

Vietnamese Brides' Practices of Maternal Citizenship at the China-Vietnam Border

Pengli Huang*

University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Sik Ying Ho

University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper shows how Vietnamese brides create new transnational subjectivities through practicing maternal citizenship at the China-Vietnam border. It focuses on discussing different strategies they have adopted in their daily lives: 1) blurring the boundaries between house-keeper and breadwinner; 2) developing dual belonging; 3) establishing transnational maternal alliances; and 4) neutralizing ethnicity/nationality differences. The authors argue that through forming a “creolized” culture, Vietnamese brides have engaged in a conscious attempt to master both Chinese and Vietnamese elements in their making of a new transnational identity. The China-Vietnam border not only provides a favorable context for the development of personal relationships, but these relationships are also an attractive strategy for gaining a social foothold in the more and more globalized world, whether they are in a cosmopolitan center or cosmopolitan periphery.

Key words

Vietnamese brides, maternal citizenship, China-Vietnam border

Introduction

The China-Vietnam border is now experiencing a rapid modernization process. Due to both the Chinese and Vietnamese governments' efforts to strengthen cross-border economic cooperation, Guangxi, as one border province, is becoming the new growth engine for regional economic development, owing to its cross-border trade and business with Vietnam, which

* Corresponding Author

has increased from 30 million USD in 1991 to 7 billion USD in 2004 (Fan & Liu, 2006). From the early 1990s, the re-opening of the China-Vietnam border, the rapid increase of cross-border trade has enabled Vietnam to finally exceed other foreign countries like the European Union, the USA, and Japan, becoming the key foreign-trading partner of Guangxi. Since 2001, Vietnam has consistently been the primary foreign-trading partner of Guangxi, and this trade has become increasingly important for the development of the border regions. Many new ports and trade points have been built up and opened for further cross-border cooperation. Between Guangxi and Vietnam, there are five first-class ports and seven second-class ports. Besides, there are twenty Border-Trade Zones and Points along the borderline (Fan & Liu, 2006). The previously remote and backward border areas have witnessed a rapid improvement of economy and infrastructure.

Accompanying this rapid modernization, the situation *luan*¹ (chaos) can also be easily observable at the border areas. Many reasons have contributed to it. First of all, crossing the border is relatively low-risk and low-cost. The border is easily penetrable and diverse means of border crossing can be found. Today, probably more than at any other time since the establishment of the PRC, people living close to the border continue to maintain contacts with their relatives and co-ethnics and move freely across the border, with or without a permit (Schoenberger & Turner, 2008). Second, the *bianmaore* (border-trade fever) has attracted a large population flow to the border areas for the opportunity they believe it presents. Grillot (2012b) points out that *luan* (chaos) is caused by the influx of people, particularly from the social margins, from everywhere. People's continuing mobility further complicates the chaotic situation. Furthermore, the loopholes of bureaucratic systems and uneven implementation of state regulations on border control² have encouraged many risk-taking attitudes and activities. There are sometimes blurred lines between legality and illegality, and many illegal activities such as small-scale smuggling,³ informal border-crossing and

¹ In Chinese, *luan* can both be a noun (chaos) and an adjective (chaotic).

² For example, there is still not a comprehensive and consistent law on immigration and foreigners' rights in China (Pieke, 2011). As well, different levels of border governance may carry out relevant state regulation with varied standards.

³ For example, in order to evade tax, coolie laborers are hired in pulic to carry split cargo to cross the border via shortcuts.

unregistered cross-border marriage,⁴ are publicly observable. The corruption of border officials is also very common.⁵ As we spent more time on our fieldwork, we found people at the border areas were not only used to the unsystematic development there but also acted to maintain the somewhat chaotic situations. One informant commented that different groups of people had various survival skills, and the situations of *luan* (chaos) were able to satisfy the needs of many stakeholders who depended on the border for their livelihood and opportunities. Thus, there was an intricate balance between chaos and stability, and the ultimate goal was to *zuandaqian* (make (big) money). As local people vividly expressed it, “*luanshi chu yingxiang*” (The hero is made in a chaotic era).

The rapid socio-economic reconfigurations in both China and Vietnam have produced far-reaching impacts on the patterns of cross-border marriages and families (He, 2006; Le Bach, Bélanger, & Khuat, 2007; Zhang, 2012; Chan, 2013). China borders Vietnam at its Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces. Historically, cross-border marriage between border residents was quite common and lasting, even during wartime. Also, the central government did not interfere much with these marriages due to the remoteness and periphery of the border areas. From the 1990s onwards, following the growth of China and Vietnam’s economic cooperation and the normalization of diplomatic relations, the border province Guangxi has witnessed a new increase in cross-border marriages. According to the data from the Guangxi Public Security Department, unregistered Vietnamese brides in Guangxi alone have numbered over 40,000 (Luo, 2006, 2013; Luo & Long, 2007). Considering that those who are in registered marriages must be added, the number must be much underestimated (Luo, 2013). Both academia (Jin, 1995; Wang & Huang, 2007; Huang, Li, & Long, 2008; B. Li, 2008; Liu, 2013) and the media (e.g., Guangming News, 2006; Xinhua News, 2006, 2007) in China have shown a continuing obsession with unregistered cross-border marriages. Within these narratives, Vietnamese brides are con-

⁴ Now people are less likely to define unregistered marriage as an illegal behavior since marriage registration is no longer a compulsory state regulation and co-habitation has also become a common social phenomenon, even in rural areas.

⁵ At the checkpoint, regular cross-border travellers were familiar with the common practice of bribing the officials for an easier and faster check. One of the researchers was told by friends to put 10 RMB inside her passport to avoid the so-called “health check” when passing through the Vietnamese customs.

structed as “backward,” and “lacking knowledge” and as “ignorant” women, and they are often associated with many social problems like illegal migration, trafficking, cheating marriages, and so on. On the one hand, the economic collaboration and cross-border trade and business in the borderlands have achieved unprecedented success within a short period of time; on the other, there are frequent negative reports on unregistered cross-border marriages in China. It seems that cross-border marriages in the borderlands have not made the same amount of progress as regional economic development.

As Chan (2013) points out, “while the stereotypical discourses and labeling of cross-border Vietnamese brides still exist, the reality today is that there is actually much variation” (p. 112). In doing our fieldwork, we found that the situation of *luan* (chaos) and the in-between characteristic of the borderlands had provided certain spaces for Vietnamese brides from different social backgrounds and circumstances, not just for the privileged groups. Accompanying *luan* (chaos), Vietnamese brides were able to search for varied chances as well to develop strategies to cope with their immediate realities. Some had even become involved in an unregistered marriage and enjoyed no Chinese *hukou*⁶ (household registration). In reality, we noticed that more and more Vietnamese brides had become passport holders and their stays in China could not be defined as illegal.⁷ Some brides did not want to lose their Vietnamese *hukou* by registering as Chinese citizens. For them, holding Vietnamese citizenship meant more choices, since with the expansion of cross-border markets and the intensified competition in China, there were also more Chinese citizens choosing to go to Vietnam for work and residency. Furthermore, many people we met at the borderlands mentioned that now Vietnam is very different from what it was ten or fifteen years before. Indeed, many policies in Vietnam have been more advanced than in China. For example, a Vietnamese passport enjoys more visa exemption rights than a Chinese one. In addition, according to the revised law in Vietnam, single women are able to register their children’s *hukou* (Luan, Rydstrom, & Burghoorn, 2008). All these new changes have impacts on China-Vietnam marriages and bring more benefits to Vietnamese

⁶ In both China and Vietnam, *hukou* functions similar to citizenship.

⁷ Among 29 Vietnamese brides we had interviewed, 18 were in unregistered marriages but only 4 were not valid passport/visa holders.

brides but are seldom noticed and discussed by most Chinese scholars.

In our fieldwork, we found that the many Vietnamese women acquire a set of life skills and tactics and create a sense of self-security and empowerment not necessarily through applying for an officially or legally recognized citizenship in China. The modern citizenship systems are deeply gendered; in many official records, we can see that the majority of foreign brides achieve their legal citizenships in receiving countries only as dependents. For many Vietnamese brides in cross-border marriages with Chinese men, they also face a similar destiny in terms of their citizenship application in China. Even worse, some Chinese husbands may fail to provide enough sponsorship for their Vietnamese wives' citizenship application. However, by taking advantage of border crossing and the identity ambiguity at the borderland (the space "in-between"), the Vietnamese brides have developed their transnational "cultural capital" and taken an active role in the citizenship-making processes. By taking advantage of rather than getting rid of their national markers in a cross-border marriage, they remake the context of the China-Vietnam border into a new "contact zone" (Sprenger, 2009). Through mobilizing their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers and depending on their intimate connections in "private" spheres, the Vietnamese brides acquire certain citizenship-like rights to resist the state's regulations. Often, their efforts will not necessarily be officially or legally recognized in a male-centric and legally defined model of citizenship. In this paper, we borrow the concept of "maternal citizenship"⁸ to present this less formal and female-centric citizenship-making process and discuss how Vietnamese brides acquire social and cultural capital through taking advantage of their maternal identities as daughters, wives, and mothers and how they create senses of self-security and empowerment at the China-Vietnam border.

⁸ Abelmann and Kim (2005) and M. Kim (2008, 2010) develop the concept of "maternal citizenship" to discuss how women achieve social and cultural citizenship via motherhood. Here, we extend the concept to include not only Vietnamese brides' roles as wives and mothers, but also their maternal connection with Vietnamese families due to their roles as daughters. The detailed discussions of "maternal citizenship" are in the Literature Review section.

Literature Review

Citizenship has been central in many studies on cross-border marriage since it uncovers “the gender and race ideologies that underpin legislation on immigration, marriage and employment” (Lyons & Ford, 2008, p. 2). A masculine and developmentalist bias can be easily identified and recognized in the construction of modern citizenship. The problem with such a conception of citizenship is that “achievement of modernity has been portrayed ... as a power struggle with the feminine” (Scott, 1995, p. 5). Within the “modern citizens: traditional women” framework, migrant women are constructed as “ethnic boundary markers” and “pre-modern others” (Lan, 2008a, 2008b) due to “their assumed natural place in the domestic life of the community through their roles as producers and reproducers, through childbirth and through the education of cultural indoctrination of children” (Williams, 2010, p. 23). Within a (male) modern model of citizenship system or in many official records, many migrant women can become citizens of the receiving countries only through the sponsorship of their husbands. As Thapan (2008) states, “While viewing women migrants as dependents, we may often ignore their individual economic contributions, and an analysis based solely on official figures would give an inadequate account of the actual migration flows pertaining to women” (p. 10).

However, making women the repositories of tradition is not the whole story, since women can also, and simultaneously, be seen as embodying modernity. Many researchers have noticed that transnational women are often able to develop creative responses to state regulation (Ong, 1999; Abelman & Kim, 2005; Amster, 2005; Amster & Lindquist, 2005; M. Kim, 2008; Lyons & Ford, 2008; Horstmann, 2009; Freeman, 2011), as well to practice certain levels of “maternal citizenships,” which is to say that women achieve social or cultural citizenship via motherhood (Abelman & Kim, 2005; M. Kim, 2008, 2010, 2013). According to Abelman and Kim (2005), maternal citizenship “suggests that a constellation of maternal efforts can produce a measure of value, self-worth, and citizenship or becoming a fully realized subject” (p. 102; also from Anagnost, 2000, p. 392). Furthermore, the constructs of maternal citizenship have transcended the state and national confines and “they highlight membership that exceeds legal status” (p. 102).

We borrow the concept of “maternal citizenship” in the study but extend

the discussion beyond foreign brides' mothering responsibility, since to sustain the lives of transnational families, these women's contributions have gone far beyond the role of mother. Although reproductive ability acts as critical site for the citizenship experience of migrant women (M. Kim, 2013), their gendered roles as daughters, wives, and mothers are all integral parts of the formation of social and cultural citizenship. In a transnational context, the maternal efforts should include both women's contributions as wives and mothers to the husbands' families and as daughters to their maternal families. The reproductive contributions of foreign brides to the husbands' family and host countries have been well recorded by many researchers (Piper & Roces, 2003; Suzuki, 2005; Sheu, 2007; Chen, 2008; Lan, 2008a, 2008b; H.-Z. Wang & Chang, 2009; Hsia, 2010; Williams, 2010). At the same time, researchers (Mills, 1999; Faier, 2007; Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2010) have also observed the continuing connections between married daughters and their maternal families, even many brides are in long distance from homes. To echo these studies, we consider foreign brides' role as daughters, wives, and mothers all affect their practice of "maternal citizenship" and the formation of varied maternal alliances in cross-border marriages.

The China-Vietnam marriages have been situated in particular historical, cultural, and political-economic contexts, and some researchers (e.g., Grillot, 2012a, 2012b; Chan, 2013) have observed new models of transnational intimate alliances are forming at the border areas. Compared with long-distance transnational marriage migrants, Vietnamese brides at the border areas enjoy more conveniences to maintain and take advantage of their connections with maternal families and with Vietnam for more economic opportunities and a better sense of security, particularly for those who may not have legal status in China or who are involved in an unregistered marriage. The geographical proximity allows them to cross the border more frequently, thereby taking advantage of the possible resources from both sides of the border. Second, the situation of *luan* (chaos) in the borderlands means that they may be able to circumvent some restrictions on citizenship and supervision from the state. More importantly, the prosperity of border trades and the influx of population also bring more money-earning opportunities.

Under the circumstance of the China-Vietnam borderlands, Vietnamese brides have indicated their different strategies to deal with the state's re-

striction on citizenship. By taking advantage of the particular context of the borderlands, Vietnamese brides can not only secure their very existences there but also transform their roles as daughters, wives and mothers into certain a kind of social and cultural capital and practice their maternal citizenship. As Pei, Ho, and Ng (2007) have argued, in understanding modern women, “we should look at how women create new syntheses of identity and strategies of being by making use of the personal and cultural resources available to them to fulfill their needs and aspirations” (p. 210). The borderlands thus provide us an alternative perspective from which to examine how Vietnamese brides form different maternal alliances and practice their maternal citizenship, a different feeling of being and belonging to women, which cannot be brought by legal citizenship (see Table below).

Table 1.
The Characteristics of Maternal Citizenship

Defining Maternal Citizenship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often unrecognized in a male (legally defined) model of citizenship • Functioning through women’s roles as daughters, wives, and mothers • Depending on women’s intimate connections in “private” spheres • Emphasizing women’s contributions to the families and communities • Increasing women’s flexibility and adaptability in a transnational context • Producing different feelings of belonging and self-value to women

Research Site and Methodology

Borderland is an important context in our study. “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” (Grillot, 2012b, p. 82). The specific modernization trajectory of the China-Vietnam border has provided a special case to understand modernity in the region. With the prosperity of border trade and the development of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the Chinese and Vietnamese governments have cooperated to create certain special economic zones along the frontier. The model of “Border Economic Corridor” is coming into being to connect parallel villages, towns, and cities in respective countries through the border.

“Nanning–the Friendship Port–Hanoi”⁹ is one of the economic corridors where we carried out our fieldwork. As capital cities, Nanning and Hanoi are sites for major political and economic events¹⁰ and educational exchanges. More direct and active economic activities can be observed in the borderlands due to the establishment of Border Trade Zones and the busy transportation of transnational cargoes.

Many special policies for cross-border trade and businesses, tourism and communications are implemented along the economic corridors. Many BTZs (Border Trade Zones) and TRZs (Tax-Reservation Zones) have been built in the borderlands. The situations of “In-between-ness” (Bao, 2005; Lyons & Ford, 2008) or “*liangguo yicheng*”¹¹ (“Two countries, one city”) are quite apparent in these areas. Within the border zones, traders and businessmen from both countries are able to invest in and carry out economic activities directly, and cross-border mobility such as for tourism, education, marriage, and family visiting, is a very common practice there. However, the development of the borderlands is proceeding in an unsystematic manner and the administrations there are also very disorganized. Thus, it is difficult for us to use traditional definitions of the rural and the urban to address the demographic background of many informants. For example, some Border Trade Zones, although located in a rural area, have become very advanced and urbanized, and many residents there have in fact come from the cities; whereas some informants we met in the cities used to live in villages or small towns and later moved and settled in the big cities. More frequently, travelling often across the border or between the rural and the urban has been part of the life reality of many people living in these “in-between” spaces.

We carried out our fieldwork mainly in 2011 and 2012. Along the “Nanning–Friendship Port–Hanoi” Economic Corridor (see Picture below),

⁹ Nanning is the capital city of Guangxi Province, and Hanoi is the capital of Vietnam and also the most important city of Northern Vietnam. This economic corridor is the most convenient way to travel between the two countries. There is an expressway to connect Nanning and Hanoi and it takes only about 4 to 5 hours’ bus trip between the two cities.

¹⁰ For example, Nanning has been chosen as the permanent site for the China-ASEAN Expo. Many Southeast countries, including Vietnam, have established consulates in Nanning. There are frequent exhibitions and fairs for merchants from Southeast countries all year round.

¹¹ This is a development strategy promoted by the governments to strengthen the construction and cooperation of Border Trade Zones (Zeng, 2011).

Nanning and Hanoi were the main locations where we collected data on cross-border marriages. Another important research site was several Border Trade Zones and neighboring villages around the Friendship Port. The Border Trade Zones we visited used to be several of many villages along the border and later were developed into special economic areas. Usually, businessmen and tourists from different places in both Vietnam and China are easily identified at the Border Trade Zones. Many local people are working in these zones during the day and go back to their home in the nearby villages at night. Some from relatively faraway villages and towns will stay in the zones much longer and visit home during holidays. Beside these formal trade zones, there were also many informal open markets formed by border residents for daily-life and small-scale transactions.



Figure 1. *Graphic Presentation of “Nanning-the Friendship Port-Hanoi” Geography*¹²

Guided by a qualitative research design, we seek to understand how the Vietnamese women make sense of their cross-border marriage and mobility experiences, and how they construct their identities as “Vietnamese brides” and to create their life spaces at the borderlands. Altogether, 29 Vietnamese

¹² The website that we originally downloaded this map had been expired; however, there is a similar Chinese version from the Xinhua News (2005) within which the Nanning-the Friendship-Hanoi Expressway is also presented and introduced. Retrieved March 12, 2016, from http://www.cq.xinhuanet.com/travel/2005-10/20/content_5394031.htm

women in different types of cross-border relationships were interviewed and all of them had met or married their Chinese husbands after the re-opening of the border in 1991. Before the interviews, we introduced the research topic and purpose to the informants and obtained their consent for interview and audio recording. They were well informed that participation was totally voluntary and they were able to refuse to answer any question they did not wish to respond; also, the informants could choose to leave the research project whenever they wanted. The majority of informants lived and worked in China, and usually women moved to where the men lived. Therefore, even though we managed to collect relevant data in Vietnam as well as China, our meeting with the informants and visiting communities mostly occurred on the Chinese side. Although many of these women kept moving back and forth over the border before and after their marriages, about 3/4 of the informants spent more time in China during the interviews.

The research design went beyond the narrow focus on unregistered cross-border marriages and the “mono-site” ethnography that many Chinese researchers had done. We noticed that along the borderline, cross-border intimate encounters happened at various levels of “contact zones.” Although location has made some differences, but it does not tell the whole stories. Thus we travelled to different border cities, towns, trade zones, and villages to meet Vietnamese brides and tried to identify varied cross-border intimacies. We took note of any possible sources of information concerning the research topic and the travelling was often triggered by the new information we got during the interview process; then we followed these clues to different sites to collect data.

The situations of Vietnamese wives we met during the fieldwork also reflected the character of *luan* (chaos) in the borderlands. These women were involved in various types of cross-border relationships with Chinese men. Some registered their marriages but some did not; some lived in cities while others lived in villages; and some resided on the Chinese side and others on the Vietnamese side. Unlike the one-direction migration described by many Chinese scholars, frequent border crossing between the countries was not only a life reality but also the strategy for survival and development. We also noticed the diverse ways in which the informants in different locations adapted to or resisted formal changes in law and policy. No doubt existing geographic/regional divisions are set up for the purpose of official

administration; however, increasing national and transnational mobility has further blurred the boundaries between different locations. Similarly, the mobility of Vietnamese women and Chinese men has been more and more bidirectional and circulated. The situations of Vietnamese brides also varied from case to case, even for those who lived in the same community.

Findings and Analysis

Both China and Vietnam are countries that deny the holding of dual citizenship. Under this circumstance, the cross-border couples face concrete problems in dealing with the issue of citizenship. Noticeably, there are many cases of unregistered cross-border marriages existing in the borderlands (Li, 2007; Dang, 2010). Undeniably, the chaotic and ambiguous administration there creates the space for these unregistered marriages. At the same time, the space in-between has given much momentum for these women to practice their maternal powers rather than simply following the state's control on citizenship. The exercise of maternal citizenship does not mean a reworking and subversion of official citizenship; rather, the informants acquire multiple or similar citizenship rights through various means such as by applying for a Vietnamese passport rather than Chinese *hukou*, by registering their children's on the Vietnamese *hokou*, by making use of kinship connections, and by depending on the practice of local naturalization¹³ (Horstmann, 2009). In much of their daily life, the Vietnamese women's practices of maternal citizenship have rendered the nation-state's concept of modern citizenship narrow and absurd.

Hezhi Hunyin ("Joint Venture" Marriages): Blurring the Boundaries between Housekeeper and Breadwinner

Although I enjoy my current (teaching) job very much, my husband plans to open his cross-border business company in the future and I will choose to help

¹³ China does not implement a policy of naturalization; however, in practice due to uneven administration at the border areas, some Vietnamese brides are able to acquire certain local identity and their marriages are also recognized and registered by local authorities although they are not endowed with a Chinese *hukou*.

him if necessary. (Fangcui,¹⁴ age 28, in a registered marriage)

When talking about doing business, I am better than my husband. He is not good at communication and does not know how to bargain with the clients. Like housework, doing business also needs a lot of skills and patience. (Tianzheng,¹⁵ age 40, in an unregistered marriage)

We are fujidian (the husband-wife shop) and manage the restaurant together. There are no clear divisions of labor between us. Sometimes I cook in the kitchen and sometimes will also deal with customers in the dining room. It depends on the customers since we have both Chinese and Vietnamese. They like to call me laobanniang¹⁶ (The wife of the boss). (Ayong, age 23, in an unregistered marriage)

James Farrer (2008) has already noticed the new cooperative pattern of international marriage between Western men and Chinese women in Shanghai. In his fieldwork, Farrer points out that resource exchanges between these couples are increasingly two-way rather than the husbands functioning as the “airplane tickets” for their wives. Farrer adopts a vivid Chinese expression *bezi bunyin* (“joint venture” marriages) to address this new type of international relationship. The forms of “joint venture” marriages were also clearly evident among the informants.¹⁷ They had creatively taken advantage of their cross-border connections to gain more economic opportunities. They played important roles in helping their husbands’ businesses and some even took

¹⁴ In interviews, we talked with most informants in Chinese or local dialect and they usually introduced their translated Vietnamese names to us since we were not familiar with Vietnamese spellings. Thus, in the paper, the names of informants are in Chinese pinyin. Moreover, pseudonyms have been used in the whole paper in order to protect informants’ privacy. Fangcui talked about how she would join in the management of the company together with her husband and provide helps like translation and *renmai* (personal network) in Vietnam to her husband.

¹⁵ Tianzheng was in her third marriage with her current Chinese husband. She had one daughter in the first marriage with a Vietnamese man and one son in the second marriage with a Chinese man.

¹⁶ Although these informants usually were called as *laobanniang* (the wife of the boss), they were actually the bosses of family businesses.

¹⁷ Among 29 Vietnamese brides, about 1/3 (10 informants) of them were in family-business marriages.

up significant positions in running family businesses.

Some informants, such as Bixiang (age 42, in a registered marriage) and Jiali (age 22, in a registered marriage), although they did not engage in their husbands' businesses, they still provided valuable assistance in that their husbands needed to depend on their wives' Vietnamese identities to avoid heavy taxes on opening a foreign company in Vietnam. Therefore the legal representatives of their husbands' companies were registered under the names of the wives. Additionally, the family properties their husbands purchased in Vietnam were under the names of the wives. Comparably, some wives, like Simei (age 34, in an unregistered marriage), Tianzheng, Jiayuan (age 24, in a registered marriage), Mingfang (age 33, in a registered marriage), Falang (age 38, in an unregistered marriage) and Ayong, had taken more active roles in family businesses. Simei met her husband when doing business at *Puzai*.¹⁸ Both her birth family and her husband's family had engaged in border trade before their marriage. Their marriage had helped to connect the respective family networks and greatly increased their chances in the market. The connections between these families also became much stronger.

In the responsibilities for family businesses, Falang and Tianzheng played a more important role than their husbands. Although the businesses were registered under the husbands' name, Fa-lang and Tian-zheng were the real heads. Tianzheng applied for a stall in the local market under her husband's name and sold some needed commodities from China and brought back some cheap-price goods from Vietnam. Usually Tianzheng was the one going to the Vietnamese side to choose goods and sell them in the market, and her daughter would come to help her during the weekends. Since the husband was not as good at communicating with customers as she was, he mainly took care of household chores, such as washing clothes, cooking, and delivering meals to the market. According to Tianzheng, her husband was as busy and working as hard as she was; without his contribution, it would be difficult for her to run a good business.¹⁹

¹⁸ A famous Border Trade Zone near the Friendship Port.

¹⁹ In our observation, although some Vietnamese brides joined in the management of family businesses, in most cases it was the husbands taking the primary role on running the business and the wives shouldering more responsibilities to take care of the household chores. Comparably, switching gender roles was more observable in Chinese family-business than in Vietnamese family-business.

Although the couples in this study may not be as prosperous and educated as those in Farrer's (2008) study, the pattern of *bezi bunyin* is as well the chief strategy for the informants to achieve their goals for advancement. These "joint venture" marriages have echoed those Chinese expressions, like *shangjia* (business family) or *wuqi* (family enterprise), which emphasize family as a corporate entity of family members. Different from Yan's (2003, 2011) idea that the corporate model has been finally replaced by the individualized model of family, at least for many Vietnamese brides in this study, the former works better to cater to their needs. Furthermore, within a "joint venture" marriage, the wives were not only able to exert more power ("I am better than my husband") and take more advantage of their "Vietnameseness" ("cross-border trades"), but also challenge the boundaries between public and private, breadwinner and house-keeper, home and work ("There are no clear divisions of labor between us").

"Chinese/Vietnamese": Developing Dual Belonging

I have sent my two children to a Chinese school in Vietnam. This is my husband's idea and he wants to teach the children to speak Chinese but he is too busy to do that. As we have lived in Vietnam since the birth of the children, he worries that the two kids cannot adjust to Chinese if we move to China in the future. (Meigang, age 36, in a registered marriage)

My mother-in-law is also Vietnamese. I speak Vietnamese quite often with her and my husband. My husband learnt to speak Vietnamese from a young age, so did my daughter. I don't need to teach her (the daughter) specifically. She grew up in a bilingual environment and knows how to speak both languages naturally. Later, she chose to improve her Vietnamese writing by going to study in Vietnam. (Simei)

My son was born in Vietnam and is now registered in my Vietnamese hukou. We chose to do that because we will stay in Hanoi for a long time; it is more convenient for the kid to enroll in school with a Vietnamese

*hukou. In the future, if necessary, we can change his citizenship in China. According to the policy, the child is able to decide his citizenship again before the age of 18.*²⁰ (Jiali)

I prefer my children to register a Vietnamese hukou. You know, Vietnamese citizenship enjoys more visa freedom than the Chinese one. Many countries provide interview-free visa to Vietnamese citizens but not Chinese citizens. (Fangcui)

According to Bao (2005), the “/” symbol “reflects a sense of newness, hybridity and ambiguity; the ‘/’ not only connects two divided identity categories, but joins the past and the present by delineating ... ‘contingent in-between space’” (p. 180). Dual cultural belonging and hybrid identities are inseparable from the Vietnamese brides’ positioning in the “spaces in-between” (Lyons & Ford, 2008, p. 2). For example, the informant Simei did not know any Chinese when she first came to the border. Since that, she not only learned to speak Zhuang (a local dialect) after marriage, but also Cantonese and Mandarin in business.²¹

Being familiar with both Chinese and Vietnamese languages and cultures lets many women enjoy more benefits in the markets, allowing them to shuttle more freely the spaces in-between China and Vietnam. Dingxuan (age 35, in an unregistered marriage) had stayed at the border trade areas for 8 years and met her Chinese husband at work. She considered that now the China-Vietnam border is in a golden development time, and there are so many opportunities here and also the need for a large labor force. She came to the border not just because it was easier to find a job here but because she also wanted to learn and improve her Mandarin. According to Dingxuan’s experience, the borderland is like an experimental base for making some tests. “To *hundebao*²² (make a good life) here, you need to master

²⁰ See Liu, G. (2011). *Chinese Immigration Law*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing.

²¹ Zhuang is the main ethnic group in Guangxi, which belongs to the Cantonese linguistic region, and in Guangxi, people speak a Cantonese dialect Baihua, close to Cantonese from Guangdong. In practice, in daily interaction, Mandarin is just a secondary language in this region. However, it is the only common language for migrants, including most Chinese traders in the borderlands who come from other non-cantonese provinces.

bilingual fluency. If you are bilingual speaker, you will be quite popular in the labor market and can easily access more profitable jobs and acquire more income sources.”

Among the informants, there was a growing awareness of raising the children in a bilingual environment (“knows how to speak both languages naturally”). Socializing the children with both languages and cultures not only meant more choices and opportunities (“the child is able to decide his citizenship again”), but also the Vietnamese women’s positive attitudes towards cross-border relationship and development.²³ Anni²⁴ (age 36, in an unregistered marriage) worked as a translator in *Nongbhuai*,²⁵ and she came to China in 2010 and had learnt to speak Chinese all by herself. In Anni’s eyes, the borderland, which used to be a remote and backward region, has now become a new land for development. Anni only finished high-school education, and she hoped her daughter could get a better education. The daughter was from Anni’s previous marriage, and the girl now was ready to enroll in a local Vietnamese university. “I asked my daughter to choose Chinese as her major in university. I think it will be much easier for her to find jobs in the future. She will also be better than me since I only know how to speak Chinese but not to write,” commented Anni.

According to Chinese researchers Qin, Cheng, and Wei (2013), being familiar with both Chinese and Vietnamese makes many casual workers win a more advantageous position in the job market and also increases their incomes. Furthermore, Wei (2014) also finds that, due to the special characteristics of borderlands, many Vietnamese women do not choose to go

²² *Hun* here is a verb and implies a person develops well in local circumstances. However, it can also be used as an adjective and has the connotation of *luan* (chaotic), especially in the borderlands.

²³ At the very beginning of the re-opening of the China-Vietnam border in early 1990s, cross-border trade and business was not as prosperous as it is now. Some Vietnamese brides mentioned they did not consider it important to teach their children Vietnamese since it was seldom used in daily life. Now along the borderlines, new Border Trade Zones are rapidly expanding and the development of cross-border economy and tourism is in need of a large bilingual labor force.

²⁴ Anni was in the second marriage with current Chinese husband. She had formally divorced her Vietnamese husband. Anni did not have kid in the second marriage but had one daughter from the first marriage. The girl stayed with Anni’s mother in Vietnam.

²⁵ A border trade point was established in 1989 on the Chinese side and it later becomes one of the most prosperous border trade zones.

to the more developed and better-paid Zhujiang Triangle Areas²⁶ (i.e., Guangdong, Zhuhai and Shenzhen) for work but stay in the relatively less developed Guangxi border areas. This choice shows their identification with the familiarity, in terms of language and culture, in the borderlands within which their existence has been more welcomed and tolerated, particular for those unregistered Vietnamese brides who held no a valid passport/visa in China. Thus many Vietnamese women, especially those who have married Chinese men, are able to regard both sides of the border as hometowns and shuttle between the two countries as semi *Jiaxiangren* (hometown people).

Being a Bridge Builder: Establishing Transnational Maternal Alliances

1) The new practice of *liangtoujia*²⁷ (a family on both ends)

Liangtoujia (a family on both ends), in tradition, was the privilege of men and it extended a man's polygamous practice²⁸ to a transnational context. A man was able to have a family in both countries: by sending remittances back to his natal family with whom his first wife and children lived, he fulfilled his economic obligation and was therefore entitled to have an additional wife and family in the guest country (Bao, 2005, p. 48). This "family on both ends" pattern could only be practiced by men and not by women. However, many Vietnamese brides have challenged the traditional definition of *liangtoujia* and maintained their close connections with families "on both ends." Compared with their Chinese husbands, these women showed more intention and efforts to manage their *liangtoujia*.

²⁶ The Zhujiang Triangle Areas are the more developed provinces neighboring Guangxi.

²⁷ This was a common practice among many overseas Chinese when they migrated to other Southeast Asian countries for business and employment before 1949 the establishment of PRC. Usually, these men got married before migration. After settling in the new places, they organized another family by marrying a local woman. In Bao's (2005) study on overseas Chinese in Thailand, *liangtoujia* is an exclusively male privilege.

²⁸ In China as well as in many countries, polygamous practice is defined as an illegal behavior and banned by the marriage laws. However, this practice does not vanish in reality and is still practiced, often secretly, by men.

I don't think that I am a married-out daughter and keep in frequent contact with my parents. Although now I am living in China, I visit my parents very often and my parents also come to visit me here (in China). I have families both in Vietnam and in China. (Jiayuan)

Most of the time my husband and I stay in China and will go to Vietnam and stay there one or two months every year for visiting family members and tourism. My husband learned to speak Vietnamese after we were together. He gets along well my children and relatives (in Vietnam). (Feifei,²⁹ age 64, in an unregistered marriage)

My connection with Vietnam will never be cut off. I have built a new house in my hometown. After my husband and I get older, we will spend our time half in Vietnam and half in China. (Falang)

In interview, many Vietnamese brides mentioned that they maintained close contacts with their families through remittances, regular visits and phone calls. Some informants, such as Mengqiu (age 36, in a registered marriage) and Bixiang, had chosen to live with their natal families rather than with the in-laws. Falang bought land and built houses, wishing to return and live in her home village in the future. Although other informants did not talk about their plans to return or consider long-term settlement in Vietnam, shuttling between the two countries was a common and frequent practice among them. Permanent or temporary residence in China did not prevent these Vietnamese wives from getting involved in matters concerning their birth families. Although many were away from home after marriage, they were involved in important decision-making and family affairs through various means. Particularly for those who developed mutually supportive relationships for businesses, for instance, Acai (age 28, in a registered marriage), Jiayuan, Tianzheng, the practice of *liangtonjia* carried more

²⁹ The informant was in the second marriage with her Chinese husband and she did not formally divorce her Vietnamese husband. She did not have any child in the second marriage but had 6 children in first marriage and these children were all in Vietnam.

significance. A family on both ends provided them with material resources and, more importantly, the sense of connection (“I don’t think that I am a married-out daughter”; “My connection with Vietnam will never be cut off”).

Keeping strong connections with maternal families was of great significance to those Vietnamese brides in unregistered marriages. Although they no longer lived with their parents and had resided in China for a long period of time, due to the support and helps from maternal families, these women were still able to keep their Vietnamese *bukou*, which made them able to apply for a passport. In interviews, we found that being a passport holder relieved unregistered brides’ pressure since their stay in China was legal. Due to rare contacts with their maternal families, some unregistered brides, such as Shilan (age 44), Shixiang (age 48), Axian (age 55) and Lushi (age 47),³⁰ had to face the consequence that their original Vietnamese *bukou* was cancelled in Vietnam.³¹ More importantly, because unregistered brides may not enjoy the security that a proper-registered marriage brought in China, maintaining their ties with maternal families and making investment in Vietnam could be a way for alternative self-protection³² in case their marriages might breakdown in the future. The houses they bought or built up in Vietnam were registered under their names rather than under their husbands’ names. Moreover, the maternal families could also take care of relevant housing issues for them when they were absent.

³⁰ The four informants all mentioned that, after marrying in China, they seldom contacted or visited their maternal families.

³¹ In both China and Vietnam, married women usually move their *bukou* from the maternal family to the husband’s *bukou*. After that, their original *bukou* is cancelled. This *bukou* policy was once strictly carried out. However, after the implementation of market economy in both countries and with the increase of human mobility, the governments have loosened the strict controls on *bukou*. Therefore, keeping her *bukou* in her maternal family even after a woman gets married is also allowed by the governments nowadays.

³² Although during the time of interview, those unregistered brides did not mention directly that buying a house and investing in Vietnam was to secure their own future in case of “divorce,” they acquired a strong sense of achievement and enhanced status in maternal families through these endeavors.

2) Developing maternal alliances

I maintain very good relations with my parents-in-law, particularly my mother-in-law. I always prepare gifts for them for major events and treat them with sincerity. They are also good to me and help with many household chores when I am busy. Sometimes when we had quarrels, my mother-in-law was always on my side. (Ahua, age 20, in an unregistered marriage)

We know almost all marry-in Vietnamese brides around this area. There are twelve in my village, seven in the upper village and eight in the lower village. ... They (Vietnamese brides in the village) like to come to my house since my place is bigger and convenient.³³ When my relatives and friends in Vietnam come to ganxu (visit the open market), they also like to visit me and stay at my place for several days. (Shixiang)

My parents recommend we buy a house in Vietnam rather in China since in China the estate right lasts only seventy years while in Vietnam the estate belongs to the buyer permanently after purchase.³⁴ Also, my parents have more resources to help us if we do so. Both my husband and I view it as a better choice because we may consider transferring our zhen di (development site) to Vietnam in the future. (Fangcui)

In studying Vietnamese brides in Taiwan, Wang (2007) notes that learning to be a good daughter-in-law is one of strategies they adopted to better integrate into the families. Similarly, in our interviews some informants had cited a compatible and benign relationship with in-laws who provided certain kinds of protection to them, particularly when the relationships with their husbands were not that satisfactory. For example, Apan (age 45, in

³³ Shi-xiang owned a four-storey house where she lived long after her in-laws and husband had all passed away.

³⁴ According to the *Property Laws of People Republic of China* (2007), individuals who purchase a house/apartment can only enjoy the land-use right (most of the time lasting 70 years) but not the land ownership since all land belongs to the state and cannot be privatized. However, in Vietnam, land privatization and ownership is recognized by laws.

an unregistered marriage) stayed living with the in-laws after her husband moved out from the family and cohabitated with his mistress. Feeling guilty for her son, Apan's mother-in-law often gave more emotional, physical, and material support to her and her two sons. Although the husband was absent from family life, Apan still considered that the family atmosphere was warm and harmonious. According to Apan, one important reason for her to accept the return of her husband was for the sake of her mother-in-law.

Of course, not all of them developed successful relationships with their in-laws. Wang (2007) again points out, "The 'Vietnamese brides' do not feel easy in the family and neighborhood, where they are always supervised or gossiped about. Only by escaping from these 'private' spaces can they find their real 'private spaces'" (pp. 720-721). Regular or occasional gatherings with other Vietnamese women were quite popular among the informants, although they did not have a strong organization.³⁵ Commonly, they would choose a favourite place for their meetings, for example, the home of Shixiang. As the informant Acai mentioned, she wanted to open a Vietnamese café not for making big money from it but for enjoying a more comfortable space with friends, most of who were Vietnamese wives themselves, as well as their new Chinese friends. Through these gatherings, these women connected with each other and developed a social network of their own. Moreover, many informants themselves became the introducers of cross-border marriages. In interview, Shixiang told us that she had successfully introduced at least five cross-border marriages, and she also had gained a good reputation as a dependable introducer in both Chinese and Vietnamese community.

Within a transnational context, the increase of cross-border marriage has expanded Vietnamese brides' family and kinship networks, and these networks then can transfer into stable and dependable social capitals for both the brides and their families in both sides of border. Vietnamese brides' connection and collaborating with their maternal families brought many advantages for them, including both emotional comforts and concrete benefits, such as physical care, Vietnamese *bukou* maintaining, and business resources from Vietnam. The geographical proximity and the development of

³⁵ The gatherings of Vietnamese brides happened in both rural and urban settings. In this study, there was no strong evidence to indicate that the urban brides would have more gatherings than the rural brides.

transportation and communication technologies have facilitated these collaborations. These Vietnamese brides were no longer “split water” but forever daughters of their maternal families. At the same time, Vietnamese brides were also able to depend on the maternal alliance they developed with the in-laws, other Vietnamese brides and new Chinese friends and make their lives in China easier and happier, even some of them were in an unregistered marriage.

Liangguo Yijia (Two Countries, One Family): Neutralizing Ethnicity/Nationality Differences

My children do realize some differences of our family from other families. My husband and I don't talk about politics at home. The children are still too young to understand about political disputes between China and Vietnam. We also don't want these issues to affect them negatively. (Meigang)

My husband often says that there is no difference between Chinese and Vietnamese. We seldom make comments like “You Vietnamese” or “You Chinese.” This kind of wording only works to hurt each other and damages family harmony. (Jiali)

My mother agreed to our relationship since she knew my husband was a good guy. She (the mother) also engages in border trade and meets and makes friends with many Chinese in business. In her mind, there are both bad Vietnamese men and good Vietnamese men, so are Chinese men. So we don't judge each other based on the nationality. (Acai)

Despite the normalization of bilateral relations between China and Vietnam since the early 1990s, there are ongoing disputes and friction in many fields, particularly in politics. The cross-border couples were aware of the constantly changing political atmosphere between the two states. To avoid the negative emotions promoted by the politicians affecting their marriages, the informants either indicated their indifference to political issues or shunned relevant argument within families (“don't talk about poli-

tics at home”). To most informants, cultural similarity played more important role on forming their cross-border marriages. There were not only cultural similarities between the Chinese and Vietnamese, and even their physical appearances share little difference (Tong, 2010). This was also the reason some informants often commented that they adjusted well to the life in China and felt no difference of their marriages from other marriages around.

Jiali considered her husband a very open-minded person who liked Vietnam and Vietnamese culture very much. “He never minds that our son might choose Vietnamese citizenship, and he also shows no objection to the idea of long-term settlement in Vietnam,” Jiali stated. Being in a cross-border marriage for the couple meant more chances and convenience to experience and learn from another culture. Although noticing many differences between the two cultures despite their similarities, Jiali said they had negotiated to accommodate these differences and learned to respect each other. “It is not easy to manage a marriage, let alone a cross-border marriage. More patience and tolerance are needed,” said Jiali. She went on to say, “Sometimes we also squabble; however we try not to associate our disputes with national emotions.” Jiali pointed out that they wanted a peaceful life rather than war to make a living, and that her husband’s business in Vietnam had been affected greatly by the recent Yellow Sea Dispute between China and Vietnam. “I hope this situation is temporary; we need a healthy environment for our business and travelling,” she sighed.

“While international relations are often diplomatic and rhetorical, borderland interactions are pragmatic and ‘on the ground’” (Chan, 2013, p.114). Many informants had mentioned they felt at ease in the borderlands but less secure by going further into inland areas of China. Meining (age 21, in a registered marriage) considered her marriage migration to Shanghai an unhappy memory since it was too far away from home and friends. She felt constant strangeness, loneliness, and isolation, so she talked all the time with friends in Vietnam through phone calls and online chats. When working in the borderland, she was never bothered by the sense of strangeness. According to her, “There are so many Vietnamese, if I want to get some information, I am able to find many sources. The feeling of being in control is good.” The intimate rhetoric at the borderlands is not only the manifestation of real connections people have formed in the region but also

their wishes for an open and peaceful border for livelihood. “To many borderlanders, not unaware of the sensitivity of inter-state relations, the border is part of the daily reality of ‘diplomatic’ challenges and courtesy that one needs to take care of ” (Chan, 2013, p. 123). Particularly for those who depend more on the border for their livelihood, trivializing the role of the states and the influences of political conflicts carry more importance. There is a consent consciousness of *tianxia datong* (same world) in the borderlands (Luo, 2010): people from two sides of the border interact with each other without caring about the differences of nationality, ethnicity and political stance. We noticed several times, when older informants mentioned the Sino-Vietnam War of some 30 years ago, that interestingly they used “conflict between family members” to address this serious political event. Certainly couples in cross-border marriages were not lacking in national/political emotions and awareness. Rather, they had deliberately tried to minimize this difference so as to maintain and improve their trust and harmony within the marriages.

Discussion

The Peripheral/Rural Cosmopolitans

According to Farrer (2008), mixed marriages and mixed lifestyles represented a form of “cosmopolitan cultural capital,” and “to be too ‘foreign’ or too ‘local’ shows a lack of mastery of cosmopolitan cultural capital” (p. 26). This kind of “cosmopolitan cultural capital” is not only observable among those Westerner-Chinese couples in cosmopolitan Shanghai but also among cross-border couples in the “cosmopolitan periphery” (Taylor, 2007, p. 246) of the China-Vietnam border. This border not only provides a favourable setting for the development of intimacies between Vietnamese women and Chinese men, but these close relationships are also an attractive strategy for gaining a social foothold in the increasingly globalized world.

As “rural cosmopolitans” (Taylor, 2007, p. 265), Vietnamese brides have shown a determined attempt to master both Chinese and Vietnamese elements in their making of a new transnational identity. For many of them, their marriages represent an investment in cosmopolitan identities in a transnational cultural and social environment in which such cosmopolitanism is

associated with daily life reality as well as participation in modernity.³⁶ To be bi-culturally competent, mixed and/or cosmopolitan is not just a mark of membership for the transnational capitalist elite. Vietnamese women with limited social capital and resources and from a relatively peripheral and newly developed region also take part actively in the construction of cosmopolitan identities.

Vietnamese brides have shown great adaptability to new circumstances, successfully renegotiating their identities in the new social-moral space of the borderlands. As Taylor (2007) argues, “The multilingualism of this rural community contrasts with the monolingualism that prevails in many urban areas. ... The accumulated knowledge they have gained living in many different places exceeds in richness that of many educated, well-travelled urban people and breaks the stereotype of rural culture as inevitably parochial or attenuated” (p. 267). Similar to other diasporic subjects, Vietnamese brides are conscious of transnational (global) aspirations (Ong, 2006; Y. Kim, 2010, 2011; Martin, 2014). In comparison, they may not be able to enjoy the relatively rich resources and capital like the economic elites (Ong, 2006) and “diasporic daughters” from newly rich Chinese families (Martin, 2014). However, they have experimented with transnational “maternal subjectivity” through taking advantage of the particular context of borderlands. Vietnamese brides not only claim their very existences in the borderlands but also transform the border into a certain kind of capital for themselves.

Practising Maternal Citizenship at the Space In-between

In studying women’s roles in the traditional Chinese family, Margery Wolf (1972) states that women were able to exert their maternal power through forming an informal, mother-centred “uterine family.” “A woman’s uterine family existed within her husband’s family but was centred around herself

³⁶ The informants’ narratives and stories have indicated what kind of woman, daughter, partner, and mother they want to be and their varied ways to practices these roles/identities. Their understandings of modernity/modern woman may be different from each other or from those single, fashionable career women in big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong. However, for many poor rural women from Vietnam, choosing a cross-border marriage and getting married without registration has been a rather modern and brave practice for them, not to mention that many have become financially capable and shoulder equal and even more responsibilities to support their families.

as mother and was based primarily on her affective relationship with her children. This informal, officially unrecognized family became woman's primary source of influence, security, and personal belonging" (Johnson, 1983). The maternal power of Vietnamese brides is also well recognized within a cross-border marriage. Comparably, in the context of borderlands, the Vietnamese brides have enjoyed more advantages and resources to practice what Abelman and Kim (2005) call "maternal citizenship" (p. 101).

Within a transnational context, the defining of legal citizenship often works for the privilege of men, and the state reinforces patriarchy through the manipulation and implementation of the so-called "modern" citizenship regime (Sheu, 2007). However, national citizenship is not the only identity that Vietnamese brides carry with them in transnational migration. What they take instead is a sense of belonging rooted in their family, kin, linguistic and ethnic group relationships, and expansion of maternal networks. "Women in transnational marriages are 'transmigrants' who, through their everyday activities, develop and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders." (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009, p. 552). Although this kind of maternal citizenship is less recognized in a legal and formal citizenship system, it is crucial to Vietnamese brides' lives and to the dynamics of family reform, as more and more of them teach their children Vietnamese, or choose to register Vietnamese citizenship for the child. Within a cross-border marriage, Vietnamese brides have many roles, including worker, wife, mother, and citizen. Their wifeness and motherhood are fundamental in shaping their experience and identity in the transnational "in-between" spaces. Their roles as wife and mother carry more cultural significance in the communities, being endowed with more importance than the legal citizenship defined by the state.

Certainly, the exercise of maternal citizenship cannot leave the context of borderlands. The geographic proximity, the prosperity of border trade and the chaotic administration all contribute to the women's increasing power to bring into play their maternal citizenship. As Mac Askew (2009) argues, borderlands function "as sites that expose patterns of transgressing against forms of state- and center-defined identity" (p. 180). Vietnamese brides' cross-border marriage and mobility have automatically carried the implication of transgression. Evidently "border crossings are not driven solely by the pragmatic attractions of the price differences prevailing between countries: when considered as cultural practices, these border cross-

ing movements can be interpreted ethnographically as transgressive and affirming practices” (p. 180). These transgressive and affirming practices are not carried out through public campaigns or political movements. Instead, Vietnamese brides have incorporated the potential for resistance and change into their daily life activities.

Conclusion

Contrary to the stereotypical view of Vietnamese brides as “backward,” “lacking knowledge,” and “ignorant” of state policies, they have shown much acumen in taking advantage of the in-between spaces they live in and showing their wisdom in dealing with complicated linguistic and cultural circumstances. In many ways, their surviving and developing trajectories in the borderlands have put the state’s dominant model and discourse of modernity in question, shedding light on women’s different ways to participating in development. Moreover, by taking advantage of the benefits of living in the space “in-between,” the Vietnamese brides have demonstrated how they “through modernization have exercised agency, attempting to negotiate and define themselves, often within and against hegemonic frameworks imposed from ‘above’” (Tanabe & Tokita-Tanabe, 2003, p. 13). Although their practices of maternal citizenship may be less recognized in a formal and official way, Vietnamese wives have announced and indicated their prominent existences in the borderlands.

Often, women’s roles and experiences as mothers and housewives are less recognized or given inadequate attention in a male-centred model of policy making. Indeed, women are excluded from the male model of modernity designs and projects. However, women do not need to resist the domination of men through abandoning their maternal identities. Their maternal identities can function like foreign passports “for creating new designs for living, new conceptions of womanhood, and new forms of relationship” (Ho, 2007, p. 263). Their integration into new environments, survival and livelihood, intimate experiences, social identification, and citizenship rights provide meaningful stories for us. The practices of maternal citizenship by Vietnamese brides are good examples to show how women in different locations negotiate changing patterns of personal life and win their recognition, self-esteem, and values through their maternal identities as daughters, wives, and mothers.

References

- Abelmann, N., & Kim, H. (2005). A failed attempt at transnational marriage: Maternal citizenship in a globalizing South Korea. In N. Constable (Ed.), *Cross-border marriages: Gender and mobility in transnational Asia* (pp. 101-123). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Amster, M. H. (2005). Cross-border marriage in the Kelabit Highlands of Borneo. *Anthropological Forum*, 15(2), 131-150.
- Amster, M. H., & Lindquist, J. (2005). Frontiers, sovereignty, and marital tactics: Comparisons from the Borneo Highlands and the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore growth triangle. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 6(1), 1-17.
- Anagnost, A. (2000). Scenes of misrecognition: maternal citizenship in the age of transnational adoption. *Positions*, 8(2), 389-421.
- Angeles, L. C., & Sunanta, S. (2009). Demanding daughter duty: Gender, community, village transformation, and transnational marriages in northeast Thailand. *Critical Asian Studies*, 41(4), 549-574.
- Askew, M. (2009). Sex and the sacred: Sojourners and visitors in the making of the southern Thai borderland. In A. Horstmann & R. L. Wadley (Eds.), *Centering the margin: Agency and narrative in Southeast Asian borderlands* (paperback ed., pp. 177-206). New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Bao, J. (2005). *Marital acts: Gender, sexuality, and identity among the Chinese Thai diaspora*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Chan, Y. W. (2013). *Vietnamese-Chinese relationships at the borderlands: Trade, tourism and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Chen, Y.-H. (2008). The significance of cross-border marriage in a low fertility society : Evidence from Taiwan. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 39, 331-352.
- Dang, J. (2010). *A study on illegal marriage migrants at the China-Vietnam border* (M.A. Thesis, Jinan University, China). (In Chinese)
- Faier, L. (2007). Filipina migrants in rural Japan and their professions of love. *American Ethnologist*, 34(1), 148-162.
- Fan, H., & Liu, Z. (2006). *A study on China-Vietnam border trade*. Nanning: Nationalities Press. (In Chinese)
- Farrer, J. (2008). From “passports” to “joint ventures”: Inter-marriage between Chinese nationals and western expatriates residing in Shanghai. *Asian Studies Review*, 32, 7-29.
- Freeman, C. (2011). *Making and faking kinship: Marriage and labor migration between China and South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Grillot, C. (2012a). Between bitterness and sweetness, when bodies say it all: Chinese perspectives on Vietnamese women in a border space. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 17(1), 106-148.
- Grillot, C. (2012b). *The fringes of conjugality: On fantasies, tactics and representations of Sino-Vietnamese encounters in borderlands* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Macquarie University, Australia).
- Guangming News. (2006, November 12). Investigating unregistered marriages at the China-Vietnam border. Retrieved November 12, 2009, from http://www.gmw.cn/01wzb/2006-11/12/content_506365.htm (In Chinese)
- He, Z. (2006). Migration and the sex industry in the Hekou-Loa Cai border region between Yunnan and Vietnam. In T. E. Blair (Ed.), *Living on the edges: Cross-border mobility and sexual exploitation in the greater Southeast Asia sub-region* (2nd ed.). Southeast Asian Consortium on Gender, Sexuality and Health.
- Ho, P. S. Y. (2007). Eternal mothers or flexible housewives: Middle-aged Chinese married women in Hong Kong. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Sex Research*, 57, 249-265.
- Horstmann, A. (2009). Deconstructing citizenship from the border: Dual ethnic minorities and local reworking of citizenship at the Thailand-Malaysian frontier. In A. Horstmann & R. L. Wadley (Eds.), *Centering the margin: Agency and narrative in Southeast Asian borderlands* (paperback ed., pp. 155-176). New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Hsia, H.-C. (2010). Introduction. In H.-C. Hsia (Ed.), *For better or for worse: Comparative research on equity and access for marriage migrants* (pp. 1-26). Hong Kong: Asia Pacific Mission For Migrants.
- Huang, L., Li, J., & Long, Y. (2008). Sociological reflection on cross-border marriage at the China-Vietnam border. *Journal of Liaoning Administrative College*, 1, 201-202. (In Chinese)
- Jin, Z. (1995). Situation of and legal reflection on marriages between Chinese and Vietnamese border residents. *Journal of Guangxi University (Philosophy & Social Science Version)*, 58(1), 49-51. (In Chinese)
- Johnson, K. A. (1983). *Women, the family and the peasant revolution in China*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago.
- Kim, M. (2008, July). *Gender, motherhood and citizenship of international marriage migrants: Maternal citizenship of Filipinas in South Korea*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, USA.
- Kim, M. (2010). Gender and international marriage migration. *Sociology Compass*, 4(9), 718-731.
- Kim, M. (2013). Citizenship projects for marriage migrants in South Korea:

- Intersecting motherhood with ethnicity and class. *Social Politics*, 20, 455-481.
- Kim, Y. (2010). Female individualization?: Transnational mobility and media consumption of Asian women. *Media Culture Society*, 32, 25-43.
- Kim, Y. (2011). *Transnational migration, media and identity of Asian women: Diasporic daughters*. New York: Routledge.
- Lan, P.-C. (2008a). New global politics of reproductive labor: Gendered labor and marriage migration. *Sociology Compass*, 2(6), 1801-1815.
- Lan, P.-C. (2008b). Migrant women's bodies as boundary markers: Reproductive crisis and sexual control in the ethnic frontiers of Taiwan. *Signs*, 33(4), 833-861.
- Lapanun, P. (2010). *Transnational marriages of rural Isan women and the local Influences*. Paper presented at the Revisiting Agrarian Transformations in Southeast Asia: Empirical, Theoretical and Applied Perspectives, Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- Le Bach, D., Bélanger, D. I., & Khuat, T. H. (2007). Transnational migration, marriage and trafficking at the China-Vietnam border. In I. Attane & C. Z. Guilmo (Eds.), *Watering the neighbour's garden: The growing demographic female deficit in Asia* (pp. 393-426). Paris: CICRED
- Li, B. (2008). A marginalized group: Research on illegal Chinese-Vietnamese marriages in Tiandeng County of Guangxi. *Around Southeast Asia*, 9, 60-66. (In Chinese)
- Li, J. (2007). *A gender perspective on cross-border marriage cases in Datian village of Guangxi Province* (M.A. Thesis, Guangxi University for Nationalities, China). (In Chinese)
- Liu, G. (2011). *Chinese immigration law*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing.
- Liu, Z. (2013). The situations of Southeast Asian brides and the impacts on China national security. *Journal of Jiangnan Social College*, 15(1), 19-22, 27. (In Chinese)
- Luan, T. D., Rydstrom, H., & Burghoorn, W. (2008). Introduction. In T. D. Luan, H. Rydstrom, & W. Burghoorn (Eds.), *Rural families in transitional Vietnam* (pp. 1-13). Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House.
- Luo, L. (2010). The basis of China-Vietnam marriage and the identity of women without nationality. *Guangxi Ethnicity Studies*, 99(1), 57-61. (In Chinese)
- Luo, L., & Long, Y. (2007). The change and pondering on cross-border marriage at the China-Vietnam border. *Journal of Baise College*, 20(1), 15-21. (In Chinese)
- Luo, W. (2006). Peace and interactions: A study on China-Vietnam marriage in Guangxi. *Journal of Guangxi Normal University (Philosophy & Social Science Version)*, 42(1), 52-56. (In Chinese)
- Luo, W. (2013). China-Vietnam marriage among Asian marriage migrants. *Journal of Changjiang Normal College*, 29(3), 1-6. (In Chinese)
- Lyons, L. T., & Ford, M. (2008). Love, sex and the spaces in-between: Kept wives and their cross-border husbands. *Citizenship Studies*, 12(1), 55-72.

- Martin, F. (2014). The gender of mobility: Chinese women students' self-making through transnational education. *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and Pacific*, 35. Retrieved August 7, 2014, from <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue35/martin.htm>
- Mills, M. B. (1999). *Thai women in the global labor force: Consuming desires, contested selves*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Durham, N.C., London: Duke University Press.
- Ong, A. (2006). Experiments with freedom: Milieus of the human. *American Literary History*, 18(2), 229-244.
- Pei, Y., Ho, P. S. Y., & Ng, M. L. (2007). Studies on women's sexuality in China since 1980: A critical review. *Journal of Sex Research*, 44(2), 202-212.
- Pieke, F. N. (2011). Immigrant China. *Modern China*, 38(1), 40-77.
- Piper, N., & Roces, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Wife or worker? Asian women and migration*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Property Laws of People Republic of China (Taking effect from Oct. 1, 2007). Retrieved February 26, 2016, from http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2007-03/19/content_554452.htm (In Chinese)
- Qin, H., Cheng, J., & Wei, Y. (2013). Cultural integration and cooperation: A discussion on irregular Vietnamese labours in D city of Guangxi. *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy & Social Science Version)*, 35(2), 111-116. (In Chinese)
- Schoenberger, L., & Turner, S. (2008). Negotiating remote borderland Access: Small-scale trade on the Vietnam–China border. *Development and Change*, 39(4), 667-696.
- Scott, C. V. (1995). *Gender and development: Rethinking modernization and dependency theory*. Boulder & Longdon: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Sheu, Y.-H. (2007). Full responsibility with partial citizenship: Immigrant wives in Taiwan. *Social Policy and Administration*, 41(2), 179-196.
- Sprenger, G. (2009). Political periphery, cosmological center: The reproduction of rmeet sociocosmic order and the Laos-Thailand border. In A. Horstmann & R. L. Wadley (Eds.), *Centering the margin: Agency and narrative in Southeast Asian borderlands* (paperback ed., pp. 67-86). New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Suzuki, N. (2005). Tripartite desires: Filipina-Japanese marriages and fantasies of transnational traversal. In N. Constable (Ed.), *Cross-border marriages: gender and mobility in transnational Asia* (pp. 124-144). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Tanabe, A., & Tokita-Tanabe, Y. (2003). Introduction: Gender and modernity in Asia and the Pacific. In Y. Hayami, A. Tanabe & Y. Tokita-Tanabe (Eds.), *Gender and modernity: Perspectives from Asia and the Pacific* (pp. 1-16). Kyoto, Melbourne: Kyoto University Press & Trans Pacific Press.
- Taylor, P. (2007). *Cham muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and mobility in the cosmopolitan periphery*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Thapan, M. (2008). Series Introduction. In R. Palriwala & P. Uberoi (Eds.), *Marriage, migration and gender* (pp. 7-17). New Delhi; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Tong, C. K. (2010). *Identity and ethnic relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness*. Singapore: Springer.
- Wang, H., & Huang, J. (2007). Women without nationality: A group lingering between tradition and modernity. *Journal of Baise College*, 20(1), 1-6. (In Chinese)
- Wang, H.-Z. (2007). Hidden spaces of resistance of the subordinated: Case studies from Vietnamese female migrant partners in Taiwan. *International Migration Review*, 41(3), 706-727.
- Wang, H.-Z., & Chang, S.-M. (2009). The commodification of international marriages: Cross-border marriage business in Taiwan and Viet Nam. In H.-Z. Wang & H.-H. M. Hsiao (Eds.), *Cross-border marriages with Asian Characteristics* (pp. 211-232). Taipei, Taiwan Academia Sinica, Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies.
- Wei, F. (2014). Cross-border mobility of Vietnamese sugarcane-cutting women. *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy & Social Science Version)*, 36(2), 72-77. (In Chinese)
- Williams, L. (2010). *Global marriage: Cross-border marriage migration in global context*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wolf, M. (1972). *Women and the family in rural Taiwan*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Xinhua News. (2005, October 20). It needs only 15 hours' driving from Chongqing to Hanoi at the end of this year. Retrieved March 12, 2016, from http://www.cq.xinhuanet.com/travel/2005-10/20/content_5394031.htm (In Chinese)
- Xinhua News. (2006, October 8). Being couples after only banquets? The investigations on unregistered marriage at the China-Vietnam border. Retrieved October 6, 2008, from http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2006-10/08/content_5174045.htm (In Chinese)
- Xinhua News. (2007, February 13). The unmarried mothers in China-Vietnam border villages. Retrieved October 6, 2008 from http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2007-02/13/content_5735300.htm (In Chinese)
- Yan, Y. (2003). *Private life under socialism: Love, intimacy and family change in a Chinese vil-*

lage, 1949-1999. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Yan, Y. (2011). The Individualization of the family in rural China. *Boundary 2*, 38(1), 203-229.
- Zeng, B. (2011). Two countries, one city: From conception to reality. *Guangxi Economy*, 4, 14-15. (In Chinese)
- Zhang, J. (2012). A trafficking “not-spot” in a China-Vietnam border town. In M. Ford, L. Lyons & W. V. Schendel (Eds.), *Labour migration and human trafficking in Southeast Asia: Critical perspectives* (pp. 75-94). New York: Routledge.

Biographical Note: Pengli Huang recently graduated from the Department of Social Work and Social Administration in the University of Hong Kong. Before that, she was a visiting scholar in Centre for Women’ and Gender Studies in University of Texas at Austin, USA. Her research field includes cross-border marriage and gender studies. E-mail: pengli305@hotmail.com

Biographical Note: Sik Ying Ho is the research supervisor of Pengli Huang and also an associate professor in the Department of Social Work & Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong. Her areas of expertise include gender, sexuality, and queer theories. E-mail: psyho@hku.hk