The Fringes of Conjugality
On fantasies, tactics and representations of Sino-Vietnamese encounters in borderlands

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. L.M. Bouter,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen
op vrijdag 1 maart 2013 om 15.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

door

Caroline Catherine Lucie Daniele Grillot

geboren te Semur-en-Auxois, Frankrijk
# Table of contents

Table of contents i  
List of illustrations and tables & Notes on the text vi  
Abstract in English viii  
Thesis title and abstract in Dutch x  
Acknowledgments xii

## Introduction  
1 Crossing borders  
   Where are the victims? 3  
   The in-betweens of research on cross-border marriages 5  
   Core ideas 6  
   What facts are we talking about? 8  
   Theoretical framework 10  
Field, sources, methods and implications 11  
Problematic and organization of the thesis 15

## Chapter 1. The ‘hows’ of a delicate approach 17

1 Dealing with Big Brother in China and Vietnam 17  
   Handling the connections 25  
   Positioning the researcher: to be or not to be affiliated 28  
   Discussion 34  
2 Disclosing oneself to the communities 37  
3 Approaching the invisible 47  
   Identification in the crowd 48  
   • Chau and Tuan: “suan bu suan [do they count]?” 49  
   • Van: the suspicion issue 55  
   • A Hua: the safety priority 58  
4 Collecting data despite impediments 63  
   The angle of approach: negotiating the intimacy realm 63
## Playing cat and mouse: into the snowball game

5 Taking off the mask: words and emotions
6 Dealing with the hindrances: the ‘tools’ of the improvised tactics
Conclusion

### Chapter 2. Borderlands: A chaotic shore for castaways

**Introduction**

1 Geographical background: the location
   - Towards Hekou: 10 September 2008, ambiance and acquaintances
   - The realities of borderlands
   - The Sino-Vietnamese twin cities
     - A land between South China and Southeast Asia
     - Dongxing and Móng Cái: the lively and the busy
     - Lào Cai and Hekou: the shy and the audacious
   - Spaces of exception and sites for imagination
      - Luan: a chaotic nature
      - Underground activities
      - Prostitution

2 Residents: old and new migrants
   - Transition spaces for people in transition
   - Migration waves and population structure
   - Personal trajectories
     - “Ni zuo shenme shengyi [what is your business]?” The shapes of interactions and connections at the border

Conclusion

### Chapter 3. Marriages without weddings: A typology of cross-border marriages

**Introduction**

1 Historical continuum versus global trend: “cross-border marriages”
   - The need for historical perspectives
   - Historical trends under the colonial period: human trade/exchange background
International/cross-border marriages in Vietnam nowadays 163

2 Today at the Sino-Vietnamese border 169
What do all Sino-Vietnamese couples share in common? 169
Contemporary terminology: How is marriage defined today at the Sino-
Vietnamese border? 170
• Jiehun [married]: a blurry definition 171
• Yuenan laopo or Yuenan mei: Vietnamese brides/wives/partners: 174

Sino-Vietnamese marriage and women’s mobility 177
Migratory movement and marriage trajectories in the case of involuntary
first migration 184
Frequent patterns of cross-border alliances 186
• Forced relationships 187
• Performed relationships 189
• Romantic but pragmatic / business-driven relationships 194

State intervention in and flexibility regarding local marital practices 198

3 Perspectives on contemporary conjugality in China: how do these stories
inform post-reform social change and its consequences? 205
The demographic burden: marriage squeeze for men 206
Social disparity and marriage migration: a new feature of conjugality 210
Normative structure versus alternative forms of conjugality 213
• Couple formation 213
• Er nai at the border or ‘being a man’ 218
• The afterward feelings 227
• Rituals and ceremonies: marriage without a wedding 230
• Bride price and other compensation 232

Conclusion 236

Chapter 4. Expectations, discourses and representations. Narratives as the site of
confrontation between intimate yearnings and community suspicion 239

Introduction 239
1 The dynamics of social representations 240
Getting to know who the Other is supposed to be like 240
• Hekou, April 2006 241
Social representations 249

Stereotypes and derogatory views: “the Others’ nation” 254
- The politicized discourse 254
- The folklorizing discourse: a question of class 256
- Interactions between various levels: the origins of stereotypes 265
  The ideological level 265
  Local society level 266
  The individual experience 270

From ‘them’ to ‘her:’ how Chinese perception of Vietnamese people alter the image of Vietnamese women 271
- Statements on Vietnamese and Chinese people: identifying the gendered stereotypes 272
- Approaching the Vietnamese women 275
- Questioning the authenticity and conformity of mixed marriages: ‘the deceived’, ‘the deceivers’ and ‘the ambiguous’ 280
- Gossip among Vietnamese women 288

2 What yearnings and fantasies? Conjugality crisis and the imagined object 293
  On loss of values, economic dynamics and disillusion 294
  The challenging emancipated wife: Chinese women 296
  The unfair husband: Vietnamese men 300

On tradition, respect and gender equality 306
- The idealised wife: Vietnamese women 306
- The incarnation of responsible masculinity: Chinese men 316

Conclusion: “Daodi shei jiang ganqing [Finally, who cares about feeling]?” 322

Chapter 5. The voice of the invisible: the tactics to exist 327

Introduction 327

1 Focus on the fringes of society: the unmarriageable 328
  Predicament in the structural order of things 329
  On law, family and love: Women in Vietnam 329
  On infertility, spinsterhood, widowhood, and education: the ‘unavoidable mishap’ 334
  The plight of Kiêu 338
- Stigma: How a physical detail betrays a family background 339
- Reputation: the invisible stigma 342
- Misconduct: self-exclusion 347

**From the particular to the general: Individuals on the margins** 352

**2 Between fate and resistance** 353

- *Mi zhu cheng fan* [the rice is already cooked/what’s done is done] 355
  - Destiny versus tactic: improvising an alliance 355
  - On emancipation from kinship, community and state’s control 361
  - The child issue: asking for a child versus yearning for an heir 366

**Nonexistence** 368

- Space of nonexistence 369
- Coping with liminal ground: manipulating the interstices of the law 372
- Ostracism prevailing over the endeavour to integrate 381
- Anecdotal exploitation of nonexistence at the intimate level: the rented womb 384

**Conclusion: Getting out of sinking in marginality?** 386

**Conclusion** 393

- Research findings 395
- Discussion and broader perspectives 397

**Appendix. A few life story narratives** 403

**Appendix 1. Nguyet: A life of turbulence** 403
**Appendix 2. Yen: Forced to leave Vietnam, and forced to go back.** 408
**Appendix 3. Zhao: Married on the Other’s side** 411
**Appendix 4. Kim: A life back and forth between Lào Cai and Hekou** 414
**Appendix 5. Thoa: The perfect wife** 418
**Appendix 6. Tam: Facing a stigma** 422
**Appendix 7. Chi: For the old days** 424

**Bibliography** 431
List of illustrations and tables

**Figures**

Figure 1  The ground shops of the Vietnamese Market at night (Grillot 2010) 86
Figure 2  View of the second floor of Hekou’s Vietnamese market (Zhang Mi 2006) 89
Figure 3  The *Assemble Esclave* shop in Dongxing (Grillot 2009) 100
Figure 4  Looking for a prostitute? Call 134*** (Grillot 2009) 117
Figure 5  The signs indicating illicit forms of trade in Hekou have recently been painted over (Grillot 2010) 117
Figure 6  A rather strange statement from the propaganda bureau in Hekou (Grillot 2010) 118
Figure 7  Along the Red River in Hekou: Mah-jong spaces facing Vietnam (Grillot 2009) 120
Figure 8  Chinese guides waiting for customers near the bridge that separates Hekou from Lào Cai 126
Figure 9  *Freedom of marriage, happiness and good luck*, 1953 ([http://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-594.php](http://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-594.php)) 157
Figure 10  *In marriage, keep an eye on your own interests, and return radiant after registration*, 1953 ([http://chineseposters.net/themes/marriage-law.php](http://chineseposters.net/themes/marriage-law.php)) 157
Figure 11  *Vietnamese Brides Matching* (Internet, unknown author) 175
Figure 12  In Hekou, Vietnamese women carry Chinese goods towards the customs gate (Grillot 2009) 311
Maps

Map 1 The Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, and the Hekou/Lào Cai & Dongxing/Móng Cái border gates (United States Central Intelligence Agency 1988) 81

Map 2 The international border gate Hekou-Lào Cai (Mellac, Pissoat 2011) 83

Tables

Table 1 A few characteristics of Vietnamese wives in the eyes of Chinese people 313

Notes on the Text

All Chinese names and words are romanised according to the pinyin system. Most of Vietnamese places and terms are presented in their original Vietnamese form, with the diacritical marks (e.g. Lào Cai). The names of informants and their workplace appearing in this study are all pseudonyms.