to official intervention (by the
Police or the immigration or customs departments) are generally related to illicit activities such as ‘human trafficking,’ ‘cheating and stealing’ and ‘illegal work,’ activities that threaten the social stability and have the potential to directly affect, in a negative sense, the Chinese population in general. In such cases, the ‘foreign elements’ are considered trouble makers. But, in cases of peaceful (or at least privately monitored) marital arrangements, the local authorities rarely bother to intervene in the interests of the law. Conversely, in China’s rural areas, compassion – even the complicity of local officers – for the local men, jeopardises the implementation of strict regulations regarding international marriage, as I am now going to describe.

3 Perspectives on contemporary conjugality in China: how do these stories inform post-reform social change and its consequences?

Any attempt to review the evolution of family and gender in both China and Vietnam over the last decades would only prove an ambitious project that several scholars have already achieved (Hershatter 2004; Luong 2003; Pettus 2003; Brandtstädt & Santos 2009; Yan 2003, Bich 1999; Croll 1994). Therefore, for the purposes of analysis, this section will simply address two major changes in Chinese society in which contemporary forms of Sino-Vietnamese marriages are grounded and expand, namely internal migration and demography, and their outcomes for marriage in post-reform China (1979-).
The demographic burden: marriage squeeze for men

In China, the evolution of family and of women’s condition over the last decades of the implementation of the powerful yet uneven socialist agenda has been turbulent. Needless to say that the socio-cultural diversity of China compared to Vietnam – despite the strong dichotomy between Vietnam’s southern and northern provinces – has imposed some radically different socio-economic conditions in various parts of the country that have considerably affected the ways in which people manage their daily lives.

In order to contextualize cross-border marriages and serve my argument, it is necessary to address the issue of demographic imbalance, which is frequently invoked to explain the need for foreign brides in disadvantaged regions of China. Although my intention is to question the importance of this factor in Chapter 5, it remains a structural issue critical to the ongoing transformation of conjugality in China (Yan 2003). Since 1979, China has implemented a One-Child Policy, which, while considerably reducing population growth over the last three decades, has created an unprecedented demographic crisis that has clear consequences for the marriage market (Poston et al. 2006). Because Chinese families have always favoured boys over girls (although this is changing today in the country’s urban areas), parents have found ways to avoid giving birth to daughters when they can only bear one child (Attané 2010; Croll 2000). Millions of girls have either never been born, have died at birth or during childhood: millions of others, who are considered “black citizens,” enjoy no rights as their existence is not recognized (Merli 1998). As a result, women have become increasingly missing over the years. It is no mystery that today overpopulated China suffers from a marriage squeeze that particularly affects the provinces of Hainan, Guangxi and Yunnan. According to demographic data, the sex
ratio at birth in provinces such as Hainan and Guangxi is much higher than the biological norm. The national crisis informs of the strength of male preference in most Chinese families, although the reasons why certain regions show extreme variations of sex ratio remain confusing. Information pertaining to local practices that could enlighten quantitative data is sensitive to collect. Guangxi, one of the regions in which numerous Sino-Vietnamese marriages take place, is not only one of the poorer provinces of China but one where deficit in female infants at birth and an abnormally high death rate among girls are most significant (Banister 2004). It is also home to China’s largest ethnic group, the Zhuang (16 million, National Census 2000). Attané offers the following summation:

[Zhuang] numerical superiority over the other minority groups earns them a significant drawback: the obligation to submit to draconian limitations of birth. While smaller minorities are granted significant concessions in the matter, to guarantee them sufficient population growth, the Zhuang, because they are the largest minority in number, are … required to have no more children than the Han: one for urban couples, two for rural couples … Herein lies the main reason why, among the Zhuang, it is so important to [get] rid of a girl to make way for a son (Attané 2005: 39-40, translation by thesis author).

Girls who do not appear in statistics or in households vanish in accordance with various methods: selective abortion, infanticide, abandonment or non-registration. Hence, once a generation reaches a marriageable age, girls are lacking in these communities, much more than elsewhere. Dongxing resident A De explained that his first wife, a Chinese woman, could not have children so they adopted a baby girl. The baby’s biological mother was a Zhuang woman, who bore a daughter as a first child. As a rural resident, she was permitted have a second child. She was eager to have a son; but, when she gave birth to a second daughter, she decided to try again and again until she eventually produced a boy… after bearing five girls. Unable to declare these girls births unless she agreed to pay the fines and submit to sterilization, “she gave them away.” A De adopted one of them. The other girls may have been
abandoned, given to relatives or friends, or sold. A De claimed that such cases were not unusual in the region. Despite the widespread local belief and this particular story told by A De, both of which blame the Zhuang for the disproportionate male-female ratio in Guangxi, the Zhuang alone cannot be the cause. Additional convincing explanations have yet to emerge.

In her contribution to an edited volume on Chinese kinship based on her research findings in a rural area located between Sichuan and Yunnan, Han questions the frequently cited assessment that “[a] shortage of young women as a result of sex-selective abortions and female infanticide is … the leading reason for bachelors” (Han 2009: 51). Even though the effects of the demographic upheavals that have occurred in contemporary China are undeniable as far as the lack of girls (and ultimately women) is concerned, they only represent one structural factor of the dramatic position Chinese men now find themselves in. In reality, understanding of this issue is highly related to local factors and testifies that “marriage practices and demographic behaviours are contextualized to the transformations of political economy spanning transnational and global capitalism, national and regional policies, wage migration, village and household economies, and personal aspirations for modernity” (Han 2009: 62). The situations and narratives of many men who I encountered at the Sino-Vietnamese border also challenge the assumption that the demographic context is responsible for the shortage of marriageable women in China’s rural areas, or that alternatively there is an excess of bachelors everywhere in China.

In their article published in 2006, Poston and Glover reviewed the likely and unlikely options that millions of Chinese bachelors may find themselves having to adopt to overcome their miserable situation – miserable inasmuch as Chinese believe that marriage is an indispensable duty in life – in current and future decades (assuming
that a demographic transition will eventuate and slowly fill the gap of sex ratio at birth for the coming generations). Among their options is the possible immigration of women from abroad to China and their matching with local Chinese men. However, as far as the rural men are concerned, such migration would only realistically occur if the potential brides were coming from places where they would consider going to China advantageous in terms of life improvement. This is why, apart from countries that are poorer than China’s rural areas, such large scale migration is unlikely to occur. The attention that Sino-Vietnamese marriages have attracted in recent years is thus very much connected with much of the speculation – and sometimes fantasised scenarios – expressed by experts and politicians in their bid to reassure and control the fear that 25, 30 or even 40 million bachelors\(^1\) in a powerful but socially unstable country might in the future prove *guang gun*, i.e., a potentially uncontrolled force (Hudson & Den Boer 2002). The major concern is that this powerful body of men may lapse into crime and illegal activities that would potentially threaten both national and global security. As Ross notes in her critical overview of these fears, such allegations, particularly when articulated by Western observers, tend to “reinforce powerful orientalist images of China” (Ross 2010: 359). In sum, the reasons for the shortage of women in this region of China are still unclear. This leaves us without a satisfying explanation of the increasingly visible occurrence of cross-border marriages and calls for a closer examination of other factors.

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\(^1\) According to various sources, demographic projections in the future decades vary dramatically.
Social disparity and marriage migration: a new feature of conjugality

The second major structural factor of cross-border marriages in the Asian region is undeniably the new economic order imposed by globalization, an opportunistic and challenging environment for nations that have implemented economic reform for only two or three decades. In China, the new context induced massive rural-to-urban migration to promising areas located within and without the country, and a constant renewing of the labour force that both supports and endures simultaneously the country’s tremendous rate of development. People move, meet, and change their perspectives of their lives and the possibilities offered in the new socio-economic settings. However, upheaval often occurs in the lives of those of the populace who may opt not to follow the mainstream movement in terms of geographical mobility, but who are equally affected by its consequences.

In most of rural China, the already reduced numbers of potential brides join the movement, rendered easier by the more flexible migration conditions than those their elders had to endure during the early years of China’s economic reform in the late 1970s. Women leave, irrespective of whether it is for work or for marriage. The extended exogamous trend observable in most areas of rural China today (Davin 2007, Jacka 2006), to which the current shortage of marriageable women in villages is frequently attributed, is not solely due to a reinterpretation of local practices of residence. New behaviour patterns among the marriageable cohorts also reflect the Chinese youth’s aspirations for an alternative to their rural life-style, as is the case in most of the world’s developing countries. Apropos of this, Jacka writes:

[D]ominant discourses on modernity and the denial of coevalness that they entail have had powerful material effects on the ways in which the countryside and the city are experienced by rural migrants. They have also become so thoroughly absorbed in the outlooks and subjectivities of individuals, and are generally so central to the
evaluative and explanatory systems of their life stories, that to hear a rural migrant
deny the superiority of the city and to advocate the countryside as the site of self and
collective development is truly startling … Since the 1990s the countryside has
ceased to provide an identity for young people in the way that it did in the past – to be
a part of the nation’s project of development and modernity, a young rural person
must now migrate to the city (Jacka 2006: 159).

With reference to gender, several authors (Woo 2006; Attané 2005; Hershatter
2004, 2007) have noted how, in the post-reform era, “Chinese women’s social status
has increased in some ways, but decreased in others” (Woo 2006: 62). Any review of
the negative effects of China’s socio-economic reforms on its women fall outside of
this thesis topic. The proletarianization of rural women, increased inequality in terms
of access to education and work, the implementation of the One-Child Policy, the
rising of divorce rate due to conjugality crisis, or the development of prostitution are
among the most commented on (Attané 2005; Hershatter 2004, 2007). However, a
few facts are worth noting on the positive side. For example, the possibility for young
generations of women to experience work, study and live outside of their birthplaces
prior to their engagement with marriage and family life has enabled a form of
emancipation, a rite of passage into adult and independent life that would not be
possible otherwise. But, I want to stress that moving out does not only mean marrying
out of the village, but out of the district, the province, of a familiar life-style,
hopefully to a city with a man of comfortable means. It is about changing values,
questioning women’s rights or sense of identity, and rejecting countryside or semi-
urban localities as symbols of backwardness. Women who opt to stay in their villages
or to return to them after temporary migration to urban areas for work number fewer
and fewer over the years, regardless of from which part of China they originate.
Degrading images of rural life in a society yearning for modernity, a synonym for
comfort and broader views of the rest of the nation and the world, impact strongly
upon young women. They can no more contemplate spending the rest of their lives
enduring agricultural hardship than they can contemplate surrendering their right to emancipation.

This does not in any way suggest that migrant women’s experience of and adaptation to town life is necessarily effortless or gratifying (if at all); rather, they acquire new perspectives by discovering new sets of values and new behaviours that influence and allow their decision-making (Jacka 2006). Empirical awareness of the social disparity that interaction with urbanites, observation of life-styles and fierce competition on the labour market triggers new yearnings and inner goals. The direct consequences of such change among cohorts of young Chinese women are manifested in their reluctance to return to their initial life-paths, in their longing for life improvement in a challenging yet promising urban environment. Disillusionment – including failure, exploitation, deception, and the precariousness of various (often nefarious) aspects of life – dashes the aspirations of many of these hopeful women. Many go back to their places of origin, to where they were meant to fulfil their familial obligations, i.e., get married and settle down permanently. If and when they fail to successfully achieve a personal project that would permit them to enjoy more satisfying lives, a large proportion of these young female migrants play another card. They embark upon a search for the ideal match, one that will help them to cut their disadvantaged rural ties (at least it is perceived as such). When they succeed, with the compliance of their husbands, they re-establish themselves in places they see as more advantageous, where they can upgrade their ranking on the social hierarchy (Davin 2005, 2007; Fan & Huang 1998; Fan 2004; Jacka 2005; Jacka & Gaetano 2004; Gilmartin & Lin Tan 2002).

Although young men also yearn for change in their rural routine lives, many find themselves irrevocably tied to family duties and land care, which render them
unable to pursue and/or implement marriage strategies. According to local kinship practices, which differ between ethnic groups and regions, at least one son in each family must take care of the elderly: either the youngest or the oldest. Groups of rural men, who may have experienced life ‘outside,’ are notwithstanding required to wait for marriageable women, wait to start a real adult life, i.e., achieving their manhood, raising a family and perpetuating the family line. Some continue to wait: others are searching for a distant match. Whatever their circumstances, the competition is always fierce. Internal migration in China has created a pool of missing potential fiancées. The situation is worse in the rural localities where sex ratio disparities are already challenging the marriage market. The conditions for extending the hunting territory of desperate men and their families, that will enable them to find a life-partner, are harder in a country where “male marriages are more closely constrained by changing socio-economic conditions … [and] where capitalism and market-driven economies … [show] increasing discrepancies and social stratifications …” (Han 2009: 58). Single men need to expand their hunting ground, and so do the divorced men with inclinations to remarry: this leads some of them to seek foreign wives.

Normative structure versus alternative forms of conjugality

- Couple formation

In the case studies I introduce in this thesis, women and men generally do not meet through organized (settled) structures such as broker agencies.¹ One needs to

¹ This situation is currently changing. Media have reported the presence of broker agencies in the northern city of Haiphong, for instance, representatives of which target Mainland Chinese men and
consider various factors such as coincidental meetings, individual strategies (cf. Chapter 5) and family arrangements to appreciate the ways in which initial encounters occur. Although one ritual common to conventional marriages and certain of these cross-border alliances remains intact, in many cases, recourse is to a form of matchmaking.

Before the Chinese reforms of 1979, finding a spouse was only possible within one’s own social space; that is, among classmates, work units or neighbours. In most cases, this required the intervention of a go-between or folk matchmaker. Voluntary migration was rarely possible; thus, the range of marriageable partners was to say the least somewhat narrow. With the opening-up brought about by Deng Xiaoping’s social reforms, the whole process of finding intimate partners benefited from new possibilities for singles to migrate and settle in new areas. The changing of social space allowed a much wider perspective of potential partners in terms of social background, class and hierarchy; wider, but unknown too. Urban migration provided men and women with the possibility to discover the social diversity of their country, the different practices associated with courtship, and the possibility to match with someone they would never have had the chance to meet otherwise. Among rural women, marriage migration started to be more commonly practiced and accepted (Fan & Huang 2008; Davin 2005, 2007; Chang 2008). According to virilocal residence practices in many parts of China, women are meant to leave their homes and marry outside whereas at least one son per family is expected to stay at home to take care of his parents and the land. Chinese bachelors, who return home after a period of working migration, including those who never leave their families, and, in particular, arrange fast marriages following similar procedures to those initiated by southern Vietnam agencies (source: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-chat/2560391/posts).
those who are not used to travelling far from home, that is, men who have no networks further than their own living place and are disadvantaged in any way, still request help from go-betweens to find marriage partners among a narrowing population of potential brides (Kohrman, 1999). Many of the men I met in Dongxing and Hekou belong to a generation of men (in their forties, fifties and above) born in rural or semi-urban settings, who have benefited from the favours and services of social networks and matchmakers, and are not familiar with the whole process of ziyou tan lian’ai [free dating] (Zhang 2005). Nowadays, these men feel disturbed by the way young people date and have learned to express and listen to their feelings (Diamant 2000; Yan 2003; Ma & Cheng 2005). But, when they need to find new and suitable partners (after a divorce, for example), they still prefer to rely on experienced matchmakers upon whom all hope and uncertainty rests.

Chi, who I introduced earlier in this chapter, recalled the matchmaker and the circumstances within which she met her current Chinese companion (cf. Appendix 7), or how a barely known woman managed to find her an unexpected partner. Among so-called ‘matchmakers,’ one also finds brothel madams and pimps who sometimes agree to negotiate the new recruits’ sale to bachelors with the women themselves. Van, a young Vietnamese mother raised in Haiphong (cf. Chapter 1), told of the difficult childhood she experienced being rejected or exploited by members of her family. She remembers how she met her Chinese husband:

— It was in 2001. I was 17 years old then, and I had already worked several years in restaurants and factories. I had recently settled in Móng Cái with my
mother,¹ who had moved there after her third divorce. My aunt [Van’s
mother’s younger sister], who lived in China, came to take me to Dongxing to
offer me some holidays, she said, and to help her to take care of her baby son.
I was so naïve. I even asked my mother [for] permission to travel with my aunt.
But, once the border [was] crossed, she offered me a pair of jeans and
abandoned me in a brothel, asking me to wait for her. Ten days later, she still
hadn’t showed up. The brothel madam confessed that my aunt sold me for
2000 yuan. I cried a lot because I didn’t understand. I suspect an arrangement
between her and my aunt because my mother recovered some money from my
sale. But, I threatened … to denounce [the madam] to the police if she tried to
force me to have sex with customers. I negotiated the permission to get a
husband instead of becoming a prostitute. She arranged something and in
November 2001, a man came with his mother to see me. The mother asked
him if he found me suitable. He was 23 years old and his elder brother was
already married with a Vietnamese woman whom he treated well. The man
said yes. The family bought me for 2900 yuan and they picked me up one
evening to take me to a village in the mountains, not far from Fangcheng.
That’s how I met my husband.

If finding a suitable partner remains a question of personal compatibility for
the sustainability of a marriage, the intervention of a third party (family, matchmaker
or friends) is still considered valuable, if not compulsory, when sealing a prospective
alliance or arranging a promising union. Generally, two families engage in the process
via an intermediary; but, in cases of cross-border marriages, the two families are

¹ Van is the illegitimate daughter of her father and his mistress. The mother Van mentions in her
account is actually her father’s wife who raised her since she was a baby.
rarely consulted directly. The geographical distance between the two generally does not allow for easy meetings between the two parties’ families. Hence, either the Vietnamese woman or the Chinese bachelor asks a friend or a family member, usually someone well connected and familiar with both Vietnamese and Chinese societies, to assist her/him to find a partner, should a specific situation so require (cf. Chapter 5). In most cases, parents are visited once the marriage is settled, not to obtain approval but as a familial acknowledgment of an already given situation. But Li, my main informant from Dongxing, had principles; so, she acted differently. She described the awkwardness of the first meeting between her parents and her Chinese husband as follows:

— My mother doesn’t like Chinese people, even though she is Chinese herself. Actually, she doesn’t like Mainland Chinese. When I was young, she always repeated that she didn’t want me to get involved with a Chinese man. But things happened. A Linh and I were in love and we decided to get married. I didn’t plan anything though; I was even reluctant to trust A Linh when he flirted with me. But he was persuasive, tender and consistent. I tested him until he proved to be reliable. But it was important that I introduced him to my parents before I married him. I had already met his family and they all accepted me. So I took A Linh home [to a village near Móng Cái]; he had brought some cigarettes for my father. He acted very nicely but both my parents ignored him, they were very angry understanding that he wanted to marry me. My mother worried, but my father eventually gave in. They were just afraid something would happen to me. But they were still unsatisfied. When I came back months later with my newborn daughter, my parents didn’t even look at her. I was really hurt.
Li and A Linh dated without any intermediary’s participation. They enjoyed
their free romance and did everything that marriage rules expected of them:
introductions to each other’s families, a baby, paperwork for the registration of their
marriage, purchase of an apartment, and so on. They proceeded according to their
own rhythm and ability to cope with various issues such as parental opposition,
administrative obstacles, and economic precariousness. But, despite all, they managed
to form a stable family and to attain a respected social position. Somewhat
regrettably, the reality is that they represent an exception in this environment, as I will
demonstrate through other case studies in this thesis.

- *Er nai* at the border or ‘being a man’

As discussed earlier, there is a demographic issue that prevents some men
from finding a suitable partner for marriage. However, most of the time this concerns
those men who are short of means and cannot respond to increasing demands from
brides’ families. As a consequence, they also compete with another growing category
of Chinese men who can afford having more than one life partner, rendering the
search for available women even more complex. Among the marriages observed in
the border areas of China I noted the phenomenon of polygyny among rather wealthy
businessmen, a marriage state broadly referred to by informants. A few cases testify
to this reality in Dongxing, for example. Polygyny was earlier practiced without
restriction in pre-revolutionary China (Watson & Buckley Ebrey 1991; McMahon
2010, for an approach to fiction production) and Vietnam (Binh 1975); but, the latest
marriage laws of both countries condemn this form of conjugality. Notwithstanding, it

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1 A Linh has since developed his business. Li found a new job and gave birth to a second child. Her
family now accept her marriage and her children.
still persists and even on occasion meets not only the specific needs of men, but also of some women.

The rich men, or those who do not have children, usually take a second wife. Those who agree to be a second-rank wife are, first, those who are poor, then those in difficult situations, those who seek wealth, honors, and finally the young widows without children who are struggling to remarry. Few girls of respectable families are willing to become second wives (Binh 1975: 70-71, translation by thesis author).

If this marriage pattern could be translated into contemporary terms, it would unarguably fit the profile of most Vietnamese women who settle in Chinese families or in their Chinese husband’s relocated homes. The quasi absence of ceremony also attests to the lower status of these migrant wives compared with principal wives, i.e., Chinese wives. This particular social hierarchy is clearly evident in the ways in which Vietnamese wives are introduced to the community, accepted, talked about and treated. Lao Wang, a married Chinese business man in Hekou stated:

— My Vietnamese partners always want to introduce me to a pretty young wife. I keep arguing that I am already married, but this does not seem to prevent them from proposing. I know a few of them who have two wives; they can enjoy having big families as long as they have sufficient incomes to provide them with what they need.

Lao Yuan, a former soldier during the border conflict and now a businessman in his forties, has lived in Hekou for more than twenty years:

— I have been married once with a Chinese wife but we have divorced. Now, I am too busy to think about having a family, I don’t need a wife now. There are opportunities but I am not interested. It’s not about Vietnamese women, it’s about getting married; it’s too troublesome. But my Vietnamese business
partners have a hard time to understand that I want to remain single when so many Vietnamese women are available.

It is interesting to note that the Chinese population in the border area generally believe polygyny to be a common practice in Vietnam. The assumption that a man can easily marry two or more wives as a matrimonial practice facilitated by a demographic ratio disadvantaging women\(^1\) is widely spread. Genuine cases alluded to by those who have been there or have connections there support this belief. In reality, even though cases of polygyny still occur in rural Vietnam despite its prohibition in 1960 (Luong 1989; Pashigian 2009), it is certainly not as commonplace as Chinese men seem to imagine.

In 2006, I met one family in Lào Cai living in a polygynous relationship, which seemed sufficiently unusual to be referred to as an ‘example’ by the locals. Yang, a Vietnamese man of Chinese origin, had been married to his wife Binh for more than thirty years. They had a daughter (already married) and a younger son together. But, Yang had an affair with Ha, a woman who used to work in the coffee shop they ran on the ground floor of their house. Then in her late twenties, Ha became pregnant and in time gave birth to a girl. The family lived near the centre of Lào Cai\(^2\) in a fairly big modern house to which Yang was adding a storey to accommodate his

\(^1\) The belief that women outnumber men in Vietnam is strong in the Chinese borderlands. In fact, consequent to the Vietnam War, this was a reality until the 1990s (Goodkind 1995); however, the 2009 Vietnamese Population and Housing Census data show a slight variation in sex ratio: 49.4% for men and 50.6% for women (http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=599&ItemID=9788).

\(^2\) According to Binh, many houses in the area were reconstructed after the 1979 war. But, she resentfully stated, most of the destruction occurred as a result of the Vietnamese Kinh vandalizing the Hoa houses, motivated by their hatred of the Chinese people.
entire family in a more independent way. His second wife, Ha, cooked and took care of the household chores while Binh, his first wife, was busy with her business (tobacco trade). During a dinner with the family and a few other casual visits during the daytime, I observed that Yang was very hard on his son while being very sweet to his daughter. Clearly, my presence did not prevent him from showing his authority and violent behaviour. I once saw him shouting at his son and slapping his face. Binh, Yang’s first wife with whom I was acquainted as she could speak Chinese, confirmed that her husband treated their son very badly while being too caring, even lacking severity, with his young daughter. During my visits to the family, the little girl acted like a princess, albeit one lacking in politeness; in sharp contrast, most of the time the son remained very silent and withdrawn, displaying what appeared to be stubborn behaviour although he was tender with his mother. Binh, delineating the complex situation of her family said:

— My son hates his father; he knows the man doesn’t treat me well either. He wants to take me away to protect me. I … separated from my husband three years ago.¹ I am the one who raised his daughter, and I managed to force him to take his responsibility and ask his lover to come back and live with us. But you know, my husband cheated on me so many times that I really feel ashamed now. I would like to leave but he told me that he would not pay for his son’s care if we leave his house. I am caught in this situation until my son reaches 18 years old. Now, he is only fifteen. His father hits him, and he [has] hurt him several times.

¹ By this, Binh meant intimate separation; but, she was still living at home with him in a separate room.
I did not learn about the conjugal situation of Yang’s family directly from him. His sister Thuy, a friend who lives in Hekou, briefed me on the family arrangement before she took me to their house/coffee shop. Hence, although initially I only met Yang and Binh, when the second wife Ha appeared in the living area soon after we arrived, there was a tacit understanding between all of us regarding the identity of the young woman. Binh did not introduce the young woman to me (although she introduced me to her), implying that she was not comfortable with the situation, especially in front of an outsider. Everything was implicitly conveyed. Despite his personal situation, Yang was still keen to meet other women, and not only women from his community. He made me personally feel uncomfortable on different occasions and I avoided staying in his house when neither of his wives was around. Even when they were present, he did not hesitate to ask me personal questions to the limits of flirting. He once proposed driving me to the railway station when I was about to take a train to Hanoi. As this was shortly after dinner in his home with his family, I accepted politely. On the way to the station, he drove slowly, asking me several times if I wanted to stop for a drink and to đi chơi [have fun/hang out] at one of the small cafés located in the station area. Given the suggestive way in which he sometimes looked at me, accepting his offer could well have invited complications and put me in a very difficult position. As well, because we had communication problems – he was not speaking Chinese and I had exhausted my limited range of Vietnamese earlier during the few family gatherings I had attended– he may have had other activities in mind that I did not care to contemplate. Here, I cannot deny that in light of what his wife Binh had told me of her life with Yang¹ and of how many local

¹ I met Binh several times during my stays in Lào Cai; and, even though she did not have much to say about cross-border marriages in the area, she obviously found me to be a confidante to whom she could
women constantly portrayed Vietnamese men, my own judgment was biased not only by this encounter but also by other interactions with local male acquaintances. The point of this somewhat lengthy anecdote is in effect to assess Vietnamese men and women’s perspectives of polygyny. Whether they feel comfortable or awkward with it appears to depend upon who benefits, tolerates or suffers from such marital arrangements. Drawing on this sole example to demonstrate that polygyny is not a situation people live with comfortably may somehow overstate the case; but, any assumption that it is a current and well accepted marital arrangement in Vietnamese society, as suggested by my Chinese informants in Hekou, verges more I will suggest upon fantasy rather than reality, a subject I return to.

Many Chinese men conveniently slot second wives into a category of ‘accepted’ polygyny as a way of excusing their own actions. Jones and Shen allude to polygyny in their overview of contemporary cross-border alliances in the Asian region:

Medium-term business migration also appears to lead to many international marriages. There is clearly a positive correlation between foreign investment from more developed countries to developing countries and the emigration of women from these developing countries as ‘foreign brides’ to the more developed countries … The married men frequently leave their wife and children in the home country, so that the children can continue their education there. In many cases, they strike up liaisons with women in the country where they are working, some of which produce children and some of which result in formal marriage (Jones & Shen 2008: 17-18).

A decade ago, Lang and Smart undertook a period of research into the topic of polygyny at a specific location in Hong Kong where cross-border polygyny among

express all of the resentment she felt about her own family life, a subject that was difficult to discuss at other social gatherings due to its sensitivity and the loss of social face it had already incurred for her.

1 On a personal note, I have to admit that in the course of my fieldwork, the figure of Vietnamese men has had very limited chance to contradict the easily stereotyped yet realistic portrait of men offered by Vietnamese women.
migrants was in the main dependent upon the economic development of the Guangdong region (Lang & Smart 2002). We can draw an obvious parallel between the situation the two authors describe and that of the Sino-Vietnamese. The authors argue that for Hong Kong men, “[t]he ‘second wife’ demonstrates both a man’s virility and his economic status” (Lang & Smart 2002: 554) and, as in Chinese border cities, men can be teased by their peers for not having a local girl-friend or mistress, as Lao Wang and Lao Yuan’s cases attest. The main difference lay in the meaning of maintaining such a relationship as the main one by abandoning a recognised Chinese marriage (divorce) or deliberately choosing to engage with a ‘foreign’ woman (Vietnamese). The implications for a man’s reputation may, in this case, be necessary to consider (cf. Chapters 4 and 5).

The various patterns of de facto polygyny (not legally legitimate) that Lang and Smart found in Hong Kong recall the conjugality patterns observed at the Sino-Vietnamese border among local communities. Such alliances can be the consequences of overlapping migrations and the frequent mixing of Chinese businessmen and Vietnamese female migrant groups that results in maintaining a second household in the meeting areas that border towns represent. These unions may also “involve a longer-term commitment and are often characterized by considerable mutual affection” (Lang & Smart 2002: 563) and become a second family once a child settles the relationship.

Out-of-wedlock affairs are not a privilege enjoyed solely by businessmen involved in border trade in China (Shen 2008). The er nai [mistress or concubine] phenomenon has persisted for over two decades now: border areas have not made any marked difference to the way in which these liaisons have become almost as common as casual sexual relationships in prostitution venues (Zheng 2006, 2009). Moreover,
mistress/concubine relationships seem to be even easier to maintain in a border town where they are considered a way to engage in efficient business partnerships in which women often play key roles, besides being the embodiment of men’s social prestige and financial ability. Here Vietnamese women are neither simply casual entertainment – the ‘icing’ on the negotiations – nor the person to fulfil the sexual or emotional needs of frustrated men. They represent a perspective of a whole market, an unknown area in which a devoted guide may ease the complicated process of establishing/negotiating a new business. However, when these relationships exist in tandem with a normative marriage back home, they represent a site that embodies the wielding of masculine power, unless a man meets a woman who dares to challenge said power and in the process changes the rules of performance.

Sino-Vietnamese cross-border alliances, however, present one significant difference from the phenomenon that Lang and Smart describe. My informants in Hekou and Dongxing stressed that cases of polygyny are as frequent as cases of de facto polyandry in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. There may be two possible reasons for this: (1) a Vietnamese woman has left her husband and household in Vietnam for various reasons without officially divorcing. After she settles in a border zone in China or Vietnam, she lives and sometimes even has children with a Chinese partner. Legally, this is polyandry; (2) a further common pattern relates to a Vietnamese woman who has a husband or lover in Vietnam but becomes (in accordance with the wishes of this Vietnamese man who acts as her accomplice) openly committed to a relationship with a Chinese man for either a short or long term. This is also considered a form of polyandry. As I have earlier suggested, local stories inform about such female deceivers whose purpose is clearly to take advantage of a man by faking a romance until they can gain access to his money. Some of the
accounts I have collected reveal cases where the Chinese lover of a Vietnamese woman engages in the role of ‘bachelor procurer’ so that both can easily cheat wealthy candidates into marriage. Underscored in borderland contexts, un-trusted Otherness and fang gezi stories directly reflect the large-scale deceptive behaviour that frequently occurs within a highly competitive Chinese society wherein the ultimate goal of becoming rich justifies any means to the end.

However, the generally disadvantaged social position of Vietnamese women prevents one from overestimating the meaning of such intimate arrangements that seem to translate more as frustrated feelings than as a disturbing reality peculiar to the Chinese male population. In fact, a mistress who finds herself in an economically disadvantaged position becomes a disposable person. Whatever her purpose, a Vietnamese woman who engages in a long-term relationship with a foreign man, without the guarantee of marriage, invites a social stigma that prevents her from being considered a potential mate by single Vietnamese men (cf. Chapter 4). Hence, by keeping a Vietnamese mistress, a Chinese man imposes on her (either knowingly or unknowingly) a social burden that is more difficult to cope with than in Chinese society, i.e., the bad reputation that these mistresses bear in their homeland. Although extramarital affairs in Vietnamese society are very common among men, they are still the subject of strong prejudice upon the women involved; they enjoy little social tolerance if their relationship is publicly known (Thi 2008; Phinney 2008b; Nguyen 2007). For Chinese men, bao er nai [maintaining a mistress] in Hekou or Dongxing may not have the same implications as it does within China. If some Chinese men feel more inclined to follow such pattern, it is because first of all, it is much cheaper to maintain a Vietnamese woman than a Chinese woman: the former’s demands are lower and, with the currency exchange rate, investment also represents less of a
burden on a man’s personal budget. Thus, keeping a Vietnamese mistress becomes a worthwhile investment for a broad range of Chinese men. Even a man of modest means can enjoy such a perceived privilege. Secondly, the belief that polygyny is still practiced in Vietnam comforts the Chinese male and allows him to act with a sense of impunity as long as his official wife and family do not suspect anything. In other words, not only do border towns offer the possibility to experience exotic encounters with ‘local (i.e., cross border)’ women (given that prostitution relies precisely upon this exceptionality to attract customers) but for those willing to push the limits of convention further, the possibility of keeping a local concubine appears as if it were a local and well-accepted custom, all at a low cost and conveniently out of sight. One must admit that the temptation may drive numerous candidates to access these ‘freedom areas’ (Zhang 2011).

- The afterward feelings

In line with other anthropologists studying the family, Rebhun argues that the notion of couplehood – a relationship based on personal attraction rather than on corporate family rules – reflects “the effect of a shift from the kind of social relations common in small, kinship-based villages to those in wage-labor-based cities, in which the definition and expression of conjugal attachment becomes more verbal, less instrumental, more romantic” (Rebhun 2007: 115). In China, the opening-up that economic reform has facilitated over the last two decades shows similar changes in conjugality. But, what happens at the Sino-Vietnamese border remains indicative of the confusion that such opening-up has created in societies that have had to shift very quickly from one model to another. The diversity of marriage patterns observable in Hekou and Dongxing, for example, reflects the degree of ease with which each individual adapts to the new social order. Where one opts for free union without
engagement, another may prefer polygyny: a third will simply coerce a woman into becoming his wife. All of these scenarios put Vietnamese women in a quite vulnerable position in the sense that they rely on their partners’ decision-making and will to compromise with convention in order to find their own niche in their host societies. Each case takes for granted the compliance of the Vietnamese woman to a rather low profile since she tends to occupy the position that her Chinese counterpart no longer seeks or agrees to occupy, i.e., that of the ‘obedient wife’ (cf. Chapter 4).

But, what of the conjugal bonds and the usual rituals that seal a betrothal? In China as well as in Vietnam, the recurrent belief that love and affection between two spouses comes after marriage, and that one should pursue a marriage free from the disturbing influence of romance, still represents the norm. Rebhun describes a similar belief in Brazil:

Older couples [in Brazil] tended to say that true love develops after marriage or cohabitation, as the couple learn each other’s preferences, raise children together and form a partnership … They regarded the emotional content of the conjugal bonds as a private matter; in public spouses treated each other with formality and avoided displays of affection (Rebhun 2007: 113).

Many of the Vietnamese women I met had not mastered the Chinese language when they met their husbands. Each had to find other ways to communicate and to understand the other’s messages. Interestingly, those who were deceived and coerced into marriage did not necessarily express aversion towards their husbands after they commenced conjugal life. Yen, the vegetable seller who left her son in China, recalls with affection that the Chinese man to whom she was sold respected her (cf. Appendix 2). Oanh was a young married mother in Vietnam when she was smuggled to China and sold. Now a street bike repairer in Hekou, she decided to stay with the Chinese man to whom she was brought in a Guangxi village because she pitied him:
— His Chinese wife died at the hospital and he was alone with three children. He had already bought three Vietnamese women who all escaped from him. He was poor but he spent again 4000 yuan to have me\(^1\) and I felt sorry that he lost so much money before for nothing in return but abandon. I stayed with him. And he … agreed to adopt my [Vietnamese]. I have spent twenty years living and working with him and we have had three children together. I learned to love him; he is a responsible man.

A Hua, a Vietnamese street dressmaker I met in Wanwei (a Jingzu village near Dongxing, *cf.* Chapter 1) through the village’s CCP secretary explained:

— A neighbour of my parents introduced me to my Chinese husband. I was 30 years old and many men wanted to marry me, but they were mostly drug addicts. I heard good things about Chinese men. When I first met my husband, I didn’t like him. But I was told that he was an orphan, and that he was too poor to find a wife. So I decided to give it a try and stayed with him [for] four months. We managed to go along well so I decided to accept the marriage. Since the birth of our son, our feelings for each other improved.

Despite the initial lack of communication, there are other ways for these couples to bond/bind together in a peaceful way. Positive behaviour, births and compassion are among the feelings that seal marriage bonds despite the obscure and sometimes dramatic circumstances of cross-border marriages that expose these mixed

\(^1\) In 1991, 4,000 yuan was a large sum of money, especially for a peasant. But Oanh assessed that the average bride price for a Chinese bride was approximately 10,000 yuan. This information, although difficult to verify, seems suspicious since my informants in Guangxi informed me twenty years later that 10,000 yuan is the minimum amount of money that Chinese families ask nowadays for marrying their daughter. Oanh wanted to stress that she was a cheap investment compared to a local bride.
couples to psychologically vulnerable consequences. For those couples who have the possibility to freely agree on an alliance, intimate feelings are less questionable. Marriage rituals, however, may constitute the missing link.

- Rituals and ceremonies: marriage without a wedding

Kim, a determined young woman from Hekou, was the only Vietnamese informant able to give me a full account of the rituals that surrounded her marriage. She described the customary steps that guided her from her home in Lào Cai to her husband’s place in Hekou, where most rituals conform to both the Vietnamese and Chinese wedding traditions. But the general tendency concerning matrimonial practices in cases of Sino-Vietnamese marriages, even though a certain degree of variety exists, is to simplify any formal ceremony, even avoid organizing any public display of the event. Van mentioned a private banquet held at her husband’s home where she drank to forget her misfortune. Yen recalled having to enter her husband’s home without stepping on the doorway, a symbolic gesture requested by the family. Many Chinese men’s companions simply moved into their lovers’ houses without further ceremony: some women chose to emphasise their first intimate contact with their husbands as the real sealing event of their relationships. In sum, no horoscope prediction, no prostration before the ancestral altar, no tea ceremony with parents, no exchanges of gifts, no festivities in fancy restaurants and expensive sessions of shooting at local photographic studios embellish the alliance. Several factors explain this secrecy.

In Vietnam, as well as in China, a wedding ceremony is a costly but necessary step for recognition of an alliance and the prestige of a family. It firmly establishes extended kinship networks and is one of the major events of a lifetime that needs to be
celebrated in proper fashion according to local traditions, family backgrounds and the degree of integration of the socialist wedding practices more prevalent in Northern Vietnam (Goodkind 1996). In the 1990s, for example, in a village in North Vietnam, Krowolski (1999) had already observed a radical change in the expenses dedicated to a marriage ceremony that broke with the restrictions imposed by public policy until the reform areas (1986-) that prefigured the coming growing changes up to the early 21st century. A decade later, Hy Van Luong made a similar observation that he attributes to the “need of households to maintain their informal networks of reciprocity, which could be mobilized in times of need” due to the “[Vietnamese] state’s partial disengagement from the public sphere” (2003: 212, 216). Display of personal and family wealth and networking ability of this type has also become commonplace in today’s China (Liu 2000). But, when a Vietnamese daughter marries a Chinese man, the technical possibility of organizing a wedding and the whole function of linking two new groups of relatives together become – to say the very least – problematic.

As I have argued elsewhere (Grillot 2010), on the Chinese side of the border the quasi-absence of significant family and/or community acknowledgment of Sino-Vietnamese marriages through a public event calls into comparison the treatment of concubines in pre-revolutionary China. When Watson explored the position of concubines in Chinese families up until the last century (Watson 1991), she stressed a few important characteristics of this special status. When a concubine was bought, she received no dowry: nor did her family receive any betrothal payment. Her children were considered those of her husband’s wife. She possessed no property and lacked private funds. Also, she usually lost contact with her family; thus, her children could not possibly bond with their matri-lateral relatives. Finally, as she was denied an
influential role, social recognition, participation in kinship rituals and a right to her offspring, a concubine’s position was closer to that of a maid than to a wife within the household of her husband. Chinese society gave little consideration to these second-rank wives, even though their mere existence participated in social reproduction given that one of their main tasks was to provide men with heirs. However, having a concubine was a sign of prestige for men. Today, a Chinese man who has a Vietnamese concubine (in the technical sense of an unrecognized wife) as a unique partner, because he has no access to the pool of marriageable Chinese women, reads more like a failure than a success, for having a Vietnamese concubine seems almost to represent ‘choice by default,’ a topic I will explore further in Chapter 5.

- Bride price and other compensation

Linked by a common framework that includes marriage customs, marriages in Southern China and Northern Vietnam – particularly among the main Han and Kinh groups although not exclusively – are based on a principle involving the exchange of a bride against monetary or material compensation, an arrangement known as ‘bride price.’ Despite the radical changes it imposed on the Chinese family structure, Maoism did not succeed in its attempt to ban some marriage customs and eradicate the practice (Marriage Law, 1950, clause 3). Although it was pragmatically difficult to practice due to the country’s poor economic performance and the people’s poverty prior to the economic reforms (Chu & Yu 2010), the marriage payments tradition never totally disappeared. Today, although officially banned, bride price remains a major source of concern for many Chinese families. And regrettably, the contemporary era has seen a considerable increase in the requirement for this marriage payment. According to Alain Testart, the term ‘bride price’ refers (1) to “any transfer of relatively standardized goods, the nature and quantity of which are
generally determined by custom; (2) to payment normally provided by the groom; and (3) to the role of the parents of the bride (Testart et al. 2002a: 166). In other words, bride price is “an institution that reflects the authority and the power of one generation on the other” (Testart et al. 2002a: 169). With reference to China, Alain Testart argues to the effect that:

The implicit idea is that fathers must not get rich at the expense of their daughters; this implies that the only decent model of marriage is the bride price with return (i.e. a combination bride price with dowry). The Chinese example illustrates well the conviction of the bride price without return because accepting it would mean that the father takes advantage of his relative, namely his daughter … This did not prevent farmers from doing so. Such differentiation of marriage practices according to social class strengthens value judgments: … bride price without return is both morally wrong, illegal and dishonourable, and it is significant that it is the prerogative of the lower classes; … bride price with the return of an equivalent dowry is just the opposite (Testart et al. 2001: 28-29, translation by thesis author).

These practices continue to have a substantial impact on members of grooms’ families, who increasingly consider marriage a drain on their resources, despite the compensation. But what form does bride price actually take? Who does it pay?

The bride price is by no means a gift: it is due. It represents a payment of marriage. What does it pay? Not a woman, who would only be a slave, but … the rights of a woman. Not just sexual access rights to her, but a whole set of rights, both financial and parental: the right of the husband to link his children to his own lineage, the right to receive fines in case of adultery, the right to benefit from her work, and so on.

Before the groom pays the bride price, these rights belong to the bride’s father … The bride price can be interpreted as the price of transfer of rights from the father to the husband (Testart 2002b: 35, translation by thesis author).

The payment of bride price represents a symbolic and economic commitment by the groom and his family; once accepted, given the sacrifices it represents, neither the bride nor her parents can reverse the decision. Bride price has now become very high. Built on tradition, it now translates into economic and property terms. Whether due to sex ratio imbalance at birth or to their migration to urban areas, the scarcity of marriageable young women in rural China further limits access to marriage for men from the most disadvantaged families, who find themselves required to meet increasingly excessive demands: land, independent housing, household equipment,
electric appliances, vehicles or photo albums. In the Dongxing area, for example, informants indicated that the current average bride price is around 10,000 yuan minimum, a substantial sum for many rural families. Marriage payments not only mean transfer of rights and wealth and declarations of prestige, but also devolution of property between two families (Siu 1993). Chinese men in Guangxi and Yunnan claim that increased payments are among the main reasons underpinning the difficulty they face trying to find suitable (affordable) wives.

However, today one finds adaptive forms of compensation replacing the conventional bride price. This is the case with those men seriously committed in a long-term relationship with their Vietnamese partner. For example, some Chinese husbands can adopt their Vietnamese wife’s children (from a first marriage) or participate in taking care of their in-laws in Vietnam; they can also propose to help with the education fees for children left in Vietnam. Others with sufficient means may also invest in land or housing, especially in cases of non-officialised unions, and in provision for difficulties in the future that may impact upon the conditions of existence (or nonexistence) of the couple. To a Chinese man, this may act as a reassuring form of commitment toward a Vietnamese wife and her family, while it may also be an investment easily transformed into a material compensation in the case of a separation. On a smaller scale, compensation can take the form of gifts offered

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1 Realized by a professional photographer, a marriage album can be very expensive: charges include the rental of costumes, makeup, digital touching up and printing as a book.

2 The average income of a rural family in Guangxi in 2004 was 2,300 yuan per person per year (source: http://www.allcountries.org/china_statistics/10_21_per_capita_net_income_of.html).

3 At least in three cases, my informants explained to me that the house they bought in Vietnam was under their wife’s name because this eased the procedure regarding land property.
after the marriage during the wife’s first return home (medicines, tea), or of self-decided amounts of money which while of consequence to a Vietnamese family do not pose a burden for a Chinese man. In other cases, a Chinese husband will help one or several family members of his Vietnamese wife to migrate and find an occupation in China, although mostly under informal conditions. Efficient connections and logistical and financial assistance represent further forms of compensation; but, to a Vietnamese family, they also prove the commitment of a son-in-law to his wife. Notwithstanding, differences between a proper bride price and the above forms of material compensation persist. A bride price is negotiated before a union whereas the various forms of compensation enumerated above are spread over time. And, the amount of money and effort that a Chinese man and/or his family agree to spend on his Vietnamese wife’s affines is also more difficult to assess. But, even more significant is the missing half of the procedure; i.e., the dowry. Brown explores the meaning of the transaction:

After brideprice had been paid, the bride's family determines the size and composition of the dowry; unlike brideprice, dowry is not negotiated with the groom's parents. In much of rural China, a bride's parents retain part of the brideprice and transfer part in the dowry. Offering elaborate dowries provides a vehicle for prestige building by the bride's family and ensures against a daughter's maltreatment by her in-laws … Modern dowries often include bedding, clothing, furniture, and possibly other durables such as a bicycle, a sewing machine, a radio, and a television. Dowries also include a significant cash component for the bride's exclusive use. Dowry thus forms the foundation of the conjugal unit's household (Brown 2009: 29).

In many Sino-Vietnamese marriages, if the bride comes to the groom without dowry, there may be negative consequences for the bride’s treatment. Since one function of marriage is the transferring of economic resources from one family to another, it is understandable that Chinese families, having reckoned that the likelihood of receiving a dowry from a Vietnamese bride’s family is almost negligible, opt not to invest much in a bride price. Not only is there little likelihood of them
meeting in person members of the other ‘foreign; party, but there is little guarantee that a go-between will effectively transfer the compensation into the right hands. In other words, there is almost zero hope of receiving any return compensation. Hence, one observes alternative and symbolic forms of contribution from the groom’s family to the bride’s family that encompass the particularity to occur after the alliance and without specific negotiation. In some cases, the term ‘bride’s family’ does not necessarily refer to the bride’s parents but to her own household, i.e., to her children from a previous marriage. Chi’s initial suitor from Shanghai proposed to pay her daughter’s school fees, and her Chinese husband promised to pay a certain amount of money as a contribution to her education (cf. Appendix 7). Oanh’s children were both adopted by her new Chinese husband as proof of his commitment to her. In both cases, the Vietnamese parents of these women were no longer concerned regarding the outcome of their daughter’s second marriage. Such situations highlight the lack of academic resources to analyse marriage payment patterns in increasingly frequent cases of second marriages of divorced/widows/women. So, to what extent her family and in-laws are concerned by this practice remains a question open to exploration.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how border towns, as liminal spaces, become sites for numerous transgressions, notably of conventional marital practices. Through various examples of cross-border alliances, I have shown how Chinese borderlands, due to their deviance from normative social settings, offer a fascinating range of marital relationship forms. For some individuals, living at the territorial margins of their country may conveniently represent the potential to cross the borderline of what
is conventionally accepted by mainstream society, and to experience the revival of earlier models of conjugality (Lang & Smart 2002). When these individuals opt to observe certain forms of cross-border alliances, whether consciously or not, they tend to comply with rules of convenience, pragmatism, commodification, needs and a given context with much more impunity and flexibility than expected and experienced elsewhere.

These various and intertwined patterns of mixed marriages exist in line with two frameworks: an historical continuum that provides pre-conditions for certain forms of human exchange to reappear, and a global trend towards ‘cross-border intimacy’ or ‘international relationships’ that are tolerated and practiced again by both the Chinese and Vietnamese societies – even compared to the colonial French period which tolerated only certain forms of mixed alliances between French and Vietnamese (Stoler 2002; Phùng 2006). But, the alternative forms of alliances observable in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands also inform the major changes the two countries have experienced in terms of demographic transition, people’s mobility and changes of values. These changes translate in terms of practices such as polygyny or non-practices such as de-valuing conventional marriage rituals.

While the impact of economical migration and demographic imbalance on China is undeniable in these transformations of the internal marriage market, they are only structural factors that are easy to focus on while other neglected factors remain underestimated, especially in Vietnam. I will now assess how contextual, circumstantial and personal factors evolving in this acknowledged background provide a different picture of Sino-Vietnamese cross-border marriages, a picture that will progressively highlight the extant links between – apparently – very contrasting local figures and couples.
Chapter 4

Expectations, discourses and representations

Narratives as the site of confrontation between intimate yearnings and community suspicion

Introduction

Borders need to be constantly maintained and socially reproduced through particular practices and discourses that emphasize the ‘other’ (van Schendel 2005: 46).

In her assessment of mid-2000s scholarship on brides, maids and prostitutes, Constable shares her scholarly concern by pointing out the difficulty with which many cases from the Asian region fit into the current framework of academic and activist literature; a scheme that highlights economical inequalities and the search for traditional values as motivating factors for marriage migration, while ignoring other factors that eventually make such a conventional narrative rather inaccurate:

[D]espite some broader gendered migration patterns, the overall theme [i.e. the scholarly and popular descriptions of ‘mail order brides’ as ‘trafficked women’] lends itself too easily to the well-accepted logic of a more simplistic modernization narrative: of course poor women will want to move from a poor or ‘backward’ country to work for or marry a richer person in a more ‘modern’ country. The structural inequality of such a situation provides a common and readily accepted logic for the growing pattern for female labor and marriage migration. This logic is not necessarily wrong, but it is not the only way to tell and understand the story. Moreover, if it is read as the story, it obscures significant variations among and between women and through time (Constable 2006: 3, emphasis added).

To address this issue of variation between what appears as ‘logic’ and what is more obscure in individual choices, this chapter will explore the complex dynamics between personal narratives and social discourses that both shape representations and establish a framework through which Otherness is interpreted. It will show how this ‘framework of thought’ tends to shape relationships between various border
communities, and to act as an attractive/repulsive site in which intimacy is experienced at the border. This chapter is thus divided into two parts that are responding to each other to illustrate the dynamics observable in the field. In the first part, I explain the dynamics of social representations as a core issue in the evolution of cross-border marriages in the Sino-Vietnamese border regions. In the second part, I stress how intimate longings confront and are influenced by the stereotypes to which couples are constantly exposed. I will analyse how these two sets of perceptions interfere with one another, leading individuals towards undesired and precarious positions, while questioning the purpose and relevance of their choice. I employ narratives gathered through the course of my fieldwork to explore this new perspective on the alternative conjugality represented through international marriages in China.

1 The Dynamics of social representations

Getting to know who the Other is supposed to be like

As I delved into scholarship readings and interviews in the field, it occurred to me how certain subjective factors seemed rather neglected in the analysis of cross-border marriages. Such factors include the way interacting communities apprehend and appreciate each other, how they mutually shape and identify themselves with or against each other, and how the nature of their respective perception affects their life choices, expression, and their status in a given social space. Actually, many of my informants would not let me enquire about their very private sphere. What I first perceived as a methodological obstacle to access personal experiences of cross-cultural marriages from the inside actually led me to a perspective rarely examined by
scholarship on this particular phenomenon of border society. To compensate for the
difficulty I experienced in gaining a sense of mixed couples’ relationships and
penetrating the opacity of their intimacy, I tried to understand their reality differently
by examining them from an external perspective. In doing so, I aimed to give voice to
the outsiders, community members who assume that they know about these marriages.
This unexpected way of picturing this form of conjugality enabled me to see how
representations of marriages’ experiences could be as enlightening as any daily life
and actions, since both construct the identity of a certain type marital relationship.
Therefore, instead of engaging with debates on the experience of mixed marriage,
cross-cultural couples, and experiences of life in their most tangible expressions, I
will argue that in particular border setting such as the Sino-Vietnamese border towns,
the articulation of fantasies, resentment and suspicion come to define mixed
conjugalility in a way that makes the involved individuals constantly negotiate their
social position and their fragile balance between their past, present and future.

- Hekou, April 2006

When I began, my enquiries about mixed couples at the border generated
many raised eyes-brows and expressions of surprise, “Why? Why was I interested in
these couples?” As I explained in the introduction, the human trafficking issue
initially underlay my interest in these personal stories. This biased vision of cross-
border marriages caused me to overlook those couples who I considered to be
“regular.” To me, these “regular” couples were those who met, engaged themselves in
an intimate and emotional relationship, and then married, as anywhere else, except
that here, the spouses came from two different countries. Therefore, when A Bo, a
young Sichuanese man – whom we met in Chapter 2 – offered to introduce me to his
best friends, a Sino-Vietnamese couple who were the owners of a trinket shop across
the street. I almost declined the offer, thinking that they were unlikely to be the type of couple I was interested in getting to know. Still, I had to start somewhere, and fortunately my curiosity was sufficiently teased to make this first move into the private space of a local mixed couple.

A beautiful young woman born in 1984, Lien¹ had lived in Hekou for two years (when we first met in 2006) and apparently cared a lot about her appearance. As she talked, she regularly caught glimpses of her face in the mirror behind me to check her hairs, her make-up, or her silhouette. Assuming that being a woman myself, I would also feel concerned by the way I look, she often interrupted our conversation with questions about my clothes, hair colour or aesthetic concerns. Was this a signal indicating how embarrassing and unusual my questions were? Although she spoke excellent Chinese that allowed her to easily elaborate on any topic of conversation and was quite happy to talk about herself, Lien quickly pointed out there was nothing special to mention about her relationship with her partner A Long.

— I have five brothers and sisters. My mother died when I was 12 years old and we all moved around a lot with my father. He remarried and we lived in Hanoi for a while. Before coming to Hekou, I stayed two years in Lào Cai where my father conducted some business. My father speaks Chinese; he lived a few years in Beijing. I met A Long in Lào Cai, when he was doing business with my father.² He comes from Zhejiang and has lived seven years in Sichuan before coming here. We liked each other and I decided to stay with him. We

¹ We already met Lien in Chapter 2 when she had already become a brothel manager.
² A Long told me that he conducted some business with Lien’s sister and that her father was doing business in Hanoi most of the time.
are not officially married yet, it’s costly, and we must wait. Our life is rather simple.

Despite such an uninspiring modest statement, Lien’s warmness, our regular conversations, some shared meals and shopping-trips over the time eventually brought up some thrilling confidences about her life and current familial situation. However, the ambiguity of her attitudes towards me, my research interests or even towards various people who came to her shop¹ slowly made me dubious. I learned how to ask her the same questions several times so that I might distinguish any difficulty she had in delivering a coherent discourse on various topics such as mixed marriage, Hekou’s atmosphere or Vietnamese prostitution. For instance, when asked if she could introduce me to some other mixed couples or some Vietnamese women who might have had such an experience in the past, Lien simply said that she did not know such persons but only heard about them. However, she once took me to a nail salon at the Vietnamese market. From the greetings she gave or received on the way, including a quick transit through the first floor of the building, it became obvious that she actually did have some local acquaintances among the Vietnamese female community, including the prostitution network. As we walked by, probably supposing that I had noticed the activity considered as ordinary in Hekou, she barely mentioned what was going on in the ‘hair salons’ of the building. She simply suggested it by discreet comments: “these girls have no choice, this is pitiful” or “it’s quite [sexually] chaotic here.” When she spoke, she adopted a pitiful expression, conveying a sense of her compassion, yet also her disagreement with the practice by saying that “the girls are

¹ Lien was selling miscellaneous items ranging from hair slides and cheap jade to low quality bibelots and Chinese souvenirs.
making a lot of money!” On the ground floor, Lien’s friend A Hua\(^1\) owned the ‘nail salon.’ But the place was mainly a massage parlour offering services to a Chinese male tourist clientele. Very young Vietnamese women were working there. The ambiguity of the place – the massage salon located within the Vietnamese market, and closely connected with the brothels on the first floor (Grillot 2012) – did not seem to affect Lien or prevent her from coming here to chat and have her nails done.

Lien became an informant whose activities and connections seemed at odds with what she pretended her social life to be. I felt she would reveal more about her real perspectives later on, but she remained secretive. At first, she appeared to me as a “regular” and well-integrated woman, even if slightly ambiguous. My perception of her may have remained this way if another informant I came to know elsewhere had not offered me a different angle on Lien’s position.

Thuy\(^2\) is a middle-age woman with a strong personality who worked in a shop nearby. A Bo is the one who introduced us: “She knows a lot about the question you are interested in, you can ask her questions.” Indeed she was well-informed but not exactly on the subject I had expected. Thuy was born in Vietnam from a Chinese family, originally from Guangdong. Classified under the category of Hoa before 1979, Thuy and some of her family members had to flee Lào Cai where they lived and went to China. The Hoa were not welcomed anymore in Vietnam and they were ‘encouraged’ by the government to go back to their ‘motherland.’ At the age of

\(^1\) Three years later, I went back to the nail salon with Lien and learned that A Hua was also a Chinese man’s wife who later agreed to talk about her marriage. Lien just “forgot” to mention it the first time. I interpret her cautiousness as a way to protect her network from me, a curious foreigner whom purpose was not very clear at first.

\(^2\) I have introduced Thuy earlier in Chapter 3. She is the sister of Mr Yang, the ‘men with two wives.’
twenty, Thuy was thus relocated in a farm in Dali\footnote{During the Hoa exodus from Vietnam, Chinese government offered permanent resettlement to overseas Chinese in ‘Overseas Chinese Farms,’ mostly in Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces (Lam 2000).} (Northwest Yunnan) where she married a Chinese man from Indonesia, had a daughter and divorced thirteen years later. In 2006, she was living in Hekou as an interpreter\footnote{A 	extit{fanyi} [translator/interpreter] in these border towns is a person who is able to communicate, even imperfectly, in both Chinese and Vietnamese. Many of these persons have received no professional training for this, but they are much needed in Chinese shops where Vietnamese customers often come. Most of them are Vietnamese who are Hoa (of Chinese origin) or who other Vietnamese who learned Chinese at school or by living in China. They usually come and go according to the (informal) salary a Chinese boss can offer them.} in a bedding-shop, and as a part-time Vietnamese language teacher in her sister’s private school. She was engaged in a long-term relationship with her partner, a Vietnamese man whom she first introduced as a Hoa from a family originally from Guangxi, like everybody believed he was.\footnote{Thuy explained me later that her husband was a Kinh Vietnamese who did not speak Chinese. Apparently, she believed that people would disregard him if they knew he was not ethnically Chinese. Vietnamese men’s reputation was controversial and she wanted to avoid gossips.} After A Bo left us on the first day we met, she commented:

— I know A Bo, he stays in the shop down the street. There is a Vietnamese woman there, did you meet her?

— Yes, I did. Her name is Lien, she’s engaged to her Chinese boyfriend A Long.

— Well, that’s what she says. Lien is a former prostitute; she used to work in Lào Cai before she met A Long. I know her. You shouldn’t trust too much what Vietnamese people say, especially women. If you find them, they will
remain silent about their private life, or they will tell you tales, everything you want to hear, except the truth.

Unfortunately, a little drama followed. Ling, one of my Chinese friends accompanied me during these very first days in Hekou. Being a writer with a strong interest with places on the margins, she was curious about Hekou’s reputation and wished to learn more about it. As a Chinese woman who liked to socialize, she also helped me the first three days to settle down within the community, pretending we were both travelling and making people more at ease with us. Sichuanese herself, Ling quickly befriended A Bo whom she could speak with in her native dialect. She was present when Thuy made the above statement about Lien. But before returning to Sichuan the second day, Ling made the mistake of asking A Bo during a casual conversation if it was true that Lien was a former prostitute. A Bo who was a friend of Lien and A Long felt very embarrassed. He admitted it was true, although he was very angry with Thuy for disclosing this secret so carelessly. Ling left Hekou and two days later, I met A Bo who became a little reluctant to talk to me:

— Even if everybody knows in our street what Lien was doing in her former life, no one ever mentions it. I always try my best to protect my friend’s reputation, you know? Lien is a nice person, she loves A Long, and she understands him despite his strange temper. And he loves and respects her as well. We are all human; we need to make a living. I respect them both and don’t want to expose them. Ling asked me to take her to the brothels I mentioned the other day; she took pictures, which is not much appreciated around here. I have a reputation here; she made me feel like I am exposing
people. If I knew in the first place what you were looking for, I wouldn’t have said anything.¹

I reassured A Bo that Ling and I were both respectful of people’s privacy as well and would not disclose any of the information anyone told us. I reiterated that the life stories I was collecting would remain hidden in my notebook as long as I was staying in Hekou. However, this unfortunate failure of diplomacy jeopardized my position in Hekou and started to cause misunderstandings – I noticed A Long and Lien’s change of behaviour over the next few days. It took some time for things to get back to normal, although people noticed I adopted an unobtrusive attitude. In fact, I had no particular interest in the local prostitution business even though people kept implicitly mentioning it when conversations concerned local society and economy. Yet, in a quite unexpected way, this episode revealed the real risk and challenge of doing such research on cross-border affairs: my enquiries were actually exposing people’s reputation and threatening the fragile balance of local relationships. One wrong step and the implicit – and professional – tact previously taken for granted during interactions with locals was in jeopardy. Not only my own position, but also that of my informants, could be subject to judgment, stigma and rejection. When A Bo stated that “everybody knows but no one mentions it,” I realized that in fact everybody knew and still talked about it when the occasion came. All along with further interviews and conversations during my several stays in Hekou, these feelings

¹ I did explain to A Bo that I was interested in meeting mixed couples in order to understand more about their experience and write a book about cross-border marriages. But as many of my informants, A Bo had a vague understanding of what academic research means and often mistook my position as the one of a foreign journalist whose aim was to reveal to the outside the special features of Hekou’s society.
were confirmed: social representations are a real issue, especially in these border towns of recent settlement. When accurate information about someone’s background is hard to apprehend, people rely heavily on his/her recent actions, immediate reputation and impressions to judge him/her. Later, I will demonstrate how this is very much related to the existence, experience and stability of cross-border alliances.

After a few weeks of fieldwork in Hekou during the spring 2006, it became quite clear that I could not escape from the ubiquitous stereotyped views that local Chinese and Vietnamese people maintain of one another. In various ways, these views inspired their narratives and came to re-orient my own research. Out of the dialogues that my new acquaintances and I had, I formulated one core question: To what extent are social and cultural representations taken into account in individual decisions to engage in cross-border alliances? Initially, I expected public concern, comments, or maybe sympathy towards the men and women who had no other option but to get involved with each other through a pragmatic marriage without romance, especially in cases of coerced marriage. Instead, I met various degrees of contempt, suspicion and a general attitude of apathy. I was confronted with unexpected and confounding insights from local people, whether on the Chinese or the Vietnamese side of the border, adding to an already disturbing setting, and a non-orthodox approach of a ‘non-existent’ community of informants. Collecting the various expressions of opinions made me realise the difficulties that mixed couples, and especially the Vietnamese wives, were coping with during the process of becoming part – willingly or not – of a moving, proud and exclusive Chinese society. For instance, according to many of my Vietnamese female informants, marrying a Chinese migrant sometimes means having to cope with his family’s call to return home one day, or with his new projects that require moving far into China (something a Vietnamese migrant do not always have
the right to do). Becoming part of a Chinese family may also expose a Vietnamese bride to explicit displays of contempt, criticism or nationalistic comments when one estimates that she comes from a developing country and assumes her to be poor. Hence, listening to what is said about mixed marriages within communities and to what they involve in terms of acceptance, integration or exclusion helps us to comprehend their social position.

- Social representations

With social life being typically storied, the construction of an identity narrative is itself political action and is part of the distribution of social power in society. In the study of state boundaries, it is important to know whose plots or turfs dominate these identity narratives, what is excluded or included by them, and how the representations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are produced and reproduced in various social practices, such as media, education, and the like (Horstmann & Bradley 2006: 20).

Horstmann and Bradley suggest that studying a social phenomenon occurring in borderlands requires the examination of identity narratives. Here, in the realm of conjugality, these narratives become a site to convey popular viewpoints on the suspected Other, as well as the role of gender within each society. Social psychology and its theory of social representations have provided me with a meaningful frame within which I could capture a “structured knowledge” (Wagner & Hayes 2005: 117) of the social settings expressed through my informants narratives and comments, the behaviours they adopted and those they advised me to learn. Thuy’s words of caution to me, “Don’t trust them!” indicated her concerns that I might be cheated in the course of my fieldwork, reflecting a widespread and empirically-based opinion: Vietnamese are unreliable; they cheat, lie, and are unpredictable. Knowing this was preventing confusion and deception.

Based on an extensive literature on social representations over the last forty years, Wagner and Hayes provide a definition of the concept of social representations:
The first aspect characterising social representations is the: (a) structured, (b) cognitive, affective, evaluative and operative, (c) metaphorical or iconic ‘portrayal’, of (d) socially relevant phenomena. These can be ‘events’, ‘stimuli’ or ‘facts’ (e) of which individuals are potentially aware and which are (f) shared by other members of the social group. This commonality between people represents (g) a fundamental element of the social identity of the individual (Wagner & Hayes 2005: 120).

The findings of my research illustrate this definition. The whole set of local communities’ statements on cross-border marriages is primarily based on a structured portrayal of these alliances constructed by a recurrent institutionalised discourse (propaganda, media reports, official policies). This discourse presents cross-border marriages as a local cultural characteristic (cross-border intra-ethnic marriages for instance) or a human trafficking issue, according to the targeted public (a). These statements are based on personal experiences that affect individual and collective values and practices, and the social order each one participates in (b). As the example of my interaction with Thuy shows, these narratives do not only constitute a ‘portrayal’ but also impose a mediation between an individual and the society (c): Thuy does not only explain me ‘facts’, she also expects me to learn from them; to approach my interactions with Vietnamese women with caution. In this sense, Vietnamese women are more than an active element of the social landscape; they have become an object endowed with a certain social meaning that one should be aware of (d). Whether we consider the rituals that embody marriage ideology (wedding ceremonies for instance) or the individuals who practice its rule de facto, the idea of marriage – especially unconventional marriage patterns – stimulates the elaboration of a certain relation between the involved partners and the rest of the community (e). This relation articulates the public position towards mixed couples through shared comments and behaviours (f). These existing social representations are heard in many settings, spread by various people coming from various professional and social backgrounds in these borderlands; they are predominantly shared, even as they are sometimes
contested or discussed among members of communities. Eventually, observations validate the idea that:

[T]hese shared ideas contain both judgemental and action-directing elements, they orientate the way members of the group act, both between one another and with respect to outsiders. The background knowledge shared by members of the group distances it from other competing groups and individuals, who lack the associated interpretative schema. The relative uniformity vis-à-vis others lends the group member security and identity (Wagner & Hayes 2005: 123).

The following anecdote provides an example of the formation of social discourse on a given reality that each newcomer comes to realize at some point. One afternoon, I was observing the border-crossing activities on a sidewalk with Thuy when a street-vendor came by to sell my favourite Vietnamese snack: trứng vịt lộn. I indicated my wish to buy some of the eggs to bring back home. A Hoa interpreter, one of Thuy’s fellows who was sitting close by heard me. She suddenly intervened and took it upon herself to negotiate the transaction for me, without actually asking my opinion. Delighted that I appreciated her snacks, the street-vendor prepared the eggs, and charged me what I felt was a reasonable price. Thuy remained silent. The interpreter chatted politely with me a moment and then walked away, as did the vendor. At this point, Thuy told me that I had overpaid for the eggs. Vietnamese customers, she told me, even in Hekou, would generally not pay out so much. This incident became an opportunity for her to show me the delicate position of the Hoa in these borderlands.

— You see, this interpreter seems nice to you, she’s doing you a favour. Yet this is only an appearance. She acted with no scruples, even though she knows me and knows you’re my friend. She told the vendor that you could pay more

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1 Trứng vịt lộn are fertilized duck embryo, a snack served boiled with fresh basilica leaves, grated ginger and lemon sauce.
for the eggs, that she could negotiate with you on her behalf. So you paid more, without the vendor trying herself to cheat you. This interpreter has chosen her side; even here, she sides with the Vietnamese, rather than you, or a Chinese customer. She is being hypocritical with you. I’m telling you, you cannot trust the Vietnamese! Even the Hoa are on their side. During business negotiations, interpreters often help Vietnamese buyers more than their own Chinese bosses. I don’t like them for this reason; they are dishonest.

Thuy pointed out how the Hoa remained in a delicate position such that they needed to negotiate carefully within their communities. This was the case whilst they were still residents in Vietnam and the ambiguity of their position within the community persisted with their current position in Chinese society years after their forced relocation, even when they stayed or came back to Vietnam. Many Hoa eventually settled in China and decided not to return to Vietnam after the war. But some of them, unable to leave in 1978, remained in Vietnam and often suffered from discrimination, even violence, among Vietnamese society (Chang 1982; Stern 1985; Appendix 4). But being in-between individuals – neither completely Chinese nor Vietnamese – they nowadays adopt a rather pragmatic attitude on either side of the border. However, they never forget how miserable they once were. There seems to be no real consensus on which side to choose among those Hoa who do not enjoy the advantageous position of the successful traders since the reopening of the border (Hai 2000). In a borderland economy, women like Thuy or her fellow interpreter belong to the economical survivors rather than the investors. Being in an ambivalent position

1 Several of my Hoa informants mentioned that after 1978, especially in border towns, most Hoa did not dare using Chinese language, going outside their home, endured insults. Some living in Lào Cai even saw their houses vandalized or burnt.
that challenges their subjectivity, both of them, according to circumstances, may stand on Chinese or Vietnamese side during a negotiation, regardless of their employer’s identity. When I asked her why she had not intervened in the negotiation on my behalf, Thuy told me that she had no choice since she was working in the same field as the other interpreter. If she had taken my defence, Vietnamese people would have deprecated her, and regarded her as a traitor to the interests of these hard-workers. Her silence was preferable. The following days, I did not see the interpreter next door. Thuy told me she quarrelled with her about the eggs episode after I left, reproaching her dishonesty towards me, and her mean-spirited attitude.

My own experience aside, many newcomers to Hekou and Dongxing such as tourists and migrants feel confused by the complexity of locals’ perceptions of, and projections on their Vietnamese neighbours. When one intends to establish oneself in town, one needs to adapt to the settled group’s set of beliefs in order to become part of the community, a necessary step for starting a business in an unfamiliar setting. In this sense, the whole process of taking a new acquaintance for a walk around Hekou or Dongxing (*cf.* Chapter 2) proves to be a way to brief the newcomers and share knowledge of facts, objects and phenomena. Such knowledge is perceived as fundamental to commencing interactions with the Other as it brings these newcomers in contact with the exotic object: the Vietnamese woman. In the specific context of a migrating society, this knowledge is also in a state of flux. Wagner and Hayes perceive a form of community bound by such knowledge, which forms the social identity of individuals. I argue, however, that in the case of borderland societies, which are culturally disparate and constantly moving, social representations are subject to change according to degrees of interaction and personal involvement between individuals. Hence, the knowledge shaped by social representations act more
as a temporary bond, an initial set of values that guide those in search of social keys to connect with the Other rather than as a fundamental element of social identity.

Stereotypes and derogatory views: “the Others’ nation”

- The politicized discourse

The discourse on a subject refers to a language or way of talking that develops, through use, a series of conventions and becomes institutionalised through use. The discourse defines the socially accepted, mainstream or apparently official version, the version that seems obvious or natural. At the same time, this discourse always leaves out experiences and points of view that do not fit, silencing difference and producing unease in those who do not see themselves included. To understand the concept of discourse is to remember that what we say about any given subject is always constructed, and there are only partial truths (Agustin 2007: 8-9).

Agustin’s definition of ‘discourse’ precisely reflects what I also mean when I refer to informants’ narratives on the field. Indeed, one repeatedly encounters numerous widespread assumptions by border people on their neighbours, whatever their status or educational background. For instance, one common statement among Chinese people is that “Vietnamese history is short, since the country was a part of Chinese empire during a thousand years.” Such statements blatantly neglect to acknowledge earlier periods of Vietnamese history, and various elements of Vietnamese culture that connect it to a broader Southeast Asian civilization. Instead, in Chinese popular discourse it becomes convenient to consider Vietnamese people as lacking a genuine culture. Many also assess that “Vietnamese language used Chinese characters for long before it later changed under French domination for a transcription [quốc ngữ] those colonialists provided them with;” and consequently, “French people should naturally all understand the written language since it uses [the Roman alphabet]!” Regardless of historical truth and the necessity to distinguish oral and written language, this simplistic vision not only suggests that Vietnamese people
never had their own language transcript, but it also implies that Vietnam depends on what other advanced powers provide them in order to exist. Chinese official history also attributes the 1979 border conflict to a deliberate attack from Vietnam. Although local people dare to challenge this interpretation based on their own experience and personal memories, it remains generally and conveniently adopted by the newcomers, who have little interest in hearing an alternative opinion.

Overall, the idea of the supremacy of Chinese civilization over a small former suzerain and economically frustrated neighbour\(^1\) shapes the belief that somehow, Vietnamese people are asking for revenge, and want their “part of the cake.” In contemporary times, this translates as economic co-dependency. However, such a discourse, which often takes the form of boasting about Chinese merits and successes during group debate sessions – especially in the presence of a foreigner – often remains unelaborated, underscoring the empty shell it actually is: a convenient site to express blurred opinions that sound like yet another manifestation of current Chinese nationalism (Barmé 1995; Cabestan 2005). In this regard, Chan (2005a) and Zhang (2011) have already suggested how the entangled but ambiguous relationships between Vietnamese and Chinese people in these specific areas provide a prolific ground for nationalistic discourse, which mixes resentment with common interests. As Chan puts it, “[t]he coherence in the Sino-Vietnam relationship lies in its constant oscillation between incoherent extremes; hostility versus amity; appreciation and trust versus suspicion and distrust; friendship versus hostility; and cooperation versus resistance” (Chan 2005a: 52). Not surprisingly, what Chan heard in Vietnam among

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\(^1\) The dominance of Chinese economy and diplomacy in this region of the world is a source of grief and controversy within Vietnamese population, and a constant subject of worry for Hanoi’s government; both longing for more autonomy and decision power.
Vietnamese people mirrors the exact same type of discourse on the Chinese side of the border. In Lào Cai, the words ‘distrust’, ‘suspicious’ and ‘distance’ are commonly used to describe a necessary cautiousness when interacting with Chinese (Chan 2005a: 87-88). Nearby, in rural parts of Lào Cai province, Sarah Turner shows us distinct attitudes in upland parts of the areas. In these villages, border trade is also very active but Vietnamese people seem very much affected by a frightening image of their imposing neighbour (cf. Chapter 2). Meanwhile, Horstmann and Wadley also highlight that “… the fluidity and ambiguity of identities is a central feature of borderlands” (Horstmann & Wadley 2006: 20). Therefore, given such a historical and cultural ground for people’s interactions, the ease with which social representations spread is not surprising. However, as I examine in the following paragraph, it is also crucial to stress the ideological framework that contemporary history and politics provide to the standardization of such visions, especially in China, adding another dimension to the Other.

- The folklorizing discourse: a question of class

There is an interesting parallel in the way the Chinese migrants recently settled in borderlands consider their Vietnamese neighbours, and the way other generations of Chinese migrants who emigrated to border regions perceived the ethnic groups they came into contact with. Mette Halskov Hansen (2005) has described in detail the perceptions of Han migrants to Xinjiang and Yunnan provinces, according to their arrival dates in the region. Most of the comments she collected are similar to those currently heard among Chinese migrants in Hekou and Dongxing about the Vietnamese who belong to their new social landscape. Interestingly, we notice the same gap between narratives of those who arrived prior to the reforms era (1979-) and those recently settled at the frontier.
[H]an immigrants who had come as individual migrants after the 1980s were often uninterested in the topic of ethnic relations and minority-majority differences. … They made no claims to a special idealistic mission as Han in a minority area, and the fact that they had come with the specific and explicit purpose of improving their and their families’ economic situation helped to explain their lack of interest in ethnic minorities as such. They often judged the minorities on the basis of their own personal encounters with landlords, neighbours and shopkeepers… (Hansen 2005: 240).

The relevance of a comparison between Chinese political perspective on its own internal ethnic groups and the way borderlanders consider their immediate foreign neighbours lies in the fact that, in Hekou and Dongxing cases, Vietnamese people are *de facto* minorities in terms of social, rather than political hierarchy. Although they remain foreigners, and only benefit from limited rights in terms of stay and access to public services, their daily life, activities and role in border towns makes them a constitutive part of local life as much as Chinese citizens. But because they come from a poorer country that is believed to be economically dependant on China, and that nowadays, the economical lens has come to be the only relevant means of establishing social hierarchy, Chinese people do not regard their Vietnamese neighbours as equals – this is also true for most other southern border countries such as Laos, Burma or Nepal. However, over the last two decades, Vietnamese people not only became once again part of the border towns’ social landscape, but they tend to outnumber the recently urbanized ethnic minorities – the Zhuang in Dongxing region, and the Yao and Miao around Hekou.

Even though today, Vietnamese migrants/traders/workers can be regarded as a *de facto* minority in Chinese borderlands, the main difference between the early Chinese inner migrants to minority areas and those recent economic migrants to border towns, lies in their goals: the early migrants came to ‘civilize’ ethnic minorities whereas the recent migrant came to benefit from the Vietnamese’s partnership (work force, women, resources, economical needs) but generally feel socially and politically
disengaged towards them. First of all, economic opportunism has largely replaced ideological convictions or feelings of duty, as it does in parts of China populated by ethnics groups too. If few traders acknowledge learning from their counterparts while training them with more accurate and efficient business methods and strategies (according to Chinese practices), most do not bother engaging with such constructive exchanges of expertise: “Zhi yao nenggou zheng qian jiu xing le [As long as we can make money, it’s fine].” They feel no responsibility in “educating” the Other. Secondly, despite proximity, cultural similarity and some shared recent history, Chinese consider Vietnamese as foreigners whose affairs are no concern to Chinese people, even those who live with them. Although most admit that, in fact, “there are no deep differences between Chinese and Vietnamese people in general,” pointing out the way they used to share a written language, or the thousand years Vietnam spent under Chinese empire’s rules as typical instances, they make a clear difference between national/internal and international/external Otherness. However, one can distinguish a significant difference between discourses of Otherness in Hekou compared to those in Dongxing. Zhuang people – the second large ethnic group in Guangxi province after the Han1 – often highlight that the ethnic backgrounds of Kinh – the main ethnic group in Vietnam – and Zhuang have affinities, and explain how this helps communication and understanding, and reduces the feeling of Otherness: “Women dou yiyang/chabuduo! [We are all the same/almost similar]” But if the Zhuang see linguistic, cultural and ethnic links with the Vietnamese, a situation that positions them as relatively ‘equal’ when facing the dominant Han Chinese, people in Hekou generally do not adopt such a discourse. Yunnan is a much more complex province and blends a greater number of ethnic groups. Here Han are the majority,

1 The administrative name of this province is ‘Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region’.
and the presence of ethnic minorities among Hekou’s residents is too modest to become significant when it comes to affinities with the Vietnamese. Hence, differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are more accentuated.

In her account of Chinese Han settlers’ experiences in minority areas located in border regions, Hansen also argues that Han people’s opinion of the ethnic communities they happen to live with, is not as condescending as one would expect, given the general portrait offered by ideological discourse: ethnic minorities are culturally and economically backward, to say the least.¹ Evolutionist assertions on ethnic hierarchy that position the Han on the higher level of advancement on the scale of human civilisation’s progress are still taught at school, still performed in media (although depicted in a folklorized form so as to enhance ethnic tourism), and discussed among ordinary people who may or may not live among ethnic minorities. This seems to have slightly changed for the last decade though. For instance, certain manifestations of openness allowed by (somewhat) free debates on the Internet, provide a more objective (less stereotyped) vision of ethnic minorities to a large public in China.²

Some Han immigrants were more than willing to talk about their perceptions of local non-Han, and quite a few introduced the subject spontaneously. However, the main problem was to understand what was actually meant by their statements, and to what extent expressions were derived from the immigrants’ long-term encounter with the official discourse on ethnic groups in China. What consequences, if any, did these expressed views have for the actual relationships between Han immigrants and minorities, and to what extent could strong racially discriminatory expressions be taken as representative of local ‘Han images of ethnic minorities’? In fact a number

1 Recent riots of ethnic and political nature in Xinjiang and Tibet areas for instance have enhance the re-emergence of radical popular and official discourses on the human quality of those ethnic groups involved in local struggles.

2 Further research is necessary to assess such changes of the propagandist discourse, mixed with popular opinions.
of Han immigrants did not talk at all about their concepts of local ethnic minorities, or … did so only in neutral or predominantly positive terms. This silence on the topic of minorities, or the lack of discriminatory or negative descriptions, was obviously much less noticeable than extreme statements which also tend to get the most attention in foreigners’ reports about Han images of minorities. But in order to understand more about majority-minority relations and especially Han images of ethnic minorities, it is relevant to focus on what prompted the pronounced differences in various Han immigrants’ ways of expressing their views on Han versus non-Han (Hansen 2005: 207).

As we can infer from Hansen’s account, the main difficulty in collecting Han’s views on their ethnic neighbours remains in distinguishing personal views from those generally admitted and unquestioned ones inherited from the state’s representations. In Hekou and Dongxing as well, it was challenging to guess what were, if any, the actual empirical opinions of Chinese residents on their Vietnamese neighbours, and what was a convenient politicized discourse delivered to answer my questions. Were these questions too sensitive, too inquisitive, or too embarrassing? Was it easier to answer in a neutral or positive manner in order to avoid debates or judgments? Or were the informants too confused about questions they never had to think about in the terms I was formulating them? It often happened that the same person gave me contradictory comments on his/her experience with Vietnamese people, according to his/her perception of my own impressions, or my degree of acquaintances with local Vietnamese people. It sometimes felt that my informants took into account a whole range of precaution before they talked, whereas in other cases, they spontaneously offered their views, whether they were neutral, positive or negative, regardless of their content or relevance. I suggest that here, the carefulness of a Chinese person in expressing opinion on Otherness also lays in his/her degree of connection with Vietnamese people, but also in this person’s position in the local hierarchy, which depends on factors such as generation, origin, economic means or reputation.
According to their date of arrival, and the degree of their daily connection with ordinary Vietnamese people, Dongxing and Hekou’s dwellers do not have the same urge (as the Han described by Hansen) to express their opinions on what they consider to be an ordinary feature of their daily social life or a relatively new form of contact with an outsider; an Other who may actually have more accurately adjusted to the local settings than themselves. In this sense, some Vietnamese people may be considered as ‘local’ more readily than lately settled migrants from other parts of China who have no close connection with their immediate foreign neighbours and no particular familiarity with the local social context. Hence, it is necessary to temper this tendency to stereotype ethnic alterity by mentioning the variety of opinions among Han migrants in new economic development areas such as Hekou or Dongxing.

A good illustration of this absence of consensus on the Other is the case of Lao Zhou. In his fifties, Lao Zhou arrived in Hekou in the early 2000s, after he failed to recover decent economic conditions in his native province Hubei following the loss of his position as a cadre in a government work unit (i.e., work security). Well-known in Hekou’s main street, people also call him “bald-headed.” With his appearance and his almost constant derisive smile, he first reminded me of mafia gangsters in Chinese popular movies. But he turned out to be very informative, and became a critical informant during our regular conversations.

— In my hometown, everyone xiagang [lost their work-unit jobs]. The unemployment rate is very high; there is not hope. The government gave us 400 yuan per month as compensation. What can you do with 400 yuan nowadays? In the time of Old Mao [Chairman Mao Zedong], things were much more organized and efficient than now. Yes, I’m nostalgic of these years. Everything is luan [chaotic] in this country. Where I come from, banks are
regularly robbed, taxi drivers get killed for cash, and insecurity is everywhere.

In my former shequ [compound], at least one member of each family has spent some time in a laogai [labor camp/prison]. This doesn’t prevent them from committing new crimes when they go out. They have no hope, job market doesn’t want them: too old, too incompetent!

Lao Zhou usually spends his days in his rented room or on the guest-house’s side-walk sipping cups of tea or coffee, emptying packs of cigarettes, sometimes interacting with some business fellows. Most of the time, he observes street activity with a somehow condescending look, although not necessarily directed at the Vietnamese, whom one would expect from a local Chinese businessman. Over the years, he has gradually felt lonely and he now admits preferring to avoid too much contact with other fellows.

— Rural people are the only ones who improved their life with the economic reforms; they migrated and were given the opportunity to run business. But we [urban people] didn’t gain much from all this. I don’t like rural people, suzhi hen di [there are of little quality]; I have nothing to share with them, nothing to say to them. They are rough and uneducated; they believe they can become someone with money! Listen to them when they talk, they are impolite and vulgar. We are all waidi ren [outsiders] in Hekou but most of these traders

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1 Shequ: public housing generally composed of several buildings (often fenced and supervised by a guard/caretaker) which usually belonged to a work unit and which concentrated most of its workers in a shared space where people used to interact a lot. These spaces are different from the recently built compounds where people buy their apartment but come from many different backgrounds and do not have a work unit to feel linked to each other. Communication channels and space became limited and people learned to live without knowing or questioning their neighbours identity and occupation.
come from countryside, we have nothing in common. They believe they are even superior to Vietnamese people, they know nothing. There are some very rich Vietnamese! And honestly, the situation in their country is not that different from that of our villages around. But they are not interested in thinking about this. I respect Vietnamese people. I believe they are honest, but if you disregard them, then they might deceive you. I don’t judge them through the economic lens.

Lao Zhou's resentment towards his rural Chinese fellows over what they feel about their neighbours illustrates the difficulty in describing a unified attitude of Chinese towards Vietnamese, despite a general coherent vision. Individual backgrounds and histories significantly alter people’s attitudes towards their own “Other,” although this is not always perceptible. Lao Zhou feels closer to Vietnamese people values and personal behaviour than to his Chinese acquaintances or business partners whom he despises for their radically different – according to him – life experience and cultural level. Although Lao Zhou, as many other traders then, expressed concerns about his business future due to the world economic crisis (end of 2008), he articulates his general bitterness with criticism and disillusioned comments on his Chinese narrow-minded fellows. Then he finds some comfort in nostalgic memories of the “good old times” under Mao’s rules, and among his Vietnamese friends with whom dialogue seems easier. These same Vietnamese people that Chinese migrants associate with backwardness, incompetence in trade and incapacity to adjust to modernization and economic changes, “just as Chinese people were twenty, even thirty years ago.” In this regard, Lao Zhou’s ambivalent sense of belonging echoes the articulation of difference, indifference and familiarity with Otherness among the various communities of Han migrants in minority areas (Hansen,
2005: 223-224), and where class, gender and economic position on the market are the more accurate factors of distinction among local population.

— Once, I complained about the general treatment that Chinese border guards inflict to Vietnamese, women in particular. I witnessed one of them beating a woman one morning, so I went to the police to mention the incident and to defend her. Since then, many people have heard about me; Vietnamese people respect me. I have a lot of friends in Lào Cai. People always complain about corruption in the Vietnamese administration, but believe me, Chinese cadres are much more corrupted! In Vietnam, they don’t have so many regulations but those they have are stricter.

Lao Zhou indeed has some connections in Lào Cai among Vietnamese and Hoa traders. As many of Hekou’s residents, he comes and goes over the bridge that separates the two twin cities as he would cross the road. “Let’s go and have a nice coffee in Lào Cai!” he would often say to me, assuming that crossing an international border was as easy for me as it was for him. For some like Lao Zhou, frontiers are not tangible lines between two countries but they do exist between sets of values. ‘Respect for’ and ‘solidarity with’ stand as core values that distinguish ‘Us’ from the ‘Other.’ The new diversity of the contemporary urban population of Hekou and Dongxing changes the dynamics of perception. It complicates the folklorizing discourse on Otherness by adding new layers of distinction: generation, province of origin, socio-economic background, education level, etc. Lao Zhou may have the tendency to over-stress his sympathy with the Vietnamese as a means of critiquing various aspects of Chinese society. And even though he does not consider Vietnamese people as his peers, nor does he view his Chinese fellows as much more similar to himself. Such a viewpoint, also shared by other long-term residents in border towns,
blurs a clearly demarcated line between Chinese and Vietnamese, and reveals a confusing ground where rumours flourish. I now turn to further explore the dynamics and articulation of stereotypes concerning Vietnamese and Chinese people that spread among borderland communities.

- Interactions between various levels: the origins of stereotypes

To propagate the spirit of the frontier defence, to propel the strategy of showing the great love to the people and strengthening the frontier defence [sic]¹

In the conversations and comments collected in Dongxing and Hekou, I have identified three levels of discourse where social representations of the Chinese or Vietnamese originate, are formulated and spread. The ideological level, where an official discourse is diffused according to diplomatic relationships and current economic policies (topics: collaboration, exchange, harmonious relations); the level of local society where general assumptions are grounded in local communities’ experience and key-actors expertise; the individual level that underlies empirical approaches and experiences, guided by and grounded in a subjective public knowledge.

The ideological level

In its own way, the propagandist slogan above gives the tone of the place: a gap between an official discourse and practices on the ground. The former “friend-or-enemy” and “elder-younger” nature of historical link between China and Vietnam still underlies the contemporary relationship of their peoples, despite the continuous efforts to build a new economically based relationship through its most directed

¹ Slogan (in both Chinese and English) hung up on the top of the Hekou Entry and Exit Inspection Center, October 2008. I deliberately did not correct the English syntax.
involved actors: local traders and workers. Here, as is presumably the case at each main border gates of the country, an emphasis on the notion of frontier and defence remains. At other times, the ideology of socialist brotherhood may come up in terms of strategy.¹ But as Zhang points out, “[m]emory at the borderland is full of ambiguity; it is in a state of liminality that constantly vacillates between forgetfulness and remembrance. People by the border can never forget, nor fully remember, thereby dwelling at the edge of reminiscence as they strive forward” (2011: 312). Whatever Hekou’s propaganda bureau hoped to express in this slogan did not seem to adequately fit the nature of the intense exchange activities that were occurring just below these words: a continuous flow of carriages filled with impressive amount of goods ready to be exported to the other side of the Red River’s bank. Whether or not dialogue at the decision-making level of the two countries was harmonious, what counts for local people is the impression their neighbours leave behind them, what degree of trust and reliance their behaviours reveal and how they can establish sustainable relationships based on empirical exchanges. In this sense, such political slogans appear obsolete and very much rooted in some distant political rhetoric that does not resonate with Chinese people.

Local society level

On a bus from Hanoi to Móng Cái, my assistant Loan and I met a friendly dressmaker who invited us to come to her shop, in the old market for fabrics. Grabbing the opportunity to make acquaintances in the Vietnamese city, we visited her the next day. We were not only hoping to extend our local network, but also

¹ The recent diplomatic issues between China and Vietnam regarding their long dispute over maritime territories render the relationship rather tense and brotherhood has given way to defensive political attitudes.
hoping to settle a street-base\(^1\) and learn more about the perspectives of local women on cross-border marriages. While we were happily chatting with her, her good friend and shop neighbour Hoa came by and enthusiastically began to enquire about us. The middle-aged woman was apparently thrilled at the opportunity to get to know a foreigner who was willing to make the effort to communicate in basic Vietnamese, an obviously rare opportunity in this remote corner of town. After sharing basic information on each other, Hoa invited us to her home. She was very protective of us, saying over and over, “You poor girls alone in an unknown city!”

In an unexpected and very welcome coincidence – a case of serendipity in the words of Pieke (2000) – it turned out that Luong, Hoa’s husband, was an expert in anti-criminal cooperation programs, involved with Non-Governmental Organisations and United Nations agencies to “fight trafficking of women and children.” Intriguingly, he was precisely the person I wished to seek out in order to compare local accounts on human trafficking with more official and professional perspectives on the issue. Yet he also belonged to the cohort of local government officers whom I was unlikely to meet formally due to my delicate position in Vietnam.\(^2\) Hence, accepting Hoa’s invitation was as exciting as it was hazardous, and I became very alert. Being scrutinized is very common in Vietnam and even though the way I got to know Hoa was apparently very casual, I had no guarantee that this was not, somehow,

\(^1\) What I refer here as a street-base is a small space in a public place where I could hang out, stay endless hours to observe daily social scenery and passively attract new informants, under the ‘protection’ of a local friend. Ideal street-bases were such shops where clients would restlessly come and go and offer chances to chat.

\(^2\) I have met Luong in 2006 during my first fieldwork in Móng Cái, while I was not a PhD candidate yet, but only an independent researcher working on a book about cross-border marriages, with a strong focus on forced marriages.
planned by suspicious observers to determine the nature of my activities and purpose in the town.

After a nice dinner cooked by Luong himself, demonstrating the abilities Hoa had previously alluded to in her flattering and loving portrait of her husband, this talkative officer provided me with a few pieces of information on the human trafficking phenomenon, based on his expertise. The conversation lasted a long time, but since I was not supposed to be doing research, I could not conduct a formal interview, or take notes from his account, which was peppered with exchanges on different local issues. My friend Loan could only translate the main elements of what she knew would be of interest for the research. She may have left out Luong’s personal ways of narrating stories that could have indicated more about his opinion on the subject. Although his arguments and descriptions were very much the same as those found in most organizations’ reports on human trafficking – the impact of economic conditions and the demography factor featuring as ‘pushing factors’ for blind migration for instance – Luong also provided a few additional concrete details and some personal viewpoints on what has become of returnees to Vietnam after their forced marriage/prostitution experience in China. But what I will hold from his account for the purpose of this chapter are his insights on Chinese people, in comparison with the perspective of Vietnamese people:

— Chinese people stand united and it is very hard for Vietnamese women to gain some support when needed in China, they do not know who to talk to or rely on … Chinese people believe that Vietnamese people are smart but have narrow views. Chinese have broader perspectives … Chinese police have more direct and efficient methods to deal with human trafficking, but human rights are not respected in China. For instance, Chinese police arrests a suspect
first and searches for evidence afterward … Chinese people are very
determined and proud. They are good at planning and implementing programs
as they were designed … Vietnamese people are rather united within villages
but not in cities, and when they live abroad, they do not care about each other.
Vietnamese people have a lot to learn from Chinese.

Luong was very loquacious and showed a real interest in sharing his views,
indicating that he probably does this quite often with other people, hence spreading a
certain gaze on China. At the end of the conversation, Luong had obviously
understood that it was no coincidence Loan and I both had a strong interest in the
plight of Vietnamese women in China and that this may have been the reason why we
were staying in Móng Cái. However, since we met informally through his wife’s
acquaintance, he was tactful enough not to ask more about our purpose. He simply
said that it was good that I wished to learn about a place while travelling.1 Offering
me his perceptions on Chinese and Vietnamese, from the specific lens of his expertise
on building bridges between the Chinese and Vietnamese, Luong provided me an
interesting blend of the conventional opinions he needed to express – in front of a
foreigner – and his own empirical findings about people with whom he worked. As a
key-actor of international collaboration in the realm of policy implementers, Luong
cautiously positioned himself at the intersection between views disseminated by
propaganda on the benefits of economic cooperation with China that encourage

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1 In 2009, I went back to Móng Cái and met again the couple without any trouble either since Hoa was
still very enthusiastic about meeting with me. This time, being officially enrolled as a PhD student, I
could elaborate further on my research purpose. Hoa asked me a few legitimate questions out of
curiosity but this was more related with the fact that I was spending time on what appeared like an
investigation instead of cradling my child at home.
dialogue, and his personal views of his neighbours, by only describing his colleagues’ professional attitude. I contend that his whole cognitive system of beliefs and opinions was actually a reflection of what was partly that of his community, and partly that of a cooperative behaviour assimilated throughout his working experience in anti-trafficking programs.

The individual experience

Each person who lives for a certain period of time at the border acquires some empirical knowledge of his/her neighbours, through various forms of interaction and experience. But it remains difficult to assess how much of this knowledge relies on exactitude, and how much is reliant upon the impact of public judgment, or the characteristic of a personality or an event. Grounded in and guided by a subjective public knowledge, people elaborate their perception of a given social group to support a common reality shared by others (Jodelet 1989). When asked what they generally thought of their neighbours – the Vietnamese or the Chinese – my ordinary informants always offered me very spontaneous answers that contained a large range of qualifying terms. Often, an anecdote followed to illustrate the statement and to convince me of its relevance. Whoever was present during the conversation often commented and added a few elements to emphasise the argument so that there would be no doubt about its veracity. When a migrant arrives in one of these border cities and listens to everyone’s experience and opinions on his new neighbours, before he even has a chance to directly experience any form of exchange with them, he would certainly have to acknowledge a certain coherence in people’s opinion, albeit rather negative. Such an opinion does not necessarily match the more neutral, economically focused image that emerges from media or official discourse.
Stereotypes involve the categorization of the Other into a popular discourse understood as a direct translation and a social validation of social representations (Leyens & Corneille 2001). It is a reductive process that imposes specific views of social groups. As McGarty, Spears and Yzerbyt summarize, “stereotypes can only be said to have formed when there are interrelations between knowledge about social categories and perceptions of those categories. The stereotype should not be considered as either the explanation or the thing to be explained, but as the full set of constraints between knowledge, perceived equivalence and labelling” (McGarty et al. 2004: 187). But above all, stereotypes formation is “a dynamic psychological process embedded in intergroup relations” (McGarty et al. 2005: 186), where “… the members of the dominant group may be keen to stereotype the members of the subordinate group in order to perpetuate their privileges. Conversely, the members of the subordinate group may be tempted to build a derogatory image of the members of the dominant group in order to change the state of affairs. Interestingly, the stereotypes in these two situations serve very clear yet contradictory goals” (McGarty et al. 2005: 197). In line with these authors, I believe that in the case of Sino-Vietnamese border cities, stereotypes stand as selective explanations of the complex nature of relationship between two social groups, and they impact upon the way individuals negotiate their intimate life.

From ‘them’ to ‘her:’ how Chinese perceptions of Vietnamese people alter the image of Vietnamese women

I have illustrated above how official viewpoints, local stories and individual experiences fertilize an already rich ground where fixed stereotypes inherited from the
past meet moving representations as they emerge from contemporary circumstances. These dynamics shape the portrayal of a ‘typical’ Vietnamese woman and a ‘typical’ Chinese man that people believe to be accurate. I will now describe how the various levels of discourse intertwine and what ‘references’ they thus deliver.

- Statements on Vietnamese and Chinese people: identifying the gendered stereotypes

Mr Tang is a 60 year-old trader from Yiwu (Zhejiang province) who arrived in Hekou with his son in 2007 to start a wholesale business of curtains’ materials. He has already visited Vietnam and is not really enthusiastic about it. In late summer 2008, on one of those long, hot afternoons he used to spend laying in a bamboo deckchair in front of his warehouse, chatting and smoking with his friends, I asked him to give me his first impressions of the Vietnamese people he encountered since he arrived in Hekou. Mr Tang was quite happy to provide me with his insights, especially on male/female relationships, an issue he seemed particularly interested in.

— Vietnamese men hit their wives publicly! *Mei you mianzi* [they have no face]... In China, we contempt a man if he beats in wife in front of other people, but in Vietnam, it’s normal, it’s the way a man shows his authority. In Chinese, we have a saying: *jia chou bu ke wai yang* [don’t wash you dirty linen in public].

Scholarship on domestic violence in Vietnam (Rydstrøm 2003a, 2003b; UNODC 2002; Huong 2010) as well as numerous empirical reports¹ support Mr

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¹ Indeed, it is more common to see opposite scenarios in the streets of China. In various occasions, I witnessed arguments between men and women in China that often ended in a woman hitting a man, while the latest only used insults and self-defence to raise his arguments. This usually attracts a lot of
Tang’s insinuation that the line between the domestic and public spheres within which Vietnamese husbands may express their disagreement, including through physical assaults, is rather flexible in Vietnamese society. Rydstrøm suggests that the perpetuation of domestic violence relies on the efforts of Vietnamese women in maintaining a calm and cooperative response to their husbands assaults, as the implicit rules of domestic life expect from them (Rydstrøm 2003a, 2003b); a situation that sees a marital relationship caught in a vicious cycle. Mr Tang went on:

— In China, a rich man may avoid working hard and may enjoy idleness, but a poor man will be scorned if he tries nothing to bail himself out, and instead sends his wife to work to make a living for the family. In Vietnam, it’s different, *nanren chi ruan fan* [men eat soft rice], they don’t mind.

What is interesting in this comment is the colloquial expression that Mr Tang uses to describe the financial reliance of husband on wife. In China, the contemporary use of the expression ‘eating soft rice’ is related to sexuality and describes a relationship in which a man benefits from a woman’s financial support in exchange of his companionship (including sexual activity). This reference to a physical relationship considerably pushes further the limits of an expression that is otherwise employed – as my informant did here – to describe a man who lives off his female partner’s incomes rather than work for a living. Adding a sexual dimension to the relationship is common in the numerous stories heard on Vietnamese prostitutes in Hekou. According to Chinese residents – including two neighbours who corroborated Mr Tang’s assessment that day – lots of these women engage in this activity in order to avoid working hard and may enjoy idleness, but a poor man will be scorned if he tries nothing to bail himself out, and instead sends his wife to work to make a living for the family. In Vietnam, it’s different, *nanren chi ruan fan* [men eat soft rice], they don’t mind. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, I also witnessed men being mean to women in the streets, even physically abusive, yet saw no reacting in favour of the women for the public that rather adopted a neutral profile.
to support their husband’s stay in Vietnam, sometimes children, even parents and siblings. On the same level, some Chinese (male) partners of Vietnamese madams are locally known for doing nothing else but taking advantage of their companion and making a living out of the sexual exploitation of young Vietnamese sisters. Whether Mr Tang was consciously making a connection between allegations on social realities in Hekou and his general viewpoint on regular couples in Vietnam or not, it is relevant to note the dimension of intimate life emerging in public discourse as a crucial element of the classification of domestic patterns. Hearing Mr Tang, and some of his fellows later on the same question, I felt that the general ‘sexual’ atmosphere of a city like Hekou allowed such assumptions to become disguised entry points for non-locals to discuss the issue of cross-border marriages.

In a similar way, Zhang has also detected how the green Vietnamese army cap that many Vietnamese men wear as a daily outfit (especially workers) a national item which has symbolized Vietnamese masculinity – as the non-la [conical hat] symbolises Vietnamese femininity – is nowadays mocked by some Chinese people in Hekou (Zhang & Grillot 2009). In Chinese, the colloquial expression dai lü maozi [wearing a green hat] designates men who have been sexually cheated by their wife. By extension, talking about “Vietnamese men wearing their green helmet” insinuates a condescending judgment on Vietnamese men’s ability to control their wives. It questions their masculinity and sexual capacity, and furthermore, implicitly indicates that Vietnamese women might be loose women. This prompts me to turn my attention on the reputation hold by Vietnamese women, in particular with regard to the commodification of their body.
Approaching the Vietnamese women

In Móng Cái and Dongxing in particular, people seem very well informed on cross-border marriages, especially cases of coerced marriages. Whoever I talked too, whether a motorcycle taxi driver, a street-seller, a business owner, a housewife or a shop employee, it sounded like everyone always had an anecdote to tell, heard about “a friend of an acquaintance who knows someone who,” and had personal comments to make on the matter. Although a sensitive political issue, forms of intimacy between Chinese and Vietnamese is a fertile and active ground for people to illustrate the general stereotypes attributed by and to Otherness on either side of the border. Hence, the topic is often debated in private conversations, judging by how effortless it was to start a conversation and glean a few facts and rumours about cross-border marriages whereas meeting these described couples, as stated in Chapter 1, was another story.

Mr Ruan, a Yao man from Dongxing whom I introduced in Chapter 2, is the owner of a Chinese restaurant in Móng Cái since March 2006. His dishes added a little variety to the usual local Vietnamese regime (especially after local dinner time), and I quickly became familiar with him. Mr Ruan was friendly and very flexible with the menu, allowing me to go to the kitchen in the back and choose for myself among the available range of vegetables the ones I wished to eat. His cooking skills were very basic and his dishes may just have reached the ‘acceptable level’ if it were in China, but to me they tasted good. During my several stays in Móng Cái, I thus experienced what Chinese people often complain about when mentioning their stay in Vietnam: the “lack of variety in Vietnamese local basic food” and the “absence of imagination” in the way vegetables are cooked. Indeed, the inability to appreciate regular ‘good’ meals disturbs many Chinese and, as a consequence, affects their perceptions of Vietnamese customs. A meal cooked without meat, oil and chilli has
little chance to get good reviews; and if Vietnamese people cannot cook, what can they do properly? As Dikötter informs us – and as Fiskesjö elaborates later (Fiskesjö 1999) – the role of cooking methods was already a criterion for comparing people with the civilized Chinese under the Chinese empire:

Food was a social signifier. It contributed to the symbolic differentiation between social groups and circumscribed cultural identity. Table habits expressed degrees of cultural alienation. In most civilizations, the main distinction was between raw and cooked food. The transforming power of fire was a symbol of culture (Dikötter 1992: 9).

On the first evening we met, Mr Ruan was very pleased to serve a foreign customer, and he invited Loan and I to stay after dinner and chat with him over endless cups of cheap jasmine tea. As soon as I expressed my interest in Vietnamese women’s life, he brought up the guaimai renkou [human trafficking] matter in the conversation, as if this were a hot topic in the area. At least, it translated an obvious association of ideas between ‘Vietnamese women in China’ and ‘human trafficking’:

— Many Vietnamese women go to China. Around Fangcheng and Dongxing, about 6000 Vietnamese women have been married to Chinese men since the 1990s,¹ but most of them were sold. This usually happens through matchmakers. Once in China, the women can’t leave, they have no papers and no money. Their husbands are often poor, old or have physical inabilities; tamen zhao bu dao laopo [they can’t find a wife]. Chinese police just let them go through, tamen bu guan [they don’t care]. When they have children, the couples register them on their father’s hukou. You know, nowadays it costs ten thousands yuan to a peasant in Guangxi to get married! That includes the wedding banquet, a living place and some furniture. If he doesn’t have any money, a bachelor can borrow, but it’s very expensive. But a Vietnamese wife

¹ Mr Ruan did not explain where this data came from.
costs less and it’s the only way for those who are not ‘normal’ to get married. And anyway, there are not enough women in this region, there are 15% of men in excess.\textsuperscript{1} \textit{zhong nan qing nü} [boys are more important than girls]. People think that way.

Mr Ruan’s statement already said much about the local understanding of cross-border marriages. The economic and demographic factors still stand as structural, but the importance of bride price and the personal situation of Chinese bachelors also weigh in the balance. His knowledge alerted me to locals’ awareness of a social issue regarded as an important local concern by Vietnamese and Chinese authorities. In 2009, Mr Ruan’s restaurant was still open but he was always too busy to talk to me. Had he said it all?

Descriptions of Vietnamese women rarely sketch a clear or consensual image of those who are married to a Chinese partner. Whether based on true facts or allegations, general representations of these women nourish the perception of each individual, and vice versa. Where do these representations actually come from? The circumstances in which these men and women from different backgrounds and with different expectations meet each other, and the sort of relationships they establish indicate how interactions suffer from environmental bias. The first encounters between Chinese men and Vietnamese women may actually occur in any locations of border cities, but it might likely happen in one of these active urban spots where virtually every newcomer starts a journey: the area surrounding border gates, the busy streets where goods are exchanged between traders, the main market places and bus

\textsuperscript{1} Here as well, mister Ruan do not quote any source, as if it was basic knowledge or well-known/locally-shared data.
stations, which are mainly central locations. The contrasting images that these encounters leave on newcomers tend to shape an ambiguous experience of the regular interactions and personal relationships that may result from this initial encounter.

When new cross-border ‘traders-to-be’ arrive in Hekou for instance, they usually already have some acquaintances in the city. They come to *kan yixia* [have a look around] or *diaocha* [investigate]. In this migration space dedicated to border trade, most of them establish their business according to their familiarity with two sorts of spheres: the sphere of expertise or business sector, and the sphere of *laoxiang* [fellows from home: same village, city or province]. Hence, besides the necessary guidance on the rules of trade that these acquaintances provide them with, newcomers are also rapidly introduced to the local social context. Hence, as in most places in China, business practices often imply a ritual visit to local entertainment places with business partners. In the case of Hekou, that includes restaurant meals, karaoke sessions, visits to the border casino and maybe an express visit to Vietnam. This may mean a simple daily visit to Lào Cái, a further step up to the local tourist attraction Sapa, or even a visit to the capital Hanoi. However, most newcomers soon hear about the infamous attraction of Hekou, the Vietnamese market, where they tend to venture at some point during their stay. In this place that clearly embodies the presence of the Vietnamese population in town, newcomers can taste Vietnamese food, buy exotic products (most of the shops are managed by Vietnamese women), and try a massage offered by a young Vietnamese woman. Generally, the ultimate entertainment activity consists in enjoying sex services provided by a Vietnamese prostitute, whether on the spot (in one of the market’s numerous brothels) or in a nearby guesthouse. As described in Chapter 2, Vietnamese prostitutes represent an entertaining activity that

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1 Here, I will focus on the experience of men that I collected.
has become a significant tool for local business associates to create familiarity with the Other and to build partnership. Indeed, these women also offer a seductive representation of, and a promising human perspective on Vietnam.

Whereas the newcomers enjoy these encounters with their new neighbours, they also come to observe in a more specific way the way their fellows organize their business in collaboration with their Vietnamese partners. For instance, consumer goods wholesalers, a large majority of Chinese traders in Hekou, use Vietnamese carriers to transport their goods to Vietnam, whether on the legal or on the smuggling path. The majority of these carriers are Vietnamese women whose ability, autonomy and efficiency are very much appreciated. Later, during their initial business trips in Vietnam, Chinese traders can enjoy the services of local guides. In this field, Vietnamese women also dominate the market. Although the position of guide often gives them the opportunity to meet future employers or extend their clientele network, it also puts them in a delicate position since they may be solicited for other sorts of services or become the target of flirting. Still in the field of services, traders often hire Vietnamese women (many of them being of Hoa origin) to translate negotiations, discussions and transactions with their Vietnamese clients. These women can directly work in Chinese shops or they can be employed on a regular basis for business meetings and business trips on either side of the border. The in-between/negotiator role that they often play, on top of their language ability helps to overcome cultural misunderstandings and to establish efficient cooperation and trusting relationships between Vietnamese and Chinese people. Being the privileged actors of direct interactions between trade associates puts these often young and unmarried women – consciously or not – in the representative position of Otherness. Increasing degrees of familiarity eventually turn some to potentially intimate Chinese partners when they
are available (single). Hence, the longer newcomers spend in Hekou, the more they notice the different levels of relationships between local Chinese men and Vietnamese women, and the more ‘pictures’ they can create out of their perceptions and absorption of local discourse, which in return, is enhanced with new perceptions and experiences.

I have argued elsewhere that representations of Vietnamese women sketch them as ‘available bodies’ (Grillot 2012). Vietnamese women embody three identities that arise from their activities in borderlands and the personality they express: the productive worker, a body full of force and energy that does not complain; the fantasized women, an emancipated and exotic body available to fulfill sexual needs; and the devoted associate who may turn into the idealized wife and mother, a domesticated body that reproduces heirs and serves family according to the conventional model of patriarchal conjugalit. However, these representations tend to contradict each other and generate confusion that is very much perceptible in the accounts collected on Vietnamese wives. Because of their ambiguous femininity and the suspected position that Vietnamese women embody in the social environment of these borderlands, mixed couples generally become the subject of allegations that question the authenticity of the relationship, the purpose of the alliance, and their conformity to certain values and schemes.

- Questioning the authenticity and conformity of mixed marriages: ‘the deceived,’ ‘the deceivers’ and ‘the ambiguous’

Tam (cf. Chapter 3) is an example of how a Vietnamese woman can become a source of allegations in the eyes of locals. One of the last circumstances within which
I met her illustrates how chaotic some mixed relationships can become and how they participate in producing a rather stereotyped popular discourse on a social group.

Helping her to trace her father’s identity, I made a journey to her hometown Yên Bái to meet her mother and gather a few needed documents for the bureaucratic search. Tam was living in Hekou then. Once in Vietnam, my assistant Loan and I managed to find the old woman’s house thanks to the villagers who knew about her ‘case.’ The house was closed and Tam’s mother was absent. Disappointed, we were about to leave when Tam suddenly emerged, riding a motorcycle taxi with a big bag. Once we overcame the surprise of meeting each other again in such an unexpected way, Tam quickly opened her house (to discover it had been robbed and that the TV had disappeared). She invited us to sit on the only available place – the bed – and told us what had just happened in a nervous and sad voice:

— I discovered that my laogong [husband] was cheating on me! I feel so sad and angry with him! He has an affair with a Chinese woman; she’s older and richer than me. I realized that this man wasn’t doing anything good for me; he was using me. For years, he never gave me any money to buy food; I’ve always paid for everything at the market! When my mother was visiting me in Hekou, he made her sleep on the floor; he had no respect and treated her like a useless old woman. He was nice to my son but he never offered him anything. Do you remember? He told you, he is working on a construction site, and he has a salary! I was doing everything at home. Sometimes he was spending the night outside but he never explained me why and where. When I eventually

1 Tam asked me to find her Morocco-French father and this led us to a complicated but fascinating search for identity that I will relate in another piece of work.
learned the truth I threatened I would leave. There was nothing else to hope for our relationship. “How dare you!” he told me. He didn’t take me seriously. I didn’t lose time, believe me! I woke up early this morning, I took advantage of his working hours, and I tidied all my things and called a scavenger. I sold all his belonging: the clothes, the kitchen utensils, everything! I used the money to pay my way back home.¹

From Tam’s viewpoint, she was ‘deceived’ and she took revenge by disappearing with her ex-companion’s possessions. However, one can imagine the gossip that ensued when the man returned home. A few weeks later, when I returned to Hekou, two people mentioned the split of this couple to me. “Tam’s husband is very angry, he’s looking for her everywhere. He may not be able to go to Vietnam though.”² He says she deceived him. He’s not a good man but he was good to Tam. Did you know she stole everything from him?” said a neighbour. People knew that Tam was an ex-prostitute, a woman who had had several companions, and who was then living in poverty. She was dishonoured. But the intimate life and tension of the couple, which were not flattering for the husband, were partly ignored by acquaintances. And the mere fact that she disappeared full-handed could not possibly argue for the defence of a Vietnamese woman. Whoever made a mistake or had an inadequate attitude, a five year relationship was being reduced in the eye of the public to a widespread model of cheating: a nice Chinese man deceived by an unscrupulous Vietnamese woman.

¹ Her way back included the boat pass between Hekou and Lào Cai, then the train ticket between Lào Cai and Yên Bái, and the taxi ride to her village.
² Tam’s companion did not have the required passport and visa to enter Vietnam as far as Yên Bái, and he did not speak Vietnamese. The story does not say if he knew Tam’s address either.
In popular accounts of mixed relationships, however, Vietnamese women always seem to assume the negative role, or the questionable position in these mixed relationships. These women endure public looks and controversy over their choice, whatever form it takes. In Lào Cai, the young Chau was engaged to a Chinese trader who was still a permanent resident of China. Chau’s marriage had become the subject of numerous allegations that her family attempted to hide or defend. My acquaintance at the time, Binh (Thuy’s sister-in-law, cf. Chapter 3) introduced me to her case. However, Binh did not want to take me to Chau’s home. She said it was “bu tai fangbian [not very convenient],” a common way to express discomfort in doing something socially awkward or unconventional. That my friend preferred to avoid a direct introduction indicated that something was unusual about this marriage. Preventing outsiders from knowing about it was a clear indicator of social stigma. Yet, following my friend’s indication, I managed to find Chau’s family home, close to Lào Cai’s train station. She was not home, but this first visit offered an opportunity for me to converse with Chau’s parents. At first suspicious but then welcoming, they described their daughter’s marital experiences. Probably used to having to justify the marriage of his daughter with a Chinese from Jianshui (Yunnan) to the community, the account of Chau’s father in particular sounded rather polite and resolutely positive. He obviously tried to persuade me of the sincerity and generosity of the husband, and of the determination of his daughter. Meanwhile, he insisted on the modern education he offered Chau, his own satisfaction with her choice, and her acquaintances’ acceptance. In other words, I was facing a happy family and a loving

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1 Even though Chau never acknowledged it, I learned that her marriage had already been recorded and that local Vietnamese administrators interviewed her (for some reasons that remain obscure), thus attracting her neighbours’ attention.
couple who lived in a tolerant community. Still, Chau’s parents’ testimony struck me as a speech intended to persuade me, with recurrent arguments, and hints of advocacy. A few days later, Chau returned home and when we asked to meet her, the reception was much cooler.¹ Her father, distant and obviously embarrassed, tried to discourage us by saying that his daughter did not agree to see us. Yet, he politely invited us to sit in the lounge while he remained silent: he had said everything there was to say with respect to his daughter’s case. Chau glanced at us out of the kitchen and then appeared. Once confident of our intentions, she offered her version of her private life.

— I loved my first husband. I chose him among many other men; I wanted a husband who was older than me. He was nine years older, and I was only eighteen. Our mothers knew each other. He was an only child, did not work and spent his time hanging around. But we all liked him. I was just graduated from high school, didn’t have a job yet. We got married and had a daughter. But things worsened after our marriage, he started to hit me. I worked hard at his family restaurant. He ended leaving me and remarrying another woman. A few months later, I have met my Chinese husband. He is 46 years old. He is honest, generous and responsible. He accepted my daughter as his own and he is good to me. Our neighbours have sympathy for us because I have experienced an unsuccessful first marriage, and my parents appreciate him. We have decided not to get married; this is better this way. We have a two year-old son now. My mother encourages me to go to Jianshui [in Yunnan] to live with my husband, but I prefer to stay here. We are building a house here in Lào Cai where we can move in next fall. My husband has some business relations here, I can solve most of our daily life issues here and I have all my

¹ It was Thuy’s father who invited us to come back and chat with his daughter.
friends around. It’s my home. In China, even though I can speak some
Chinese, I would not be at ease. I have no friends there. So we stay very
independent, like when we were business partners. We both experienced a
divorce and we belong to the same social class.

My initial suspicions found justification when some intriguing details
appeared in Chau’s narrative, compared with her father’s. There were obviously
certain aspects of the relationship that would be preferably ‘disguised’, for the benefit
of the family’s reputation. Indeed, before I asked her any questions, Chau
enthusiastically began to tell me of the mutual tolerance of Chinese and Vietnamese
people nowadays, the similarities of their cultures, and her own independency vis-à-
vis her husband, showing she was an emancipated woman. This elaborate narrative
made it seem as though Chau often had to answer for her actions to prevent any
judgmental comments. Once she was done with her story, she relaxed and opted for
an open-minded discussion. Perhaps she was surprised by the neutrality of my
questions, and the absence of comments on my behalf. She was certainly encouraged
by the absence of her father, who grew tired of our chattering and left the room soon
after she started talking.

Unlike Tam, Chau could not be blamed for a Chinese man’s loss of face. But
she could be judged for tarnishing her family’s reputation. Chau’s real situation
became difficult to clearly assess. She found a compromising Chinese husband, who
accepted a foreign partner, her daughter and her family. This man provided her with a
house and the necessary means to make a living in Vietnam. But the couple was not
married and they had a son together. This remains an unusual profile in both countries
and Chau did not provide a very convincing explanation as to how it came about. Was
the man keeping her as a concubine and paying her to remain this way? Was her
reluctance to go to China the reason why she preferred to stay independent? Was she ‘sold’ to a Chinese man to provide for the family needs? In any case, the life choices of this couple were confusing enough to maintain a dubious interpretation of cross-border alliances by Lào Cai’s observers.

Tam and Chau’s narrative trajectories illustrate how, in the course of time, representations of mixed marriages strongly impact the way a community interpret any unusual feature or fact that challenge a certain idea of conventionality in the realm of conjugality. In contemporary China, leaving a husband on account of cheating, or not sharing a household life and still, remaining a couple, are certainly no longer the exception. Although living a marital life, and/or have children without being formally married also emerge as new patterns of conjugality (cf. Chapter 3) they might not be well accepted by families. In these borderlands, they still nourish private concerns and social debates. But as far as Vietnamese women and Chinese men are concerned, judgmental viewpoints and gossip arise easily and encourage couples to adopt a protective social behaviour as a strategy: defensive narrative, disappearing, white lies, etc. These couples inherit the ambiguous status of former couples, subject to suspicion as well, left on the tracks of the public scene. Hidden thoughts or opened discussions suggest that Vietnamese women make use of their body and affection to fulfil the needs of Chinese men in order to dispossess them one day; Vietnamese women make themselves available to Chinese men without scruples in exchange for material security, regardless of their family’s face; Vietnamese women also seduce Chinese men and tie their hands with fatherhood in order to secure their own material needs, etc. On the other hand, Chinese men are said to enjoy Vietnamese concubines at the border in order to benefit from their social network, their company or a nice place to stay while conducting their border trade business; Chinese men have
Vietnamese women carry their babies as they have no means to get married and raise a family with Chinese women, or they wish to have a son when they did not succeed in having one with their wives (cf. Chapter 5), and so on. In Chinese observers’ comments however, Chinese men often seem to benefit from mitigating circumstances whereas depictions of Vietnamese women’s attitudes suggest more devious motives. In other words, for commentators, two main figures emerge from cross-border marriages cases. The first one, driven by inevitable circumstances, makes use of an affective or economical power on a foreign partner that allows him/her to establish an illusory but reassuring social position, and to enjoy the result of such a pragmatically envisaged union. The second one plots the deception of a foreign partner for purely egoistical reasons – that might involve a whole family – without the intention of normalizing a relationship planned as temporary in its initial form. Not surprisingly, the latter role is often attributed to the female party, the ‘pretender.’ Although economic determinism is strongly emphasised by many informants’ accounts of cross-border marriages, it is still difficult to distinguish how central these depicted realities are for individuals’ intimate motives. Economic exchanges and compensations certainly have their importance, as they do in most matrimonial arrangements in human societies. They may as well be the easiest to pinpoint for those individuals and communities whose perceptions are also strongly affected by material considerations in every aspect of their daily life. But because mixed couples do not easily communicate on their intimate choices, how can one be certain that economic determinism was prevalent or immediate when they settled?

The most intriguing comments from Chinese borderlanders on cross-border marriages are those made on the topic of coerced marriages, or cases of allegedly human trafficking. Here, short cuts become easy explanations to issues that can be
embarrassing for Chinese pride: the female victims of deception become guilty, and vulnerable women become dangerous and manipulative. ‘Deception’ here is interpreted as a fake label that hides a trick, and vulnerability is a performance designed to detract attention from the real motives. For example, I have mentioned in Chapter 3 the case of *fang gezi* [stand someone up], which inspires many stories and gossip. Whether based on alleged facts or not, these accounts of Vietnamese women who intentionally throw themselves into marital arrangements with Chinese men in order to strip them of their possessions before finding another similar deal, have become harmful to other Vietnamese women who are seriously engaged in committed relationships. Altogether, the different stories described above stretch a rather ambiguous perception of Vietnamese women’s intimate position within Chinese borderland society, as well as within Vietnamese communities.

- Gossip among Vietnamese women

Even among mixed marriages apparently solidly rooted in romance and socially accepted, details regarding couples’ privacy eventually leak and inevitably arouse suspicion of the authenticity of the relationship, and the intentions of each spouse. Nga’s experiences illustrate such a scenario. A proud young Vietnamese woman from Haiphong, Nga had lived and worked in Dongxing and Móng Cái for several years with her Chinese partner A Liu when I met her in 2006. For a long time, Nga has publicly claimed that the formalities required for the registration of her marriage were underway. But according to some of her Vietnamese friends – also my informants – she continually concealed the actual reason for the delay. Nga, it was said, had abandoned a drug addict husband and a child in Vietnam, but had failed to file for a divorce. Her friends knew her background, whereas her Chinese acquaintances seemed to ignore it, including her partner A Liu. Yet, the couple
showed signs of commitment: in 2009, Nga and A Liu became the parents of a little boy, and they bought some land in Móng Cái where they were building a house. When we last talked, Nga admitted that she was reluctant to leave the border, although her husband would prefer to settle in his hometown Nanning – Guangxi’s provincial capital. But without an authorization to enter the Chinese territory beyond Dongxing (i.e., a regular visa), and without having formalized their union, even though they have a child, the couple remained vulnerable. A Liu was often absent for business, and Nga shared her time and activities on both sides of the border between their home and business. I believe she was hesitant to completely move away from her past, conscious of her double moral stigma this would involve: the leaving of her secret Vietnamese family\(^1\) and her commitment to a Chinese family, both impossible to formally secure.

Familiar with border societies, Nga seemed aware of the confusion that a full disclosure of her past could generate in people’s minds, myself included. Even though we met many times, Nga chose to give me a simplified and socially acceptable narrative of her private situation. One day, she even described the pain of her son’s delivery, proclaiming her ignorance about childbirth before experiencing it for the first time in China. Was Nga deceiving her Vietnamese husband? Was her Chinese husband deceived? Nga and A Liu’s story had yet to provoke controversy within the community, but if people learned the details of their situation it would likely stoke rumours of Vietnamese women’s ambition and pragmatic interest as well as their

\(^1\) Living in Móng Cái or even Dongxing allowed her to easily and regularly travel to her hometown Haiphong, while settling in Nanning would mean less flexibility.
ability to disguise a shameful past. This may explain why most of the details on Nga’s former life were provided by her friends, themselves in rather unconventional situations, and easy subjects of gossip. In his account of how he himself became the topic of locals’ idle talk during his time spent in Shanghai, living in a compound with his Chinese wife, anthropologist James Farrer argued that “[g]ossip allows participants to understand their own situations in a comparative context and gain sympathy for the predicaments of others, through which they can begin to revise their moral views” (Farrer 2004: 200).

One after the other, Nga’s friends provided me with details about each other’s lives, knowing that I may compare these with the account each of them would give me of their story, and eventually piecing together a complete picture of each situation. Why such an indirect way of disclosing oneself? These women did not make choices solely based on their personal will; they had a responsibility towards their family, acquaintances and community: “Bu neng zheyang shuo/zuo, bie ren hui shuo [I cannot tell/do this, people may talk].” Their priority was to preserve face in their marriage, within which every sign of failure or unusual feature may be discussed by their community. Such discussions threatened to jeopardise their efforts to present a normative image of their marriage to judgemental eyes.

In the neighbourhood, a primary use of gossip stories is constructing local standards of normalcy around issues of work, money, sex, and marriage. … Gossip constrains people’s actions through the threat of censure and laughter, but its multivalence offers the possibility of alternative interpretations. The actual meanings individuals attach to stories depend on their own circumstances (Farrer 2004: 207, original emphasis).

Doing everything she could to undermine gossip about her own situation, Li (cf. Chapter 1) described her marriage as a happy one, which she enjoyed with her

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1 I understood that so far, only a very limited number of Nga’s Vietnamese friends knew about her real position.
loving, caring Chinese husband. Her enthusiasm never failed. But across the four years of our friendship, whenever we met, whether during a market expedition, a cooking session, or a meeting with her neighbours, Li also slowly disclosed her knowledge of local stories and gossips: “Did I tell you about X and Y? You have to know what happened.” At first, I interpreted her providing me with such details as pure generosity, and a demonstration of her genuine interest in the topic of cross-border marriages. However, I later realised how these depictions of other people’s lives and predicaments served as a springboard for her primary intention: convincing me that yes, it was possible that a Vietnamese woman and a Chinese man were together for romance, family and happiness. Li’s private trajectory was not exactly that of a simple and idealised story (cf. Chapter 5), but she kept emphasising its exceptional circumstances compared to those of her ‘unlucky’ acquaintances. By constantly comparing her position to “those Vietnamese women who were deceived, are deceiving or do not know what they really want,” she hoped to convince not only me, but a larger audience whom she became aware of. In her eyes, my own understanding of a local phenomenon may change the way people – my colleagues, my Chinese acquaintances, my future readers, hence an outsider public – considered her own position.

But, not everyone anticipated public judgment by a convincing and demonstrative self-positioning discourse. Within the spectrum of cross-border marriages, I found Wang Litao and Xiao Hu, a couple recently established in Hekou whom I introduced in Chapter 3. Apparently living a very standardized life and experiencing an ordinary love relationship, their marriage still aroused comments from the community. While one of his acquaintances suspected Wang Litao of using his wife’s network in Vietnam and her language skills to enhance his business, his
Vietnamese associate reproached Xiao Hu for behaving more Chinese than she already was – due to her mixed blood and her way of life – and for neglecting the Vietnamese values attached to women’s role, particularly within the domestic sphere. Therefore, we see how no matter what Wang Litao and Xiao Hu did, they both faced criticism. When asked his opinion about the reputation of cross-border marriages in borderland communities, Wang Litao concluded with a smile: “We don’t care about what people say, our real friends understand us, and that’s all we need.”

In his research on sexual repression during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Zhang elucidates the neglected factors involved in the process of positioning oneself in society through conforming to a conventional and controlled relationship. Among these factors is the inspiration that unusual unions provide to local commentators. Yet, focusing on the image reflected by people’s actions implies putting aside the unreachable ‘truth’ hidden behind the efforts made to maintain their social face (Zhang 2005: 14).

At the border community level, people cohabit with an object, an Other who is observable on a daily basis, with whom one communicates, interferes, and works, but these activities also occur with its representation. Images, discourse, stories, gossip all participate in building an interpretation of this very Other; they categorise them, establish their pretend social identity, and confront personal narratives. In borderlands, social representations are a process eased by a language barrier that gives way to all sorts of misunderstandings as well as misleading performances. In such a context, mixed couples face rumours and mistreatment that tend to disqualify them from being trustworthy members of a community, a situation that leads them to hide their inner yearnings. I will examine in the second part of this
chapter how these external representations become negotiable in the realm of conjugality.

2 What yearnings and fantasies? Conjugality crisis and the imagined object

No matter how borderlands communities consider Sino-Vietnamese alliances, their perceptions mainly translate a general point of view of an Other encountered or confronted in daily life. More important is the impact of these perceptions on the establishment of mixed relationships, i.e., how it affects the representations that partners have of each other when they search for a marriage, during and after their experience of it. In the first part of this chapter, I have described the point of view of communities on the Other; I will now step away from representations and focus on the individual experiences and opinions of the marriageable Other. For instance, despite the controversial reputation of Vietnamese women in Chinese borderlands, what would motivate a Chinese man to choose one of them as a partner? How does he imagine a Vietnamese wife? And what advantage does a Vietnamese woman see in engaging in a relationship with a Chinese partner, given the complications this may involve for her social position? I will demonstrate the extent to which conjugality ideals manage to overcome social discourse, even though couples still struggle to position themselves in communities who continue to scrutinise and spread accounts of them.

To do so, I show how these general representations of Chinese and Vietnamese people intertwine with spouses’ archetypes in a region where different marriage patterns interfere with one another to cope with a conjugality crisis (cf.
Chapter 3). I demonstrate how over-heard stories, observed scenarios and intimate experiences construct a typical – although controversial – profile of a partner, and how this becomes an imagined site where fantasies and yearnings can be expressed. In the meantime, I will show how such contradictory images induce those who are in search of conjugal alternatives to provide various explanations of their marital choice; these narratives revealing how individuals try either to adopt, to overcome, to deny or to change such original perceptions.

**On loss of values, economic dynamics and disillusion**

Lao He, a widower from Dongdan (Liaoning province, northeast China) arrived in Nanxi (a large village near Hekou) in 1999 where he met his current Vietnamese partner Tuyet. Separated from her Vietnamese husband, a teacher, she migrated to Nanxi in 2000. Lao He is twelve years older than Tuyet. This is what he says about his conjugal expectations:

— Tuyet and I get along well. I don’t need to tell her what to do, like I used to with my former wife. When we met, I was very sick. Tuyet took care of me, she took me to the hospital. She paid the bills. I know I can rely on her. I am quite da nanzi zhuyi zhe [macho], you know: she does housework, cooks according to my taste, and I deal with matters pertaining to our social life. Her family considers me their son-in-law.

Lao He’s wife’s area of expertise was not limited to household activities: she was allegedly a madam. But Lao He emphasised his vision of his marriage as idealized and conventional: his purpose was to deliver his own discourse, what he
wanted me to believe and focus on, rather than his actual position. Tuyet’s account\(^1\) portrayed the marriage in less glowing terms: Lao He was still married to his Chinese wife when he started his relationship with Tuyet. This caused constant quarrelling between Tuyet and Lao He. Further, to make sure he made the right choice and to test Tuyet’s sincerity, Lao He investigated her background. Later, his Chinese wife died from illness giving him the freedom to ‘remarry.’ The omissions in Lao He’s account of his relationships, such as his cheating on his wife, his secret investigations of another woman’s life and living off her income – earned from the sexual exploitation of other women – actually created a rather unflattering portrait of his masculinity.

In their review of the phenomenon of international marriage in East and Southeast Asia, Jones and Shen notice how men wildly complain that “local women are selfish, calculating, consumerist, career oriented, and unwilling to entertain the traditional female roles of producing and raising children” (Jones & Shen 2008: 16). The authors seem to refer to those men living in countries (i.e., Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Singapore) seeking brides in other countries that are supposedly in a more disadvantaged position economically (i.e., Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines) and where women are believed to fit in the model they favour. I wish to stress that China’s position is relatively ambiguous here since its population is so diverse that it receives as well as it sends away brides. Besides, East Asian women might be identified as ‘traditional’ or ‘emancipated’ according to what sort of men they encounter. However, the common point between Korean or Singaporean men and Chinese men in search of foreign brides, whether they come from a village or a megalopolis, is that they all agree on the challenge that many East Asian women’s emancipation and individualism represent for the sustainability of the traditional family they long for.

\(^1\) I interviewed Tuyet separately.
Nowadays in the most developed part of East Asia (i.e., South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and China), women tend to marry late, to raise less children, to privilege their career over family life and to favour urban setting for life, although “there are variation within countries, reflecting class, ethnic and rural/urban divides” (Jackson, Liu & Woo 2008: 13). Jones and Shen suggest that men in these countries tend to hold traditionalist views of women’s roles exist regardless of educational levels. I argue that they can also hold these traditionalist views regardless of financial means and social position. Ideals in the realm of conjugality have no social frontier.

- The challenging emancipated wife: Chinese women

As described in the previous chapter, internal migration in China has changed the social landscape of Chinese rural areas. If men and women both tend to migrate towards cities to work on a temporary basis, a proportion of these women tend to marry and stay away while men tend to come back, either for agricultural seasons only or definitively to raise their family, take responsibility for their parents’ care or simply because it is time to leave the cities, which have become overcrowded with new cohorts of competitive young workers. Meanwhile, another phenomenon has appeared due to population movements that empty villages of their men. According to some commentators, the absence of the male workforce empowers the married women who stay behind in villages, waiting for their husband or brothers (or potential grooms for the unmarried) to come back: an empowerment in the sense of decision-making authority, and a sign of the emergence of individualism in opposition to the former generations of women who were more entangled with traditional approaches of their role within the family circle and the community (Jacka 1997; Liu 2007). Nowadays, Chinese women are more likely to decide by themselves whether or not
they want to fulfil such conditions. Although workload and other burdens added on top of housework and childrearing makes their life harder than before the migration trend, women learn to become responsible in field traditionally reserved to men. Fifteen years ago, when Chinese women’s rural-urban migration had yet to reach current levels, and when unmarried as well as married women tended to remain back home due to the lack of work opportunities in urban centres, scholarly interpretations of the feminisation of agriculture were uneven as the object of women’s responsibilities differed according to regional context, as Jacka noticed in the 1990s:

It is interesting to note that the identification of women with the family and domestic work functions here very differently from the way it functions in other contexts. Thus, where demand for agricultural employment cannot be fully satisfied, women’s domestic responsibilities are used as a legitimation for keeping women off the land. Where, on the other hand, a maintenance of labour in agriculture is of more concern, women’s domestic responsibilities are used as a legitimation for keeping women on the land (Jacka 1997: 136).

Updating the debate, Zuo (2004) conducted research in rural Guangxi and confirmed the common pattern of rural men out-migrating for paid jobs, leaving work in the fields and responsibility for agricultural production to their wives, already burdened with other duties. Men return home during farming seasons and sometimes less than that. Zuo also explores the intimate interpretation of such upheaval in household management. Acknowledging that men generally bring home more cash incomes than their wives earn with agriculture, couples “still identified with what was traditionally defined as men’s and women’s work with a slight modification. Now men’s ‘outside’ role has been redefined to include non-agricultural tasks, whereas women’s ‘inside’ role has extended to include agricultural production” (Zuo 2004: 525). Zuo later revealed that such “discrepancy is seen as the consequence of relational exchange based on cultural criteria for evaluating wives’ and husbands’ work that differ from those assumed by market exchange models” (Zuo 2004: 527). In
the same vein, other authors have recently confirmed that the gender division of labour in rural areas has resulted in a significant feminization of agriculture (Zuo 2004, Huang 2012) and may be the sign of an on-going transformation of relationships within communities. Fan sees the dark face of such upheaval in terms of the outcomes of marriage for rural women by considering that “to women migrants, marriage is disempowering because it requires leaving their wage work and thereby decreases their own economic mobility, forcing them to rely on their husbands’ wages for improving the household’s well-being (Fan 2004: 201). However, this picture does not satisfy other authors who insist on the misunderstanding inherent to this ‘feminisation of agriculture’ assumption, and they debunk the myth:

Our analysis – which uses different data sets, different measures and looking at different aspects of the problems – fundamentally finds that in China there has been a feminization of neither labour nor management in its agriculture. Women take on a large part of on-farm work (as well as an increasingly large role in off-farm work), but they appear to be putting in no more than half the agricultural labour, their share of labour is not increasing and their role in management, while growing a bit, is still relatively minor (de Brauw et al. 2008: 348).

Based on her research findings in a Chinese village (Hubei province), and in an attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between various opinions on the matter, Huang (2012) argues that due to a demographic transition, Chinese villages “have experienced a transition from the ‘feminization of agriculture’ (from the last 1970s to the late 1990s) to the ‘ageing of the farming population’ (since the late 1990s)” (Huang 2012: 29). Hence, Huang also challenges the idea of empowerment of rural women by stating that they might “lose bargaining power to their husbands due to their bringing in less cash income as a result of being left behind to farm (Huang 2012: 29).” The debate is still going on between scholars but most of these authors discuss the issue of the feminisation of agriculture in China through an economic lens, and examine women’s changing status in terms of labour supply, productivity and income.
However, my informants from rural areas suggest that the real management of power issues occurs within the household. A close examination of the dynamics involved with socio-economic changes reveal that women have gained some power at the household level, and dare be more demanding towards men than before, particularly with regard to the sacrifices they make and the burden of work they carry. However, the accuracy of this argument and its extent still needs to be assessed with additional qualitative and quantitative data, the provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan in particular. As Mr Tang articulated for me, “Chinese women nowadays are not as easy going as they used to be.”

Reviewing women’s position in rural China aimed to show how Chinese women have acquired new behaviours, whether in the context of urban migration or in the context of feminization of agriculture, that gives them a sense of responsibility and control over their activities, albeit to a limited extent. Another proportion of rural women continues to suffer from their hard life and low position in the social hierarchy, resulting in divorce, abandonment, and suicide for many of them.¹ Nevertheless, many Chinese men and especially those who have experienced social changes over the last decades feel confused by all the challenges encompassed by a new gendered balance of power in the social and domestic spheres. And while some men accommodate, the nostalgic others take refuge in the foundations of the family institution and its female archetype: the housewife. Yet it is precisely in this context that the idealized Vietnamese woman appears to be the obvious saviour of a patriarchy at risk.

¹ China’s record of women suicide is the highest in the world (Wu 2010).
But before entering the sphere of fantasy with regards to Vietnamese female archetypes, it is important to understand what, on the other side of the border, challenges unity between Vietnamese men and women to the extent that most Vietnamese women (including all my informants) have a low opinion of Vietnamese husbands.

- The unfair husband: Vietnamese men

Highly educated women like Thanh resisted patriarchal arrangements by avoiding marriages with local men. They did not want to “marry down” economically and socially—which seemed to be their only choice with local marriages—because they believed that marrying local men would only constrain them in domestic roles in a male-dominated culture. As Thanh told me, some women would endure the often painful stigma of being single and having no children over the oppression they could face with dominating husbands. For some of these women, the emergence of a transpacific marriage market with Viet Kieu men provided hope for a different kind of marriage, one where they thought their overseas husbands would believe in, and practice, the ideal of gender equity. These women ventured into the transpacific marriage market hoping that their Viet Kieu grooms would work with them to create a much less patriarchal relationship, if not an equal one (Thai 2008: 117-118).

Hung Cam Thai has conducted extensive research within the Việt Kiều (overseas Vietnamese) communities in the United States, and especially on couples composed by low-range working Việt Kiều men and educated Vietnamese women from Southern Vietnam. He reveals how Vietnamese women prospect on the international marriage market in the hope of escaping a local marriage pattern they believe too oppressive. Becoming the domestic worker of a disrespectful man is not what they dream of. Hung Cam Thai explains his informants’ articulation of hopes, and their yearnings for respect and gender equity in line with their education level and ideal representations of Western conjugality. But I argue that similar ideals move even northern women, who are not exposed to Western marriage patterns nor highly educated. When they look towards Chinese men, it is also in search of respect. The question one needs to explore to explain such similar yearnings is the disillusion that all these Vietnamese women, already married or not, feel about marriage with
Vietnamese men. What is wrong with these husbands? Kim, the young manager from a hotel-bar in Hekou once summarized the issue:

— My friends and I share the same opinion of men: “Vietnamese for romance, Chinese for marriage!” Vietnamese men know how to date with women, they offer flowers, gifts, go out with their girlfriends, are attentive and patient. If they have money, they buy you flowers, while a Chinese man would spend it on a chicken for dinner. My boyfriend was capable of buying a bouquet of fresh flowers in Hanoi, taking the train up to Lào Cai, staying up all night to avoid damaging them or have them stolen, and then offering them on the platform on arrival. I felt embarrassed but excited. Every major holiday, he would come to see me and offer me a gift. All do that! … However, Vietnamese men are not good husbands. They rely too much on their wives for domestic life. After marriage, the romance ends, it is usually disillusion! The men play and sleep around while their wives take care for children, cooking, household chores, and work: women have a hard time with them. Plus, Vietnamese men don’t trust their wife, they are wary, always demanding explanations for everything they do.

Kim’s mother, a massage parlour’s manager in Hekou, ironically commented:

— Vietnamese are romantic indeed. Or should I say seducer? When they like a woman, they know how to talk to her. When they have a wife home, they go out and flirt with other women, yes, they are very romantic! Marriage doesn’t change them much. Chinese men respect women more. They don’t ask question on women’s past even if they suspect something reprehensible. But Vietnamese men torment women if they know they had been prostitutes. For
example, some poor Vietnamese men can marry ex-prostitutes – those who made enough money to have savings – they don’t disregard them, but they will always find ways to remind these women who they were, so that themselves can act as they want, and their wives can have nothing to complain about.

Thoa, an educated young interpreter in Hekou evokes her parents:

— My parents were not happy together. When I was young, I remember my father was like a dictator, very feudal. He used to beat my mother a lot. She left for Taiwan, then Korea to earn money for our family. She wanted to divorce but because my father is a civil servant, a divorce would cost him his career, so he refused.

Hoang is a 55 years old Vietnamese woman who lives in Hekou with her son. She commented on Tam’s recent separation from her Chinese companion, a worker who cheated on her:

— A woman needs to be tolerant, she must be understanding, and take on her to save her marriage. It’s better to close your eyes, for the family harmony, for your children. One can tolerate a man who has a life outside his marriage but a woman mustn’t seduce a married man.

According to Rydstrøm who conducted extensive fieldwork among northern Vietnamese families (2003a, 2003b), the problem of domestic violence that has become a public issue in recent years should be treated from several angles. First, the patrilineal social hierarchy that governs family relations puts women in an inferior position while men have the dominant role at home.

Females learn from an early age that they are expected to act with a well-developed ‘sense’ (tinh cam) and adjust themselves in accordance with the character of a
particular social situation. In practice, this also means that ... women frequently manifest that they posses a sense for their inferior position within the patrilineal hierarchy. If a woman is not capable of demonstrating a sense for how to enact herself verbally and bodily, she may encounter the common Vietnamese idea that it is a husband’s right to punish his wife. Because of an inferior status, a female is expected to comply with the wishes of her husband and to endure if he demonstrates anger. Women often emphasized to me that they have to ‘swallow the pill’ (nhin nhuc) if their husbands become angry and/or violent (Rydstrøm 2003a: 684).

According to Taoist cosmology, characters and behaviours of men and women respectively are interpreted as the complementary energies ‘hot’ and ‘cold.’ This amplifies the belief that when men activate their inner fire – by absorbing alcohol for example – the need to externalize this heat can lead to violence that women should temper – that is to say endure.

[A] female is assumed to be flexible in her behavior and actions by possessing a highly tuned sense concerning the ways in which she should enact herself in a whole range of social situations. Ideas concerning such capacities in females relate to expectations of their responsibilities regarding the maintenance of harmony within a household. Harmony and happiness must be stimulated by an enduring and cool female, who does not create frictions or provoke others. If transferring such social expectations to women and their bodies, we find that in cases of domestic violence, a woman’s body is converted into a material symbol of a female’s assumed social flexibility. Similar to the ways in which a female is thought to be flexible in her actions and words, her body is also signified in terms of flexibility whenever she finds herself involved in scenes of domestic violence. If a wife does not endure and stay cool by adjusting herself, a violent husband might literally want to shape her by manipulating her body into an appropriate ‘enduring’ form. Hence, in cases of domestic violence, a woman’s body is treated as a physical materiality of plasticity that a superior person could sculpt. Such assumptions are echoed in local discussions about domestic violence and the ways in which men’s violence may be minimized and denied (Rydstrøm 2003a: 690-691).

Most, if not all my Vietnamese female informants sketched a controversial portrait of Vietnamese men that contained all their grief, fear, anger and disappointment, showing a certain homogeneous nature of some aspects of Vietnamese society, such as gender position within the marriage sphere. Some of these women had already been married and divorced, some had been abused, some never even dated one, but all were sceptical about the ability of their male compatriots to fulfil their needs for respect, love and well-being. “I have been married with him for seventeen years two months and four days. He was cheating on me for four years,
he had another wife – she was young – and a two years old daughter, so I divorced him,” said Chi about her Vietnamese husband. One Vietnamese friend from Hekou briefly introduced me to her visiting young sister once: aged 22 years old, the mother of an 18 month-old baby had just divorced her husband who was cheating on her. Chau from Lào Cai, and Tam from Yên Bái both experienced the same pattern of short-time marriage before seeing their Vietnamese husband leave with a younger lover, leaving them with a baby to nurse alone. Hang, who left for Poland selling smuggled cigarettes after experiencing a sad marriage bitterly commented: “Vietnamese men are lazy, they spend all days home, they play or drink, they do nothing and send their wife to work and bring some money home. Then, they spend the money.” Even men themselves acknowledge this. A street male tea seller in Móng Cái highlighted: “The majority of men are not good husbands here. They prefer eating rather than working, they gamble and beat their wives. When they’re poor, they spend their time at home and quarrel with their wife, and when they’re rich, they look for other women, cheat on their wife… and also have disputes with their lovers.” On the topic of domestic violence, Luke et al. research findings support the idea that “several dimensions of couple status disparities were significantly associated with violence after controlling for husbands’ individual characteristics … [and] the view that couple inequalities matter – that men who are threatened by their wives’ higher status respond with a backlash of violence to assert their dominant position … For a woman, having a husband who expresses equitable attitudes is not in itself protective against violence; the benefit of having such a husband greatly increases when her own gender attitudes are more equitable” (Luke et al. 2007: 22).

The four specific and recurring complaints among all grievances concerned laziness, infidelity, domestic violence and drug use. While the three first issues are
often mentioned in Vietnamese couple’s misfortunes (Luke et al. 2007), the drug use seems to be much more related with the specific context of northern Vietnam (UNODC 2002). My informants all referred to men who *chou baifen* [smoke white powder], which actually included smoking and shooting drugs. One does not have to look far to find such a reality among the Vietnamese population. In Lào Cai, I have seen drug addicts under the bridges ‘cleaning’ their needles, and in Yên Bái, dozens of used syringes littered the sidewalk gutters around the bus station. Observing traces of drug use has become so easy that it reveals how widespread this ‘social evil’ is in these northern territories. Factors such as high level of unemployment and easy availability go some way to explaining this phenomenon (Pettus 2003). Drugs are relatively cheap and easily found. A dose of heroin costs around 20,000 to 30,000 dong (UNODC 2002), a price that two officers involved in the struggle against drug traffic in Móng Cái confirmed in a private conversation.¹

Before exploring further some of these crucial issues in the next chapter, I wish to stress how marital life has become a non-attractive prospect for many Vietnamese women of this region, especially those who are yet to marry. Recent scholarship on post-reform social context in Vietnam assesses that the domestic sphere has seen little improvement regarding gender equality in household management and couples’ relationship (Goodkind 1995; Long et al. 2000; Drummond & Rydstrøm 2004c; Werner 2009). This is due to either a more competitive market and a higher risk of being economically pressured or discriminated – a scenario that overlooks many peasants and workers – or else to increasing social inequality that gives rise to wealthier individuals who exercise their new economic power over

¹ In 2006, this amount of money represented the price of one noodle soup (with meat) in an average Vietnamese restaurant.
women, through their position as wife or mistress. Hence, the frustrations Vietnamese men experience due to their position in a volatile social hierarchy, or the challenge they perceive in women’s increasing role as breadwinners, seem to provide some men with a new imperative for asserting their authority. Hence, even the youngest generations of Vietnamese women have witnessed examples of failed marriages and dramatic issues that involve bad behaviours of men in their role of husband. Disillusioned before they even try to find a suitable match, Vietnamese women are more likely attracted by other options for conjugal life. And the man next door seems to fulfil their expectations, or so they believe.

**On tradition, respect and gender equality**

- The idealised wife: Vietnamese women

Earlier in this chapter, I showed how nowadays in rural China, men and women share power on production and decision-making. This has a significant impact on how men feel in the realm of conjugality. Most of them find ways to cope with the societal changes that have impacted their intimate life through women’s behaviours, expectations and demands. But for those who live in borderlands, a comparative perspective afforded by cultural differences with their neighbours affords them an alternative evaluation of their situation; they are able to imagine alternative solutions to the shift in the gendered balance of power in the household.

A Wei, a young man from Sichuan who lives with his Vietnamese girlfriend in Hekou told me about his daily life with her:
— We love each other a lot. She’s very nice to me. In the evening, when I come home, she warms some water and washes my feet. When I need to relax, she goes out and buys me some drinks and cigarettes. A Chinese woman would not do that, she would rather ask me to quit and criticize me for having bad habits. Well, I had one Chinese wife before, so I know.

Mr Wu, the owner of a hotel in Hekou described his relationship with his Vietnamese wife putting into perspective Chinese women’s behaviour:

— My wife and I have a good relationship; let’s say I am 90% satisfied. We do argue a lot though; we have different opinions. But we have yuanfen [fate] together. She is my first love; I didn’t have any relationship with a Chinese woman before her. Chinese women always kaikou [stick one’s oar in], and I don’t like that. My wife and I talk business at home to avoid arguing in front of other people, but in general she follows my advice. A Chinese woman would interfere with everything, and it’s tiring. Vietnamese women don’t dingzui [answer back/reply defiantly].

Mr Xu is a 45 years-old owner of a market restaurant in Hekou. He is a native of China’s northeast region, a place in which dumplings are famous in Chinese gastronomy. He added:

— In my hometown, Chinese women drink, smoke and gamble a lot. I was married two years to my Chinese wife, she was a middle-school teacher, we were schoolmates. But we didn’t get along during our marriage, we divorced soon after our daughter was born – she’s seventeen years old now. My Vietnamese wife is different [26 years old]. She helps me a lot and she is not afraid of chi ku [eat bitterness/bear hardship]. Even when we were in financial
difficulties, she stayed with me. She takes care of our home, our daughter, and cook if I have friends over for dinner. She doesn’t have many friends here though. But she integrated well.

Vietnamese women embody high values that are perceived as fading and jeopardised by Chinese women’s emancipation and social crisis. An explanation may lay in a distinction that informants hardly manage to articulate clearly but one that still emerges from their regular comments. Vietnamese women may not be fully trusted in the sense of their individuality and agency, but they ‘structurally’ carry, by virtue of their education and the cultural environment wherein they grew up, a set of conjugal values that Chinese men greatly appreciate. And this is exactly what is seducing about them: they fulfil some needs, and even if the risk that this might be temporary exists, at least disillusion does not come from the structural. A man knows – or thinks he knows – what to expect with/from a Vietnamese wife while he is not sure, in these times of social change and uncertainty, what a Chinese woman will request from him. And this is a crucial concern: social pressure on Chinese men is enormous and, as they often complain, women’s demands add even more stress to the situation. Mr Tang gives an example:

— If a man does not earn enough money in China, his wife will despise him, even publicly. Being good isn’t enough, neither is providing the basic needs; you have to do more than that. It’s exhausting.

Hung Cam Thai argued that when Việt Kiều men return to Vietnam to search for suitable wives, they actually restored their masculinity (2008); this is especially true for those who experienced downward mobility by becoming low wage immigrants in Western countries. In China, women challenge masculinity by claiming
the right to discuss men’s economic status, a field that constitutes a large part of male identity. In this sense, I argue that Chinese men who marry Vietnamese women tread a conjugal pathway similar to Việt Kiều’s transnational marriages. These matches allow them to achieve a sense of masculinity that has come to be threatened by significant improvements on the way to Chinese women emancipation.

Friedman (2006) has demonstrated how fantasy and idealization of certain categories of women, may be imbued with ambiguity. For example, the discourse on Vietnamese women’s resilience – a highly emphasised feature – echoes Friedman’s depiction of the Huidong women (Hui’an county, Fujian province, Eastern China), another female community subject to contradictory representations in China:

Representations showing Huidong women engaged in feats of heavy labor have become as constitutive of ‘Hui’an woman’ as portrayals that focus on their exotic dress … Despite the widespread post-Mao disdain for physical labor, the hardworking Huidong woman clearly has her own kind of appeal. Popular sayings reinforce Huidong women’s widely proclaimed ability to work hard and endure suffering. The oft-repeated phrase ‘industrious, simple, frugal’ transforms women’s impressive physical strength into a model of the virtuous Confucian wife or daughter who subsumes her own desires in devotion to her family’s welfare (Friedman 2006: 211).

I have described elsewhere how Chinese male discourse on Vietnamese women varies according to the place they see these women, and the activity they are engaged in (Grillot 2012). A woman is hen shou danshi hen you li [skinny but strong] when she carries heavy work in the street, while she’s miaotiao he wenrou [thin and tender] when she seduces a customer in a brothel. In the first case, she is covered with a set of working clothes that hide every part of her body while in the second case, she wears as little as decency allows in a public space, suggesting or showing her attractive attributes. Sometimes distant and busy, sometimes intimate and lascivious, she is active in order to achieve her task or to please a man. In this case, male perceptions reflect how, in their imagination, Vietnamese women embody the
transgression of gender roles: females capable of carrying out harsh labour better than males themselves, while being devoted to men/husbands in conventional terms, i.e., better than (Chinese) women.

In Chinese rural society, although women are proving their physical strength by handling hard agricultural work, popular beliefs still stress that men are biologically predisposed to take charge of physical task thus remaining indispensable: force is biologically determined (Jacka 1997; Liu 2007). We remember how Mr Tang—earlier in this chapter—described Chinese women versus Vietnamese women in terms of working ability. According to him and his male friends who participated in our conversation, Chinese women would never be able to handle the demanding efforts that goods transportation requires from Vietnamese workers in Hekou for instance. They argued that Chinese women (in general, but their familiarity with semi-urban setting influenced their perspective) had changed to the extent of refusing to work physically, that they were becoming lazy, and were leaving the load of physical work to men. They enlightened these assertions by explaining that indeed, men’s duty was to handle hard work, suggesting that Vietnamese men were lacking responsibility by asking their women to replace them. In the eyes of Chinese men, as suggested by the terms they used to describe Vietnamese women, the physical resilience refers to the productive aspect of their body (Grillot 2012).
In Chinese men’s construction of difference, as I mentioned earlier, the appreciation of Vietnamese women’s work ability is biased by their own perception of physical work: hard work is what men would normally do. Carrying heavily loaded bikes, pushing enormous amount of goods on non-motorized trailers or pulling customers on pedicabs is something that qualifies Vietnamese women as tough, and hence worthy of respect (cf. Figure 12). But housework or childrearing, whatever effort this requires, does not count as quantifiable and valuable work. Hence, what they see in Vietnamese women is a body able to relieve them of workload without threatening their masculinity because the female duties remain their ‘natural’ responsibilities. What an ideal combination! However, physical resilience and working ability are not the only criteria of difference that Chinese men in borderlands have learned to appreciate in Vietnamese women. As in the case of Huidong women, or that of many ethnic minorities’ representation in China, good physical condition or shape encompasses a sexual dimension:
The conditional nature of Huidong women’s Han identity becomes even more apparent when we compare two types of images: those in which the sensuality and eroticism that characterize portrayals of official minority women find their way into depictions of ‘the Hui’an woman’ and those that seeks to de-exoticize ‘the Hui’an woman’ by emphasizing her remarkable physical strength and labor abilities. These modes of representation at once edge ‘the Hui’an woman’ into the category of ethnic minority and struggle to recuperate her definitive Han status (Friedman 2006: 208).

Vietnamese women’s strength and sensuality are also closely linked, and their physical aesthetic features benefit from consensual opinion. Vietnamese women possess some of the most sought-after attributes according to East Asian beauty rating; they are always portrayed as beautiful, like the adjectives above indicate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work/skills</td>
<td>chiku</td>
<td>bear hardships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>laodong</td>
<td>do labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qinlao</td>
<td>hard-working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nenggan</td>
<td>capable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>jianchi</td>
<td>perseverant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xianhui</td>
<td>virtuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attributes</td>
<td>niangqing</td>
<td>young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>piaoliang</td>
<td>beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>da yanjing</td>
<td>big eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bai pifu</td>
<td>white/light skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xi yao</td>
<td>slim waist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>wenrou</td>
<td>tender/respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hui zhaogu ren</td>
<td>can take care of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yang nanren</td>
<td>support men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hen huasuan</td>
<td>good deal (to have a Vietnamese wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you yuyan nengli</td>
<td>language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xinxian</td>
<td>fresh/exotic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>jiang ganqing</td>
<td>romantic/care about feelings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: A few characteristics of Vietnamese wives in the eyes of Chinese people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese term</th>
<th>Chinese term (description)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zunzhong zhangbei</td>
<td>respectful of elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>da ge zhaohu</td>
<td>tells other (when a Vietnamese wife goes out for instance)/not secretive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ting hua</td>
<td>obedient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limao</td>
<td>polite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bu pian laogong</td>
<td>faithful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the above table shows, a Vietnamese woman, as wife, combines the qualities of the archetypal traditional Chinese wife complemented with a few exotic and pleasant physical elements that enhance her appeal. Moreover, besides the highly rated physical resilience and attributes of Vietnamese women, there are also various aspects of their personalities that are seen as favourable by Chinese men, although some are also constantly questioned. Experience and personalities explain the diversity of viewpoints. But social representations also go some way to explaining these viewpoints. These are expressed through attitudes and through language. The Chinese word *wenrou* provides a good example. Whether Vietnamese female or Chinese male, most of my informants used this word to describe the most specific quality of Vietnamese women. Knowing that *wenrou* literally meant tender, I first thought that my informants meant that Vietnamese women displayed affection in a more physically expressive way as compared to Chinese women. But even if I did observe a significant difference between Vietnamese and Chinese women in their expressions of maternal love for their children – the first tended to be more tactile

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1 This table synthesises two tables previously published on the vocabulary used in media as well as in popular discourse (Grillot 2010: 272, 278). Additional fieldworks findings proved the distinction to be pointless since the two sets of words are now equally employed in the Chinese description of Vietnamese women.
than the second – I did not notice the same particularity between couples (at least not in public). I did not understand the point my informants were trying to convey. One client at Lien’s brothel attempted to clarify this for me: “Yuenan mei [Vietnamese young women] know how to please a man, they are more simple and honest too, almost pure. They don’t cheat; if they agree on doing something they don’t change their mind later, they respect clients and they work seriously. With Chinese xiaojie [prostitute], I feel pressured, I don’t relax the same way.” Mister Su, the fisherman from Shanxin (cf. Chapter 3) was the more explicit: “Vietnamese women are tender with men, they know how to talk to us. My wife never calls me my name, or says ‘you’, she calls me ‘anh’, it’s very respectful.”

Terms of address in Vietnamese language embed the elder-younger hierarchy inherent to Southeast Asian societies, including Yunnan and Guangxi (Condominas 1983). In Chinese, especially in Southern China, the terms of address laogong and laopo replace the neutral ni [you] to indicate a proper kin relationship and respect, but also, as my informants interpret their usage, to simply designate respectively husband and wife as in ‘darling’ in English. In Vietnamese however, the terms of address anh and em both mean elder brother/husband and younger sister/wife. Simply said, a wife addresses her husband with the same respect she would with her elder brother, and any other man of the same approximate age, which puts her in the inferior but devoted position of a young sister. Translated in the context of Chinese society where men feel less respected and more pressured by their wives, such expressions have the power to reassure these hurt males of their dominant position, and to flatter their masculinity: they feel needed but respected. As Chan has noted, based on her observation in Lào Cai, “[c]oming to the borderlands to find women of a lesser status provides a space for sustaining gender superiority for the Chinese men who feel frustrated at home for losing their
dominance (Chan 2005a: 218). Wenrou is not showing how Vietnamese women may be tender in a physical way, it simply implies they are respectful of men and authority, and it shows their devotion. Surprisingly, such an ideal portrait seems far from the unflattering reputation that general discourse spread on the real Vietnamese women. In Hekou, Mr Hu, the card player whose Vietnamese wife left after years of marital life, bitterly comments: “Those nongcun ren [peasants] and waidi ren [men from other provinces] don’t know, they believe that Vietnamese women are such and such… This is partly true, they’re hard-working, but nowadays, women all have goals, they do nothing for free, they have no feelings.” But generally, if Chinese men perceive Vietnamese women, in particular in their role as wife, as strong, courageous, responsible but also flexible – which is not a new representation – it may be grounded in a unique cultural background as Thai Thi Ngoc Du suggests here:

[T]hroughout its history, the Vietnamese people had to wage many struggles for independence. This particular situation has strengthened the role of women who have both participated actively in these struggles and replaced men in production activities and daily life. Thus, the combination of Confucian education and the tradition of struggle for independence has contributed forging an identity of Vietnamese women that combines resignation and self-sacrifice to struggle, courage and yearning for justice and equality (Du 2000: 410, translation by thesis author).

In a contemporary Chinese society that sees divorce rates reach unprecedented levels, Chinese men – in particular those who have already gone through a marriage breakdown – tend to look forward marrying women who are expected to cope with difficulties, and sacrifice their well-being whatever the cost. In an essay entitled ‘Faithful, heroic, resourceful’, as Vietnamese women are described in the Vietnamese official discourse, Gammeltoft stressed how “women often stay in violent and unhappy marriages with the hardships of their daily lives in order to protect their children and maintain domestic peace” (Gammeltoft 2001: 274). So when Vietnamese women adopt another behaviour, and do not meet the standards of endurance expected
of them, they are regarded as lacking resilience, as becoming weak and irresponsible women. These expectations are known in China, and this knowledge leads Chinese people to expect a similar attitude from their Vietnamese partners. When they do not act as sacrificing women and devoted mothers, when they seemingly abandon their offspring once their purpose is fulfilled, their reputation is stained once again. Maybe such divergence from a conventional model comes from those Vietnamese women who do find satisfaction in entertaining Chinese men’s interpretation of their identity. However, as will be discussed in the last chapter, the productive function of the body and the compliant nature of the archetypal wife also evoke the physical and social reproductive function of marriage, and may give rise to further implications for these Sino-Vietnamese couples.

- The incarnation of responsible masculinity: Chinese men

I once asked Kim why she accepted her Chinese husband’s proposal. She replied, insisting on her previous statement: “If you want to find a good match you need to think about how serious and reliable is a man. To me, Chinese men can do that better than Vietnamese men.”

The search for the ideal partner overseas is not confined to men. While men are looking for ‘traditional wives’ abroad, some women are also looking for ‘modern husbands’ from afar … Men from wealthier countries are often imaged by some women from less developed countries to be more sophisticated, civilized, romantic, and open-minded than local ones (Jones & Shen 2008: 16).

Women like Kim may benefit from direct observations of Chinese society if they live in close proximity to Chinese communities, have acquaintances among Chinese people or even a family background that validates social representations of the archetypal Chinese husband. But for those Vietnamese women who used to live far from the border, with little opportunity to pass by any Chinese man, the range of perceptions may be very narrow and biased. A popular way to vicariously experience
romance and conjugality in Chinese society is by watching soap operas regularly scheduled on Vietnamese television programs, just as romance novels do for Chinese migrant women in their pre-marital age (Ma & Cheng 2005). These dramas, as well as their South Korean counterpart, are widely followed in Vietnamese households to the extent that every evening, in each corner of the country, it is possible to hear the echo of all television sets and passively follow the stories of foreign couples on screen while wandering in the streets. On an anecdotal note, I was forced to reschedule an interview of one informant twice because she was so absorbed by one of these programs – and the television was so loud – that she could not pay attention to my repeated questions. Given the random evening entertainment activities in Vietnamese villages and small towns for women, television has become a central window to the outside world, even though this world may be right on the other side of the nearby river. Fictional depictions of couples’ lives in China attract Vietnamese women because they generally portray a luxurious way of life in urban settings, strong female personalities and ambitious men that stimulate their imagination. Maintaining that Vietnamese women migrate to China in search of an ideal Chinese partner because of soap operas would be overestimating the influence of media and popular culture on individual’s agency (Abu-Lughod 2005). However, a few informants did mention their strong interest for these programs and described their first impressions of China in relation to what they had previously seen on television. Television plays a significant role in the elaboration of fantasy about romance, modernity and Chinese men, as well as directing interactions with “those who live/lived there.” When recalling how they imagined their future Chinese husbands before meeting them, a few informants told me, “I had a friend/sister who was married to a Chinese man; he was good to her.” Social face sometimes encourages the performance of happiness or
at least satisfaction with marriage for women who visit their communities in Vietnam after they become engaged to Chinese men in China. These performances not only activate fantasies of Chinese husbands, but they also motivate some female fellows to join them on the marriage market, animated by altruistic intentions or financial prospects. Finally, for those who regularly encounter Chinese people in their living or working spaces, observations and confrontation also stimulate expectations.

Gammeltoft stresses that in the eyes of Vietnamese women, “the greatest difference between women and men is women’s higher sense of responsibility for their families. Men are generally known to be much more carefree and relaxed (vo tu) than women” (Gammeltoft 2001: 273). And the general impression they have of Chinese men is how far they carry the burden of family responsibilities – especially economical – leaving women free to deal with domestic matters. Hence, many women trust that Chinese husbands will fulfil their role by being hard workers, concerned about their family’s well-being and evenly sharing daily life tasks together with their wife. Two significant examples from my discussions with Vietnamese women illustrate the expectations surrounding a Chinese husband’s involvement in household and family life. The first is their relation with the kitchen: the space as well as the activities. One evening, Nhun was setting dinner on the table while explaining:

— Su Yong taught me how to cook Chinese food, and I am doing my best to improve my abilities. I don’t mind. Vietnamese men never enter a house’s kitchen; it’s not their place; only women are active there. And they never cook either. They don’t know how to cook, and they would not want to cook; they would lose face in front of their family and acquaintances. But Chinese men are different, they know and they enjoy cooking. Su Yong makes dinner when I am busy. But he’s quite lazy, he has got used to see me doing it now.
Household chores, cooking and childrearing are domains customarily reserved for females in Vietnam and the thought of sharing these tasks with a husband is a thrilling motivation for many Vietnamese women. Fatherhood is the other crucial factor in determining whether or not a man is a good husband. As some of my informants’ experience attested earlier, many failed marriages in Vietnam end with an escaping husband and a lonely young mother who can only rely on her own family for help raising her baby. The subject was regularly discussed among my Vietnamese and Chinese informants as a criterion for ‘responsible men.’ Yang Li, a lawyer in Hekou often offered me her insights on various aspects of cross-marriages in the area:

— A Chinese man would not abandon his child; it’s a question of responsibility. He will always find a way to provide for his well-being, even though he has separated from the mother. In many of these Sino-Vietnamese couples, women are replaceable, men do not care so much about their status or the project they may build together. But when a child is born, a Chinese father manages to register him/her on his hukou.

Even though Yang Li may be overrating Chinese men for their sense of familial responsibility in general, it is true that in the life stories I have collected, the arrival of a child into a mixed couple’s life, whether it was intentional or not, changed the dimension of the relationship by settling it.¹

¹ Only two cases of coerced unions in Dongxing demonstrated a child was not necessarily helping marital bond, but there were exceptional: Van’s husband abandoned her and their son (cf. Chapter 1) while Xuan (cf. Chapter 3) raised her two boys under the abusive when not indifferent eyes of her cheating companion.
But I believe that the way Vietnamese women articulate their relationship with Chinese men reveals their inner expectations of a marriage. Whereas several women who were quite satisfied with their companion said “Wo ai ta/wo teng ta [I love him],” rare were those frankly saying “ta ai wo [he loves me].” Instead they would rather use the expression “ta dui wo hao [he’s good to me],” often adding “ta bu da wo, ye bu ma wo [he does not beat me, he does not insult me].” This way of emphasising what a husband is not doing reveals an imagination or awareness of what he could have done within the norm. The fact that a husband is ‘good’ to his wife (whatever this term really encompasses for each person) already satisfies the expectations of many Vietnamese women. Articulating couples’ emotions or feelings, and defining a marital bond in such a way exposes how conjugality’s picture has already been altered in these women’s imagination and lives, given their previous experience in Vietnam. Because for many Vietnamese women, domestic abuse is so embedded in the meaning of marital relationship, the opposite perspective looks like an ideal deal, a fantasy. Therefore, ‘love’ is not the word they find relevant to use. “He’s good to me,” is already an improvement, a satisfactory situation, and an achievement in itself. So, when a husband cooks, takes care of children, and works, what more could one ask for? When her TV set was eventually turned off, Ngoc, the owner of a massage parlour depicted her husband A Peng:

— When I met him in 2000, A Peng was alone, he had had no girlfriend for nine years, since he broke up with his first love, and he just lost his father. I was working in a massage salon on the first floor [of the Vietnamese market], a real one, I spent my days washing customers’ hair and give them massages. My boss introduced us. A Peng was nice to me. He dated me for one year. He was born in 1970 and me in 1983, so he’s older but it doesn’t matter. We
stayed together three years and got married in 2003. We organized a little banquet with my family in Vietnam and then a big one with both families in China. He’s very compassionate, and very understanding, because I have many flaws, and I make a lot of mistakes. Sometimes when I tell him: If you’re not satisfied with me, go, take everything with you, I want nothing.” He doesn’t leave, he always forgives me. I love him, he’s a good man. He says I am his only and last wife.

Ironically, Kim told me that she had happened to hit her Chinese husband during some disputes. When she complained to her mother about her husband’s misconduct, and reported her tough way of responding, she replied: “If you were in Vietnam, you could never do such a thing, you’re lucky!” Reviewing the ‘push factors’ driving Asian women to seek out international marriages in the 1990s, Constable establishes that:

[These women’s] interest was tied at least in part by a desire to be married, and to achieve marital subjectivity, since remaining single was looked down upon. Their non-material reasons included a desire for love and compatibility, and a desire to meet a man who would treat them as equals. Such reasons were not necessarily conceived of as separate from economic or material considerations (Constable 2006: 8).

In the eyes of Vietnamese women, if Chinese men are better husbands than Vietnamese men, Chinese women are luckier. Consequently, they wish to enjoy the same sense of emancipation. Even though scholarship on Chinese society has assessed how the post-Maoist era has seen a significant deterioration of Chinese women’s situations in many field (Attané 2005), from a comparative perspective, which is the one Vietnamese people hold on this matter, women’s position in China is certainly better than in Vietnam and sufficient to enhance their imagination (cf. Chapter 5).
Conclusion: “Daodi shei jiang ganqing [finally, who cares about feeling]?”

People form stereotypes to make sense of the world they live in. The things that they tend to make sense of are relations between groups that they encounter, interact with and are dependent on. Perceivers are intent on producing these understandings because they need this knowledge to understand the world and to take and coordinate action. In forming these stereotypes people bring two key sorts of resources to bear. The first includes naïve (or everyday) theories about the groups, which might take the form of expectations of coherence within, or difference between the groups, or beliefs about the naturalness and essential qualities of the categories that underlie the groups, or beliefs about the collective (group qualities or social organization that underpins the group). The second kind of resource that the perceivers bring involves their perceptions of members of the categories that enable judgements of similarities and differences (McGarty, Spears & Yzerbyt 2004: 198).

Understanding the evolution of border societies and cross-border relationships between people requires drawing attention to perceptions, an important aspect rarely mentioned in academic work on the region. In this chapter, I have explored the various sources that inform each group of people about the other, and from which they choose the most accurate elements that gradually form their own opinion. This enlightens how two spheres of experiences of the Other (as an adopted and ‘cooked’ Other or as a tolerated and close-by Other) intertwine and affect each side of one mixed border society. Here, community members tend to maintain some doubts and adopt a warning behaviour, whereas the Sino-Vietnamese couples choose indifference or attempt to change the stereotypes by constantly proving, justifying, and performing the reality of their conjugal experience, not so much in order to enhance their communities’ tolerance, but in order to gain their social recognition and support from their community (or at least to avoid rejection).

1 I use this term in reference to the way ‘barbarian’ populations – such as the Miao – who submitted to the emperor’s rules and assimilated Han culture to a certain degree were designated under the empire of China (Dikötter 1992; Fiskeşjö 1999).
on either side of the border. Vietnamese women are most often subjects of concern in social representations. Two figures of Vietnamese women cohabit in borderland localities. They are conflicting and affect those who have to carry them no matter what their personal background and situation may be: the submitted/devoted wife of Chinese men’s ideal confronts the dominant/opportunistic foreign woman of local construction of difference. Living close to Otherness exacerbates contrasts and enhances imagination, whether in a positive or in a negative way, leading to contradictory and controversial comments. In an attempt to conclude this thorny issue of social representation and their impact on people’s feeling, I will leave the last words to some of my informants, words that reveal only more contradictions.

Yang Li, Chinese lawyer in Hekou: “Vietnamese people are not sentimental, they care about interest, so I don’t want to interact with them.”

Diep, Vietnamese shop-owner in Hekou: “Chinese people don’t care about feelings, they care about money, nothing else matters.”

Luong, police officer in Móng Cái: “When you are sincere and honest with Chinese people, they treat you well, and they can be really nice. But if you are dishonest or try to swindle them, they are unforgiving, they punish you with no mercy.”

Lao Zhou, a Chinese trader in Hekou concludes: “I find Vietnamese people honest. I don’t believe what other people say here. In my opinion, when you respect Vietnamese people, they will act accordingly. But if you disregard them, they will deceive you.”
In most conversations on the topic of cross-border alliances, Vietnamese and Chinese informants discussed widespread stories and empirical knowledge to determine who – between Chinese or Vietnamese people – pay the most attention to feelings. For some, Vietnamese people were heartless and pragmatic gold-diggers. For others, Chinese people were driven by personal ambition and contempt for the inferior Other. These two different expressions insist on the similar role played by new socio-economic conditions in the upheaval of two neighboured societies; two different approaches both using Vietnamese female bodies to reach their goal. Hence, despite an ambiguous local context wherein people all suspect each other’s ambitions, it is important to consider how newcomers and fantasies interact with one other in prospective searches for alliances. Chinese men categorise Chinese and Vietnamese women according to variation in their affective, productive and treatment abilities. In search of equal treatment in marriage, Vietnamese women imagine that a Chinese husband can be nothing but a better option than marrying a Vietnamese fellow. The description of one party in comparison with the other encompasses the idea that one choice is preferable to another because it means degrees of satisfaction over degrees of frustration. Research findings in Sino-Vietnamese borderlands have sketched a ‘cartography of aspiration’ that drives Vietnamese women towards the dream of emancipation while Chinese men search for a fading ideal of traditional values and conjugal patterns. All are moved by a common aspiration for respect in the realm of marriage, and the need for support in a society in which tremendous changes compel men and women to meet arising expectations regarding their present and future. In this context, marriage appears more as a shelter rather than a mere social obligation.

What strategies will men and women implement, what tactics will they improvise to accommodate the realities they encounter on their journey? How do the
longings of individuals eventually confront the experience of a relationship with an Other? How do marital partners navigate between compromise, loss and performance to maintain their relationship, as well as their credibility and face in a dubious social environment? These questions will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.
Chapter 5

The voice of the invisible: the tactics to exist

Introduction

Borderlands are marginalized yet strategic, inviolate yet continually violated, forgotten yet significant … Because they defy categorization, borderlands have been seen as sites of resistance, as sources of alternatives to the status quo, as places where a modus vivendi that redefines the social order can be devised (Coutin 2003: 171).

The social changes that are transforming marriage patterns and conjugal practices in Vietnamese and Chinese societies lead us to examine what these upheavals mean at the fringes, among those who encounter difficulties adapting to a new environment. In existing studies of Sino-Vietnamese marriages, factors other than demographic imbalance or economic disparities often remain unexplored, even when they are preceded, supported or followed by sincere romance. Exploring individual cases leads us to consider other reasons why some men and women may become attracted to one another – not necessarily in a physical or emotional sense, but in a strategic manner, or matched into arranged marriages – with or without their consent – i.e., hence improving their initial social position.

In the last chapter, I discussed how the nature of Sino-Vietnamese cross-border marriages is changing compared to the historical antecedent, and are presently increasing in visibility, if not in number. I argued that this pattern occurs in spite of the stereotypes that constitute a heavy burden on couples. In fact, this trend is largely shaped by socio-cultural constraints that marginalise the growing fringes of both borderland societies. In Chapter 2, I showed how borderlands become the shores of
social castaways, especially in terms of economic position. I will now go on to demonstrate how cross-border marriages actually ‘unite’ people who are socially ostracized, i.e., individuals who share a liminal existence, and provide them either with refuge from a previous predicament, or with a necessary impetus to regain a sense of personal dignity and social recognition.

In the first part of this chapter, I demonstrate how the Vietnamese women involved in cross-border marriages with China emerge from a community of women at the fringes: those who experience difficulties in coping with their social and familial stigma, and decide to challenge their position by transgressing rules in the realm of conjugality. In the second part of the chapter, my analysis draws on the concept of agency to illustrate how these women, as well as their Chinese partners, explore possibilities of changing their ‘fate.’ They engage in various strategies and tactics such as contracting alliances in order to regain missing bonds with society, and emancipating themselves from a discriminatory situation. I conclude by questioning whether by contracting such intimate alliances they achieve these goals.

1 Focus on the fringes of society: the unmarriageable

In Chapters 3 and 4, I discussed how certain groups of men in China endure the upheavals of a changing society in terms of demography and migration, finding themselves disadvantaged in the marriage market. Those in economically modest circumstances, along with older men, struggle to find a wife. Structural determinative socio-economic factors also shape the way Vietnamese women comply with the conditions within which they experience conjugality. Some endure their plight as wives, or decide to skirt the local marriage market and contemplate other ways to
exist as a woman. In the first section of this chapter, I propose to focus on the position of Vietnamese women to illustrate how marginality emerges from the transgression of social expectations in the realm of conjugalility.

**Predicament in the structural order of things**

- On law, family and love: Women in Vietnam

In this section, I introduce the concept of the emotional condition of women in Vietnam by providing some historical background of its evolution within the framework of conjugalility. I assess how, for some women, this can provide an impetus to pursue their own individual goals, even as they risk being marginalized in the process.

Until the mid-twentieth century, marriage in Vietnam resulted from a parental consultation. A bride did not really have a say in choosing her life partner. Compatibility was assessed in relation to social status, economic status, numerology (date of birth of the fiancé). Even the reputation of parents was carefully considered before an alliance was settled (Bich 1999). The revolutionary years (1954-1975) that marked the transition between the end of colonial rule and the seizure of power by the communists changed all that by expanding the traditional role of women. Women’s role in the domestic sphere was transformed as they assumed a more committed and decisive role in armed conflict. In 1959, under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh, The Socialist Republic of Vietnam promulgated a new “Law on Marriage and Family” designed to eradicate a feudal system that was incompatible with the new vision of
society proposed by the communist party. The communist party promoted equality between men and women, who now shared equal responsibility for kinship decisions, which came under state rule. For the first time, love became the legal basis of marriage, the result of a voluntary union between two people. The new position of women, required by law, advocated their emancipation from the traditional patriarchal family (Minh 2000). However, in the early 1980s, social services investigations conducted among Vietnamese families found these findings confounding. High rates of divorce initiated by women, early marriage, and adultery resulted in revisions to the law on marriage in 1986 (Phinney, 2008a). An amendment in 2000 attests to the new mentality of conjugality in contemporary Vietnamese society: unmarried couples and single mothers were the direct beneficiaries.

At the same time, there is often a gap between the law and popular practices on marriage, and much depends on time, place, couples and their families. With the increasing prevalence of love marriages in Vietnam, arranged marriages and parental involvement in decision-making have faded considerably such that they often simply represent an advisory character (Minh 2000). Social norms have undergone changes over the last twenty years, and most young people have their say in their union and suffer less stress dictated by the interests of family or state agenda (Phuong 2007). Nowadays, occupational prestige and material considerations such as possessions and income matter more than an individual’s political career, social class of origin, socio-geographical origin (rural or urban) and education.

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1 The new law enforced minimum age, freely consented marriage, monogamy, equality between spouses, and advocacy of women and children.
Even though the Vietnamese family may be described as a “sanctified reality” (Phuong 2004), it remains the object of widespread representations such as the Confucian model where the patriarch holds power over his submissive wife and obedient children to maintain a harmonious entity. One needs to moderate the fixity of such representations by including considerations of the subjectivity of conjugal affection, voluntary participation of each member in family welfare, or various spiritual and political influences. Realities attest to a real diversity among families whose lives confirm how the influence of Confucianism has lessened in Vietnamese society (Phuong 2004; Du 2000).

Popular discourse in Vietnam establishes that marriage is the union of two persons destined to share their lives. Like in China, affection between the couple is said to settle with time, whereas the birth of children is considered the cement of families, the goal of unions, and the link between spouses. However in the recent history of the country, the role and the expression of love in Vietnamese marriages has been uneven. The notion of romanticism and individual love only appeared in Vietnamese poetry in the 1930s, under the influence of the French Romantic movement that was evidenced in Vietnamese literary education under the French colonial system. These writings, although initiated by those of urban and educated classes, had a considerable impact on the representation of love and the couple, which preceded the revolutionary period of the country. They managed to publicize the debate over the legitimacy of marriage without love. Then in the 1950s, patriotic feeling triumphed in both the artistic and individual expression of love. Again the ‘I’ slipped away to make way for the collective ‘we.’ Revolutionary leaders intended to

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1 The literary movement Thơ mới (1930-1945) or ‘New poetry’ tended to assert individual sensitivity, thus going against the forms of poetry influenced by classical Chinese literature.
divert young people from romantic love in favour of patriotic love to generate a common dynamic that could free the country from the French, and then later, the Americans. Once the Communist Party was in power, revolutionary socialist love became the official and dominant form of love until the 1980s. The state governed individual feelings by deciding ‘who was a good match for who,’ a judgment based mainly on political criteria. In endorsing or objecting to relationships leading to marriage, the state intervene within the family to mediate the emotional life of individuals, who in turn pledged to serve the construction of the harmonious society. As with marital arrangements in the Confucian tradition, in the socialist model of marriage advocated by the state, “love took a backseat to duty and responsibility – this time reframed in service to the revolution” (Phinney 2008a: 337). The advent of Đổi Mới (1986) reignited a focus on individual feelings and responsible subjects as the foundation of an ideal society and a successful nation (Phinney 2008a). At the end of the 1980s, a new social order regarding conjugality appeared. This model continues to underlie current expectations of marital life, the ‘Happy Family’ is “… orderly, has an adequate income, stable conjugal relations, and two children whose parents educate them properly” (Phinney 2008a: 348). In urban and rural areas of Vietnam, marriage has become the centre of a discourse on love inherited from these different stages of adaptation to modern life.

Inherent in the evolution of the institution of marriage in Vietnam is the transformation of society in terms of economic development, geographic mobility and the adjustment to a new global order that provides fertile ground for new aspirations. With family being the cement of Vietnamese society, one would question whether in the realm of conjugal relations, such changes have enhanced women’s emancipation with regard to equal treatment in the society, as initially claimed in the political agenda.
Hy Van Luong argues that behind the ideal picture of a household based on love and equality, a complex reality borne of new social and economic conditions has emerged in the last two decades:

[Vietnamese data on gender relations in the era of economic reforms and globalization do not support the hypothesis, rooted in modernization theory, that gender equality will increase with modernization. Neither do they support a Marxist theoretical framework that sees gender inequality as rooted in the feudal and capitalist modes of production: gender inequality in Vietnam persisted even at the height of socialist reforms … Vietnamese women’s significant role in the economy do not necessarily lead to a restructuring of gender relations to their advantages … [T]he currently available Vietnamese findings suggest that the socioculturally and historically embedded definition of gender relations may be as powerful as the political economic framework in reproducing and potentially transforming gender relations in Vietnam (Luong 2003: 220-221).

By refocusing their activities on domestic life and children rearing, the state has gone some way to reactivating the role traditionally assigned to women. Meanwhile, it does not ease their task since women also have to contribute to the family economical life, that is to say, to perform work outside to complement that of their husband. In the words of Hy Van Luong (2003: 221), “Vietnamese women’s significant roles in the economy do not necessarily lead to a restructuring of gender relations to their advantages.” Starting in the post independence era, roughly around the same time as modern China aimed to establish a new society under Marxist and Maoist precepts guidance (the first years of the 1950s), the Vietnamese state policies regarding the family aimed to improve women’s status within the society as well as within the domestic realm. But forty years later after a major political change and ideological guidance in both countries (respectively 1949 for China and 1954 for Vietnam), the results of social reforms under socialism reveal some discrepancies. In China, although things still vary considerably between urban and rural areas, the social position of women, as more recognized productive actors and decision-makers both in and outside the domestic sphere, has improved significantly (Hershatter 2004). However, Vietnamese society fails to demonstrate sustainable and positive structural
changes in their position (Werner & Bélanger 2002; Werner 2009). These differences have created an obvious gap between the two countries that lead observers of each side of the frontier to comment harshly on the plight of Vietnamese women within their communities.

As a result, and as far as conjugality is concerned, such conditions have also created a potential source of growing dissatisfaction among Vietnamese women, especially in rural areas where life has not improved as fast as in the cities. Migration and what it brings in terms of serendipity, as I will argue in the next chapter, provide some of these women with more opportunities to improve their personal life. The recurring pressure on gender relations in Vietnamese society encourage the marginalisation of those women who cannot bear their position, or the high demands imposed on them. The circumstances that send them to the fringes of their society are the subject of the following section.

- On infertility, spinsterhood, widowhood, and education: the ‘unavoidable mishap’

The first section of this chapter aimed to outline the social transformation of Vietnamese society that has structurally affected the life and choices of most women in this study. For some of them, this has resulted in establishing their conjugal life in China. Before addressing the crucial question of circumstantial factors in the decision-making process of these unions, I will allude briefly to other elements that play a significant role in the creation of social fringes in Vietnam, among which many candidates to migration for marriage may be found. I refer to these elements as ‘unavoidable mishaps,’ because they are related to physical conditions, uncontrollable life events, and their unpredictable social consequences, In a way, they are also the
result of structural causes in that they are validated by certain mentalities and social practices. I already mentioned that in Vietnam, and particularly in northern rural areas, marriage age is, in practice, set at a very young age for women, i.e., before women are 22 years old. Past this age, a woman is considered too old and sees her opportunities for marriage narrowing. But, “[r]estrained by the traditional mindset and afraid of criticism, Vietnamese girls are often tentative in seeking a mate,” explains Lê Thi (2008: 26). Those who do not find a match in time, due to reserve and various other causes such as unattractiveness, sickness, poor reputation, poverty and so on, may easily follow the uneasy pathway of spinsterhood.

Never married childless women must find social networks other than marriage that provide social and financial support that will sustain them once their parents are deceased (Pashigian 2009: 40).

Here, Pashigian evokes the plight of infertility, a circumstance which places Vietnamese women in a difficult position to remain married. A case study from my ethnographic fieldwork illustrates the challenge that infertility poses for Vietnamese women. Duong, a woman from Hải Dương, married a man her father imposed her when she was 20 years old. In the space of less than two years, she endured one miscarriage after another, able to conceive but unable to hold on a pregnancy. Impatient, her husband cheated on her and shortly abandoned her at the age of 22. Over the following nine years, she dedicated her time and energy to agricultural work, refusing the advances of men, and remaining single, until someone took her to China. Two decades after having renounced men, she found peace in a marriage with an old teacher – 29 years her elder – in a village near Dongxing and conceived again at the age of 44. This time however, she decided to abort.

Among the numerous factors that may prevent a woman from being marriageable in Vietnam, age, physical inability to produce a child, the very raison
d’être of a marriage, widowhood, and education level, were those constantly mentioned in my informants’ narratives. Education is deemed as important for girls as boys. But when a girl becomes too educated compared to the cohort of available men around her, this too becomes a problem. Hung Cam Thai (2008) explored this issue among highly educated southern Vietnamese women who struggle to find a partner because men do not cope well with being less educated than their wife. In rural northern provinces, the difference might be between a graduation from primary school and one from middle school, but it would still be regarded as inappropriate for a bride to be more educated than her groom. Amongst my informants, Li graduated from high school and learned several languages by herself and is inclined to study, Thoa (cf. Appendix 5) was about to graduate from the Foreign Language Department of Hanoi University, A Mei (cf. Chapter 3) learned medicine after middle school, and Thanh studied accounting in a Chinese university. For all of these women, education made it difficult to find local spouses.¹ The cases I have described, enlightened by their historical precedents and their current social context, refute the idea that Vietnamese women who marry in China, whether on a voluntary or on a coerced basis, are

¹ Interestingly, in the ostracism of single women in contemporary Vietnamese society and in Chinese borderlands communities, one finds the reminiscent flavour of the life-frame in which disadvantaged European women used to live under French Indochinese social system: “Professional competence did not protect single European women from marginalization. They were held in contempt along with European prostitutes, on the basis of similar objections. White prostitutes undermined prestige, while professional women needed protection. Both fell outside the colonial space to which European women were assigned: custodians of family welfare and respectability and dedicated and willing subordinates to and supporters of men. These norms were so rigorous precisely because European family life and bourgeois respectability were conceived as the cultural bases for imperial patriotism and a racial survival (Stoler 2002: 61).”
economically disadvantaged, young or uneducated women. Everything is a question of dimension and relativity.

In sum, decades after the Vietnamese revolution and the prospect of women’s emancipation, policies still fail to accommodate the realities of social face. Marriage prevails as a necessary step of life, and a component of social recognition. Thus, shame falls on unmarried women and their families. Not finding a husband, whatever the reason, is deemed a social failure that leads to stigmatization, especially in rural areas where women have few opportunities to demonstrate their personal strengths in domains outside of marriage. Women’s talents articulated in marriage, family and domestic life are what give them an adult life. Movement away from this model and framework is marginalizing oneself.

Being single in our country is not yet considered a person’s free choice, especially with regard to women. Families and communities still see a single woman as a ‘worry and concern’ to her relatives and friends. They often act as go-between to help single women succeed in finding a good husband and having children, as for many other women (Thi 2008: 73).

Lê Thi’s analysis of single women’s plight in contemporary Vietnam supports the idea that the personal status of a woman defines her position in the community no matter what she is capable of, what she may have achieved, and how she shows her honesty (Thi 2008). A woman is expected to fulfil her contribution to the nation through being a wife and a mother as well as a daughter. These roles are seen as pivotal to the harmony and welfare of her community by perpetuating duties of womanhood in the footsteps of her elders. If one of these social functions is missed, it questions her female identity and her ability to become a responsible person. Structural predicament inevitably shape Vietnamese women’s ability to place themselves advantageously on the marriage market, in terms or timeframe, social hierarchy and natural attributes. However, as will be discussed in the following
section, personal circumstances play the main role in the process of marginalisation of ‘potentially but unrealistically’ marriageable women in Vietnam. And when, at some point, such circumstances become negotiable, these candidates to conjugal happiness attest their endeavour to challenge the social power order.

**The plight of Kiêu**

A floating fern minds not the swift, strong stream — 
destined to drift, it drifts no matter where. 
But how, alone and lost on strangers’ soil, 
shall I fight cold and hunger with bare hands?”

(Du 1983: 105)

Kiêu is the heroin of *Kim Văn Kiêu* (Du 1983), the most famous epic poem in Vietnam (although based on a Chinese story), written in the early nineteenth century. It recounts the unfortunate life of a young, talented, virtuous and beautiful woman. In love with her fiancé to whom she is promised, Kiêu agrees to marry another man to save her father from debt. The man, the accomplice of a brothel madam, sells her to prostitution. And year after year, she endures her destiny, carried from ordeal to predicament, between lust, renouncement, spiritual life and eventually love, to which she gives only her spirit. Kiêu’s story is taught in school and spread within popular culture and symbolize both the plight of virtuous women and the burden of destiny. In this sense, it resonates potently with the narrative of Kiêu’s unfortunate sisters who dwell in today’s Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, and bears a striking similarity to their thoroughly moving accounts. Besides determinative factors shared by all women in contemporary Vietnam, the causes of many women’s unmarried status are bountiful and diverse, and like Kiêu, often lie in personal circumstances and stigmatizing misfortunes. I propose to describe below some of the most informative examples of this.
- Stigma: How a physical detail betrays a family background

It is not surprising to learn that those women who have physical imperfections, or handicaps, those who are poorly educated or lack working skills are unlikely to find a husband easily. This is true in many societies. But in Vietnam, stigmatisation goes beyond this. Physical stigma, for instance, may reveal a problematic background.

The term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective: does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the discredited, in the second with that of the discreditable. This is an important difference, even though a particular stigmatized individual is likely to have experience with both situations (Goffman 1986: 4).

One evening in Hekou, Tam invited me over for a dinner in the modest room she then shared with her Chinese partner (cf. Appendix 6). While observing her combing her hair, I noticed it had an unusual curl for a Vietnamese woman. She did not see it as pretty. The detail escaped my attention earlier because Tam used to pull her hair back as straight as possible and maintain it this way with hairspray and a tight ponytail: “I don’t like my hair, my face already displays my physical difference to Vietnamese.” Hair was the only external part of her body she could actually try to change. Tam carried a family background that stigmatized her. Her physical features had always attracted sarcastic and rude comments throughout her and her mother’s lives. Tam was the only informant whose body literally displayed her stigma, and who suffered from it to the extent that it changed her life. The daughter of a Vietnamese woman and a Moroccan man, Tam’s face showed significant features of her Northern African-Asian mixed-blood legacy. She was called ‘Tam tay’ [Tam the foreigner] since her childhood in Yên Bái; but, being a mixed-blood person was more than merely embedded in her identity, it was her identity. Prejudice and discrimination were part of Tam’s life and left her prone to people’s deception and exploitation. In
her adult life, her physical stigma became responsible for two contradictory positions. Considered as non-marriageable in her community for the blame her face reflected, Tam was an easy target for deception. She was sold to a villager in China by an acquaintance (cf. Appendix 6). When she returned, she managed to marry a Vietnamese man; but the husband soon cheated on her and his family encouraged him to leave Tam because of her reputation. However, when Tam ended up in prostitution, her physical features made her special: she became a long-time partner for some clients who appreciated her for being different. Later, she started a new life with a Chinese worker, and despite the limited comfort he offered her, she stayed with him, aware that she could hardly find a better match due to her stigma and her controversial past. But in the end the man cheated on her and Tam left him after five years of common-law marriage.

Tam endured rather extreme consequences of stigmatisation along her life, but even a woman like Li shared with her similar problems, despite a seemingly more fortunate trajectory over the years. Li also has issues with her hair. During most of my stays in Dongxing, Li has been my good friend, as well as my devoted interpreter (cf. Chapters 1 and 3). She was also my favourite informant, providing me with infinite details on the Dongxing environment, the Vietnamese community and life-stories of Vietnamese women involved in cross-border marriage. I thought I had explored most of her experience in this matter since Li loved to talk about her marital relationship. However, even three years after I first met her, she continued to gradually disclose details about her family background and her own insights. When I first met her in 2006, Li always wore her hair in a high ponytail of thick black hair that looked permed. By 2009, she had cut it shorter and had it straightened, following – so I thought – the current fashion all over China among young women. She explained her
choice to me but I did not think of it as relevant, and simply forgot about it. Unlike Tam, nothing special about Li’s face warned me of her origin until one day when Li mentioned her aesthetic taste in a casual conversation.

— I can’t stand my frizzy hair. It’s hard to comb. I never permed it: it’s natural. Now, I have it regularly straightened because I don’t want people to notice that I have unusual hair.

— What do you mean?

— From what I know, a French soldier raped my great grandmother when she was young. She fell pregnant, so my grandfather, my father and myself all have frizzy hair. People have often called us ‘bastard children.’ Luckily, she was able to get married, and she had other children who are normal. But when my brothers and sisters and myself were kids, people used to laugh at our hair, as they made fun of our Chinese slanting eyes [Li is half Hoa; Vietnamese eyes are believed to be bigger than Chinese]. I was not like other children. I believe that’s why in 2001, when I reached 20 years old, my father and a friend of his arranged a marriage for me. This friend was a Huaqiao who had left Vietnam for the USA and he had a son there. The son was a 27 year-old [born in 1974] and quite rich. But I refused this arrangement, I didn’t love him and I felt I was being cheated. So the fiancé’s father asked me to become his goddaughter: “I have three sons but no daughter, I would like to have one. You can just sign a fake marriage certificate and come with me to the USA.” I refused and escaped home for a month, enough time for the ‘Americans’ to leave. I resented my parents so much for trying to marry me out this way. “But he is Chinese and he is rich!” my mother said to me. The fiancé had tried to convince me that he was in love with me but I answered that he couldn’t buy
me with dollars. So now, you can understand why my parents were not happy
either about my marriage with A Linh!

Biographic and academic literature on the plight of mixed-blood children in Vietnam is abundant. Accounts of children born during the French colonial era and those born out of relationships between American soldiers and Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War – the Bười đời [street children/dust of life] – all inform the stigmatisation that they, as children then adults, have endured in Vietnamese society (Firpo 2007, 2010; Delanoé 2002; Yarborough 2005) ever since. In Vietnamese people’s eyes, they all embody the war sequels (rapes), the shame of a nation (war prostitution and alliance with the ‘enemy’), and because they carry their stigma down through several generations, their access to local marriage markets is rather limited. Tam or Li’s hair and features embody a controversial history that renders them ‘problematic’ enough for their parents and community to find alternative match choices, or to let them choose their own fate without interfering when a privileged solution was turned down. Tam – the ‘discredited’ (in Goffman’s words 1986) – was once sold to China before marrying a disreputable man, whereas Li – the ‘discreditable’ – chose to marry a poor Zhuang man in China, rather than form a union with a rich and compromising Vietnamese man overseas.

- Reputation: the invisible stigma

Even though similarly discriminating, ‘invisible’ family stigma, as Kim’s case attests (cf. Appendix 4), also stands as a subtler yet recurrent element in many Vietnamese wives’ backgrounds. When I first met Yao, Kim’s mother, she was a masseuse in a professional massage salon owned by her ‘sister’ (her relative, an elder)
in Hekou. The two middle-aged women were both practicing medical massage\(^1\) and my friend Qiuxia (cf. Chapter 1) was one of their regular clients. Yao recalled how harsh the 1978-1979 period was for Hoa people who fled Vietnam, how complicated Sino-Vietnamese relationships have become since, especially for her generation. When she understood the topic and purpose of my research, and was reassured of my position,\(^2\) she said:

— Go meet my daughter! She works in the big hotel near the border gate.

She’s married to a Chinese man. Go there and ask for Kim, everybody knows her. But don’t tell her I told you to go there. There’s no need for her to know that. Just enjoy a coffee there: she can make good Vietnamese coffee. She likes to talk, she will tell you about her marriage for sure.

After my first visit to Kim, I return to Yao to thank her for introducing me to her daughter. She elaborated for me how her background related to Kim’s choice:

— I separated from my husband because of my ethnic origin.\(^3\) I am Hoa but he is only mixed-blood. After 1978, he could stay in Vietnam while I had to hide, and then flee and leave my children behind. Men are strong, they can cope with discrimination, but women can’t. Now, my two sons are married in Vietnam. Kim dated some Vietnamese boyfriends before, but I always discouraged her from dating them: “You are Hoa, it would be more secure if you married a Chinese man.”

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\(^1\) Yao’s relative graduated from a medical school in Kunming and taught Yao the skills and knowledge of proper Chinese massages.

\(^2\) Like many other local informants, Yao was afraid of journalists who would unscrupulously investigate Hekou’s activities or disclose people’s private lives, as had apparently happened previously.

\(^3\) Yao’s parents originated from Yunnan and Guangdong provinces in China.
The circumstances in which I met Kim (cf. Appendix 4) revealed a constant and untold form of stigma surrounding individuals involved in cross-border marriages. In 2008 and early 2009, Yao spent most of her mornings resting from the late evening massage sessions which she, along with her elder ‘sister,’ had to do to satisfy their local clientele. Then, she used to spend hours in the card/mah-jong playing room next door until their afternoon session began. She was rarely absent from these two main spaces of her life. But in July 2009, I could not find her anymore. The massage place was still open but neither she nor her ‘sister’ were working there. Their regular assistant simply mentioned that the ‘sister’ had returned to Kunming, her hometown. It was only by coincidence that I found Yao during a walk through an unfamiliar alley of Hekou’s Vietnamese market. She had opened one of the four massage parlours on the ground floor where young Vietnamese women gave (non-professional) massage treats to Chinese visitors. By October 2010, Yao had vanished again. Her immediate neighbour (Ngoc, cf. Chapter 5) told me that Yao had sold her massage salon, but no one was able to give me any information on where she had gone. Yao was a gambling addict, and often relied on her daughter to pay her debt. Kim mentioned to me that this issue with her mother remained unresolved, and was a persistent source of tension in their relationship.

The fact that Yao continued to urge Kim to marry a Chinese man reveals how insecure and feared she remained regarding her identity. History had taught her what being Chinese in Vietnam meant in sensitive political times, and her advice to her

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1 Once again, the recent events that occurred around the recurring issue of Parcel Islands that divides Vietnam and China on a political level for decades (June 2011: public protests; April 2012: diplomatic crisis) showed how nationally sensitive groups in Vietnam designate Chinese/Hoa people as their favourite target, making their community the site for their grievances.
daughter reflects this concern. Yao, who refer to herself as *nanmin* [refugee] and said she has remained in this position,\(^1\) seemed to be one of these itinerant individuals who were constantly seeking stability in life; stuck between their resentment about their experience in Vietnam in 1978, followed by an insecure, stigmatized existence in China, and their navigation within a new and changing environment (*cf.* Appendix 4).

Hekou’s current society mixes a majority of migrants born or arrived long after the 1978-1979 events. Most do not feel concerned by these historical issues. As is the case with many issues that challenge people’s nationalistic embrace in China, such topics may be discussed over dinner tables, but rarely does it impact their daily professional or personal interactions with Vietnamese people. Business has become more important than politics in contemporary China. But Hoa, Việt Kiều and refugees may still feel these highly political issues as disturbing matters that with the potential to open old wounds and place them in jeopardy.

In Yao’s case, gambling, surviving in an uncomfortable social position, and relying on children who have acquired their own legitimate position might be one way to sustain her own life, but her stigma also alters Kim’s reputation. It is worth

\(^1\) *Nanqiao* [Chinese refugees] was the exact term used to designate the ethnically Chinese refugees from Vietnam in 1978-1979. They were granted such status over their ethnic belonging. China received them, and when its government accessed to the UN Convention of Refugees (1951) and associated protocol (1967) in 1982, it received funds from the UNHCR to improve the living conditions of the refugees who arrived and settled since 1978. However, this specific management was conditioned by the ethnic origin of the refugees, and the legal status of *nanmin* [refugee] still does not exist in China, due to an unclear interpretation of the convention, as the issue of Chinese policy toward refugees from North Korea has revealed since 1997 (Lam 2000; Freeman & Thompson 2009; Cohen 2010; Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland 2004).
wondering why Yao asked me not to mention her name to Kim. Did that indicate her concern for Kim’s privacy, or Yao’s desire to clear her daughter from any relation to her own plight? Considering Kim’s patience with her mother’s gambling addiction in the face of Yao’s repeated failures, this preservation of anonymity may articulate a form of maternal love from a mother whose position prevents her from offering much beside troubles. Yao introducing me to her daughter in a direct manner would have been the equivalent of supporting a public enquiry on a “Vietnamese wife of a Chinese husband,” and Yao did not want to be the one who, again, ‘brings troubles.’

As addressed in my discussion of methodological issues (cf. Chapter 1), most of my informants, and particularly those who acquainted me with mixed couples, were concerned about cautiousness and anonymity. In many cases, they avoided direct interaction to relevant individuals, merely offering me descriptions and addresses as clues for my investigation. Couples, in return, often took for granted the fact that I somehow heard about them from anonymous acquaintances, requiring creativity on my part in order to avoid saying who had made the connection. If some were curious about their identification process, most tacitly accepted the fact that they were the subjects of conversation, hence preserving the ‘informers’ from being blamed for their indiscretion.

Furthermore, the story of Kim’s family is an example of the complexity of the social context in which cross-border alliances are embedded at the Sino-Vietnamese border. Even though Kim’s marriage appears ‘normal’ in the sense that she presents it as the result of romance, it also appears obvious that given her family background, she would have had issues finding a suitable partner in Vietnam according to local standards. In both Chinese and Vietnamese societies, being marriageable requires maintaining a social face, and a respectable reputation. But Kim’s parents were
segregated during the 1978 anti-Hoa movement, then they divorced, and her father had a child out of wedlock, and her mother had no legal position. So one does not have to look far into each spouse’s past to realize how marginalized these particular families are, due to division, migration, conflicting identities, nonexistence, and failures’ stains. If some members of the Hoa community managed to improve their social status by playing an active role in the economic development of the region, many remain left out from the regained recognition of their former economic influence. Often they remain underestimated, unemployed and court suspicion regarding their ambiguous role of intermediaries.

- Misconduct: self-exclusion

In Vietnamese society, parents educate their children according to moral principles that emphasise the respect of elders’ authority and wisdom. When a daughter acts without complying with such principles, she is seen as wilful and might expose herself to various forms of sanctions, including expulsion from her family and her community. Dung committed the mistake to let her romance rather than her family’s advices guide her first steps in adult life:

— I was born in 1977 in Thanh Hóa in a family of seven children – six girls and one boy. At 17, I had a boyfriend, we loved each other but our parents were opposed to our marriage. My family was too poor and not well thought of. When I ended up seven months pregnant, my fiancé and I decided to flee to Saigon. We stayed there a month. It worked and I was expecting the birth. But I couldn’t stand the pressure that my fiancé’s family put on me from far away so I went back to Thanh Hóa to give birth. My fiancé came to visit me the day before I gave birth to a son. He wrote me a beautiful letter from Saigon. But
our two mothers were constantly quarrelling, throwing the blame for our situation on one another, and successively accusing one of us for seducing the other to force a marriage. I was so ashamed. My family was losing face and my fiancé’s family denied the paternity of my baby. At 18 [in 1994], I left with my son – he was seven months old. I spent a few days with a friend and her husband but they put me to sleep by drugging me. I found myself at the gate of China: they sold me to Làng Sơn to a trafficker for 2000 yuan. The man made me cross the border and then gave me away to a Vietnamese woman for 3000 yuan. It was her who finally sold me to my husband for 5000 yuan, with my baby. She knew his family. She threatened to sell my child if I didn’t accept this marriage. My husband had to borrow this money, he was poor and childless – his first wife had left him.

Dung’s experience is an example of how behavioural misconduct may lead to exclusion. At a young age she engaged in an emotional and physical relationship with a fiancé whom her parents did not approve of, thus challenging their authorities. She did not demonstrate filial piety, nor did she act according to the conventional procedure of a marriage: negotiation, exchange of gift and marriage celebration. Dung’s emancipation from the established rules in regard to marriage practices, her escape from home as a tactic to avoid blame and responsibility, the birth of her child out of wedlock and her fiancé’s abandonment were all too heavy a shame for her family – and in-laws – to forgive. In this case, the only solution was to leave, an opportunity her ‘friends’ (opportunely for the family?) provided. Li, by refusing the marriage that her parents arranged for her with a Việt Kiều, demonstrated how independent-minded she was. But after choosing her own life, Li excluded herself
from the local marriage market, and from her family support in that matter. Mai (cf. Chapter 3) also refused a match her father had arranged for her:

— I am the eldest of four children, and I was fifteen when my father, who was alcoholic, decided to marry me to a young man from my village without my consent. He was only sixteen years old. Our fathers were friends, and made a deal. Neither the boy nor our mothers agreed, but on an auspicious day, the boy's father brought to my family a chicken that they sacrificed, and money that my father spent on alcohol quickly. I refused to accept the gifts, but he didn’t care. This family was rich. As I refused to submit, I found myself at an impasse: either I gave in, or I worked to reimburse the bride price. Since I was already out of school because our family was too poor, I started to do business to repay my debt. Time passed, the boy who treated me as if I were his bride was waiting for me to decide. Meanwhile, I dated a boyfriend. I guess the boy was jealous, he began to stop me from flirting with my boyfriend. In fact, the boy was waiting for me to grow old so I would finally give in to the impossibility of marrying elsewhere. I managed to reimburse the bride price, but the boy’s family refused it, and gave back the money to my father who spent it again on alcohol. My situation was hopeless. At 21 years of age, I left with a friend [cf. Chapter 3]. Until today, both the boy and my boyfriend are still single.

Both Dung and Mai paid for their misconduct and lack of respect towards their family’s decision when they found themselves trapped in China, both due to a friend’s plot. Defying their families’ authorities prompted these families to sully their personal reputations by presenting them as non-submissive. This reputation then became their
stigma and led them to China where they married, even though this was not their original wish. But both women’s accounts also raise the question of affective pressure and sexual harassment, which in Vietnamese society, is also a factor in exclusion. In discussing how sexual harassment serves as a reason for discrimination of women among Vietnamese communities, Khuat Thu Hong explains that “[Vietnamese women] consider it a problem with no real solution because it is thoroughly ingrained behaviour, supported by traditional notions that condone male sexual activity but seriously condemn women for any sexual activity outside marriage, even when she has been victimized” (2004: 133). In her research on rape in Vietnam, Nguyen Thu Huong explains how the disclosure of rape becomes a stigma attached to the victim’s family. Recovering the family’s honour generally demands that they negotiate with the perpetrator rather than denouncing him, to skirt public confrontation, and to save face for both parties. Such attitudes thus imply that the women involved in the unfortunate encounters are partly responsible. According to my informants’ accounts, returnees from China after an experience of deception that led them either to prostitution or to coerced marriage, rarely expect support or empathy from their family or community. Somehow, they may also have encountered a form of rape. Even worse, the rape took place in a foreign environment, providing the grounds for further allegation and suspicions as to the reality of the claimed harm. Many returnees (whether they escaped, were saved or repatriated) are blamed for their foolishness, or their lack of responsibility. In this sense, their testimonies resonate with the rapees whose coping strategies were the subject of Nguyen Thu Huong’s research.

By relocating the rapee elsewhere through migration even for a definite period, the family attempts to help her recover from the ordeal in a new environment with the help of kin members or acquaintances. It is also an effort to relieve social pressure on the family members who stay behind now that the object of shame is removed – a sort of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ solution (Huong 2011: 222).
Similarly, migration appears as a recurrent coping strategy for stigmatised women in Vietnam. In this way, they seek to avoid gossip and deal with dire emotional predicaments. Then only, the stigma attached to ‘bad fate’ becomes bearable for the family while the victims of deception followed by suspicion, start a new journey. Back from China where she accepted her life as a Chinese peasant’s wife, Yen (cf. Appendix 2) was sent away from her home to her sister’s distant family, and quickly matched with a local husband. Escaped from a coerced marriage in China, Tam (cf. Appendix 6) was mocked in her hometown, and decided to return to China to protect her mother from gossip. Also accepting her coerced marriage in China, Mai (cf. Chapter 3) visited her family home after establishing a trusting relationship with her in-laws… only to discover that her own mother, rather than alerting authorities and searching for her, chose to believe a fortune-teller who had the “vision of Mai naked and dead on a road,” burned her daughter’s clothes and identity card, and set an altar to mourn Mai. These three examples demonstrate that whatever the emotional journey and intentions of a woman who ‘vanished’ from her community, her return causes far more harm to her family than it does to relieve the woman of despair. Such circumstances account for the stigma attached to some women who in the end, may have no other option than finding a desired match within a pool of potential Chinese men who, as a matter of fact, would not be directly affected by the reputation of their Vietnamese companion back home. Disappearing a second time also liberates women’s families from social pressure.

Each of these examples demonstrates how women’s lives may drift in uncertain ways, either as a consequence of their yearnings, their resistance or the fact that their project challenges socially acceptable standards of gender relations and
familial expectations. In this sense, they also illustrate Link and Phelan’s (2003) definition of stigma, proposed in their review of the use of the concept:

We choose to define stigma in the convergence of interrelated components. Thus stigma exists when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation than allows them. This is definition that we derived, not one that exists in some independent existential way (Link & Phelan 2001: 377).

From the particular to the general: Individuals on the margins

In the first part of this chapter, I conveyed the idea that stigmatization of individual women in Vietnamese society in particular, constitutes an overt example of how personal circumstances that grow out of an already disadvantaged social environment with regard to gender equality of treatment, encourage some individuals to pursue an alternative pathway to conjugality (cf. Chapter 3). Through various examples, I have demonstrated how stigmatization premised on predetermined components, misfortunes and life events in one’s homeland becomes a cogent explanation for the need to migrate and experiment life elsewhere. This ‘elsewhere’ may not only provide anonymity and a site to ‘discharge’ burdens of a previous life, but such a place may also offer the conditions for a new start in life, released from social disapproval and criticism.

Indeed, it is not just any person in China and Vietnam who gets married at the border. And among those who do, it is not just any individual who makes such a choice, what little choice there may be. To a certain extent, most of these marriage candidates are people who position themselves on the margins of society (due to their ideas, their life choices or their ambitions) or who found themselves relegated to a marginal position by virtue of their background or actions. They are the ‘leftovers’ of
the marriage market. They have experienced personal failure, disillusion, domestic violence, divorce, or single motherhood. They may also have disabilities, an illness, or carry some form of stigma. They may be infertile, carry debt, or be too old to make them a desirable candidate for marriage. They may even have criminal record, be engaged in illicit activities, have a bad reputation, or be an ex-prostitute. Any of these circumstances may force them to contemplate marriage, where possible, with a person who either accepts such a background or else ignores it. They are people who are already excluded, or who face social exclusion in a way or another. What is striking in the various profiles of cross-border marriages is the common ground of liminality. Therefore, even if someone has economic means, and even if he/she lives in a social environment that is not suffering from marriage squeeze, this does not necessarily mean that they will easily find a potential mate to satisfy a desire to raise a family together. As bachelors in Chinese rural areas tend to search within the ‘unmarriageable’ or ‘unwanted’ pool of women (widows and divorcees), people at the border find possible marital arrangements with other outcasts, their ‘second-rank fellows.’ This is what I will call a ‘choice by default,’ a concept which I now turn to elaborate in the last part of this chapter.

2 Between fate and resistance

Her tears, like pearls, kept rolling down Kiều’s cheeks—
foreboding brewed and stirred within her soul:
“I’ve had an ample share of life’s foul dust,
and now this swamp of mud proves twice as vile.
Will fortune never let its victims so
but in its snares and toils hold fast a rose?
I sinned in some past life and have to pay:
I’ll pay as flowers must fade and jade must break.”
(Du 1983: 91)
Nearly all my Vietnamese female informants portrayed their life and that of Vietnamese women in general with one term: *khô* – in Vietnamese – or *xingku* – in Chinese – which means ‘harsh/bitter/difficult.’ From their perspective, this single word defines the essence of a woman’s life: the word commonly appeared as an introduction or as a conclusion or their narrative, along with a sigh or a smile. The echoes of Kiều’s story still resonate. But, in real life, one needs to avoid portraying stigmatized people as passive and helpless victims of an imposed burden, and to consider closely the various ways they articulate their existence and plight, but also how they exercise their agency in various acts of resistance:

We can see that people in stigmatized groups actively use available resources to resist the stigmatizing tendencies of the more powerful group and that, to the extent that they do, it is inappropriate to portray them as passive recipients of stigma. At the same time, to the extent that power differences exist, resistance cannot fully overcome constraint. The amount of stigma that people experience will be profoundly shaped by the relative power of the stigmatized and the stigmatizer (Link & Phelan 2001: 378).

In light of those observations, I propose in the second part of this chapter to examine the various ways that people who were left on the fringes of their societies manage to work around their position, to set their stigma to the side and to regain social recognition despite their initial perceived weakness. I will describe how those disadvantaged components of their subjectivities and existence did not prevent them from pursuing social survival and, to this end, engage with cross-border marriage as the key moment of a new life, whether it was an intentional strategy for escaping stigma or not. This will lead me to observe what parts agency and strategy play in setting up a new social situation. Eventually, I will convey the idea that despite personal efforts to integrate within a community, and regardless of the extent of success in that endeavour, the issue of individuals’ social nonexistence remains. This
problematic status informs the precariousness of cross-border marriages that could be otherwise deemed as a way to sublimate various personal frustrations.

**Mi zhu cheng fan [the rice is already cooked/what’s done is done]**

[T]he victim-agent dichotomy falls short of providing us with a useful framework for understanding the lives, choices, experiences, and difficulties faced by migrant women. [C]oercion, force, and agency are extremely hard to gauge or measure, and … they also vary through time, making it impossible to label all migrant women (maids, sex workers, correspondence brides) as trafficked, or to suggest … they are ever outside of a system of power and inequality (Constable 2006: 20-21).

As Constable suggests, it takes close attention to individuals’ life narratives to unravel the way specific, individual circumstances interact with structural conditions that would easily define their trajectory within a clear framework. Amongst my informants, some had left their country, their hometown, by coercion or deception, but agreed on staying where they ended: a choice driven by pragmatism. Others, in contrast, may have chosen to leave their home to experience something new and were then forced by circumstances to remain where they arrived. The whole process of building a life out of a given socio-economical ground once again blurs the dichotomy between agent and passive (or trafficked) migrant. I propose to call the choice emerging from the interstices the ‘choice by default.’

- **Destiny versus tactic: improvising an alliance**

The Vietnamese women who confided in me their life stories and marriage experiences almost never mentioned any spiritual belief as a source of relief in times of trouble. When I deliberately asked if they were worshipping any deities or if they believed in a religion, most denied having any specific belief. I once accompanied Thao (*cf.* Chapter 2) to a local shrine in Móng Cái vicinity, and I also attended the little ceremony that Thoa (*cf.* Appendix 5) asked to hold in a small temple around Lào
Cai. But none of them were able to articulate their belief except with awkward smiles and light comments such as “it’s nothing,” “I want to see if my fate will change,” “I want to express my gratefulness [for this or that],” or even hints of irony towards themselves: “it’s just superstition, you know.” But amongst my informants, there was a strong consensus on the articulation of their inner perspectives on life. It emerged through a repeated expression: “Zhe shi wo de ming [this is my fate/destiny],” when it described something rather unfortunate. In the case of a fortunate encounter with a lover or a husband, the expression changed into “Zhe shi yuanfen [this is predestined affinity].” A short review on the concept of fate/destiny in this region is necessary to measure what exactly these narratives of Vietnamese women’s lives allude to.

Reviewing the history of the religious revival in pre-revolutionary Vietnam, and its link with the contemporary strong re-emergence of spirit worship and popular religiosity in the Mekong Delta and borderlands, Taylor illuminates such beliefs by providing the historical ground that sustains the current beliefs in Vietnam:

Women’s reliance on spirits was described as a function of their lack of self-belief and susceptibility to trickery. Spirit worship and feminine religiosity went hand in hand as practices that needed to be purged if the country was to advance into modernity. This set of views illustrates that in early-twentieth-century urban Vietnam, modernity was associated with notions of self-reliance and faith in one’s own efforts (sự mình). In the early twentieth century the ‘self-strengthening’ movement among the literati was an important vehicle for the introduction of ideas that it was thought would aid the modernizing of society … Science and the ‘new learning’ encouraged people to believe in themselves rather than in the power of obscure forces. Presented as such, progress (tiến bộ) was a movement toward inclinations that were often gendered male in the Vietnamese cultural context (Taylor 2004a: 34-35).

Drawing upon his findings on goddess worship in southern Vietnam, Taylor also underlines the cultural bond with Chinese practices:

Goddess beliefs are also widely seen as a cultural model introduced by the ethnic Chinese, who, notwithstanding their acknowledged business prowess, are often faulted by Vietnamese intellectuals as characteristically predisposed to ‘superstition.’ Alternatively, some argue that goddess beliefs find a hold among those lacking a solid education, whose ignorance leads them mistakenly to believe that spiritual forces guide their destiny. People such as market vendors and migrant workers in the
commercial service sector, who lack equitable access to the centralized educational system, are likely to be influenced by such beliefs. Either way the propitiation of goddesses fails the culture test, either as influenced by non-Vietnamese culture or as indicating lack of exposure to a modern scientific cultural outlook (Taylor 2004: 17).

To Harrell, the belief in fate was originally used to secure the elite's position in China: it was a “sophisticated ideology of oppression, a way to make the peasants think they could do nothing about their wretched lot, a device for making a humanly constructed system (and a cruel one at that) appear to the gullible peasantry to be nothing less than the order of nature” (1987: 91-92). However, he later raises a flag by emphasising that “[T]he popularity of fate-figurers underlines the error of assuming that belief in fate has something to do with a resigned, passive fatalism” (1987: 97).

Drawing upon his research findings among Taiwanese entrepreneurial villagers in the 1970s, Harrell proposed this conception of fate in Chinese culture:

How they view it, in the end, depends on how they use it. Casually, it is nothing but a description of someone's existence, comfortable or uncomfortable. Theoretically, it is a kind of predetermination according to the harmony or disharmony of cosmic forces, something that is both immutable and predictable by an expert who knows the code. But practically, it is more than anything a kind of post-hoc rationalization, a catchall explanation when others fail, a way of acknowledging that even the most moral and diligent human beings cannot necessarily guarantee their own success in life. In this sense, ming or mia really does mean ‘life.’ (Harrell 1987: 101)

Drawing upon the perspectives of Confucianism and Buddhism, Young encapsulate the influence of belief in destiny in social relationships in the Vietnamese context by stating that:

[a] fate peculiar to each individual dominates that person's life. It prevails over social norms; it intrudes into family relationships; it makes or breaks friendships … Innate individual character, so dispositive of communal realities, rests within each person separately. Society is the sum total of individual accretions; individuals do not take their purpose and their coherence from the social order but from fate itself” (1998: 147-148).

In response to the issue of negative social representations of Vietnamese people in Chinese eyes (cf. Chapter 4), Young then provides a cogent link between fate and a recurrent stereotype that Lao He, one of my male informants (cf. Chapter 4),
revealed when he said, “Vietnamese people are egoists, they don’t care about others. They are centred upon their family and don’t care about the community. And even among one same family, they don’t help each other as we Chinese people do. I witnessed this in my wife’s family. They don’t value solidarity.”

The scheme of destiny places individuals in isolation, driven by forces beyond their control. People cannot be assumed to be reliable, for they may not have the ability to control what they do. A defensive wariness is the best stance for interpersonal relations among Vietnamese. There is little that bonds one Vietnamese to another (Young 1998: 153-154)

Without suggesting that destiny constitutes the universal explanation for an individual’s plight, and the ‘excuse’ for all social behaviours, this example still underscores the complex interplay between perspectives. My informants' explanations of their own and other people's trajectories showed no evidence upon which I could draw to offer a clear delineation between a Vietnamese and a Chinese definition of ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’, whether one consider the philosophical concept or the popular understanding of such a signifier. However, my Vietnamese informants invoked this explanation more often than Chinese ones.

If we consider that Chinese philosophy and Buddhism have both defined East Asian culture and Vietnam in particular, the understanding of the notion of ming [destiny, fate] should be quite similar for a Chinese and a Vietnamese speaker. One could finds roots of this conception even earlier, as Raphals exposes in her essay on the semantic fields of meaning of the Chinese term ming based on pre-Buddhist texts:

At the level of individual agency, a conscious agent is apt to consider the ‘fate’ she is ‘given’ in life and ask what can be changed and what is unalterable. In this sense, the concept of fate can provide a way to categorize or discriminate what can and cannot be changed (Raphals 2005: 72).

By comparing the notion of fate in ancient Greece and China, the author emphasises that
Pre-Buddhist Chinese accounts combine acceptance of fate with strong anti-fatalism and well-developed notions of strategy of maneuvering room within its decrees… Change and resilience are the order of the day and open to human strategy and ingenuity (Raphals 2005: 102).

Following this notion and highlighting it in a contemporary context, Lupke adds that

[although the status of *ming* in modern China has changed, the way in which it is understood and referenced is still closely linked to traditional, classical usages: *ming* is one’s ‘lot’ and one’s ‘life’… *ming* is also, ironically, a sort of ‘life-giving force’… (Lupke 2005: 297)]

I suggest that, at least in this region and among individuals whose regular migrations expose them to additional external and uncontrollable factors of disturbances, the belief in destiny supports the articulation of vicissitudes of one’s life, including the consequences of risk-taking behaviours. Slote summarises the state of mind resulting from the strong conviction reflected in my Vietnamese informants’ sighs or smiles:

What is unique about the Vietnamese is the nature of their beliefs, the power that is assigned to the forces that govern their destiny, the panoply of elements that combine to determine fate, and the high degree to which these external forces are internalized within the conscious and unconscious life of the Vietnamese people. The consequence is that the Vietnamese to a great, although far from an absolute extent experience themselves as being in the hands of a destiny that is determined by forces beyond their command (1998: 320).

Nevertheless, on the fringes of society, and because of and despite the plight inflicted by destiny, some women find ways to resist such forces and move away from their pathway. Destiny as a sole framework fails to explain why some women accept their predicament but others challenge it. As several of the life-stories I have translated here and in the appendices demonstrate, there are sequences of life attributed to destiny, and others interpreted as tactical moves (de Certeau 1984) very much at odds with a supposed passivity. It is the ability of each individual to make use of certain situations that allow some control over the course of their existence, even though the extent of such a move might be limited. I have showed earlier (cf.
Chapter 4) how borderland residents perceived many Vietnamese women’s settlement in Chinese communities as the implementation of migration strategies through available means (their body and/or their working skills). However, empirical data prove that most of the time, the arrival, the stay and the departure from China, as well as the decision to get married to a Chinese man, are the result of on-the-spot decisions rather than carefully planned arrangements.

But in the case of cross-border marriage, Chinese men also may act out of given circumstances that for a particular reason would urge them to grasp an opportunity that could change their own fate. A De, the man from Dongxing who adopted one of the six daughters of an acquaintance (cf. Chapter 3) told me about his second marriage:

— I have been married to my Chinese wife for fourteen years. But she had a bad temper; even my father couldn’t stand her. After the divorce, women often approached me: I have fields of sugar cane, this catches women’s eyes. I’ve always been wary and I always refused, even Vietnamese women. One day, a friend in Dongxing introduced me to a 24 year-old woman who had just arrived from Vietnam, and was going to end up in prostitution. “Try her, if she suits you, keep her, you’ll remunerate me later.” I told the woman: “If I suit you and if you agree to take care of my daughter [9 year-old], you can stay, otherwise you're free to go.” She stayed and it has been eight years. We have two sons, an eight and a one year-old. Later, I paid my friend who was only an intermediary.

Neither A De nor Duong’s husband (cf. earlier in this chapter) intended to remarry after their divorce. Still, they both found a life-partner because of a chance
encounter with two Vietnamese women in difficulty – but not in demand. Yen, Mai and Van escaped brothels relying on their tears, their threats to commit suicide or their friends, i.e., their ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1987) to impose their will and swing a position of powerlessness in their ‘favour,’ change the course of their lives, and win a measure of power over their destinies. And, as Nyíri puts it, it is precisely the act of migration that allows the “ability to manipulate cultural constructs of distant places to gain the privilege of different behaviour” (2002: 307). Schein argues, based on a study of cross-border and international marriages of Hmong/Miao people, that such marriages have the potential to emancipate couples from obligations among affines, and are more conjugal-centred (2005). Herein emerges the core idea of agency among migrants, an essential element that Vietnamese women confront in the context of their own migration.

[V]ietnamese women were not simply passive agents in the context of conflicting structural pressures on gender relations in the 1990s … I would suggest that women’s heavy leaning toward Buddhism with its concept of karma and infinite cycle of miseries was also a reaction to the problems that they faced in the Vietnamese sociocultural and economic systems (Luong 2003: 220).

Hy Van Luong also questions the idea that migration that allows a marriage ‘outside,’ or a marriage that allows for migration, conveys a form of resistance to Vietnamese social transformations after the Đổi Mới ['Renovation,’ i.e., Vietnam’s free market economic reforms in the 1980s]. Following these authors, I would like to elaborate on and illustrate this argument.

- On emancipation from kinship, community and state’s control

Given the predicament of those Vietnamese women who do not fit into the framework of well-established gender roles in their own society, it is not surprising that singles (Thi 2008), but also divorcées and widows, meet tremendous challenges in establishing a long-term position within their communities. The alcoholism, drug
addiction, abuse or infidelity of a husband might attract community empathy for a
wife; yet the general social attitude towards women in such circumstances is that they
should find any possible ways to cope with domestic and intimate problems. So when
some women decide, out of exhaustion, suffering or despair, to leave their marriage,
their household, and even their children to escape an unbearable position, they are
failing in the eyes of their community. As soon as they step out of their family,
exclusion threatens them and they need, for the sake of dignity, social face and well-
being, to leave their surrounding and to attempt starting another life elsewhere, under
an anonymous identity, where they can endeavour to transform themselves from
failures to success.

[I]t is still mainly women who encounter difficulties after divorce, not least in facing
public opinion. Though more and more women initiate divorce, a divorced woman is
still seen in the eyes of many people as immoral, even though a divorced man is
acceptable … This means that the double standard hare also works in favour of men.
Divorced women even have to face difficulties in remarriage (Pham Van Bich 1999:
165).

Several scholars (Bélanger & Hong 2001; Minh 2000; Phuong 2007) stressed
the role that parents have played in the marriage decisions of their children all through
the modern history of Vietnam. In a comprehensive study of the evolution of
conjugalitity in the northern part of Vietnam throughout the past century, Pham Van
Bich thus concludes that parents are now only playing a double role of ‘significant
other’ (consulted on the choice of a fiancé) and the ‘crucial payers’ in their children’s
marriage (1999: 166), rather than the absolute decision-makers of previous historical
eras. But a clear account of the role that parents play in the case of a second marriage
in Vietnam is still missing. Literature on the topic is scarce for the region but with the
increasing rate of divorce in both Chinese and Vietnamese societies, this merits
further discussion. What happens to the divorcées regarding a second-marriage? What
is the logic by which divorcées contract another marriage? On the Chinese front,
demographers have examined the link between remarriage and the marriage squeeze in China: unable to find available brides amongst the pool of young single women, bachelors tend to search for a spouse from the initially stigmatized pool of divorcées and widows. But demographers fail to mention family and individual practices in the matter, except that the main purpose for unions (first or second) remains the production of an heir (Jiang, Attané, Li & Feldman 2007). Such a gap in the literature on this issue may reveal an absence of clear kinship rules on the matter of second marriages in Vietnamese families. Indeed, rules exist on divorce itself, or on widowhood, while re-marriage, especially that of women, seems left out. But this may also signify that once a first marriage ends, which is still a form of dishonour for the families and individuals involved, the stigma is so severe that it does not really matter what a daughter who failed to keep her first family united would become afterwards.

Reviewing the marriage market in Vietnam after the Vietnam War, Daniel Goodkind mentions this issue and alludes to possible implications for the women at the core of my research:

> Although the surplus of women at the younger age groups has receded recently, the cohort of women that entered the marriage market throughout the late 1970s and the early 1980s has been severely disadvantaged relative to men. Researchers have noted the implications for delayed marriage, entering and remaining in a marriage with an undesirable or abusive partner, an almost nil chance of remarriage in the case of marital disruption, and an increase in out-of-wedlock childbearing, all of which constitute major problems for a society in which marriage is universally expected. Men, conversely, have been better able to cycle through the marriage market owing not only to the surplus of women but also to more permissive social norms regarding remarriage (Goodkind 1995: 348-349).

In their 1995 study of marriage and remarriage patterns among the Asian communities in the USA, Aguirre, Saenz and Hwang argue that remarriage is associated with greater exogamy because mate selection norms only exist for first marriage, but also, and this supports my argument here, “the hypothesized relation between remarriage and intermarriage may be the effect of personality patterns;
persons who break marriage norms in one area of their lives, such as divorcing their spouses and entering remarriage, are probably more likely to break other marriage norms such as marrying outside their ethnic and racial groups” (1995: 208). The recent findings on cross-border marriages in Asia confirm the high proportion of remarriage among these international couples (Yang & Lu 2010). Applying this explanation to current changing Chinese and Vietnamese societies illuminates the life experience and decision-making of my informants. Those previously married in Vietnam were left at the fringes of their communities due to the stigma associated with divorce and the social ‘misconduct’ that I described earlier in terms of marital rules.¹ Drawing upon Aguirre, Saenz and Hwang’s (1995) findings, I suggest that once their social and moral capital was lost, exogamy through remarriage in China could not damage Vietnamese women’s reputation more that it was already damaged. A sense of liberation from social norms of conjugality emerges in their narratives. However, the pathway is uneven. Various authors (Drummond 2004; Gammeltoft 1999; Pettus 2003; Phinney 2008b; Lê Thi 2008; Phan Van Bich 1999) emphasised the ostracism that these women endure due to the strong belief that women should always compromise in family conflicts and overcome their fear in the household realm. For those who leave, an uncertain future arises. The burden of loneliness, added to an altered sense of what it means to be a woman, might easily lead them to suffer from lack of self-confidence and lack of trust in what life might still bring to them. While some women chose to keep a low profile and survive in their society despite their fate – by ignoring social contempt or by migrating – others chose to adopt new behaviour. Amongst my informants, Chi (cf. Appendix 7) chose to follow

¹ Women’s right to divorce and widows’ right to remarry was only granted after the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Malarney 1996).
the advice of a matchmaker and marry a Chinese man to secure her needs in her old age, and Nguyet (cf. Appendix 1) accepted a life in China to fulfil her needs for affection after a life of familial conflict. Many of the women who disclosed their personal trajectories recounted the life they once had and often described it as the real ‘push factor’ that led them into a new society which may be more tolerant of people’s pasts. These cases argue against the economic motivation often attributed to these cross-border marriages by analysts and demand recognition of the intimate aspirations and ideals of emancipation and respect that these women have. According to Pham Van Bich’s classification (Bich 1999), Chi and Nguyet belong to a generation that did not see marriage as the concretization of a romance but as a necessary bond between individuals in order to produce children and provide the country with a labour force, and saw self-sacrifice as a duty and personal feelings as a luxury (Yan 2003; Zhang 2005). One might have the impression that they have made a marital choice out of some opportunities that they did not intentionally look for. Yet Chi and Nguyet’s move towards the idea of an alternative form of conjugality reveals a significant emphasis on affection and care as a form of intimate healing that helped them to eventually overcome the negative circumstances that led them to this second start in life. Discussing this impetus towards liberation, in the sense that building a family does not necessarily mean bowing to parents and public opinion, Goodkind (2007), Thi (2008) and Phinney (2005) all described the phenomenon of women ‘asking for a child’ as the expression of ostracised women’s determination, and as a form of resistance.
The child issue: asking for a child *versus* yearning for an heir

When Chinese borderland residents discuss the issue of Sino-Vietnamese marriages, the question of children often emerges as a very sensitive point. An affair between a man and a woman that ends as a result of the cheating of one or the other partner does not have a significant impact on society and does not offend community sentiment. It is only a private matter than may become a topic of discussion and gossip. But a family interacts with society to a greater extent than a couple, and the connection it creates implies a larger number of persons. In contemporary China, a child has become, more than ever in modern history, the object of extreme care and concern because of the One-Child Policy. The precious ‘little emperor’ has also become the object of tremendous expectations in terms of his/her future responsibilities towards his/her family (Chicharro 2010). Chinese families need children, who are expected to support their parents in their old age. Bachelors yearn for wives who can produce an heir. And when brides eventually enter families, it is their reproductive functions that are most scrutinized. Having said that, the issue emerges when the center of the family – the Chinese son – also becomes the object of negotiations and blackmailing between his parents. That Chinese men seek a fertile woman and future mother from amongst a pool of available Vietnamese women is not surprising, even though the marriage they contract with the mother may also be grounded in affection and stable conjugal life. When these men request that the child stays in China when their mother returns to Vietnam for a visit, it reflects their anxiety about their security and their wellbeing. But such precaution is also a response to stories and rumours about women who take away their offspring and vanish, leaving their Chinese husbands in despair. One may give some credence to these stories if one
ever heard about single Vietnamese women and the *xin con* ['ask for a child'] phenomenon that Phinney describes in her work. Instead of considering Vietnamese women through the lens of the reproductive dimension of femininity (Drummond 2004), Phinney examines the emotional life of lonely women and their intimate yearning for maternity. Regardless of social normative behaviour, some Vietnamese women excluded from the marriage/remarriage market found a way to satisfy their need for company, affection, love and support by rearing a child alone, out of the normative structure of a family. They may find a lover and get pregnant, or intentionally ask a man whose various attributes they appreciate to inseminate them, or even go to the hospital to receive anonymous insemination (Phinney 2005). Whether the donor is aware or not of the consequences, be he single or married, the strategy of such mothers-to-be is clearly to raise their own child and fulfil something missing in their life by properly *becoming* a woman, if not in the eyes of their community, at least in their own viewpoint. In doing so, they refuse men’s involvement in their own life, they challenge social norms around family structure, and act according to their will rather than social rules. When Vietnamese women living near Chinese borderlands are aware of the availability of potential genitors for their child in China, it may be an easy option to contemplate. Even though I have no empirical data to confirm the impact of the ‘asking for a child’ phenomenon in China, several elements corroborate such a theory. First of all, the Marriage Law in Vietnam supports single women and guarantees a legal status to children born out of wedlock, which is not the case with the Chinese Marriage Law where recognition is contingent on their payment of a fine. Further, some informants’ comments on their mixed child reveal that maternity for them is clearly more important than conjugal life. If their relationship with their current Chinese husband was jeopardised, they claim they
would not hesitate to go back to Vietnam with their child. Also, I quoted earlier some Chinese men in Hekou who blamed their former Vietnamese wives for having vanished with their children (cf. Chapter 5). But from their perspective, these Vietnamese mothers were ‘stealing their child’ rather than asking, and this is precisely what hurts Chinese men. In these cases, not only their feelings are hurt but also their pride and their masculinity, and to a larger extent that of their families and communities. Stories of these men who were allegedly deceived and deprived of their child and heir enhance the general suspicion of Vietnamese women in China (cf. Chapter 5). Based on these anxious and conflicting perspectives on children born out of unregistered – thus vulnerable – marriages, parents often negotiate their position. Questions related to registration on one parent’s hukou, schooling, provision of care by in-laws, or language learning, all elements that ease but also orient an individual’s social existence, also translate parental strategies for the future. Data suggest a clear tendency to register a second child on his father’s hukou if the family has the means to pay the fine and/or if the child is a boy. However, registration on the mother’s Vietnamese hukou is considered when the father already has a Chinese (non-divorced) family (i.e., when his relationship with a Vietnamese partner is polygamous), or if he already has reached the number of children he can legally have. Nonetheless, mixed children are the symbolic site for parents to articulate their prospects for the future and their way of coping with social nonexistence (Luo & Long 2008).

**Nonexistence**

According to the latest research on international marriage migration in Asia, government policies are not encouraging this trend: “Bolstered by negative stereotypes, deep-seated suspicion of women migrants from less-developed countries
ensures that some state policies, especially concerning naturalization, serve to deter international marriage migration” (Kim 2010: 726-727). As far as Chinese authorities are concerned, a dilemma exists. They try to control and regulate migration, deter registration, and scrutinize reproduction (cf. Xuan: Chapter 3, and Chi: Appendix 7). But because cross-border marriages temporarily serve traders’ interest or solve social problems (such as a lack of marriageable women), officials tend to tolerate these marriages, particularly when those in charge of implementing policies are members of the community and feel sympathetic towards families in despair, a situation that frequently occurs in rural settings where officials are more closely connected to their communities than in urban settings.

In the meantime, though, tolerance creates resentment amongst those who conform to normative patterns of family structure, and who must cope with restrictions on reproduction. Hence, those Sino-Vietnamese couples that do not comply with the law, despite apparent integration in the community, enter a space that Coutin calls ‘nonexistent’ (2003).

- Space of nonexistence

The undocumented are denied legal rights, social services, and full personhood, and can be detained and deported if apprehended by immigration authorities. [...] And yet, clearly, regardless of their legal status, migrants do exist in that they live, work, go to school, play, have parties, ride buses, and so forth (Coutin 2003: 173).

The mere existence of a child as the ‘natural’ outcome of marital alliances reopens the debate of legal legitimacy of Sino-Vietnamese couples who, for the most part, encounter difficulties in registering their relationship. Indeed, if many couples tend not to bother complying with formal administrative procedures to register a marriage while they are still with no child, the occurrence of a pregnancy (cf. Chapter 3) and then a child generally impels the couple to find a way to secure their child’s
To assess how families negotiate their social position, I will build on Coutin’s innovative concept of ‘spaces of nonexistence,’ i.e., spaces of invisibility, exclusion, repression, exploitation, and violence. This concept appears relevant to explaining the liminal state of many Sino-Vietnamese families in the social spaces of borderlands because, similar to the situation of illegal Central Americans migrants entering and then living in the USA, Vietnamese women and their Chinese husbands are living a ‘normal life’ albeit an illegal one. But the idea of nonexistence also reflects the fact that in many cases, regardless of legal recognition, nonexistence is also a social status. The concept of nonexistence conveys the idea that groups of people are excluded from public life and recognition because of their legal status, even when they apparently live just like others in their community. Mai (cf. Chapter 3) recalls one anecdote that happened to her:

— In 1990, after I weaned my first son, my husband and I had sex again, and I fell pregnant very fast. I had decided to go back to Vietnam to see my family. I left my son in the village where we lived and my husband accompanied me to the border in Dongxing. We took a bus. We both carried some cash with us. When we reached Nasuo [a checkpoint on the way to Dongxing] someone found out that I was Vietnamese, was going back, had money and didn’t know my way. The person denounced me. The bianfang [border defense] officer took all my money because, of course, I didn’t have any ID. My husband gave me his money and I returned to Vietnam for a few days … In eighteen years in

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1 Coutin’s article on nonexistence (2003) inspired a workshop entitled “Studying Spaces of Nonexistence: Methodological Concerns” that was held at Murdoch University (Perth, Australia) in March 2010.
China, my identity has only been checked once at home [in the village]. I asked to normalise my status but the immigration officer refused to legalise my marriage. He threatened to repatriate me to Vietnam because I didn’t comply with the migration law. So I asked him: “You don’t want to legalise? Do you want to raise my children? If you send me back, there will be two more Chinese orphans in China. Do you want Chinese children to live with no mother to take care of them? If you send me back I will come back for them.”

He eventually let me go and that was it. What could he respond to my argument?

Mai’s negotiation for her residential rights is an overt example of the tactics migrant women may use when they confront Chinese authorities. Indeed, Mai could have gone back to Vietnam, like many other migrants do so to satisfy the agents of state power, and then return to China in a few hours’ time to recover her daily life. Several Chinese residents in Hekou and Dongxing also explained how, when political tensions impose a more severe enforcement of border control, Vietnamese people with illegal status all cross the border back to their native land, waiting for thing to return to ‘normal’, their own ‘normality’ being exactly situated in this nonexistent position:

On a day-to-day basis, their illegality may be irrelevant to most of their activities, only becoming an issue in certain contexts, such as when changing jobs, applying for college, or encountering an immigration official. The undocumented thus move in and out of existence. Much of the time they are undifferentiated from those around them, but suddenly, when legal reality is superimposed on daily life, they are once more in a space of nonexistence. The borders between existence and nonexistence nonetheless remain fuzzy and permeable (Coutin 2003: 186).

The line between registered unions and common-law marriage may not find an overt embodiment and remain blurry in practice, just as trying to classify which circumstances reflect the most genuine intimate engagement between two partners in
cases of marriage, alliance, cohabitation, prostitution, or partnership is somehow meaningless when all occupy common liminal ground. The ambiguous content such terms encompass reflects how the notion of legality, as a living reality, has lost most of its significance in borderlands.

But, as Coutin reminds us, “the physical and social presence of illegal aliens may be more important than their legal nonexistence given that illicit travellers create transnational communities and develop underground economies and exchanges, such as remittances that migrants send ‘home’ to their families” (Coutin 2003: 194). This counts as a valid explanation for Chinese local authorities’ uneven treatment of the activities of Vietnamese migrants in China. In the economic sphere, they benefit from no protection and generally request little surveillance, but Vietnamese migrants participate in the local economy by extending business network and providing Chinese traders new market prospects beyond the Chinese border (Grillot in press).

- Coping with liminal ground: manipulating the interstices of the law

The ‘women of no nationality,’ as some Chinese scholars have labelled Vietnamese women, cannot expect China to grant them with the right to live in China (Li, Luo & Long 2007). They cannot rely on asylum policies either, because China does not legally recognize the status of refugee1 – a position that Vietnamese women themselves do not refer to – but rather considers them as illegal economic migrants. Therefore, whether or not they chose to migrate to and remain in China, they cannot

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1 “In China, UNHCR continues to advocate for the enactment and implementation of national asylum legislation in line with the Refugee Convention and has confirmed its readiness to assist the Government in this area” (available from: http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e487cd6&submit=GO, consulted on June 28th, 2012).
claim the right of residency and face the risk of being deported back to Vietnam. Their situation also differs from that of Central Americans in the U.S. in the sense that Vietnamese women in China do not really complain or try to seek help. Due to the political regime of their host country, they understand that they cannot do so and as a consequence, they do not resist Chinese policy and they remain in the shadows of the borderlands, trying to remain inconspicuous. In Guangxi, a research team under the supervision of Zhou Jianxin (2002) has conducted some investigations in a few border villages in the late 2000s. In the tradition of Chinese anthropology, most of this research was applied anthropology and aimed to address issues of concern for the Chinese government (be it central or local). Based on their findings, they provided recommendations to local policy-makers. In the case of Sino-Vietnamese cross-border marriages, these recommendations reflect the real problems that such families represent: marriage registration, access to Chinese citizenship, permanent residence rights, children identity and citizenship, right to education. But while the marriages are presented as the consequences of Chinese economic reforms and opening-up, and friendly policies towards neighbouring countries, they are also set out as being disadvantageous for China itself rather than for migrants. Hence, the researchers recommended that the state takes new measures in the legal system with the aim of easing border entry management, social security and family planning (Luo & Long 2007).

The problematic status of these couples, but more particularly those Vietnamese women in China, labelled as victims of trafficking or illegal migrants, represents a threat to the Chinese nation-state, these Chinese scholars argued. In that sense, these migrants’ position may be compared to that of the refugees whom Malkki described in her account of Hutu refugee camps in Tanzanian borderlands.
It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates “the problem” not first in the political oppression or violence that produces massive territorial displacements of people, but within the bodies and minds of people classified as refugees. This interiorization – making it appear that there are specific empirical features or personal traits that render this or that person recognizable as a refugee – is related to another aspect of the literature: the universalization of the figure of “the refugee.” “The refugee” has come to be an almost generic, ideal-typical figure – so that it is not uncommon to see references to “the refugee,” “the refugee experience,” “refugee psychology,” and so on (Malkki 1995: 8).

In the same way, the Chinese categorization ‘feifa yimin’ [illegal migrant] or ‘guaimai renkou’ [trafficked people] has also become a stereotyped figure of the social landscape of the borderlands. Drawing upon Mary Douglas’s notion of cleanliness (1966), Turner states that

transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least “betwixt and between” all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification … liminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarding as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, “inoculated” against them, though having been themselves initiated into the same state (Turner 1967: 97, original emphasis).

Turner’s articulation of the concept of liminality is particularly illuminating for conceptualizing Vietnamese women and Chinese men engaged in cross-border marriages. If we only consider that the majority of cases are non-registered – hence rather vulnerable and non-recognized – unions, and if we recall the popular discourses that circulate around those couples, we can relate their position to that of liminal individuals. They stand between the status of single and spouse, i.e., a status that generates comments, suspicion, and worry from local people, while it triggers scrutiny and sometimes intervention from Chinese and Vietnamese authorities. By representing an abnormality in the realm of migration, conjugality, and social welfare, these marriages threaten normality and are conceptually polluting by changing marriage practices and thus affecting social morality at the local level. Vietnamese women may steal Chinese money, Chinese husbands of other women, provide alluring spaces where Chinese men can satisfy their needs, and so on. They also
reproduce children who become a burden to Chinese society since their status is associated with that of *hei haizi* [black children/nonexistent children], but also create inequality and generate animosity amongst communities. In short, these couples threaten social stability.

The main issue here is that so far, there is little opportunity for many cross-border families to leave such a liminal state. Hence, remaining in liminal space generates, over the long-term, the existence of a social fringes, i.e., people who live a ‘nonexistence’ for an unlimited period of time, under vulnerable conditions that lead them to adopt tactics to respond to the changing environment that potentially jeopardises their insecure position. In the terms of Turner, on a metaphorical level, a liminal person is ‘invisible’:

> The symbolism attached to and surrounding the liminal *persona* is complex and bizarre … The structural “invisibility” of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified (Turner 1967: 96, original emphasis).

Translated into the context of borderlands, this means that couples and families are generally neither legally nor socially recognized as such, hence not labelled or classified under the category of ‘marriage.’ But the obstacles they encounter at various levels to become ‘properly married’ are so serious that most individuals cannot find their way out of the allegedly temporary state of liminality. Coutin states that “[t]he space of legal nonexistence occupied by unauthorized immigrants is therefore another dimension of a previously entered space of social nonexistence” (Coutin 2003: 184). Indeed, many men and women who sought social recognition by finding a mate and switched from being bachelors, single, divorcées, ex-convicts, ex-prostitutes, elderly, or any other sort of social outcast position to that of the normative ‘married person’ may actually enter other realms of marginality.
This is, as I addressed earlier, due to the continuing social stigmatization attached to mixed marriages, but this is also directly related to their administrative status that deprives them of the advantages of citizenship. Caught between a ‘before-life’ from which they intend to emancipate themselves and an ‘after-life’ that can only be partially achieved in terms of social position, those couples find themselves in a nonexistent position, in a liminal space that provides them with the condition needed for resistance: in case of problems, they can leave, cross the border, return to their hometown, become visible in their own space, reconnect with a ‘before-life,’ or indefinitely remain on the fringes of either society.

Zhang is a middle-age businessman in Hekou. He manages his brother’s hotel while his wife manages two brothels:

— I originally come from Guangxi and I arrived in Hekou in 1990. I met my wife in 1995 and we have been living together since. We only got married in 2004. My hukou was in Guangxi, and she could not go there to get married with me. So we waited until we could buy an apartment in Hekou, then transfer my hukou here\(^1\). Then, it was possible to do the formalities. We had our son in 1999. But theoretically, we couldn’t have a second child. We paid to buy a hukou for her in Guangxi (using personal connections). She has never been there but she is considered a Chinese woman from Guangxi now. This means that she must comply with the One-Child Policy as I do. However, we do have a second child now. We had to pay 3000 yuan to register the first one

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\(^1\) The hukou’s policies and practices started to change from the late 1990s for investors: in 1998, they were allowed to acquire the hukou of the city they invested in. The implementation of this policy in small cities such as Hekou extended this right to those who, among other conditions, purchased housing (Nyiri 2010).
on my hukou. In 1999, my wife was still officially Vietnamese and we were not married, so our first child was considered born out of wedlock. According to what we have been told, we would have to pay 78,000 yuan now to register the second. This time, the fine is for being born out-of-plan.¹

A Min (cf. Chapter 2) also provides the tip he employed to thread his way through the family planning policies (the ‘fake adoption tip’ widely used among ordinary Chinese couples):

— My wife and I have lived in Hekou for four years. She had just arrived in China four years ago when I moved here from Hunan. I am 30 years old and she is 22. We have a six months baby-boy [born in March 2008]. We are not registered. Before, I was working on the casino boat² and I’ve been arrested and fined. For this reason I can’t have a passport. I’ve registered my son on my younger brother’s hukou. He has a rural hukou that allows him to have two children. He already has a daughter. My son is officially his second child.

These are only two examples of how families manage to get around the legal requirements in terms of family planning, registration of marriage and birth. Many informants mentioned how difficult it has become without enough money to buy a property. It seems that a few years ago, it was possible to virtually buy a hukou from

¹ According to the – regularly amended – One-Child Policy, couples must apply for a permit if they want to have a second child (assuming that they are eligible for it). In addition, they have to wait five years between the two births. If they do not comply with all the requests, their newborn is considered ‘out-of-plan’ (Skalla 2005).

² For a few years, an illegal but tolerated casino operated on a boat tied on the Chinese bank of the Red River.
whichever place one intended to establish residency status.\textsuperscript{1} Apparently, the law has changed on this particular point and it is not possible anymore. Nowadays, the practice for most people who wish to move their \textit{hukou} from their native location to their new living place (in the context of permanent migration) is to buy a property that allows one to obtain a new \textit{hukou}. This eases much of the formalities linked to family, and allows border people, for instance, to arrange marriage registration easily when they do not have the financial means to travel all over China to get a stamp or an appointment with an official.

In Hekou, many men who live with a Vietnamese partner are recent migrants who do not necessarily intend to spend a life time in Hekou and do not wish to move their \textit{hukou} there while they may have a more convenient access to other sorts of formalities in their hometown and thus prefer not to lose this benefit for the sake of registering a marriage. Therefore, many couples remain unregistered. However, as A Min and Zhang’s cases attest, dealing with these policies is unavoidable for all when a child is born. The decisions made at this stage of a relationship say a lot about gender imbalance as well as about the prospects each couple imagines for their future. In many cases, when the child is a girl, couples tend to register her in Vietnam, while boys are more likely to be registered in China. Men tend to be more committed to securing their child’s status when they have boys. A registration in China means that a father can have greater control over the choice related to his child: school, health, etc. If a child is registered in Vietnam, the responsibility for the child falls on his mother, while the father is excluded from any official role. This complex position in which mixed couples are put when facing their responsibilities as parents also reveals the

\textsuperscript{1} I was not able to obtain consistent, reliable information on this policy and more precisely on its implementation in migration locations such as border towns.
level of trust and the importance of family pressure on the couple to secure a child’s future, whether in China or in Vietnam. As Jiang, one Chinese informant officially married to his Vietnamese wife, puts it, “registering a marriage is also a responsibility towards spouses’ parents, the expression of filial piety: it makes both family relieved from worries, it’s respecting them.”

However, as in the 1970s when dating was not allowed in Chinese schools and universities, authorities have a very delicate role to play – apart from repression – when dealing with these relationships after the fact:

Therefore there would be a tension between the administrators’ human sympathy toward any possible separation and the room available for them to accommodate these ‘special’ requests (Zhang 2005: 8).

To avoid this, in the case of dating at school, authorities would rather reinforce their power and prevent such dating from happening. But in village life and cross-border marriages, authorities do not play the prevention card, but rather adopt a compassionate and compromising attitude towards mixed couples. In Wanwei, the Jing village near Dongxing, local officers register the presence of Vietnamese wives, but they still do not provide them with a permanent residence card or even counselling on international marriage procedures.

Behind some administrators’ rigidity in stopping any dating as a disruption to the moral, ideological and structural order was, surprisingly, a concern about being put in a position where they would have to bangda yuanyang [beat apart ‘the couple of mandarin ducks,’ a metaphor for an affectionate couple], an immoral thing to do according to many local folk tradition (Zhang 2005: 9).

Like de facto student couples, the existence of Sino-Vietnamese couples is a reality that put local authorities in an awkward moral position, particularly when the latest are represented by local empathic officers who comprehend why such phenomenon exists. Therefore in villages such as Wanwei, authorities vacillate between two possible behaviours: denouncing the illegality of Vietnamese women
and ruining local families’ life and hope, or tolerating them, regardless of central regulations, and adopting a flexible attitude to allow mixed couples and families to remain united, under various conditions negotiated between parties: payment of bribes, keeping a low profile in the community, close surveillance. But, as I mentioned earlier, local administrators know perfectly well the concerns of their fellows, who are sometimes relatives, schoolmates, friends or acquaintances, and such dilemmas occur within a complex web of social networks, where one who is representing law and authorities must choose between going against central regulations or against his own network of social connections. It is an awkward position to negotiate, which leads to all sorts of compromises and an uneven status quo.

In sum, to avoid inviting the Chinese state into their private life, some couples explore various ways of manipulating the interstices of law and regulations to obtain or maintain a status: fake ID, fake marriage certificate, foreign hukou registration, adoption, and so on. But on the Vietnamese side, things seem more difficult to arrange. Finally, for those Vietnamese women who do not have the possibility of regularly returning to Vietnam and updating their administrative status, their marginalisation increases. Not only can they not obtain a marriage certificate hence a regular residence card in China, but they also lose their rights in Vietnam.

For those who left their community without registration of temporary absence, their names were erased from the permanent registration book. When they return home, these women experienced difficulties in the registration process to re-obtain their rights as citizens (Quy 2000: 14).

This position jeopardises their mere existence as (any) citizen and thus deprives them from citizenship rights anywhere, leaving them in a state of profound vulnerability, and enhancing their survival skills. But for them, finding a social
existence in a space of legal nonexistence is certainly one of their most difficult challenges, as the next informant’s story will describe.

- Ostracism prevailing over the endeavour to integrate

A storm of fury burst upon her head:
“But you’re one of those vagabonds past all shame!
This wench is no good, decent woman, no!
She must have fled her man! A hen that prowls the fields!
You hemmed and hawed and could not clear yourself.
I’ve bought you soul and body — you’re my slave,
and yet such airs and graces you display!
Where are you lasses who enforce my law?
Teach her a lesson — deal her thirty strokes!”
(Du, 1983: 90-91)

Thoa is a charming young lady from Hanoi to whom my well-connected Hekou’s friend Qiuxia introduced me one summer night (cf. Appendix 5). Her fiancé Li Fan, with whom she works, is a Chinese man who sells Tibetan medicine. Thoa, Qiuxia and I met at the usual refreshment stall on the riverside where Qiuxia loves to go after dinner to meet up with her local acquaintances and where she likes to show up with interesting and influential people. After a few polite exchanges, it appeared to me that Thoa put considerable efforts in the way she talked, behaved with Qiuxia, reacted to me, and in the extremely enthusiastic and flattering portrait Qiuxia made of her. She was acting more Chinese than Chinese themselves in her politeness, elegant manner and modest attitude. This very first evening, Thoa suggested I accompany her the next morning to one of Lào Cai’s temples for some praying. I could not decline this opportunity to learn about a young Vietnamese woman’s belief and since she obviously trusted me enough to disclose her personality to such extent, I immediately accepted. Early the next day, Thoa and I crossed the border and jumped on a xe-om [Vietnamese moto-taxi] on the other side of the bridge to reach a small temple a little outside of Lào Cai city. Her cousin whom she first introduced as her didi [younger
brother in Chinese] joined us bringing along some offerings for the ceremony’s master. While I quietly sat in a corner of the room, I observed this man carrying on a somehow obscure private ceremony in front of Thoa and her cousin, involving what looked like a magic trick and the impressive insertion of a huge needle through the master’s cheeks without signs of bleeding. At the end of the ceremony, Thoa gave me a few 500 dong bills to keep for good luck or to give away if it could help people. This was an entry point to a subsequent conversation about remittances, debt and gratitude to those to whom she felt beholden: her cousin, friends who helped, and the spirits. “I asked for this ritual to thank the spirits and to bring me good luck,” Thoa confessed. For reasons she did not explain, she mentioned paying her cousin’s tuition fees in Vietnam and giving free Chinese language lessons to the children of ‘people who were nice to me,’ raising the issue of indebtedness so embedded in Vietnamese social relations (Lainez 2012, Barslund & Tarp 2008).

Intrigued by her performative behaviour at these various occasions, including a dinner with her husband and his business colleagues, I asked Thoa, after numerous unfruitful attempts, to tell me more about her relationship to her husband and his circle of friends and colleagues. As a statement to introduce what was going to follow, Thoa started her narrative by a saying which I am not sure if it was Chinese, Vietnamese or if it emerged from her own imagination: “A child sees love and marriage between adults as a beautiful drawing. An adult has to draw it himself.” Thoa puts aside her relationship to her husband to emphasise her busy life and to show her ability to be independent, organized and determined. Her daily routine starts with an hour of Yoga training and an hour of dance, followed by a day of work at Li

1 The next day, Thoa took me to the place she teaches Yoga and where she takes lessons of Latin dance. I did not expect to find such a setting in Hekou and this was an illustration of the degree of
Fan’s medicine business, before her class in Chinese language in Lào Cai: “Two more years and I’ll graduate!” We went on walking in the quiet streets of Hekou when I told her how impressive her schedule sounds like. After a pause, tears appeared in Thoa’s eyes and she managed to say: “You don’t know what I went through…” Sensing that our conversation was reaching a sensitive point, I tried to orientate it towards more positive aspects. Thoa articulated a personal position that I had observed on numerous occasions among Vietnamese women, whether I could actually see its implementation during social interaction or I could deduce it from the descriptions of their relationships with the Chinese communities in which they lived. Thoa forces the respect she deserves by adopting a firm position when confronting gossip and stories that the disclosure of her identity triggers in social conversation. But, perhaps assuming that she needed to justify her position, or to prove her sincerity to an outsider like me, Thoa continued her narrative by providing me with the short life-story of a duplicitous Vietnamese female that was meant to illustrate that this was what she was not, and to put an end to allegations about her honesty. She did it the same way she had done earlier during the dinner. The natural way she included these accounts in her conversation appeared, to me, as a form of unconscious need for comparisons or a discourse technique she uses during any conversation related to her position as a ‘Vietnamese women in Chinese society.’

Thoa sometimes manages to conceal her Vietnamese identity (as does Li in Dongxing) and she experiences what it feels to be integrated in a group that maintains such ambivalent attitudes towards the Vietnamese community. But she also experiences from the inside how these representations are spread and shared with integration some Vietnamese women can reach through their involvement with community life and social activities.
newcomers, and whose social interactions they influence. Thoa may not be a stereotypical marginalized individual if one simply socialises with her. She is healthy, young, beautiful, educated and smart. But in Vietnamese society, at this point, she is challenging the norms. She is too educated, she comes from a broken family, she is too old and unmarried, and she has other expectations than being what her gender has prepared her to be: a housewife and a mother. And even when she said she dreamt of being one – she suggested “with Li Fan” (her husband) – this translates a yearning for ‘peaceful normality’ rather than a lack of personal ambition, of personality, or an obedient response to her feminine fate, as she was taught since her childhood (Rydstrøm 2004). However, Thoa’s feelings demonstrate how, despite appearance, integration of Vietnamese women into Chinese society through marriage remains limited, as long as local negative representations circulate. Several other informants’ narratives similarly articulate a sense of disillusionment behind a face of satisfaction, but they also share a common reality: they know that the range of alternative options is narrow, and remain convinced that at least they escaped or avoided a worse scenario in Vietnam. Women’s choices to live, study, and work in China with a divorced Chinese man need to accommodate an impossible return, and an uncertain and limited possibility to integrate within their host society.

- Anecdotal exploitation of nonexistence at the intimate level: the rented womb

And yet, the difficult position in which some Vietnamese women remain in these Sino-Vietnamese borderlands attracts abuse from some local individuals, abuses that go much farther than forced marriage or prostitution in regard to commodification of their bodies. Li told me this story once when I asked her to elaborate on rumours
that she mentioned once about surrogate mothers. After I insisted, she eventually shared the story of a woman she had worked with in the past, when she was a kindergarten teacher in Móng Cái.

— Nhan worked as the kindergarten cook, that’s how I know her and can assure you that such things do happen around here. Nhan was in her early forties then and the mother of four children in Vietnam: three daughters and one son. This is what she told me. Her Vietnamese husband was a drug addict. With him, they once made a lot of money selling drugs but the police eventually caught him. So Nhan became a single mother when her youngest child was less than a year old. The people they were dealing with for drugs took everything from them, the house, the money, and the drugs. So she tried to come to Móng Cái to find someone who had money to take care of her and her children, and she ended in prostitution, until she met a Chinese family who offered her some money to give birth to their child. She had already broken social rules, so she accepted. Meanwhile, her eldest child took care of the younger in Vietnam. Nhan was locked in the family’s house in a room upstairs during her pregnancy. The wife was faking her own pregnancy until the birth. Then, they took the baby to the hospital where they obtained a birth certificate. They took care of her and they gave her the money as agreed. But she was

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1 This topic recently reached the headlines in Vietnam with the case of several women found in Thailand (http://tuoitrenews.vn/cmlink/tuoitrenews/society/vn-surrogate-moms-paid-5-500-for-each-baby-1.22750).

2 Li explained later that the baby was conceived through sexual intercourse between A X and the Chinese husband of the couple. Thus, she was the biological mother and no medical procedure had been involved.
ambitious, and she wanted the husband and the child! Eventually she got nothing, no husband, no child, and no money. She went back to prostitution. When I met her she was back in Vietnam working in the kindergarten. She could speak baihua (Guangxi’s dialect) like me, and she had learned it from the days she was doing drug smuggling with her husband.

A De and Xiao Fang, both my informants in Móng Cái, later confirmed to me that surrogacy cases occur in and around Móng Cái. However, A De stressed that even though surrogacy is still legally banned, it was a widespread phenomenon in internal China as well (involving Chinese people only). According to him, Móng Cái simply provides prospective family with potentially more available women in need of financial support, hence more likely to comply with cheap arrangements and poor pregnancy conditions than elsewhere. Xiao Fang mentioned the case of a woman who was paid 50,000 yuan to give birth to a couple’s child: she did it and simply left after the delivery. Another one had an affair with a soldier and fell pregnant. She gave birth to a daughter. A go-between proposed this baby for adoption to Xiao Fang and her husband since they had trouble having a child. They were both considering the offer seriously when I last met her. It is difficult to define whether such scenarios might be labelled as adoption, child trafficking, surrogacy or simply personal arrangements, but since each case also generates contradictory interpretations from the informants, I will simply leave it here and call for more research on the topic (Pashigian 2009; Lainez 2011a, 2011b). My purpose here was to point out a specific form of abuse of the situation of marginality in which some women in Vietnam find themselves trapped. The case that Li recalls not only illustrates the extent of the commoditization of some women who make themselves available to ‘womb purchasers’, it also offers insight into what also motivates those candidates beyond the financial benefit they may gain.
Even though I am interpreting a second-hand story that certainly lacks all details and subtleties, Nhan obviously made it clear to her confident that she was offering her womb in exchange for a relationship. Money was not enough. She was sacrificing herself for the sake of her own emotional needs and the security of her children’s future. This may have represented the ultimate step she could make, at her age, to attempt to get out of the difficult social and personal circumstances in which she found herself.

The contemporary manifestation of second wives is further complicated by the matter of surrogacy. Relationships that might constitute surrogacy in contemporary Vietnam are surrounded by ambiguity. Possible surrogate relationships include a surrogate who undergoes IVF to produce a child for a recipient couple (now illegal); a woman who is impregnated by a man under an arrangement in which he hopes to claim the resulting child for himself and his wife; adultery associated with producing an heir; and polygamy, also known as the phenomenon of taking second wives [vợ hai] (Pashigian 2009: 51)

Then how far are the above cases from that of a Chinese men who is buying a wife who can bear and raise his child, or the case of a Vietnamese woman who is asking a Chinese man for a child (whether she discloses her purpose or not) and then flees with the baby? How does the economy confront the emotional and security need of these men and women who may see a child as a way to create a family, a structure – even unstable – on which they can rely? What role do moral values play here?

The occurrence of extortion cases points to the challenges brought about by increased social interaction among strangers in public spaces … Moral values and behavioural patterns seem to lag behind the fast-changing economy and social structure. Dealing with strangers poses an urgent challenge for every Chinese individual, regardless of his or her moral orientation. For those who are still deeply embedded in particularistic and contextual morality, the immediate challenges include the cultivation of social trust beyond one’s personal networks and the acceptance of some universal moral values that apply to both related and unrelated people … The market-driven modernization project not only brings in a new kind of universal ethics but the ideology of individualism that posts new threats to many forms of sociality and collective morality. The pursuit of self-interest and individual gratification in certain circumstances can lead to extreme egocentric and antisocial behaviour (Yan 2009: 21).
This leads us back to the question of *daode* [social morality] (*cf*. Chapter 1), and what constitutes norms in that matter, a discussion with which Yan, drawing on other scholars’ approach and his own findings, has recently engaged by investigating changing human behaviours in the ‘increasingly risky society’ (2009: 21) China has become (Jeffreys 2006; Zheng 2009; Farrer 2002). For the last two decades, the socialist morality still praised and promoted in Chinese ideological discourse as a condition to social stability (Sigley 2006) is being constantly challenged by various social phenomena and personal actions beyond the government’s control. Nowadays, some Chinese assess that their society is coping with what they call a ‘morality crisis’: it emerges in everyday discourse at each level of experience as an expression of worry, an explanation to many deviant behaviours, and it is constantly exacerbated in mass media’s reports. Many Chinese articulate their confusion in a nostalgic discourse referring to their past social life. For those over fifty years old who experienced the Mao era, “the nostalgic experience achieves a moral critique of the dilemmas of Chinese modernity [which] are directly manifest in the conflict between increasing material wealth and the weakening of concern for morality… the past becomes a source of moral challenge against the changing cultural terrain of contemporary Chinese life” (Yang 2003: 287). The younger who were raised and even born after Maoism – most of my informants – emphasise the contrast between Chinese current society and the 1980s – i.e. the period extending from the launch of the economic reforms (1979) and Deng Xiaoping’s speech (Shenzhen, 1992) that boosted them. Most accounts reflect how various forms of solidarity amongst people compensated the hardship on the economic level and the ramping corruption already palpable at the government level that all were facing at the time. But while they complain about the recent changes, these Chinese also recognize how difficult it has become to totally
avoid personal participation in the alterations of moral values of their transforming
society: people pay bribes, exploit each other, and comply with various malfunctions
of their environment because they reached the point where they believe having no
other choice to satisfy their needs, to assert their rights, or to achieve their personal
project. These inner conflicts reflects how confused Chinese people are when making
decisions today compared to an era “offered simple answers to complex questions:
direct collective action over painful individual decisions, reliance on the state rather
than a grinding struggle for the self, national pride as opposed to self-doubt” (Barmé

Ci Jiwei calls such morality crisis a “crisis of the moral self, a crisis of moral
willingness or moral agency” (Ci 2009: 24). According to Ci, it results from a
breakdown of reciprocation among people, and the absence of what he calls the
‘identification condition’ since “[i]t is through identification with moral authority and
moral exemplars that ordinary agents, in a moral culture like China’s, acquire an
understanding of norms and the motivation to act in accordance with them” (Ci 2009:
23-34). Articulating this collective perception among Chinese intellectuals of a moral
crisis – or a moral predicament (Liu 2004) – in Chinese society, which my research
findings inform, Ci Jiwei summarises:

[B]y moral crisis I refer to a state of affairs in which large numbers of people fail to
comply with more or less acceptable rules of social co-existence and cooperation
rather than a state of affairs in which large numbers of people pursue legally and
morally permissible but arguably less than admirable conceptions of the good. Given
this notion of a moral crisis, it is not surprising that the moral crisis in post-Mao
China is at the same time a crisis of social order (Ci 2009: 20).

It is in this particular context, whether it is called ‘immoral’ or ‘chaotic’ in
public discourse, that the exploitation of an unknown woman’s body for the mere
purpose of reproduction appears, in the realm of intimacy and conjugality, as one of
the latest outcomes of the destabilizing of social morality, rapidly overwhelmed by financial power.

**Conclusion: Getting out or sinking in marginality?**

In this last chapter, I have discussed the way personal projects generate the impulse to cross a social and physical border, and challenge a predetermined social position. I also endeavoured to sketch out how the idea of social identity lies beyond the articulation of a wide range of intimate yearning and resistance in the form of actions. What is at play in the dynamics of these cross-border alliances is the normativity that every individual has a right to seek for his or her own wellbeing, regardless of his or her past trajectory. Despite the representations of each other that limit the possibility of existing openly in the community and in the state’s eyes, the core question is not located in national identity and what it conveys. Marrying across a border is not about conveying or adopting Chinese or Vietnamese identity, it is not about embodying the archetype of an imagined and idealized conjugal figure, but it may be simply about a yearning to be part of a couple, part of a normative structure, a conventional pattern of family in societies which are strongly structured by the entity of marriage, a life milestone. But not entirely achieving the passage between singlehood and marriage, these people remain marginalized and hence ‘nonexistent,’ a barely sustainable position. Therefore, for these Chinese men and Vietnamese women, it is the social identity that marriage provides, specifically that of ‘spouse,’ that allows them to interact with the rest of the society and hopefully gain access to social recognition, i.e., to exist as a member of society rather than an outcast. And this depends on the form each couple actually takes, or shows, or performs.
By creating a ‘site’ governed by different rules, the state of marginality, especially embedded in a physical space of liminality, allows the transgression of rules, an absence of limits on people’s actions, and life flexibility. But this position is at odds with the sought-after normality. From this perspective, we can either deem cross-border marriages as a possible way to overcome a socially disadvantaged position, or on the contrary an uneven and exposed pathway to further sink into a nonexistent position on the fringes of society. And for migrating Vietnamese women, this can signify switching from being an outcast in Vietnam to becoming a subaltern in China.
Conclusion

We must not only consider dominant ideologies but also consistently implicate interactions between people so as to better understand how actual experiences reshape knowledge (Lyttleton 1994: 276).

My initial interest in Sino-Vietnamese cross-border marriages emerged from various – although mostly non-academic – readings on the topic of human trafficking in the Great Mekong Sub-Region. I noticed how most reports tended to classify people and activities in fixed categories, which did not seem to reflect locals’ viewpoint on the matter. Smuggled people easily became ‘human trafficking victims,’ targeted groups were ‘women and children,’ social network resemble ‘criminal organization’ and activities could only read as ‘prostitution, forced labour and coerced marriages,’ When cross-border marriages were the core topic, the focus was on ‘naïve and poor women’ and unscrupulous ‘disadvantaged bachelors.’ These categories also used endlessly in other social and cultural contexts, merged into the same pigeonhole, a variety of situations, and interpreted them through a rather narrow lens. This piqued my curiosity because such perspective would force me to make a choice and decide whether these marriages were the result of human trafficking or were the outcomes of encounters shaped by economic and demographical determinism. But such a picture draws upon the use of established categories on a number of individuals who appear anonymous through the statistics, regardless of their personal background, cultural roots or socio-economical position. Hence Chinese and Vietnamese men, women and children are labelled as vulnerable, venal, poor, handicapped, naïve, un-educated, single, and so on. In the eyes of many anthropologists, these categories blur the picture more than they illuminate it (Molland 2011; Peters 2003).
Out of curiosity and frustration with the existing literature, I aimed to further explore the topic and conduct research on mixed couples in border towns. This led me to question the relevance of the discourses of human trafficking and economic determinism to describe the specificities of patterns in human interaction at the Sino-Vietnamese border. While trying to understand whether or not such frameworks were valid at the local level, I identified another discourse that describes the cross-border marriages. While both discourses try to capture genuine relationships as well as more obscure and complex forms of pragmatic interactions, the empirical experiences were missing from depictions. During my fieldwork and in analysing the data, my purpose was to articulate the reality underneath different layers of external discourses by confronting them with individuals’ narratives.

Following Bu Wei’s call for an ‘insider’s perspective’ (2006) to relativise our perception of alliance patterns, I rendered men’s and women’s voices in a way that allows us to re-articulate the link between migration and marriage, or yearnings and pragmatism. Above all, I described the personalities, the trajectories and the prospects of the anonymous embedded in statistics. By focusing on life-story narratives and social discourse, I reflected upon borderlanders’ explanations of the how and the why of cross-border marriages, eclectic and sometimes contradictory though their viewpoints may sometimes appear.

The main challenges and the main outcomes of this research was highlighting the common ground of very diverse profiles of couples, of individuals, and of communities, in order to propose a broader perspective on the phenomenon of cross-border marriages, while still preserving a perspective on individual experiences and agency. In that regard, a focus on narratives revealed both ostracism and frustrated expectations in conjugality, offered an interesting insight of couples often deemed as
the result of contextual or personal drama. Based on the combination/merging of various perspectives, I will now briefly summarize the research findings.

**Research findings**

In engaging in this research I also expected to deepen my perspective on cross-border marriages but also to consider what these stories ultimately say about the current conditions of Chinese kinship, family values, and social disparities, as well as the relationship between two populations linked by an ambivalent history made of conflicts, political brotherhood, cultural sharing and economical dependency, constantly challenged/undermined by trust issues.

The first major question I elaborated is how borderlands, the site of geographical margins by definition, also act as the site of various informal practices. This includes marginal practices of individuals on the fringes, whether their position is the result of predetermined conditions or post-exposure to an Other. Physical and metaphorical layers intertwined to render a complex picture of cross-border marriages as a component of border towns’ social landscape. In this context, I argue that the act of migrating, particularly migrating to these surroundings allows individuals – Vietnamese women and Chinese men – to leave the plight of the ‘discredited’ (i.e. already stigmatized), for that of the ‘discreditable’ (i.e., vulnerable but not necessarily subjected to discriminating stereotypes) and maybe one day the ‘un-discreditable’ (Goffman 1986).

My argument is articulated through four main chapters that each underlines one specific aspect of cross-border marriages in a Sino-Vietnamese setting. Chapter 1
elaborated on the conditions of a research project on a sensitive matter orientated my initial interest towards unexplored aspects of it, i.e., the reflections and controversies they generate in borderland communities. Chapter 2 described the particulars of a setting in which practices shaped social interactions and constitute an inspiring ground for those in search for alternative way to live, grow, increase position and wealth, or to drop social principles and act impulsively. But in this environment, cross-border marriages also embody the recurrent sensitivity of Chinese and Vietnamese relationship by translating the ambiguity of their historical experience through individual bodies and subjectivities. Chapter 3 focused on life stories and used them as a prolific material to propose different ways of identification of conjugal practices in borderlands. The various patterns of marriage illuminate transgressions in regard with conventional conjugality. Chapter 4 highlighted how the public’s social representations, encapsulated by a stereotyping popular discourse, interact with individuals’ intimate expectations on marriage, ideal partners and hosting society. Chapter 5 finally examines how the combination of a liminal position and the agency of men and women shape their quest for social recognition. It suggests how the main purpose of these specific cross-border marriages is about yearning to be part of a normative structure and gain the social recognition entailed in the status of marriage, and despite persistent administrative obstacles. In a border setting shaped by trade exchanges, characterized by the permeability of physical frontiers, the intensity of migration flux, and absorption of new sets of values, the search for unchanging conjugal ideals – the archetypal traditional wife and the responsible protective husband – remains a great factor shaping the encounter between unsatisfied people. In this context, I demonstrated how Chinese and Vietnamese people use unconventional patterns of alliances to cope with new socio-economic conditions that weakens their
communities – social balance, organization and functioning – as well as their personal lives, and how mixed marriage can then be interpreted as a means of emancipation (for women) and as an exit from a marginalized social position (for both women and men).

Discussion and broader perspectives

In sum, this research abandoned the conventional explanation for a social phenomenon, and it unveiled another interpretation of it by deconstructing its image/representation. Restoring a tangible reality to the obscuring portrait of cross-border intimacy entailed in academic discourses on human trafficking was made possible by analysing and juxtaposing community perspectives and individual experiences. Furthermore, this research’s findings inform current scholarly discussions on various aspects of the recent socio-economic upheavals in East Asia, particularly in China and Vietnam, for the last three decades. It reveals how such new living conditions particularly affects the margins of society, and how those people finding it difficult to adjust to a challenging, pressuring and often excluding environment, may find refuge in alternative forms of socialisation. These issues are refracted in changing practices in the realm of conjugality, on which cross-border alliances located in borderlands sketch a significant picture. Cross-border marriages inform us on social changes in general and on their consequences concealed in individuals’ yearnings and communities’ behaviours.

I first stress the major outcomes of socio-economic transformations in both China and Vietnam, i.e., massive rural-urban migration. Social mobility encourages spatial redistribution of population that disrupts local social hierarchies and lead to
un-anticipated outcomes in communities: fierce competition for the new market economy benefits, gender empowerment in rural areas, regional economic disparities, and a demographic ‘marriage squeeze.’ By training the spotlight on a remote section of the Chinese and Vietnamese map, I bring the discussion back to the local level and the specificities of regional context. Examining the impact of migration in Hanoi or Shanghai does not resonate the same way as it does in a border town, the exact symbol of what migration is accomplishing. Chinese megalopolis would not undergo their current development without the workforce of rural migrants. But smaller towns like Hekou in China or Móng Cái in Vietnam (respectively the two most developed cities among my four field sites) would not emerge as crucial communication, trade and human exchanges nodes in the region if not for migration. A large portion of the new population in these border towns come from slightly more advantaged rural areas or from cities that do not provide them with enough opportunities to enhance their socio-economic position. All these migrants are actively engaged in participating in the economic development zone, generally for their own benefit. But, as one informant put it, they would not go if not for some specific advantages. Among them, the repositioning on social hierarchies emerges as a main benefit driving migration. Lao Zhou (cf. Chapter 4) once stressed:

— These nongmin [rurals] are nothing at home; they have no culture, no skills, and they find no satisfaction. Here, they believe they have power, just because they have money and dominate Vietnamese people; but they just found people who are lower than themselves. Look at their behaviour, here they forget who they are, they forget that they are nothing more in their homeland.

Interactions with an Other participate in enhancing ordinary people status and establishing their economic power. This takes place in an environment dedicated to
border trade that shaped relationships between neighbours, in a country where an individuals’ social position is measured by the extent of one’s influence and control over people. Many portraits of cross-border couples here indicate that when the private realm of conjugality is associated with such modes of exchange, men put their position at risk. They may benefit greatly from an association with a foreign and exploitable Other, but they may as well lose the precious capital of social face, creating a constant dilemma at the individual level as well as the community level: i.e., a community who maintains a set of representations meant to warn individuals of the danger of crossing a specific frontier: that of the intimate.

In this work, I also highlight the difficulties that particular categories of people find in adjusting to the conditions brought about by tremendous social upheavals through the last three decades, which leave them on the fringes of society and create pools of outcasts. Hence this research follows on from the burgeoning scholarship on marginality in China (Cheung et al. 2009; Wu & Webster 2010, Zhang et al. 2007). On either side of the Sino-Vietnamese border, the example of rural bachelors, social losers, men choosing alternative forms of conjugality, as well as stigmatized women such as divorcées, highly educated, or single spinsters, i.e., the outcasts of the marriage pool, raise the questions of the treatment of social minorities in China. There is a great deal of scholarship on social minorities in East Asian countries, although most of this literature tends to concentrate on ethnic minorities, on class minorities, such as exploited migrant workers, impoverished peasantry, laid-off workers, and even cultural minorities such as artists. When gender issues are evoked, the debate centres on the inequality of treatment toward women in the course of socio-economic changes, leaving men’s condition out of the picture. But those groups who are more difficult to identity since they spread through many categories of a whole population,
meaning that for the most part, those invisible on the fringes of society have yet to be discussed in academic literature. This research on marginal and marginalized practices in conjugality located at the border only represents one example of what studies of the fringes could offer. China and Vietnam are (too) rapidly transforming in unprecedented ways and impose their power on the regional and the global sphere. Our understanding of their societies cannot afford to leave on a side those people whose actions make a difference by challenging such an emerging force. The viewpoint that sees a threat in the anticipated millions of Chinese bachelors in the Asian region (Ross 2010) might be a fairly radical position, but it nevertheless points out the necessity of taking into account those social groups who, for various reasons, do not fully participate in the mainstream impetus for modernity and enjoy the social and political rights of some of their peers.

Finally, the findings illustrate significant changes to the principles that govern social interaction, revealing how the post-reform era’s socio-economical upheavals have damaged the solidarity that re-emerged in China after the devastating Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and that used to bond Chinese population throughout the 1980s. Many of the Chinese who, as adult, observed social change since the implementation of the economic reforms (1979-) and maintain a critical viewpoint on these, may look back with nostalgia on this epoch. They believe that values such as morality, honesty, trust, generosity, hospitality or filial piety, being significant of the post-Maoist period, are in danger now that another set of values driven by pragmatism and materialism dominates family and social life (Yan 2009). “Daochu dou luan [chaos is everywhere,]” often commented street observer Lao Zhou. I have detailed in this research the transgression of many social principles and norms through the practices of cross-border marriages. It illustrates a major issue that many emerging
countries encounter during their socio-economic transition, i.e., sustaining amongst their population the respect of fundamental principles of morality, and ethics as a fundamental principle to govern society. The lack of social and political concern toward the plight of Vietnamese women in borderlands not only reflects public attitude toward the Other, the foreigner, but an absence of empathy, individualistic behaviour, and the value of pragmatism over solidarity in general. It is believed, as Yan demonstrated in his account on good Samaritans (2009), acting out of empathy now brings trouble. In China, the powerful social reactions (both in terms of indifference and scandalized position) triggered by every social incident show the populace’s concern, deep consternation and inability to cope with sudden metamorphosis in people’s attitude toward each other. Here, the sole example of China’s transformation of social values inform on the dramatic outcomes of inefficiently monitored social changes of emerging developing countries. I believe that such upheavals in the realm of principles and social values deserve more attention than it has received so far.

It is now time to put all my field notes back into their box, not without a hint of regret for not being able to offer a space to all those men and women who confided their stories and feelings in me. I put to rest dozens of moving moments and interesting details about daily-life, conjugal relationships, and fascinating life trajectories that remain in those pages. But I achieve the writing of this dissertation being confident that later, I will eventually do justice to any undisclosed data by exploring further relevant connections that emerged too late from literature on additional related topics. There were many ways to approach the realm of conjugality, and focusing on one specific angle inevitably leaves many questions unaddressed. The analysis of household life, children’s perspectives, communication, love, intimacy,
and remittances for instance, all of which are missing in the framework of this thesis, await further, promising explorations. The choice to examine questions of perceptions and status of these marriages deemed as meaningful ‘site’ instead of lively experience emerged from fieldwork serendipity, and I hope that this research, as it turned, has contributed to original approaches of social marginalisation.
Appendix – A few life story narratives

Appendix 1. Nguyet: A life of turbulence

— My name is Nguyet, I am 55 years old and I come from Haiphong. When the American war occurred, I was married and I went to fight as well as my husband. But a year after our marriage, he died in Cambodia and left me a widow and the mother of our son. Eight years later, my family managed to arrange a marriage for me with a man in the district of Cam Duong, in Lào Cai province. “Even poor, even ugly, he’s still a husband,” I was told.¹ He was a Tay² man. Life was hard then, we were very poor, and I suffered a lot. We had nothing to wear, and we had no blankets. Sometimes people would offer clothes. We did not have much to eat either. When I had my periods, I used old pieces of clothes. My husband was always drunk and very violent. One day, he even burnt our house in front of our children and me. He was abusing me a lot and when I refused to satisfy him, he used to beat and I was often injured, on the face or the nose. Once, he wanted to have sex just a few days after a child delivery. I got a disease that necessitated surgery. We were married fifteen years: I gave birth to three children – two boys and one girl – and I underwent twelve abortions in the local dispensary. All my children have had bronchitis, and one son even died from pneumonia. We remained very poor almost fifteen years, leaving an auto-subsistence life, until a gold mine was discovered in Lào Cai. Then we could work there and make some money. [She cries] I was wounded many times and one

¹ This details stands as an example of the vulnerability and the ostracism that hangs over women who fought for the National Liberation Front, became war widows and whose sacrifice their country has slowly forgotten (Taylor 1999).

² The Tay ethnic group is partly established in Lào Cai province.
time, my husband hit my head very badly. This time, his family encouraged me to escape from him to save my life and those of my children. Even his family had to endure his violence, everyone was afraid of him. They gave me some money, I took my older son with me [the one Nguyet had from her first marriage], left the son I had with him and I left. I was one month pregnant of our daughter. I had decided to keep the baby because my uterus was already so damaged, I didn’t want to undergo another abortion. It was not an easy journey home. I had no money. I had to work all the way, stopping for a temporary job, like cutting sugar cane, then go on, then stop again. It took several months to return to Haiphong. I gave birth to my daughter after I arrived but I didn’t manage to start a new life in Haiphong.

[When you were in Lào Cai, why did you wait fifteen years of torment before escaping your marriage?]

— There were my children, and wo de ming bu hao [I have a bad destiny], so yao ren [I have to endure].

[Why did you leave your son¹ in the village when you left?]

— I couldn’t take him with me when I left, I didn’t have enough money. And he was also his father’s son after all, I thought that when my husband would die, there would always be someone to shaoxiang [to burn incense] for him.² Today, my husband is dead, our son is living well there – he’s married – and the local government offered him a compensation for our land that they took for the gold mine.

¹ The surviving son of this marriage with her Tay husband.

² This son, being the eldest of this couple, could carry on the ancestor worship of his father’s lineage.
Once in Haiphong, someone offered me a job in Hong Kong, so I took a boat, but I ended in a camp for illegal migrants there. I spent a year there until I was released after an interview and sent back to Haiphong with a small capital [7 millions dong/3500 yuan]. So I invested it in a fresh fruits’ business. My elder brother gave me a piece of his land and my other siblings gave me some money so I could build a house. My daughter once fainted when she was five years old. She was diagnosed with a brain disease. She was cured for free because we were a poor family. My children went to school quite late and were sponsored by a program to help poor families. I started to frequent Móng Cái and Dongxing to stock up with fresh Chinese fruits. I then settled in Móng Cái where I lived in a small boarding house with other people. I sold fruits during three years, until 1998.

[At this point, Nguyet provided me with two different versions of her meeting with her Chinese husband. In her initial account, Nguyet explained that she had met her husband in Dongxing in the waiting room of a hospital in 1998. She was there to receive some treatments for gynaecologic troubles, consequences of her numerous abortions. He took care of her, brought her food during her hospitalization, and he even paid for her treatment. They got along well, so he proposed to take her to his home, with her children and live with him. In the second account, mentioning again the way she met her Chinese husband, Nguyet said it was in 1996, while she was having difficulties in Vietnam, a Vietnamese woman deceived her by offering some work in China. She followed her, accompanied by one of her child. Once the border crossed, she was sold to a Chinese man. At first, she refused the marriage, but then she got used to it. Hence, the exact circumstances of Nguyet’s initial encounter with]
her Chinese husband remains uncertain, and it is unclear whether she agreed on the marriage or not.\textsuperscript{1} 

When I met my laogong, he was still single at 48 years old – I was 46. He’s from Guangdong province. He asked me why I was alone and he felt touched by my story, ta kelian wo [he pitied me]. He was nice with my children. They have lived with us until they were grown up, then they returned to Vietnam. My elder son is now married and has a child. My daughter is also married but her husband has just been murdered in Fangcheng.\textsuperscript{2} You know, my laogong also had a hard time. He was the illegitimate child of his family. When his mother got married she got already pregnant by a lover. So my laogong’s brothers and sisters all despise him. He bought several Vietnamese wives but he’s too honest and they all cheated him and left. But we didn’t meet that way. I stayed eight years in his hometown until I came back in Dongxing two months ago [2006]. He worked in construction sites where he dealt with cement. There, I took care of the field, reared pigs and poultry, and so on. But my stepmother didn’t like me: she often insulted and mistreated me. I was happy with my laogong

\textsuperscript{1} This is assuming that the husband she mentioned the first time was the same as the one she mentioned later.

\textsuperscript{2} While I was staying in Dongxing, I first heard from a friend that Nguyet’s son-in-law had just been assassinated in Fangcheng city where he was living. The rumor said he was murdered because he was not paying his tax. Nguyet’s daughter had just arrived in town to stay with her mother. When I met Nguyet the next time, she told me that her son-in-law was actually in prison where he was beaten to death by the inmates’ hei shehui [mafia]. In Chinese prison, inmates are submitted to various informal rules including all sorts of rackets by cell’s chief – laoda [chief]. Those who do not comply are often beaten, punished, and humiliated, sometimes until death (Human Rights Watch 2010). The drama that the family was experiencing prevented another meeting with Nguyet. Two years later, when I returned to Dongxing, she was no longer seen around town/the place, she had vanished.
but I couldn’t stand his family’s treatment anymore. So I decided to come here [Dongxing] and dagong [work]. My laogong stayed in Guangdong. His brother and his wife live in Dongxing as well but they want to get rid of me too. Here, I live with some family acquaintances. I would like to go back to Guangdong. We have a house there. When we call each other on the phone, we cry. He is nice with me: he takes care of my health and my wellbeing. He respects me, and never insults or beats me, you know?
Appendix 2. Yen: Forced to leave Vietnam, and forced to go back.

— It was in 1999. I was 21 years old and I was working in a garment factory in Thái Bình since I left secondary school. I wanted to visit my sister who lived in Lào Cai because she gave birth to her second boy. I had to take a train and commute [to] Hanoi. I travelled with my younger aunt who was 29 years old. While we were waiting for our next train in Hanoi station, a man in his thirties asked us … what time the train for Lào Cai would leave. We answered and he offered some plums to thank us. It was nice of him. But the plums were drugged. I only remember that I could walk but I had no reaction. I simply followed him, like my aunt did too. We took a taxi from Hanoi to Lạng Sơn. I also remember a ferry to cross a river. I ‘woke up’ in China, about a hundred kilometres from the border. This man was living in Nanning; his father was Chinese and his mother Vietnamese. My aunt and I stayed two weeks at his place with his Vietnamese wife and two sons. They were professional brokers. The man threatened us, [and] said he would beat us if we yelled. His Vietnamese wife tried to entertain us, she even took us out for some walks. But she had no money because her husband was keeping it. She was his accomplice, and she didn’t try to help us. This was their business. Then a Vietnamese madam took us to Dongxing. There were seven or eight Vietnamese girls at her place, aged from fourteen to thirty. A Vietnamese man who pretended to work for a company had approached the fourteen year-old girl; but, he raped her in a hotel in Hanoi before taking her to Dongxing. The madam just tried to reassure us, and we were a group, so we felt less frightened. We knew we would be sold for marriage. We stayed there two more weeks. I contemplated suicide but I thought about my family and I didn’t do it. However, I threatened to commit suicide and I think I was convincing because when I
asked the madam to allow me to choose my husband myself, she accepted. Three men came to see me, and I refused all of them. Then I accepted the fourth one because he looked nicer. One night, six members of his family came to take me to their home by motorbike. We travelled a long distance by night so I could not remember the road.

The first nights in his home, my husband did not abuse me. He talked to me. He understood I was afraid. Instead, he waited patiently until I agreed to spend the night beside him. He did not ask me to work either; he was nice and bought me some clothes. I developed feelings for him. After seven months, I was able to communicate in baihua. My husband was nice, I didn’t have to work, and he never yelled at me. I stayed two and a half years in the village. I got pregnant and had a boy. A month after his birth, I wrote a letter to my family. But the letter came back. Then, I wrote another one, with pictures, and we started to communicate, even by phone. I missed my family and I asked to go back to Vietnam to visit them. My husband’s family agreed and gave me some traditional medicine as a gift to my parents and I left, without my son. But once in Vietnam, my family persuaded me to stay, to not return to China. They said it was too risky, that I could not speak Chinese properly, and that I could be sold again. Actually I had come back to Vietnam with three other Vietnamese women and a trafficker, and this frightened my mother. My family hid my husband’s calls, they would not let me speak to him. They convinced me to stay a month in Vietnam and to think about my situation before making a decision. So, I went to Lào Cai to see my sister and [to] take my mind off things. I was sad; I missed my son so much, he was only two years old when I left him. My sister took me out, made me meet people, and I met my current husband. At first, I did not like him, but he was compassionate and nice with me. He let me look at my Chinese husband and son’s pictures when I

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1 Yen learned from her in-laws that she was sold 10,000 yuan.
felt depressed. Four months later, we had developed some feelings and we got married. That was fate. We now have a son. My husband reassured me a lot and today, I found peace with myself because for a long time I felt guilty to have abandoned my Chinese son. Several times, I tried to call him but I lacked courage at the last minute. Sometimes I missed my Chinese husband too. I felt so sorry to leave him alone with our little boy. I still feel sad but it is better to leave the past behind.
Appendix 3. Zhao: Married on the Other’s side

—I was born in the Year of the Horse [in 1954] in Kunming where I lived until 1959. My father died in 1960 and my mother had to work as a housekeeper to feed my brother and I. I was raised the hard way.

I am 55 years old now [2008]. I have spent nine years in Vietnam, from 1998 to 2007, in Yên Bái and later in Phú Thọ provinces. My current wife is actually my second wife, because the first one died in a car accident in China in 1992. I’m a widower. My mother-in-law sold our house, and now I own nothing. In Hekou my wife and I rent the place where we live. Currently we save our money for the marriage formalities. We manage to save 1000 yuan a month, including 700 yuan from my taxi business.

My son was born in 1988 and he was only four years old when his mother died. When I came to Hekou, I met a prostitute and I followed her to Vietnam with my son. But she was hitting him, so I left her. Then, someone introduced me to another woman there. But we often argued, especially with her father. She left for Hanoi and it ended our relationship. I saw her once again at the funeral of her father, years later. We didn’t talk to each other.

In Vietnam my son could go to school so now he understands both languages. He used to say he was Vietnamese. My first Vietnamese wife [the prostitute] managed to register him at school and made it possible for him to have an education in Vietnam.

Then in 2002, I met my current wife. She was taking care of the pigs at her elder brother’s house. When I was in Vietnam, someone denounced me to the
authorities after I had a fight with my ex-wife [the Vietnamese prostitute]. I had to return back to China and do the paperwork so I could re-enter Vietnam legally. Now I have a passport issued in Kunming. You know, in Vietnam, people still denounce each other. Before being caught I used to say I was Vietnamese and I took care of pigs, corn fields, like my wife, I had a peasant life. But who knows what she was doing before that? We have been together for six years already. She was born in 1966, she’s 43 years old. My wife and I are getting along well. I came back to China a little earlier than my wife, in 2006 so I could prepare our life here before she also move.

She came in 2007. We work as caretakers for an insurance company in Hekou. And I have my taxi business too. My wife is quite lazy. She was not married when we met and her family agreed on our marriage. An uncle introduced us. We went out for four or five months before holding the wedding ceremony. I told her: “I have a son, don’t hit him, or at least don’t do it with a bench!” She was still living at her parents then. I don’t know much about her past. She has a good temper, doesn’t like to talk. She goes to the market and buys groceries because I don’t have time for this. She works well for others but not so much at home. [He smiles] She’s not so good at house chores! I have always talked in Chinese to my son, so my wife learnt Chinese that way. There are more migrants married to Vietnamese women than local Hekou’s people. My wife got used to the life here. People don’t comment much on us, they’re used to this [mixed couples]: it’s common now. My wife and I go back to Vietnam once a year for the New Year. Our relationship is yiban [fine]. But I have a bad temper. We often argue. I can be rough sometimes. But I’m honest. During the 1970s, I was a coolie, and I’ve done all sorts of work. Now, I’m too old for this. I am just working as a moto-taxi driver. The motorbike belongs to my son.
In Vietnam, I have a house in Yên Bái, which is occupied by my mother-in-law at the moment. If I don’t have much money after getting old, I will spend my retirement there. My wife has friends in Hekou but if I decide to leave, she will leave with me.

When my son was 15 years old, he started working in Lào Cai, then he learned how to drive and he became an electric bus driver at 18 [Hekou’s main public transport mean]. He’s 20 now and works for this company. He still lives with us, but he doesn’t care where he will live later.
Appendix 4. Kim: A life back and forth between Lào Cai and Hekou

— You want to know my family history? It was not a happy family. My mother is Hoa.¹ She was 18 years old when she was forced to marry my father² in early 1978. He was 20, was very capable, had money, even seven motorbikes! He liked my mother so she had no choice. In November that year, my elder brother was born and just after that, my mother, her brother and her parents had to leave Vietnam and come to China. But she had to leave my baby-brother behind with my grandfather. My mother told me that she didn’t want to leave him; she was so hesitant that she waited and waited until the very last boat took people to China.³ Her family left but she didn’t get on board after all, because my father didn’t want her to leave and he beat her. He kept her at home until they could flee together to Yên Bái, which was more secure than Lào Cai at that time. In 1980, my second brother was born and in 1982 my family moved back to Lào Cai province and stayed in the town of Phô Lu. I was born in 1983. My father worked in the ‘highway work-unit’ but he started to make some business with Hanoi. It was forbidden at that time. My mother worked in the market sewing jackets. My elder brother was always outside and my second brother used to take care of me. In 1986, my mother … started some petty trade as well. She was selling little dogs to Chinese people in Hekou. Later, because she was regularly going to Saigon for her business, she brought my brothers and I with her to China and left us with our maternal grandparents who were living in Hekou. That

¹ This woman, and her mother and father, are ethnic Chinese, identified as Hoa in Vietnam.

² This man’s mother was born in China (Chinese) where she was once married and had a child. She went to Vietnam to work, and there she met a new husband, a Vietnamese man. Hence, Kim’s father was recognized as ethnic Vietnamese.

³ The Hoa (Chinese from Vietnam) were evicted from Vietnam around 1978-1979.
same year, my father disappeared. In fact, he followed another woman. But, he reappeared a few years later. Then, my mother brought him back my two brothers while I stayed in Hekou with my grandparents and my uncle. When it was time for me to go to school in 1989, my mother sent me back to Vietnam and I stayed with some of her relatives. I remember that my father sometimes came to see me while my mother was away in China, I liked that, and it was fun. But, my mother was always afraid that he would kidnap me and she finally took me back to China. I actually spent my school years between China and Vietnam until 1994 when my father did kidnap me. [After that] I stayed with him, his new wife and their daughter. When my mother found me, she asked me whether or not I wanted to stay. I said I wanted to be in Vietnam, so she agreed. But, because she didn’t trust my father’s new wife, she didn’t want me to stay with them. So, I stayed at my paternal grandmother’s home until she died in 1996. Then, I went back to my father until I eventually became independent and started to work in 1999. I recently learned that my father had a baby with the woman he followed in the first place [who is different from the one he married later]. So I have an ‘extra’ little brother in Vietnam. My father told me that he found his son 18 years after he was born. He is now financially helping him and his mother. My father’s second wife also had another daughter from a previous marriage. So you see, we are a complex family!

Before living with my husband Lufei, I lived with my mother in Hekou. My mother also remarried. The man used to beat her because she would gamble and lose her money, then borrow again and lose again. So she divorced him and lived with me. Lufei takes care of my family. He once cleared her debt and found her a place to live. He has a good heart, and this is why I married him.

I have lived in Hekou permanently for five years now [in 2008]. Before
knowing me, Lufei didn’t have much. He didn’t have a secure job and his parents were modest retired persons. If I wanted to follow another man now, that would not be too hard because I have already ‘married down’ by marrying Lufei. I couldn’t bear it if he went looking for another woman. I sacrificed everything to be with him. I have had other opportunities to get married before. On our wedding day, he cried … thanking me for taking him as a husband. He had everything to benefit from by marrying me. I don’t know why I married him – we simply had fun together. I refused to marry my Hanoi boyfriend, and I even turned away a fiancé from Beijing who was ‘rich,’ as my mother would say… I met Lufei when I was a guide. We were colleagues. I was a guide for eight years until one day I found myself old and decided to get married. Between 2000 and 2003 I had not seen Lufei until I saw him one day by chance in Hekou. We began to see each other privately, but we never really had a romantic dating period – to put it nicely – we were always surrounded [by] many friends, eating and playing mah-jong all together. It would have been different in Vietnam.

[Slowly, Kim started to give me different insights into her husband]

Lufei and I … lived together for five years in a dormitory before we got married, that was before we managed this hotel coffee shop. We used to rely on mah-jong for a living. Lufei is very good at this game but he also likes to drink and he can get really mad sometimes. I … felt very tired of his anger first. I even attempted suicide several times, you know? When he’s drunk, he says harsh words, and he breaks things… When I met him, his girlfriend had just dumped him and he didn’t trust women anymore. He didn’t want to get married because he was persuaded that women are only interested in money. He was very sad. I often think that he would die alone if I left him, and since it’s only when he’s drunk that he acts badly, I always
come back to him. I accept him like he is. I actually got married to avoid small talk. In China, people don’t care, but living together as a couple is not well thought of in Vietnam. We wanted to wait for Lufei to save some money before we got married. We married twice, once in Vietnam and once in China [Kim explained in detail each step of the wedding rituals, including the crossing of the river]. We wanted a wedding ceremony according to tradition. In Vietnam, the more complicated it is, the better considered you are. If you make it casual, you are disregarded. Parents usually want a high bride price, but it must not be too high, otherwise it looks like the bride [has been] sold. We did not want to be associated with those mixed couples you can find in the Vietnamese market. And for Vietnamese people, the way we got married was the best way to do it [so we would be] recognized.

Now my main concern is my mother. She was so indebted because of gambling that she could not even be part of my marriage. She fled to Qiujin [Yunnan] because she was bankrupt. Later, I … cleared her debt once again but she continues to play, so we had a big fight lately.
Appendix 5. Thoa: The perfect wife

— I come from an unhappy family. My father was very violent and he used to hit my mother. She left to Taiwan, then South Korea to work and make a living for our family. I have a younger brother. At school I was good at sciences. My grandfather was a scientist and I wanted to follow his path, but I failed the entry examination of the University of Sciences in Hanoi. Although, I passed the examination for the Foreign languages department. That’s how I have learned English and Japanese for three years. Later, when I came to Lào Cai I started to learn Chinese. I met my husband four years ago. We work in the same company. We sell Tibetan medicine to Vietnamese people. It’s authorized\(^1\) and real medicine. For that matter I have to take examinations about knowledge on Tibet because part of my work is to explain to customers where this medicine comes from.

I dream about becoming a housewife and recover my English language level. I would also like to open a school of Vietnamese language for Chinese people in Hekou.\(^2\)

[About her husband Li Fan]

He *nian jing* [prays]\(^3\) everyday because he is grateful to have found me when his affairs were going bad. He is a very pragmatic man. He does not speak

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\(^1\) Authorized by the Chinese sanitary services. Thoa specifies the origin of the product since all sorts of fake goods circulates within the border’s informal trade channels. Earlier in Dongxing, Xiao Fan gave an insight of this fruitful business she was temporarily involved with as a translator.

\(^2\) Such private school already exists in the city.

\(^3\) Li Fan is a Buddhist.
Vietnamese. I believe when cross-border marriages are based on love, Chinese man make more effort to learn Vietnamese.

In the past, Li Fan has been married to his childhood friend. It didn’t work out. They divorced when their daughter was three years old. Now, she is eleven. Li Fan and I met in 2003, soon after he left them. Two years later I was working in his company. We were just friends until we started our relationship in 2007. Today we are still unsure about getting married. Our main problem concerns the place where we want to live together. Li Fan doesn’t like Hekou, it’s far from Kunming where live his ex-wife and his daughter. And I don’t like Kunming’s climate, and the city is too far from Vietnam. We could both make concession out of love but there would always remain a gap between us. You know, we intended to buy an apartment in Hekou but he decided to buy two in Kunming instead… Li Fan blames me for being too idealistic.

[What do you think of him?]

Li Fan is a lazy man: he doesn’t help me with house chores. He leaves his dirty clothes everywhere. Before his wife used to do everything and he got used to it. Sometimes, I’m annoyed and I shout at him, I get angry but he stays unsupportive. So I’ve decided to let it go, nobody is perfect, I won’t change him now!

[How is your relationship with Li Fan’s family?]

Oh, his mother likes me a lot because I have changed her son. Now he talks more than before, he articulates better his own feelings. He takes better care of his daughter whom he used to neglect. His ex-wife is also someone nice but they could not get along well and they were not happy as a couple.
What about Li Fan’s network of friends and colleagues?

Chinese people are *hen keqi* [very polite] with me, but when they realize who I am, and when they call me *Yuenan mei nü* [pretty Vietnamese girl/women] to address me, I become very sensitive. They may not mean it but I can see a change in their attitude towards me. Even though they remain polite, they see me differently. I remain the same with them.

Hekou’s people disregard Vietnamese people for two reasons: prostitutes and some dishonest business partners, even though there are good individuals among them. I try to change this image by always remaining neutral and serious. At first some people do not realize that I am Vietnamese but when I need to disclose my origins, especially when we meet officials, I can see a change of attitude. I feel very *nanshou* [uncomfortable] with this contempt.

[sighing] You have no idea of what I went through to get here. My strength comes from my mother, she suffered a lot and she supports me. At first, when people saw me returning from China wearing nice new clothes, they used to say that I was prostituting myself, that I loved money and was sleeping with Chinese *laoban* [bosses] to obtain this. Meanwhile in China, people believed I was staying with these men by self-interest. But then, they observed my behaviour and they changed their mind, *tamen bu guan le* [they don’t care anymore]. Chinese don’t think further than that. But in both places, I have long been the subject of gossip; everybody was watching me. I had to get over it. In Vietnam, people spread the fact that Li Fan had a wife and a daughter in Kunming and that I was his mistress. Even today, some people continue to

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1 This recalls Thoa’s behaviour during the diner and even during our first meeting with Qiuxia.
believe this. I don’t know where my strength comes from, really. Yes, my mother. But love? I am happy with him, but… It was not easy.
Appendix 6. Tam: Facing a stigma

— I left school after I failed the high school examination. I started to sell vegetables at the market and take care of the house. I was bored in Yên Bái.¹ My family was poor, my stepfather was alcoholic and I wanted to go elsewhere. Two friends were selling tofu at the market,² and they … suggested following them to China to find a job. We left on the quiet, crossed the border at Lào Cai and spent a few days in Hekou. Then a man took us to Xinjie, a Giay³ village in a mountain about 80 kilometres from Hekou. The two friends escaped with the man and I found myself alone. I was 20 years old [in 1991]. The man who bought me cultivated manioc and corn with his family. He was 27 years old [and] healthy. I did not understand why and how much he bought me [for]. There weren’t any other Vietnamese in the village. I couldn’t speak Chinese and I panicked, [fearing] no one would defend me. My mother-in-law and sisters-in-law were nice with me: they did not ask me to work at the beginning. But, I had to sleep with my husband during one month and twenty-five days. He raped me the first week until I accepted him and submitted. I did not fall pregnant. I told the family I wanted to go home. In Vietnam, my mother was worried and she told the police, but because she didn’t have any money to offer, they didn’t do anything about my disappearing. One day, my husband was away and the family let me go. I crossed a river, and I managed to take a bus to Hekou thanks to people who bought me a ticket (I was crying). Once in Hekou, a Vietnamese man I knew helped

¹ Yên Bái, a northern province on the south of Lào Cai province in Vietnam.

² Tam only knew these women for one month and found out later that they were deliberately deceiving young women to sell them to China. They regularly changed their living place and approached their victims by selling tofu in the markets.

³ The Giay are a minority ethnic group.
me to cross the border with another Vietnamese woman. When we arrived in Lào Cai, we took a train to Yên Bái. I arrived in the middle of the night and my mother welcomed me. I told her what had happened …

Later, I got married with a Vietnamese man and we had a boy. My husband was nice but he became unfaithful to me. He took drugs with his lover, a prostitute, and felt very sick. He died a year later from a lung disease. Who would want a woman who had been sold in China, then became a widow in Vietnam? There was no hope for me in Yên Bái. I returned to China and settled in Hekou. I tried to find a proper job, but it was not easy. I had several boyfriends, Chinese businessmen who said they would take care of me. I did prostitute myself, what choice did I have? I tried to return to Vietnam but people kept talking about me, and I didn’t want my mother and my son to suffer from gossip. Staying in China was easier. Then I met my laogong. He’s a worker, he’s not rich but we get along. It’s been five years now. My mother takes care of my son in Vietnam and we visit each other sometimes. During the day, I help my Vietnamese friends selling their drinks here. I also do recycling, but I know this is temporary.¹

(Tam’s narrative continues in sections included in Chapter 4 and 5)

¹ A few months later, Tam’s trajectory took her to Vietnam once again, where she now works as a maid for a stable, foreign employer in Hanoi (personal communication, January 2012).
Appendix 7. Chi: For the old days

— I came from a poor family. We were five children, an elder brother and sister, a younger brother and sister. I am the third child. My father served in the army 6 years during the Vietnam War, [so] we didn’t have much to eat at home. I was married in Vietnam. I still have two children there who live with their father. I left my Vietnamese husband in 2001 after having been married to him 17 years 2 months and 4 days. He was cheating on me for 4 years with a woman in her thirties. They already had a 2 year old daughter together when I found out. Anyway, it took a year to get the divorce papers done and until today I haven’t received the half part of the house¹ that my ex-husband owes me. He lives in it with his new wife and daughter! After the divorce, I went to Taiwan to work for three years.

My daughter is 13 years old now and she lives alone in the house I … built after I returned from Taiwan, near Hanoi. On the land I bought, there is also a rice field. My mother takes care of it. My son is 22 years old and works in Hanoi. He has lived with his father since we separated; his house is just ten minutes walk away. He often comes to see his sister who doesn’t want to meet her father [because] she doesn’t like him. Yes, we thought I couldn’t have children anymore. But, I fell pregnant with my daughter nine years after my son.

My Chinese laogong is 51 years old and comes from a village around Maguan [near Hekou]. You need to walk an hour to reach the place! He was also previously married and has two daughters. He was beating his wife because he wanted a son and she did not want any more children. She left for Guangxi where her sister is living and

¹ Chi talks about the house where the family used to live in before the divorce.
she remarried. She then had three more children, all boys! My laogong did not want to remarry because he was afraid that a second wife would abuse his daughters. But you know, he is the eldest of three boys in his family and all of them had girls. He needed to have a boy. He came to work to Hekou when his two daughters were old enough [and didn’t need] him. One is working in Beijing, and the other one lives with her boyfriend. My laogong wanted to find a life partner for his old [age]. First, he found a young woman who agreed to be with him but she was gambling at mah-jong and always asked for money. So he let her [go]. You know, he drives a motorcycle to transport goods in Hekou. He had this colleague who was married to a Vietnamese wife. That’s how we met.

After I returned from Taiwan, I engaged in small trade between Lào Cai and Hekou. I was selling flowers in the Yuenan gai [the Vietnamese street, the local idiom used to designate the Vietnamese market). This is where I met the matchmaker. Since 2001 [presumably the year she returned from Taiwan], some men had approached me but I always declined their offers. I would say: “Wo hen nimen [I hate you all]!” I didn’t trust men anymore, I wanted to live alone, I was happy as I was. The matchmaker was also selling flowers. She started to talk to me about marriage, and tried to convince me that it was important for me to remarry. She was saying: “Think about the old days, your son stays with your husband, your daughter will soon take care of her in-laws, you won’t be able to take care of yourself …” She introduced me to a first man, but he was zang [unclean]. The second one was looking for a wife he could bring back to Shanghai. He even agreed to give me some money for my daughter, but I didn’t want to go that far.¹ By the way, the matchmaker was a pian ren [a cheat]. You know what? When the man from Shanghai was interested in me, she

¹ Hekou is located about 2,700 kilometres from Shanghai.
suggested keeping the money for my daughter while I would follow him to Shanghai, and give it back when I would return to Hekou!¹ So then she introduced me to my laogong [husband], who I first found a little benben [foolish]. He promised 2000 yuan for my daughter and 500 yuan for the matchmaker. After two weeks, wo jia gei ta le [I married him]. I don’t know, I think I became fond of him. Then, since the matchmaker and him were acquaintances, he negotiated and only gave her 200 yuan as a symbolic contribution, but nothing to me. He said he had no money at the moment, and that he would give me some later. “Manman lai [take it easy],” he said. I once asked him for 1000 yuan, pretending I had to buy wholesale flowers, but I spent the money on my daughter. When I told him afterward, he accepted to consider this as his contribution to our marriage.

[On her newborn]

My laogong and I have been together for two years now. We didn’t know each other very well before we married, and our relationship is yiban [so-so]. After two months with him, I fell pregnant. I went to Lào Cai to abort without telling him. When I came back, I confessed. He was so angry: “You are crazy,” “I want a boy,” “You killed my child!” and so on… The following months, I fell pregnant again. This time, unsure, I asked around. My family in-law treats me well. I have visited them several times, but I wouldn’t live there! They advised me to keep the baby. In Vietnam, my family members were divided. They advised me to give birth to the baby and give it to my brother if it was a girl, and to keep it if it was a boy. Both [of] the Vietnamese

¹ Being an illegal migrant, Chi did not have a bank account in China. Unless she kept the money in cash with her during her travel (this is considered unsafe), she had no way of saving it until she could return to Vietnam, change it into Vietnamese dong (Vietnamese currency) on the black market and eventually bring it back to her daughter in Vietnam.
ultrasounds\textsuperscript{1} confirmed it was a boy. But then, we had to talk about the delivery.\textsuperscript{2} My family-in-law said: “Give birth at home. You have experience, your mother-in-law can be your midwife.” But you know, I am not that young and I was afraid of dying if there were complications. My \textit{laogong} suggested I had to decide by myself. Eventually I delivered in Hekou’s hospital, after the labour was induced, and we had to pay more than a thousand yuan. But it went well. People offered us a stroller and some clothes. My \textit{laogong} wanted a son in the past but he didn’t expect to have a child now. He is 51 years old, you know, it just happened. It cost us 17,000 yuan to register him on his \textit{hukou},\textsuperscript{3} mei banfa [there was no escape].

[She described the room where we were chatting]

After we married, I moved to the place where he was living with his younger sister. It was small though, so we moved into this room last week, for the child. His mother came from Maguan and took our space in his sister’s place; actually, she’s waiting for us to be settled so that she can also move in with us. I am sleeping with our baby on the large bed that we just bought [a double mattress put on the floor], while my \textit{laogong} sleeps on the small wooden bed you’re sitting on now. Later, his

\textsuperscript{1} In China, to avoid discriminative abortion, it is not permitted to reveal the sex of a baby during ultrasound examinations. In Vietnam, there is no restriction.

\textsuperscript{2} Delivery at a hospital can prove quite expensive for a rural family, especially one that has no welfare cover. In addition, the baby was to be born out of wedlock and out of the allowed quota (the \textit{laogong} already had two children), which sometimes implies having to pay a fine before a birth certificate will be issued.

\textsuperscript{3} This amount, which differs according to locality, is officially called shehui fuyang fei [social support] and is imposed as a form of amendment one has to pay when registering a child born out of wedlock on one of his/her parent’s household registration (\textit{hukou}) booklet. In this case, the amount was quite considerable when one takes into account the average local income for a rural household.
mother will sleep on a similar bed. When we arrived here, there was no door to separate us from the next room occupied by another family. So we all agreed on building one out of wood boards. It’s temporary, you know. The water is outside, in the courtyard. This place is supposed to serve as an office. [She sighs] The main door’s lock is broken. I have asked my laogong to change it. He said “manman lai [be patient]” so … I just have to stay home so no one will try to enter. I get bored here. I can go nowhere, so my friends come to visit me. I know a lot of people, but I don’t have many real friends.

[On her laogong]

He never expresses his feelings. Anyway, wo yijing jia gei ta le [I have already married him]. He’s a highlander,1 but he’s not that bad. When I was 4-5 months pregnant, he asked me not to work but to stay at home [she recalls her decision to marry him, smiling]. I don’t know what was the matter with me when I agreed. Wo teng ta [I was fond of him]! But he’s very xiaoqi [stingy]. That … disappoints me. He has money but he is reluctant to spend it. He [has] never bought me any clothes! [She pouts]. Do you see our TV? His daughter from Beijing bought it for us, with the DVD player. But him, he just wanted a second-hand TV! I bought everything for us – the bed, the fridge, and the bicycle. He just provided the drinking fountain and the electric fan. We really possess the minimum. Do we quarrel? Oh yes we do! He once blamed me for spending 200 yuan too easily. But, at first he [said], “My money is your money!” I feel very disappointed by his stinginess. He once said,

1 In China, as in Vietnam, highlanders are believed to be more primitive than their lowland counterparts. This is especially true regarding members of ethnic groups living in the mountains of this region. But, stereotyping can extend to other rural populations, irrespective of ethnic group. Here, Chi specifies that her husband was Han Chinese.
“you can leave if you want, but leave the baby, I’ll take care of him.” I answered, “I have carried this baby, it wasn’t easy, I suffered to deliver it, I can’t leave it with you. I want nothing else but him. I’m taking him!” But he can also be flexible. I cook Vietnamese food, and he eats whatever I make, he just adds some chilli, that’s all.¹

[On her perspective of the marriage and its future]

I feel [insecure] about the future. I have asked my laogong several times to come with me to visit my family, but he refuses. He hasn’t got any passport yet. Now he agrees but I don’t want [him to go] anymore. Both our families have met our son anyway. I wished I could return to Vietnam to take care of my daughter. She is still young, but I have this son here … [so it] is difficult. He’s the most important thing now. If one day, things are not going well anymore, I can return to Vietnam. I have a field, a house, my daughter there, and I can work too. Here, I have nothing. I didn’t expect to have a child, but once I became pregnant and he knew it, he wanted it.²

¹ The general tendency among Chinese men married to Vietnamese women is to teach their wives how to cook Chinese food, since most Chinese do not appreciate Vietnamese cuisine. Chi’s husband is among the exceptions because he agrees to eat Vietnamese food, albeit adding the unavoidable Yunnan chilli.

² Here, Chi moderates her first statement. Was she afraid I would gain the impression that he was a man who had a specific purpose for marrying her?
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1 I have used the standard way to display Vietnamese names in a bibliography as practiced in English language publications. However, a certain inconsistency still remains in the documents consulted, sometimes among various publications from one same author. Hence, in order to avoid any mistake, I have put in square brackets the original order of family and first names in Vietnamese languages.
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