Between Bitterness and Sweetness, When Bodies Say it All: Chinese Perspectives on Vietnamese Women in a Border Space

After more than ten hours confined in a bus, travelers from Kunming eventually arrive in Hekou (Yunnan, China). They grab their belongings and leave the station to find accommodations or an acquaintance. The sky is already dark when the small city begins to stir and nightlife starts. The last goods-carriers cross the bridge to go home to Vietnam, storehouses close, hotels switch their electric signs on, restaurants get busy, internet cafés fill up, and the area around the Vietnamese market attracts the attention of newcomers. This is the border, the limits between these Chinese and the Other.

Only a few days after I had arrived in Hekou, I realized through conversation how the simple evocation of Vietnamese women can inspire local dwellers to elaborate complex discourses on their neighbor, and they expressed some perplexity about my interest in these Vietnamese lives. Hekou is a little Chinese border town located in Yunnan Province. It faces its twin Vietnamese city of Lào Cai on the other bank of the Red River [Sông Hồng]. Since the official reopening of border exchanges in 1991, both towns have been experiencing an economic boom for the last two decades and have become attractive places for Chinese nationals who wish to invest in the challenging sector of cross-border trade, as
well as local tourism. As a result, the various migration waves have transformed the demographic structure of Hekou. Nowadays, mobility characterizes a large part of Hekou and Lào Cai’s dwellers, among which Vietnamese women occupy a unique position. But a long history of Vietnamese immigration to Hekou and southern China reaches back centuries, with the most important moves occurring in the early twentieth century.

This study is based on several months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hekou and Lào Cai, conducted between 2006 and 2009.¹ In this article, I focus on male Chinese perceptions of Vietnamese women, using Hekou as my case study. I will examine four main types of communities that represent different facets of Vietnamese female identity in the male Chinese gaze. All of them embody a set of connotations, stereotypes, and perceptions of an exotic but ambiguous Other. Drawing on the numerous comments of my informants as an original standpoint, I have chosen to use the narrative of a promenade through the city of Hekou as a deliberate and original canvas to describe the common way people arriving from inner China—especially men—discover this border city, and how they encounter and perceive their Vietnamese neighbors—particularly women.² A focus on how Chinese male observers interpret the body language of Vietnamese females helps underline the importance of bodily functions in the Chinese definition of Vietnamese women and their aspirations in Hekou. This will illuminate how the recurring approaches to these women’s physicality as well as individual subjectivities shape relations between both communities and help construct and maintain stereotypes and narratives that remain dominant in the local discourse related to the significance of cross-border alliances.

The Pernicious Other

For Chinese people who live far from any possible encounter with the Vietnamese, especially for the younger generation, and unless they pay attention to economic development in southern border areas, the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War remains the principal event that comes to mind when Vietnam is mentioned. School education, mass media, and public culture have spread stories that lead a majority of these people to the conclusion that Vietnam was once an enemy at China’s frontier, where the People’s Republic Army fought back the invaders with great efficiency despite considerable human loss.
Women do not have a specific position in this discourse, but if mentioned, theirs is certainly not a glorious part. However, in local memories, as the stories collected by Zhang Juan show, embellished images of Vietnamese female soldiers echo some of the narratives of the recent border war.3 Those Chinese who actually experienced the short but destructive war in the winter of 1979 sometimes recall events and conjure up images of female warriors, although in a very ambiguous way. These Vietnamese soldiers, represented in Vietnamese propaganda iconography as patriotic and anonymous servants of an idealistic cause, were not totally denied a feminine identity.4 This was especially true when battle tactics required them to be creative. Hence, tales of female civilians who seduced naïve and necessarily reserved Chinese soldiers extrapolate on “genuine” war episodes in which naked female soldiers expose their attractive bodies to confuse their enemies and make them fall easily into the ambush of Vietnamese male soldiers. Such stories of disguised and seductive enemies abound in American soldiers’ accounts of their war experiences in Vietnam as well—in cinematographic representations for instance—but Chinese official history of the border conflict does not include such images or accounts of erotic seduction tactics. Nevertheless, Vietnamese female warriors still appear in local memories and contribute to the construction of a contradictory image of contemporary Vietnamese women, which, as I will describe here, has a certain impact on the interaction between today’s border civilians and Chinese categorization of their female neighbors, regardless of their generation.

The Feminine Silhouette: Allegory of Vietnamese National Identity

In the iconography of contemporary Vietnam, women often symbolize national identity. Their portrayal as working and fighting for the sake of the nation during the Vietnam War still has an impact on popular imagination, in Western countries as well as in China. Official propaganda has been used to elaborate the image of women’s dutiful role within society and transform them into the icons of a revolution, a new model of emancipation from tradition, and so on.5

As remarked by Nguyễn-vô Thu-hương, in the 2002 exhibition at the Women’s Museum in Hà Nội, the state representation of women bridges
“[T]he productive and reproductive realms, the public and the private, marking the feminine character of ‘Vietnamese women’ . . . to capture women in their conflated role of female workers for the global economy . . . ” According to Nguyễn-vô Thu-hương, these exhibits, like pageants, put women in national attire such as áo dài and áo bà ba and display them as the embodiment of the nation. “[O]nly these body markers of the nation now enter the market as fashion items. The less-than-subtle state representation of women in relation to work and to goods in the market marks a space of anxiety which the state must guard in order to regulate the femininity that connects laboring to consuming selves.” Brave and strong, devoted and loving, Vietnamese women have also actively participated in resistance against invaders and proudly sacrificed their own life to protect their compatriots. Vietnamese public opinion populated by nationalist propaganda usually emphasizes how French, Japanese, American, and Chinese soldiers have all been challenged by the unexpected commitment of their Vietnamese female enemies. Nowadays, images of Vietnamese women are still popular tools for expressing the pride of Vietnamese national identity and they are widely used in an extended range of media, for instance, as pictorial advertisements for the tourism industry. Chinese border regions and towns where tourism is a main local economic resource are no exception. Domestic Chinese tourists who wish to discover their exotic neighbors are provided with paper and electronic materials disclosing three types of pictures: landscapes, war memorial and other sites, as well as attractive women. So even before they reach the border zone of their country to encounter the real Vietnamese, their imagination has already been filled with certain exotic images that they expect to meet—like women from Chinese ethnic groups who, in the Chinese iconography, embody their own group’s identity and features with their young, feminine, and eroticized bodies. It is the same with images of Vietnamese women. Most of the time, tourist literature stages attractive young Vietnamese women dressed in their national costume, the áo dài.

As superficial as it may seem, this pictorial impression is indeed what the average Chinese tourists as well as new migrants expect to encounter in the social landscape of the borderland. In most cases, expectation meets disillusion. But soon, another perception emerges from the physical interactions and experiences in the border areas: that of pragmatic and active bodies.
Figure 1: An example of the figures of Vietnamese women used for commercial purposes (Hekou, December 2007). SOURCE: Zhang Juan.

The Familiar Neighbors

Nowadays, images of war have faded and the Chinese who interact with their neighbors no longer see Vietnam as a potential threat. Vietnam is considered an economic partner, engaged in the process of active economic development since 1986, and still developing. Vietnam is perceived to be full of opportunities available to those who wish to invest time, connections, and funds in a naturally rich and accessible region. Opportunities have replaced threat. The military enemy has vanished and the economic partner has emerged, but inequality remains a component of the Sino-Vietnamese trade relationship. However, although Chinese entrepreneurs are now seen as the invaders of Vietnamese border spaces through their business, investments, and sales, Vietnamese women have also become a familiar figure of Hekou’s streets and its surrounding rural communities. In regards to long-term settlements, a rather clear picture emerges in border cities: among the population of those who migrate for economic reasons, Vietnamese men generally do not settle in
China nor do Chinese women agree to live in Vietnam. Vietnamese men generally have homes, families, and land in their hometown; they migrate more and more to border and urban centers for seasonal work or business, but they do not choose to live in a foreign country since their activity does not require long-term settlement in China.\textsuperscript{10}

Vietnamese women appear more flexible and adapt more easily to the new environment. Temporary labor brings many men to Southeast Asian countries but they are not welcome as workers in an already overpopulated China. Chinese women on their part would generally not consider moving to a country perceived as poor and backward, where women are already excessive in number and where life is less convenient and less flexible than in China. Compared to any small city in China, Lào Cai looks more like a township to a Chinese urbanite. Thus, even when their Chinese husbands need to travel frequently or stay in Vietnam for their commercial activities, Chinese wives who may live anywhere in China often choose to wait back home, despite the distance and risks to their marriage. Hence, gender structures regulate migration flows and borderland settlements, which mainly occur in these specific one-way directions: Vietnamese women move to China (long and short term) while Chinese men move to Vietnam (short term).

**Inconspicuous as a Vietnamese Body in the Crowd**

Vietnamese women encountered in Hekou generally adopt a much more low-profile behavior than the idealistic depictions of official propaganda, war accounts or tourist brochures would suggest. They are visible but in a rather different way. Generally, Chinese tourists in Hekou are attracted by Vietnamese exoticism materialized in costumes, which symbolize ethnicity from the masses’ point of view. They come to see striking feminine silhouettes as part of the human landscape, an exoticism that might inspire them to explore the site, to cross some limits, and eventually to go abroad. Even though they sometimes see women wearing áo dài in Hekou, they still experience the feeling of encountering an outsider, a foreigner, an Other while wandering the streets, satisfying their curiosity, and practicing their sighting skills. Ethno-tourism in China has developed essentially through the exploitation of a seductive and amusing picture of otherness that ethnic groups embody by dressing in a different way, eating different food, speaking a different language, and
having strange and entertaining habits, such as dancing whenever they celebrate a festival or express their joy. This “internal orientalism” remains the mainstream perspective and it has been described in numerous scholarly works, such as Sandra Teresa Hyde’s recent research on sex tourism in the neighboring region of Xishuangbanna.\textsuperscript{11}

If defining oneself as “proper” requires defining oneself against an Other, Han China would perceive non-Han as a repository of pleasure, a China that is highly sexism as it is raced. The post-reform Chinese state is a key player in these representations of the borderlands (\textit{bianjing}) and their association with pleasure, sex, and desire, because economic development in the form of tourism uses these representations for marketing purposes.\textsuperscript{12}

In Hekou, the initial perception of Vietnamese people, among which women make up the majority, arises from a casual exploratory walk in the streets located in the city center and around the bus station and border gate. The differences between corporal identity amongst a crowd of busy individuals first appear in the way they occupy the space. The Vietnamese make themselves

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Vietnamese street-vendors in Hekou (January 2009). \textit{Source:} Caroline Grillot.}
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available at any time and place in the city center since they are mobile and ready to offer drinks, snacks, fruits, and so forth. This is a way of conducting their business but also a necessity since they are not allocated any specific area for trade, unless they can rent a stall or a shop in the main market building dedicated to “international products.” For those Vietnamese carrying out a modest business in Hekou, available space can be an issue. Some young men wander the streets near the border and along the Red River shore, hawking hammocks, Vietnamese cigarettes, and gadgets of all kinds, while women carry baskets of fruits and food or small stalls on wheels, allowing them more flexibility in where they can settle briefly. Others who conduct their business on a more permanent basis make arrangements with local shops and rent a portion of shade and sidewalk. They may also use the spot freely when it does not interfere with the shop’s space. Moneychangers sit in plastic chairs or just squat at the corners of main streets with their bags held tightly against their bodies, scrutinizing potential clients. The owners of small street stalls cook their food on portable coal heaters and offer their homemade refreshments to customers who eat on tiny tables, sitting on low benches in the available spaces, usually under the shade of the roof of a corner house, in front of a Chinese restaurant, next to a market gate, or against a wall. These vendors use as little space as possible to remain mobile and quick in the morning and the evening, and in case rain or a sudden “clean city” movement requires them to disappear temporarily.

As it has been slowly promoted—and implemented in a compulsory way—for over a decade in China, a civilized city is a city that displays clean streets, that is, cleared of any street vendors, stalls, and extensions of shops on the sidewalks. Hekou authorities periodically remove anything that protrudes from buildings, especially when the image of the city has to be polished to welcome an official delegation. Thus, in the ideological language of the state, peddlers, vendors, anarchic graffiti on walls, and private installations within public spaces are the ultimate expression of uncivilized habits and backward ways of conducting private business; the word “luan” [chaotic]—as opposed to “xihe” [harmonious]—characterizes this environment.  

Since Vietnamese women represent most of the street vendors, as mobile, uncontrolled, and often installed at a physically low level, their patterns of activity tend to define their social position and status. To avoid exacerbating this
implicit discourse of hierarchy, they generally remain rather inconspicuous. In contrast, Chinese shops and restaurant owners tend to occupy a higher level on the street scene, which they dominate in numbers: they sit on chairs in front of their shops, stand or remain indoors, and are very rarely seen at the ground level, squatting or sitting on the floor. In the occupation of public space, there exists a marked frontier between Chinese and Vietnamese people that may be the result of deeply inculcated corporal habitus. But, as Mandy Thomas has argued in her work on Vietnamese immigrants in Australia, body stature and physical positioning can also be interpreted as a marker of a difference between social statuses in a Chinese city where “foreigners” remain “foreigners” even though a certain familiarity characterizes the locals’ relationship with them.  

Thus, a quick glance allows newcomers to distinguish in the crowd of local, regular occupiers two unbalanced groups who share the city’s public space. In Hekou, choice in spaces to occupy is limited for Vietnamese streets vendors who must accommodate, as they do in Vietnam, narrow sidewalks and flexibility of movement. Under these conditions, locals accept the Vietnamese in their midst. Their presence does not challenge Chinese vendors' monopoly since their precarious position does not threaten Chinese business. Thus, one could consider that Vietnamese street vendors maintain a tolerant relationship by remaining inconspicuous and keeping a low profile, in other words, being inferior and deferential or obsequious toward the city and people who include them as part of their borderland society.

But physical features can mark other differences. Often they are interpreted as reflections of the different stages of “cultural progress,” an interpretive framework or lens commonly used within Chinese political, and consequently, popular discourses on otherness. Interestingly, Hekou visitors who expect Vietnamese people to look quite different from the Chinese often ask locals how to distinguish them with a simple glance. Among locals’ answers, emphasis is placed on body position as well as body language, using a phenomenological approach to identify one from another. According to them, Vietnamese men walk slower than Chinese men, they wear sandals, and tend to walk splay-footed. Vietnamese women carry their babies on their hips while Chinese mothers hold babies in their arms against their chests. Vietnamese people eat on floor mats while Chinese use table and chairs or benches. For outdoor naps,
Vietnamese use hammocks hung between any poles or trees available in public spaces under shade, or they simply lie on their bags of goods or their vehicles. Local Chinese nap at home or at least sit on a chair and sleep over their business’ counter. Of course, such bodily exposure is also the consequence of the lack of personal space available to a population of Vietnamese who do not necessarily live in Hekou but only work there during the day. These conditions prevent them from enjoying more comfort and freedom of movement, and some of these corporal attitudes are more related to body language that is specific not only to Vietnamese people, but also to rural Chinese populations, especially some ethnic groups.

Comments on physical features focus on the believed existence of a clear line of distinction between Chinese and Vietnamese, although it may not seem very obvious to those unfamiliar with locals and who have not spent time in mutual observation. But comments, sometimes expressed with a certain condescending tone, reveal how body display is interpreted as a sign of backwardness
and lack of proper civilized behaviors. For instance, in China as well as in Vietnam, it is common to observe people squatting anywhere while waiting, observing, resting, thinking, and even working. But for Chinese urbanites, regardless of the comfort that this physical position may give them, they try to avoid displaying it in public. They regard squatting as a peasant’s posture. From such a comparative perspective, the habitus of Vietnamese bodies is easily connected with the idea of backwardness.

**Strong and Efficient as a Productive Body**

Hekou has been, and remains, an important economic gate for Yunnan and northern Vietnam. It is a place where trade takes place at any moment. Thus, one would expect to discover a very busy town. Indeed, a mixed population occupies the streets, particularly around the border gate. The streets in and about the main border gate district provide an impressive sight of turmoil, displayed mainly in the morning and until the middle of the afternoon. Here, in

![Figure 4: Vietnamese goods-carriers line up on Shangmao Street to go back to Vietnam on a rainy afternoon (Hekou, January 2007). Source: Zhang Juan.](image-url)
the few streets dedicated to wholesale trade, impressive quantities of products coming mainly from Chinese factories on the east coast are delivered.

Chinese wholesalers and shopkeepers negotiate, count, and sell their goods while Vietnamese women load and carry them toward the bridge that separates the two countries. Tireless female workers carefully transport huge amounts of goods on remarkably large bicycles. They cover their faces and thin bodies almost entirely with long-sleeved shirts, long pants, masks, gloves, and hats, which protect them from the dirt and the sun. If not for the Vietnamese conical hats [nón lâ] they wear and the thin stature of the bodies, these silhouettes could also be mistaken for those of male goods-carriers, since their working outfits tend to masculinize their shape. Some women, for instance, wear male shirts. This sort of scenery constitutes one of the main original landscapes observable in Hekou. This first sight would usually translate into a general perception. Visitors as well as locals often comment:

Vietnamese women are tough women. They can eat bitterness [chi ku]. They work hard, they do men’s jobs. They are usually quite responsible and efficient. I wonder how they manage to move their vehicles. They look skinny—that’s because they eat poorly—but they are really strong.

The first impression seems to be that Vietnamese women are just these hardly identifiable bodies available for productive labor. In Hekou, Vietnamese women occupy the immediate border space in a temporary but active manner, and their energy fills the streets’ atmosphere. Some curious Chinese visitors like to wake early enough in the morning to watch their national flag rising at eight o’clock when the border gate officially opens its door. This symbol of sovereignty and power also concretely marks the moment when the flood of Vietnamese goods-carriers and sellers, waiting since the early morning hours on the other side of the Friendship Bridge, are allowed to enter China. They run, sometimes fall, sometimes argue with the border services who extort from them an illicit tax, in order to arrive soon enough to collect the products they need or have been put in charge of transporting.¹⁵

It is a spectacular vision that can also provide a certain image of the Other across the river: a crowd of mostly women who run in an alluring uniformity, all modestly dressed with similarly anonymous and gender-neutral work clothes, faces covered with masks or tired expressions. They push forward with empty bags attached to the frame of heavy bikes, their border-passes
firmly in hand, ready to get the necessary stamp from a bored Chinese customs officer hidden behind a small window to start a labor day dedicated to commercial trade in its most tangible and physical sense. These contemporary coolies invade the streets to pack a huge amount of Chinese products into bike-bags, trailers, or baskets carried on the shoulder with a yoke. This labor force, serving their own business or their bosses (Chinese or Vietnamese), represent in the eyes of local dwellers and visitors nothing other than productive bodies who sell their physical strength and availability to needy businesses and, by extension, to the economic development of their country. The scene is remarkable enough to attract those Chinese visitors with a certain sense of nationalism who enjoy watching the rush of “foreigners” to their beloved country. They enjoy the scene with a perceptible sense of pride for what their country has achieved in terms of “modernization,” a success that the wide availability and visibility of manufactured goods reflects.16

**Figure 5:** Vietnamese goods-carriers, workers and traders rush into China when the border gate opens on the Friendship Bridge every morning at 8 a.m. (Hekou, December 2007). **Source:** Zhang Juan.
One can also see in the Chinese onlookers a complex sense of disregard for those poor neighbors of theirs who rush through the gate. But they cannot fail to be impressed by the display of energy and activeness of those moving bodies. Local Chinese men who directly use their service (at low rates) all agree on the great working potential of Vietnamese women, their endurance, strength, independence, and efficiency. They also emphasize the surprising disconnect between the nature of these women’s work and the appearance of their bodies: small, very thin, and sometimes aged. This is popularly explained by the poor diet of Vietnamese people. As several Chinese informants believe, “they eat small quantities of food, which contain low amounts of protein, often only twice a day.” Their body shape is thus the result of insufficiency in quantity and quality of nutritional inputs. These comments must be read not only as assumptions about the nature of Vietnamese food, but also as implicit or explicit remarks concerning the low quality of a cuisine that is looked down upon in China. Chinese tourists or businessmen who have sojourned in Vietnam provide in their accounts unflattering details about the maladjustment of the local dishes to their voracious and demanding appetites: Vietnamese food is alleged to lack taste, diversity, nutrient, and quality. Despite this supposedly poor diet, Vietnamese women’s ability to carry large and heavy loads of products is explained by Chinese locals with no more argument than, “This is how they are shaped . . . They have no choice; this work is for economic survival.” The contradiction within this discourse does not seem to raise more questions regarding the nature of these astonishing bodies.

However, when comments on the presence and activity of Vietnamese female goods-carriers emerge in local discussions, Vietnamese bodies often become the forum for larger debates that compare them with Chinese women and Chinese women’s relationship to physical activity. What is of note here is not so much the consensual account of the physical conditions of Vietnamese women, but how this account emphasizes what is believed and described as the opposite nature of Chinese women’s bodies. Hence, Chinese men would often extrapolate on what Vietnamese women can physically achieve and what their own female compatriots cannot. But in the discourse, what could be taken as the recognition of a physical ability and the praise of a hardworking people becomes a tacit way of describing and idealizing a local social picture. Nowadays, this same popular discourse conceives that Chinese women are emancipated from hardship because of the general advancement of their society,
which no longer asks them to carry out such coolie work. Their position in
society has changed; a certain improvement toward gender equality has been
reached under the socialist period, although the post-reform era emphasizes
new inequalities and some regression to sexist ideologies. But most impor-
tantly, this description of Vietnamese women's enduring bodies leads to the
assessment that Chinese men would never let their mother, wife, or sister carry
out such tasks if they could do it themselves.

Herein lies the core of the perceptions shared by most of the Chinese who
live close to their Vietnamese neighbors and who have constructed a point of
view that Gang, a trader from Zhejiang in his late fifties, summarizes with a
disapproving scowl:

These women are hardworking because their husbands are lazy; these men have
no face. In China, if a man is rich, he can get away with being lazy. But if he is
poor and does not try to change this situation by working hard, people disregard
him. In Vietnam, men eat soft rice [chi ruan fan]; it means they are kept men.

In a manner of speaking, Vietnamese women, regarded as active working
bodies, have become the site of a socio-economic-political discourse that
informs us about the progress of social transformations in both China and
Vietnam. By evoking of the backwardness of a society whose women still lack
basic needs (nourishing food) and emancipation (from patriarchal power), the
discourse rather explicitly emphasizes how Chinese women have improved
their social position. Although gender equality is far from being reached
in China, Chinese society has nevertheless become an environment where
women have come to enjoy some benefits of the tremendous social changes
that occurred during the recent decades of political action. At least in the
common discourse, these positive changes are seen to overcome the negative
impacts of the reforms on women's status and existence. The comparison
between the labor position of Vietnamese and Chinese women emphasizes
the assumed liberation of the latter and allows a certain disregard for a coun-
try that has yet to implement policies of gender equality. Inequality in China is
currently more structured by rural-urban dichotomies than by gender differen-
tiation. In short, according to Chinese men, the laboring bodies of Vietnem-
ese women embody what modern and emancipated Chinese women no longer
accept: being part of a mass, and being regarded as second-class citizens or just
as hard-working, subservient bodies.
However, while they are cognizant of these differences, a touch of nostalgia remains perceptible among those who lived before the economic reforms. As Mister Guo puts it:

Today, [Chinese] women are self-serving; they don’t want to marry you if you don’t possess anything. Before, we were all people of modest means; there was no special financial demand from a fiancée. If you were a good person, you could find a wife.

Mister Lu, an urban migrant, commented:

Chinese women are not as capable as they were before. When they have money, they prefer to employ housemaids instead of doing housework themselves. They become lazy; they prefer to gamble and shop.

According to many of these sometimes critical and frustrated Chinese men, an honest assessment of the idealistic portrait of a modernizing Chinese society should at least acknowledge the flip-side of emancipation: the unsatisfied, demanding, and increasingly pressuring type of woman. This subject of discussion attracts much elaborate comments from the men who tend to portray themselves—not without some sense of humor—as the victims of women’s emancipation.

Yet, the complex perception of Vietnamese women’s ability to undertake physical work can be illustrated by some Chinese wholesalers’ ambiguous attitude toward them. In Hekou, while these women struggle to stack impressive loads on their special bikes in order to bring the cargo back to the customs channels up to Lào Cai, the Chinese men who employ or deal with these women, one notices, rarely help them. They ignore them, or simply observe them from a distance. They make comments about their strength and ability to manage to pile up so many items on a two-wheel vehicle, but very rarely would they lift a finger to give them a hand. This can be linked to the fact that Chinese men disregard Vietnamese men, who, they assume, would not make a move to help either. Thus, why would a Chinese man, a boss, and a superior in the local social and economic hierarchy, do so? Helping once would oblige him to help on a more regular basis and risk disrupting the established economic balance between Chinese man and Vietnamese woman and the set roles of traders versus coolies. Yes, Vietnamese female bodies are strong, but they are also submissive and used to enduring such tasks, in Chinese perspective.
Interfering would perhaps be kind but it would not change an accepted fact. In contrast, a Chinese man who helps would also risk losing face.

In Hekou, I spent time with a small group of wholesalers and traders in a narrow street behind the border gate. There, Vietnamese women load their bikes with all the goods that some motorized goods-carriers bring them when the storehouses are too far from the gate. Throughout the morning, I would watch the familiar sight of busy women with their piles of bags and their impressive efforts to lift their heavy bikes. The floor was covered with goods waiting to be taken care of, ropes, and sacks. On the side, my Chinese friends spent hours chatting, smoking, and drinking tea while all this activity went on before them. One of these men was selling old second-hand factory sewing machines. His days were mostly spent sitting in a plastic chair at his shop doorway, and at lunchtime he would cook for his family, a neighbor friend, and occasionally me. Meanwhile, from time to time, a Vietnamese associate would repair and pack each machine in a sackcloth bag while squatting on the floor, then load the heavy machines onto bikes. Another neighbor sold vehicles and electronic goods spare parts. Thus, right in front of the alley shops, numerous times I saw two or three women struggling with the weight of their cargo, trying to lift up a seriously loaded bike, failing, falling, and then trying again, with visible hardship. I never saw any of my friends get up to help them. When once I made a move to help, I was immediately warned: “Be careful, it’s very heavy, don’t bother, you won’t be helpful, only they can do this, even we can’t help them, we can’t even move their bike, let it go, they’ll manage,” said Lao Liu, one of the neighbors. I sat down. Another time, I briefly helped a woman carry a bag of tiles. This time, the woman herself urged me to stay away, arguing that I could not carry such a heavy item. In fact, I did, and it was bearable. Her facial expression turned from neutral to smiling. She thanked me several times, obviously not used to enjoying much kindness from the people who use her services on a daily basis. No one commented on my move, but I felt that it created an awkward feeling among the observers. Here, more than the language or gender issue, social class and economic position were barriers no one was willing to challenge with altruist attitudes.

This anecdote reveals how the Chinese of Hekou consider Vietnamese goods-carriers not merely as workers, but also as outsiders marked by another
social hierarchy, one that generates a complex mixture of admiration and disregard, and from which it seems better to preserve a certain distance. Lending a hand would suggest disturbing such implicit conventions. It would amount to a challenge to the established social order, which is based on divergent values on gender and social hierarchy. And apparently, to shake up conventions is not part of the current Sino-Vietnamese social relationship agenda. Vietnamese women’s bodies remain employed and esteemed for their availability, skills, and productivity. Furthermore, the power relationship explicitly revealed in this street scene also symbolizes the male ideal of domination in the realm of conjugality. Although the indifference of my Chinese male friends to the burdens of Vietnamese women preserves the street’s hierarchy, their behavior could also be seen as a way to counterbalance the status of Chinese women that they describe as “too demanding,” “more and more lazy,” “like to gamble,” “often complains,” and so forth.

Indeed, what was also interesting to observe in these scenes of silent interaction is the curious way Vietnamese women watched my male Chinese friends cook. These men would alternate between going to the market, chopping vegetables, and stir-frying the dishes. According to Vietnamese household habits described by Vietnamese women, men very rarely take care of family meals, a task conventionally attributed to women. This particular chore, inverted or at least more equally shared in Chinese society, contributes to the representation of ideal Chinese husbands that circulates amongst Vietnamese women. The moment we sat down for lunch at noon corresponded to the resting time of some Vietnamese women. They would sit on empty boxes and bags on the floor. They rarely ate a proper meal but nibbled on homemade snacks. Again, this situation created a sense of hierarchy in the shared public space. The Chinese men—sometimes with their family—ate their self-cooked meals in the streets, on a table in front of their home or store, while the Vietnamese women worked or silently rested on the ground under the shade of their hat near the working tools and goods that did not belong to them.

But keeping some distance from these anonymous, flexible, and available labor resources—from which almost any physical labor can be demanded, since economic power and nationalistic instincts allow such domination—does not reflect the entire relationship established between Chinese men and Vietnamese women in this particular border city. From a Chinese dweller’s point of view,
and from a visitor’s perspective, the Vietnamese female body encountered in Hekou is firstly perceived as small, active, and with an indistinct personality as far as the regular street worker is concerned. But, as is the case in the gaze of Australian people commenting on Vietnamese immigrants, this account is “countered by references made to their dexterity and strength.”¹⁸ In Hekou’s discourse, this feature of Vietnamese female bodies is even more emphasized when compared with the bodies of Vietnamese men, portrayed as lazy and weak because of alcohol and drugs, to which it is often believed they are addicted.¹⁹

Interestingly, these same female bodies attract a completely different type of regard when partly undressed and exposed in a more lascivious way. Once the streets are emptied of the accumulation of goods, once the goods-carriers have brought their load back to Vietnam, once the afternoon’s nap hours have passed, another crowd of Vietnamese bodies becomes available for a different type of physical service: sexual intercourse. The dependence they create with local men adds another, seemingly different layer to the relationship of these neighbor societies.

Sensual and Emancipated as a Fantasized Body

The laboring and productive bodies of Vietnamese women are visible everywhere around the main commercial streets of Hekou, where they are part of the landscape as key actors in the economic dynamism of the region, especially small cross-border trade. Ordinary visitors of the city could very well be left with the impression that their female “neighbors” are subordinate, strong, and masculinized bodies, and that this appearance reveals the character of Vietnamese people. As mentioned earlier, this image meets the official representation of Vietnamese women as “masculinized proletarian subjects,” a propagandist language and image to which a large majority of Chinese people still subscribe.²⁰ However, a walk further along and inside the famous local “Vietnamese market” reveals that Vietnamese women’s body language offers multiple perspectives on their presumed identity.

The officially named “China-Vietnam Border Trade Market of Hekou” is actually what makes the city well-known within and without the trading network that brings most of its visitors there. In official documentation, including
the official tourism industry, the name refers to a building located on the main street along the Red River that separates Hekou from Lào Cái. The market is actually composed of the junction of two similar but initially separate buildings. It offers a whole ground level, including shops and stalls of “Made in Vietnam” goods. These range from exotic fruits to latex shoes, along with redwood handicrafts, swords, coffee, dried fish, and multiple souvenir items for those who don’t have the time or the means to cross the border and tour a tiny piece of Vietnam itself. After some shopping, visitors can rest at a small restaurant and enjoy a lunch made of already prepared dishes perfumed with unusual spices, a rice noodle soup, or some fried spring rolls on the go. Later, while enjoying the lively market sights on one side or a view of the Red River on the other, visitors can sip fresh coconut drinks or a cup of coffee under the shade of a few outdoor teahouses. This constitutes a must-do for any tour of Vietnam’s flavor. These goods and delicacies are sold mainly by Vietnamese women in stalls and shops outside and inside the building. First encounters and negotiations with them allow visitors to put a face on an identity. In this
main touristic spot of Hekou, interactions occur in Chinese, the basics of which all Vietnamese sellers have learned in order to communicate with a clientele that comes from all over China. Clients like to ask questions about the products and engage in negotiations with the seller. This allows them to experience a rather different Vietnamese way of dealing. Vietnamese sellers are harder to negotiate with than Chinese traders. These interactions, while leaving them quite perplexed at first, lead Chinese customers to make some rapid assumptions about Vietnamese women’s character and social behaviors. Vietnamese women may be tough when they do physical work, but they are also harsh in trading; they behave differently from Chinese women. They hardly compromise and thus face easy judgments from their clients: “They don’t know how to do business,” is often the complaint. This commercial interaction is perhaps one of the key moments when Chinese visitors go beyond the initial vision of productive and hardworking bodies to contemplate another type of persona hidden behind this facade. Unfortunately, the interaction often fails to establish a familiar connection.

These impressions are further elaborated in local traders’ discourse on the relationship they try to build with their Vietnamese clientele, that is, the difficulties encountered in trying to speak the same language in terms of business customs, habits, and informal rules. More often than not, Chinese traders and shop owners blame Vietnamese people for being picky and ignoring the art of bargaining, for disrespecting rules of trust, reliance, and commitment when establishing business partnership, and for their lack of honesty. This negative portrait is already well established among the community of cross-border traders at the local level. If newcomers ignore this general impression, the first interactions they have with Vietnamese women at the market quickly remind them. Their experiences quickly come to confirm a feeling they may have toward these “similar but different” neighbors.

Still, whatever mixed feelings they may have about their neighbors’ trading abilities and friendliness, an expected sense of exoticism emerges from a visit to the Vietnamese market. What is not really mentioned in advertisements about this Hekou tourist spot is the second floor of the market, of which one can have a foretaste while wandering around the ground floor to have a closer look at what is also available amongst tropical fruits, arts, crafts, and
latex sandals. As in several other places along the streets near the market, like landmarks on the path to a thrilling, exotic experience, the market entrance spaces shelter some sex shops on open display. Sex toys, pornographic dvds, aphrodisiacs, and other erotic gadgets are on display in very explicit ways. While in ordinary settings these may disturb some visitors, here they mostly tease the curious appetites of men who know that they have reached a liminal border region. Then, along with perplexity, ambiguity starts to emerge. A few meters away from these exciting body stimulants are the massage parlors where other hardworking women wait for customers to appreciate their services. Vietnamese women, the only masseuses in this Vietnamese market, are once again approached for their physical abilities.

At the very end of the market, visitors are suddenly faced with the verbal assault and coaxing from young and attractive, but still, Vietnamese masseuses. Like their fellows in the shops, they all manage to speak basic Chinese at levels that vary according to the length of their stay in China. Gathered at the front of their salons, seated on plastic chairs, wearing young, simple but fashionable clothes, sometimes holding or touching each other (not in a licentious way but simply as young women do as expressions of affection and sorority), and speaking in Vietnamese, they offer a sight that directly addresses the expectations of Chinese visitors. The tourists eventually meet some welcoming, easily approachable, imagined and sometimes fantasized-about figures without compromising themselves by entering into a more illicit sphere. We must keep in mind that most of the Chinese visitors to Hekou and the Vietnamese market in particular come in groups, and rarely on their own. No matter how interested they become in the Vietnamese, especially in Vietnamese women’s bodies, they need to preserve their reputation. Even in the case of sexual tourism, Chinese men who visit the market in search of sexual experience have a look around and enjoy a massage before they specifically direct their steps toward karaoke bars, hotels, or brothels. The step-by-step approach seems to be part of the process.

In order to attract their clientele, Vietnamese masseuses strategically work toward the point of contact by calling their potential customers’ attention with the usual terms of address used in this part of Asia: gege or dage [elder brother]. This term implies that they put themselves in the position of
meimei [younger sisters]. In this particular context, when men and women do not know each other, these words contain a rather implicit sense of familiarity and intimacy and help to lower a supposed cultural barrier or awkwardness that may restrain men from stopping in. These terms are also used by men and women who are engaged in an intimate relationship, or at least dating each other. The use of these terms, along with a lascivious tone, does not differ much from the language of prostitution. The subtlety here is that it establishes between a masseuse and her customer a flirtatious platform on which rules remain, apparently, strict.

Performed in both Chinese- and Vietnamese-owned or rented parlors, these massages are not sexual encounters but they do represent a liminal stage that every individual can choose to transcend by going up to the second floor, or not. Generally following a shampoo and face-wash, massages include conventional but also thrilling gestures: I have seen women straddling their customers to give them vigorous back and shoulder rubs. This practice is not unusual in ordinary massage salons in China. But the excitement may emerge from the sometimes-painful massage when it is provided, along with flirtatious chat, in the licentious atmosphere conjured by the reputation of the market. However, this sight is quite visible, since most of the salons are wide open and any passerby can actually enjoy a glance on a quite unequal physical encounter: more often than not, big Chinese men being ridden by petite Vietnamese female bodies. Chats are common during the massage and visitors ask curious questions about almost everything related to these women’s otherness, from Vietnamese customs to cultural habits, from relationships to food. Most of the masseuses speak some basic Chinese but when they work together, they chat to each other in Vietnamese while providing massages, intriguing their clients even more. Language games, laughing, and teasing are a way to relax each other.

These massage parlors act as ambiguous spaces where flirtation is empirically part of the massage deal. They permit physical sensual encounters—although under the established rules of the masseuses the "touching" happens only one-way—and they emphasize the sense of exoticism. These parlors almost erase the not-so-friendly feeling that visitors may have experienced a few minutes ago with the "Made in Vietnam" product sellers. Like their "sisters" who work in the streets as goods-carriers, Vietnamese masseuses
are appreciated for their physical abilities, their efficiency, and the strength of their gestures, even though the objectiveness of these assumptions is questionable since their otherness and body language play a large part in the impression they leave on their customers. Indeed, while the performance of their service may enforce the idea that Vietnamese women’s bodies certainly hold a strong inner nature that needs to be acknowledged, it also ambiguously arouses Chinese men—who compose the majority of massage parlor patrons—to consider the implicit possibility of soliciting sexual services from the parlor girls or those in brothels. These flirtatious massages may have no other purpose for men than to provide them the opportunity to get closer to an exotic body and to enjoy being taken care of at a cheaper price than at Chinese massage parlors. However, for some of them, such a location and encounter also represents a forum to get more information on the kind of entertainment and extra physical services available on-site or elsewhere, and to prepare them for a further adventure. Theoretically, these salons do not offer sexual services, but in reality, under request, they can arrange some or

FIGURE 2: Three Vietnamese younger sisters [Yuenan mei] are waiting for clients in a brothel at the Vietnamese market (Hekou, April 2006). SOURCE: Zhang Mi.
send their clients to brothels that they are connected with. The massage constitutes the first step, an appetizer, and a sensual preliminary that any of these young Vietnamese women can offer, as long as she performs her “Vietnamese-ness” through language, attitude, and gestures.

At this stage, visitors have almost all noticed or been informed that the second floor of the market is also the area of a bustling business. Outside of the building, some Chinese women associated with brothel owners would have already solicited visitors to propose an “exciting encounter.” In fact, the inner mezzanine of the building allows sights of young females who expose their upper bodies and faces to those who would be tempted by a visit. Just a few steps above visitors’ heads, the real attraction is put on display: dozens of brothels full of young Vietnamese women, ready to expose their so-called “Vietnamese characteristics.” Once upstairs, the tough workers and the flirting sisters are forgotten and replaced by the Yuenan mei. On average aged 15 to 25 years old, these Vietnamese women embody the fantasy of the exotic sexual encounter on the border, the foreign experience. They sit inside their small pseudo “beauty salons” or pose in front of them, dressed in short and sexy clothes and make up, and they are supervised by their Chinese or Vietnamese pimp. From time to time, some of these women wear the áo dài, the traditional Vietnamese dress, an eroticized outfit in the eyes of Chinese men. In Chinese male imagination and in the hierarchy of stereotyped Asian beauty, Vietnamese women hold a high position for their sensuality. At the national as well as local levels in public discourse, in the promotional materials from broker agencies or on internet forums on sexuality in Asia, for instance, a constant orientalist perception of Chinese men finds its translation in fantasies about the supposed white skin, big eyes, and slender waist of Vietnamese women.

In my own observations, these women’s body shapes do not differ much from those of their fellows who work as stevedores in the streets. But they are perceived as different because of the way they alternatively hide or expose their inner or outer features. In the brothels for instance, intentionally exposed bodies are no longer “skinny” but “thin.” Mr. Yuan, a Sichuanese brothel owner, comments:

*Yuenan mei* are generally beautiful. They are quite short, have light skin and their body is very thin, especially their waist. Have you noticed how
big their eyes are? They are very feminine and I think they have more gracious curves than Chinese women.

Vietnamese women thus become attractive, seductive, sensual, and sought after for their beauty. Their open-mindedness, the nature of their services, the competitive low prices, and their indulgence of clients’ expectations and caprices make them very popular. Liang, a regular client from Mile (Yunnan) adds:

You don’t need to negotiate with *Yuenan mei* on the kind of service you like, they will do it anyway. The price includes unlimited time and acts. This is not the case with Chinese *xiaojie* who are pickier about what they agree to. Vietnamese girls are natural and friendly, they are tender, and they have my preference. I think they are honest and more straightforward than Chinese *xiaojie*.

These exotic bodies are flexible in the sense that they are available to satisfy one’s needs and ready to do anything that pleases, without resistance. They are authentic and do not endorse a fake identity as can be the case elsewhere in China. They are seductive and obedient, but when they initiate contact with curious visitors through their games, they can also be insistent enough to force the most hesitant of men into their parlor. They can be provocative. While some visitors dislike being assaulted this way, others appreciate becoming the object of such desire—which they oppose with weak resistance—because they feel flattered. Here, Vietnamese women reach the paroxysm of their image: they are no longer discreet, low profile, and submissive to family and economic pressures; in this particular space, they appear emancipated, provocative, young, and available to perform their “Vietnamese-ness.” These women literally assault their clients by openly touching them, pushing them into their rooms, and preventing them from escaping their advances. Chinese men are not used to such straightforward approaches with Chinese *xiaojie*, who would rather enter such games after a few drinks in a karaoke room. All of this provocative body language is part of the seduction process, an assumed expression of Vietnamese women’s character, and a performance game of their persistence appeals to their clientele of Chinese men. Liang goes on:

Vietnamese younger sisters [*Yuenan mei*] act very differently. They are like kids; they like to play. I like to come to Hekou; this is a place I can relax. Everywhere else, I feel pressure, even with Chinese *xiaojie*. 
Mr. Yuan even emphasizes:

Some Chinese men who come here for the first time become crazy! They just can’t control themselves and end up staying three or four days. They can hire a girl for that long and pay a very cheap price. Things are so easy and open here.

In Hekou, *Yuenan mei* are not just exposed, lascivious, and forward, but also passive bodies that wait for potential clients. They offer an experience different from an encounter with a Chinese *xiaojie* in that the way they act meets Chinese men’s fantasy: a young, sexually emancipated, feminine (*you nüren wei*), tender (*wenrou*), and playful female partner. And the fact that Chinese clients expect an exotic encounter—not just a sexual service—makes them more receptive to every specific detail. *Yuenan mei* are available in number and in a diverse range of physical types, age, and skills. Yet, they remain commodified bodies, cheap to rent and buy, easy to exploit and even to abuse since their position within the local society relies on a tolerant behavior toward their activities and illegal status. *Yuenan mei* are undocumented migrants who are believed to actively sustain the local economy. As Mr. Yuan formulates it:

If there were no *Yuenan mei* here, no one would even think of doing cross-border trade. Why would anyone bother coming so far and risk investment if there wasn’t some kind of reward? So police and Hekou’s authorities don’t intervene, they even protect the business.

Mr Yuan’s assertion finds some convincing elements in the way business is conducted in China in general and in Hekou in particular. There, Vietnamese women play an important role as economic partners of many traders. In that sense, they participate in the development of local economy as well as generate considerable incomes for themselves and their pimps. Experienced fully or not, the encounter with the Vietnamese women’s community of the Hekou market certainly leaves visitors tantalized. When they step back outside, they might even look more attentively at the amount of small guest-houses all along Shangmao Street behind the long building, which rent their rooms by the night or the hour at competitive rates. They may also take a closer look at the percentage of medicines available in local pharmacy related to sexual comfort. And if they wander along the river and behind the main streets, they would discover the walls covered with phone numbers advertising services and goods. Together with the usual illegal services, such as fake documentation,
and illegal items, such as drugs, smuggled cars, and guns, the inscriptions also propose xiaojie, Yuenan mei and virgins. Vietnamese bodies are presented as part of the underground economy of Hekou. It takes a hand sign, a step inside a building, or a phone call to become a participant.

Docile and Devoted as a Domesticated Body

When visitors of Hekou happen to stay a little longer in the city and already have a sense of the multiple figures of Vietnamese women that are offered locally, they will soon discover, among their new acquaintances or their business associates and during their daily interactions with the local population, that inconspicuous Vietnamese women are also part of the city’s social landscape. After the street vendors and moneychangers, the goods-carriers, and the prostitutes, this fourth group accompanies the community of Hekou. For some visitors, they remain invisible. But for others, they become key figures in daily life and activities. To an observer, these women are much more difficult to identify because they remain scattered among the population. They do not gather in specific areas as their national fellows, the street vendors, the moneychangers, the goods-carriers, or the Yuenan mei. They do not share a specific style of dress that would distinguish them from other women. They remain discreet since they tend to physically blend in with the local crowd. Their life stories often sound like a combination of experiences that make these women close to their exploited fellows, although they rarely articulate it in that way and do not necessarily maintain friendly relations with each other.

Translators, tour guides, associates, representatives of Vietnamese trading companies, intermediaries with Vietnamese administration for paperwork and meetings, these women provide their services to strengthen the economic partnership between the two communities of traders. They usually master enough of the Chinese language to become a necessary and crucial link to proceed with efficient economic transactions. Mostly young, qualified, pragmatic, available, and productive, they also extend their employers’ businesses by providing access to their own familial or social networks on both sides of the borders, when they find an interest in doing so. Rather unsurprisingly, intimate affairs hence occur within this frame of relationship. Numerous stories support the assumption that many of these young go-between women make a
step forward in Vietnam’s relationship with China by becoming the private partner of their associate or employer. Marriages happen, children are born, and cross-border families are created. Therefore, some of these women share a common marital situation that makes them belong to a community from the local point of view, whether they recognize themselves as being part of it or not. Living in a variety of different situations, these Vietnamese women are the wives, concubines, fiancées, partners, and ex-partners of Chinese men, that is, the second half of a Chinese household whose mixed arrangement is inscribed within the local historical marital practices.

This phenomenon has been the case throughout history all along the Sino-Vietnamese border’s dwelling zones. So why would one perceive these women as physical bodies before or beside their social position? What do they share with other Vietnamese women that make them an embodied entity in the gazes of Chinese people, despite their perceptible integration in Chinese society? How do some apparently very different personal situations, which have led some Vietnamese women to experience conjugality with a Chinese partner, become perceived from a common approach? The idea that one can gauge a women’s private situation from a physical perspective arises from different factors.

While visitors notice and perhaps question these mixed alliances among the local population, they also hear about the multiple cases of Vietnamese women who initially did not intend to get personally involved with Chinese men but were deceived and forced to become their wives. These cases have been widely reported in the media in recent years, in local tales, and in historical accounts. Consequently, the label of “human trafficking” has become too-easily applicable to a large range of complex personal situations that led some women and men to share a life together, whatever the means they employed or the consent they actually gave. Again, since arranged and forced marriages are not new patterns in China, these cross-border alliances should be considered as an extended form of the similar interregional ones still occurring on a large scale within the country. But the very fact that these alliances are the direct result of the commodification of Vietnamese women orientates the perspective that people commonly have about their bodies.

It is commonly assumed by Chinese that these Vietnamese women’s involvement in Chinese family life represents the alternative conjugal option
for Chinese men who did not succeed in finding a suitable life partner within the Chinese matrimonial market. To explain this phenomenon, a few structural factors are generally assumed. The first is the gender imbalance in the marriage market originating from the one-child policy implemented during the last three decades, as well as rural-to-urban migration that empties rural areas of marriageable women. The second one emphasizes the economic disparity between China and Vietnam that encourages disadvantaged men from China to look for partners in Vietnam, where women are assumed to have pragmatic ambitions to improve their life standard. However, these explanations are not sufficient to explain many cases. For several complex reasons that have already been described elsewhere, some men in this part of China consider a Vietnamese spouse to be a convenient choice to meet their marriage expectations: available, cheap, culturally close, hardworking, and not demanding.

On the other side, the easy explanation of these women's availability starts with the popular belief that Vietnamese women exceed Vietnamese men in number. Indeed, Vietnam's demography shows a significant deficit in male population, but this uneven ratio found in most countries is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon. According to the local construction of this situation, the lack of men forces some women to live a single life while encouraging others to find partners beyond their country's borders. Another widely accepted "push-factor" lies in the poverty level of Vietnam, especially the northern parts of the country. Poverty persuades waves of migrants to move toward richer urban centers and developing areas, such as border-trading zones, where they might find more work opportunities. Lots of people manage to cross the border in search of even more advantageous economic choices, whatever these may be.

But beyond these structural factors, I suggest that two other essential ones emerge from this general picture and they need to be included in the understanding of this particular marriage practice nowadays. Indeed, paying careful attention to personal narratives reveals that conjugal aspirations and ideals emerge as a significant motivation for those Chinese men and Vietnamese women who search for each other, on their own or through go-betweens. In popular discourse, Vietnamese women recall for Chinese men a nostalgic picture of what Chinese women used to embody. The latter are believed to have lost their original sense of obedience, respect, duty, and devotion to husband and family that a wife position implies under traditional rules. According to
this discourse, Chinese women have become rather demanding in their emancipation and now insist on making decisions or holding finances in the household realm. On the other side of the mirror, Chinese men are portrayed as hard-working, responsible, participatory in domestic chores, and responsive to fair demands from their wives, in contrast with Vietnamese men who are described by Vietnamese women as unfaithful, uncommitted, lazy, drinkers, and even drug addicts. In this discourse, the differential transformation of gendered behaviors is explained by the very strong patriarchal ideology that still rules Vietnamese families, and which social policies have failed to totally change at many levels of society. Thus, projected ideals are an obvious driving force for individuals who feel that they cannot meet their ideal partner within their own society. But aspiring to marry a “foreign” wife is nevertheless a complex procedure that involves time, money, and ability to handle administrative issues. The choice is not easy. But what if it was actually a choice by default? What if marrying an outsider was the eventual alternative?

Drawing on the numerous life stories collected in Hekou, these men and women appear to constitute the fringes of their original communities, partly disadvantaged by life and marital experiences, economical status, reputation, age, or physical disabilities that put their marriageability in doubt. Although the diversity of cases does not allow a typical portrait of these mixed couples to be drawn, data show that to some extent and degree, personal situations and limitations have marginalized these individuals previous to their meeting each other. This had a considerable impact on how they managed to share a life together. And sadly, in many cases, the choice to engage with a “foreign” spouse has led them to be discriminated against even more. However, in a border city such as Hekou, an ambiguous borderland where many experimental lives begin and many others try to escape a liminal position, the marriage circumstances of the mixed couples I encountered ranged from the worst to the best. According to local tales and firsthand life stories, some women were bought by their husbands and exploited within their household without any sort of reward or comfort; some men are being cheated on by temporary fiancées; while other men and women are enjoying a comfortable life with loving and protective “foreign” partners.

Nevertheless, in the popular discourse, one persistent representation attributes only pragmatic reasons to these alliances, even though they may have
been freely contracted. On one hand, Vietnamese women are suspected to sell themselves to business-oriented Chinese husbands and families in order to improve their economic situation and consequently their own family’s subsistence in Vietnam. Others are accused of being “professional brides” who take advantage of their partners by sharing a temporary relationship with them, then stealing their belongings, and escaping back to Vietnam where their real family—husband and children—can benefit from the maneuver. On the other hand, Chinese men involved in border trade are often suspected of faking a romance simply to get access to the Vietnamese network of their Vietnamese partners, whom they do not intend to marry and may leave behind. While doing so, they also hide their Chinese family, wife and child, and consider their Vietnamese partner to be a second—illegal—wife. Other men benefit from a compassionate perspective from their fellows when it is acknowledged that making a commitment to a woman in order to start a family is a legitimate yearning, whatever her nationality and legal situation in China. These social representations blur the realities of individuals and families whose lives may greatly vary in terms of marital conditions and expectations.38

Nevertheless, commodification of exotic female bodies remains at the core of the issue. Since social representations are nourished on actual facts, let us give some credit to a few local tales and examine the impact they have on perceptions of Vietnamese women. Often, when attempting to establish a connection or bond with a Vietnamese female informant, I would hear warnings from my local acquaintances. Li Jie, a well-informed overseas Vietnamese established in Hekou who translates trade negotiations, told me once:

Beware! Behind this discrete silhouette is a person you should not trust because she threatens you, she would use and abuse you before vanishing. You can’t become her friend. Those who have risked intimacy with these women all ended in a miserable condition. Vietnamese women take away their hearts—they know how to please a husband—their money, even their children! There are many examples . . .

Who are the people behind these unfortunate couplings? In the case of women being deceived, their body is the object of a transaction. It is a commodity offered—through intermediaries to a man or family in need—and purchased for its health, youth, fertility, strength, and presumed submissiveness. In the case of men who were deceived, the Vietnamese body becomes
a tool that the women use to attract and seduce those men who project onto it dreams about their own future—getting a spouse to produce an heir. In both cases, when a child appears in the picture, it is the reproductive facet of the women’s body that contributes to the couple’s consolidation and social validation. Indeed, when a man sees his desire to become a father fulfilled, and if his wife agrees to stay by his side—whether or not she has any other alternative—a family has been created and a more complex relationship of mutual dependency develops between the spouses. But a child can also lead to their separation once a woman has achieved her original plan of becoming a mother. Chinese men may only serve as “unconscious donor” to some Vietnamese women who cannot get married and have children in their country due to their age, divorcee status, reputation, or personal background. In these scenarios, a woman figns a romance with a Chinese man, gets herself pregnant, and once she gives birth and gathers enough money to go home, simply vanishes. Again, widespread stories echo a well-known phenomenon in Vietnam called _xìn con_ [asking for a child], which specifically identifies those socially excluded women who decide to make an informal arrangement with a man, married or not, in order to give birth to a child out of wedlock.39 Supported by the recently updated “Law on Family and Marriage,” which guarantees the same rights to legitimate and illegitimate children in Vietnam, candidates to motherhood manage to fulfill their needs for affection, a father figure for their existing children, and goals for the future.40 But from Chinese fathers’ points of view, these stories, full of resentment, emphasize men’s loss as much as women’s ungratefulness. Zhou Yuan, an elderly man in his mid-sixties, remains bitter about his experience:

I have been married to a Vietnamese woman, tell me 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 for eleven years! And one day she just left. I have been cheated. [Pointing to one of his fellow mahjong players] Look at him, he’s experienced the same things! He never wants to mention it. They’re like that, no heart, no feelings!

Yet various stories of Chinese men who stop providing the minimum of care to the women who give them sons also abound. Husbands may abandon their Vietnamese wives or encourage them to return to Vietnam under the condition that they leave their child in China. In both situations, Vietnamese bodies serve
as the vessel to produce a new generation needed for one or both spouses within his/her community, for the sake of continuing the ancestral line, heritage issues, or retirement security. As a matter of fact, even when a Vietnamese woman deliberately chooses to have a child with a Chinese man, by whatever means, she instrumentalizes her body to fulfill her emotional need and to secure her future, based on the assumption that her child will support her in her old age. Thao, a Vietnamese middle-aged woman who recently gave birth to her third child (a boy) with her new Chinese partner, told me:

The woman who introduced me to my Chinese husband convinced me to keep the child when I fell pregnant. My family was not so enthusiastic about it but my husband's family encouraged me. I felt old too but then I thought about it... Well, my first boy lives with his father, my daughter will soon get married and they both live in Vietnam. I am divorced and alone here. This man is nice and eager to have a boy. So I figure this is my fate. I kept the baby! Who knows what the future will be?

But it is important to notice that these stories rarely touch upon the administrative challenge that the birth of a child in such mixed families represents. This challenge generates anxiety, vulnerability, and powerful feelings when fathers or mothers choose to give their child a socially accepted existence, regardless of the couple's legal status. Made out of pragmatic considerations, the final choice may explain some misunderstandings that lead to unpleasant comments and biased interpretations from the community. When one, two, or sometimes more children are born, the common practice is to register them on their father's household registration system (hukou), under the conditions of paying official fines and possible bribes. In the case of de facto marriages, the procedure grants the father paternity rights and leaves the mother in the shade, depriving her of any legal tie and right to her children. Indeed, considered illegal migrants in China when they are not officially married, such women are nonexistent as far as the state is concerned. At most, when Chinese fathers register children in China, they pay a fine for having more children than they are theoretically allowed to have.

In some cases though, for example when both parents estimate that an education in Vietnam would be of better quality, children are registered on their mother's household registration system (hộ khẩu) in Vietnam. However, when registration is done in Vietnam, or simply avoided, or impossible
paying fines, then Chinese men can enjoy having as many children as they wish since these children will remain administratively nonexistent in China.\textsuperscript{45} Although this deprives the Chinese father of any rights to them, it gives children a legal existence in Vietnam. Making one choice or another in terms of registering children is discussed by both parents, or imposed by the circumstances, or by the father’s will. The relative tolerance of local authorities toward these mixed marriages is also crucial in this perspective. However, an unequal share of rights and responsibilities may affect and complicate a couple’s relationship and may lead to unexpected choices interpreted by others as suspicious, disrespectful, or unfair. For instance, if a Vietnamese woman registers her child in Vietnam, she may be suspected of planning a future return and leaving her Chinese partner.

These administrative aspects of a child’s arrival in a mixed family can point out the agency of the Vietnamese women who live a marital life with their Chinese husbands. But in reality, Vietnamese wives stay with their Chinese husbands whether they enjoy their life or not, as long as they consider the situation to be an improvement of their personal situation on an emotional as well as an economic level.

Conventionally, Vietnamese women are perceived as domesticated individuals whose sphere of activity and influence is the household. They are seen as obedient spouses, entirely devoted to their husbands and family. Local discourse strongly highlights the domestic dimension of their life, but also emphasizes these women’s ability to work and to contribute to raising income for the benefit of their dependents. In social representations—that is, public discourse and media depiction—Vietnamese wives are considered diligent [qinlao], capable [nenggan], tender [wenrou], and virtuous [xianhui]. These qualifications all relate to a physical capacity to handle both emotions—they must satisfy their husbands’ desires and control their own—and hardship. Within the domestic sphere, these Vietnamese women tend to be more flexible or even more vulnerable than their Chinese counterparts. From an external point of view, this translates to a more absent or more passive female figure than in regular Chinese families. Vietnamese women’s socialization as dutiful daughters and wives prepares them to carry out more work than Chinese women would agree to. This feature is widely agreed upon and taken advantage of by some Chinese husbands.
Cooking is an obvious example. Chinese men usually participate more in the preparation of meals than their Vietnamese counterparts who, according to Vietnamese women, never step into the kitchen. But observation and interviews show that Chinese men tend to rely on their Vietnamese wives to cook much more than they would expect from a Chinese wife—although not before they have trained their partner in Chinese cooking, which they often refer to as explaining “how to cook.” Indeed, almost uniformly, tastes of food, choices of spices, vegetables, and dishes cooked by Vietnamese wives are Chinese. The ability to be flexible, to please, and to put aside their own food preferences is implicitly or explicitly required of Vietnamese wives. Appetites and tastes are domesticated, and in terms of physical perception, this regime adjustment interestingly has a certain effect on their appearance. Several of my Vietnamese informants explained that time spent living in China and cooking according to a Chinese diet has shaped their body differently: they put on extra weight. Oilier and more nutritious food is to blame.

Others report a similar situation after a pregnancy, complaining that following their new family’s advice, and often under their mother-in-law’s supervision, they had to eat much more than they would have in Vietnam. Under contemporary Chinese standards, pregnant women’s diets become excessively rich and the emphasis placed on weight gain prevents new mothers from getting back to their original shape afterward. Hence, conjugal life shaped by a process of Chinese domestication becomes inscribed onto Vietnamese women’s bodies and can contribute to making them more invisible amongst a Chinese population after a certain period of time. Their newly shaped body not only translates into a form of domestication but also a form of social and cultural assimilation.

Nevertheless, although these physical transformations make it more difficult to single out and identify Vietnamese wives than other groups of Vietnamese women in Hekou, a visitor who carefully scrutinizes physical appearances can identify some Vietnamese wives from their body language. In contrast to the figure of the Chinese wife, Vietnamese wives are less visible in terms of power within a domestic sphere, which translates into inconspicuous manners and presence. They may be mothers of more than one child, and they appear devoted to their husband, compliant, and available for any sort of work, while nevertheless showing some resemblance to the Chinese silhouette.
Nevertheless, Vietnamese women's bodies contain a certain ambiguity that is the result of the social context of Hekou. The presence of other groups of Vietnamese women, whose purposes and means maintain a general picture, nourish strong representations and unconsciously lead some who interact with them to remain distant. In their husband's views, Vietnamese women also constitute the desires, the expectations, as well as the fear of having a child—and thereby a fortune, and as a consequence, a social face—taken from them. As a result, the image of Vietnamese women—in a physical and in an abstract sense—embodies a complex feeling of attraction and repulsion that disturbs Chinese men. The relative power that Chinese men may exert on Vietnamese women becomes weakened by the nature of bodies whose employment, sexual exploitation, or domestication do not prevent them from remaining unpredictable.

**Ambiguous Perceptions of Appropriated Bodies**

In Hekou, the perception of the crowd of street workers is that of a rather masculinized, productive, Vietnamese female body that is tough yet subordinated, and whose personality tends to remain overlooked. In the contexts of entertainment, with familiarity acquired through business relationships, this image transforms to that of a more exotic and talented woman who plays with the image of the fantasized Other that she might represent for her Chinese clientele. This more gendered and sexualized figure has the potential to attract Chinese partners with whom they can engage in a long-term relationship, becoming a domesticated and normalized reproductive body. This description of the layers of encounters with Vietnamese women in Hekou can be seen as a metaphor for the evolution of its Chinese population's perception of Vietnamese femininity. Vietnamese women first appear as hard workers but difficult to interact with. Proximity allows them to then disclose multiple faces, exposing an ambiguous feminine body used to reach pragmatic goals, such as wealth or future security.

Still, as Thomas has described in her account of Vietnamese communities in Australia, "[T]he contingency of migrant bodies is experienced through their regulation and control by the host society, through the histories they carry with them, and through the continuous and unfolding discourses they are situated within." In the case of Hekou, historical accounts of Vietnamese women, associated with prejudices based on convincing life-stories, nourish the social
representations of them. In these pictures, they pragmatically use—and are abused for—their bodies’ functions and performance skills in order to improve their own or their relatives’ conditions and positions. They seem ready to translate, to connect, to reproduce, to adjust, to provide comfort, service, work, and to fulfill domestic needs. The availability of these bodies, the impunity with which they are exploited, and the general disregard Chinese people maintain toward them, allows a subtle discourse that blames the seductive, deceptive, and manipulative embodied nature of Vietnamese women. In other words, assumptions and suspicions are constructed upon the complex combination of expectations, desire, and access: “You can’t be friends with them, don’t trust them!” said Li Jie. The specific example of the terminology used to designate Vietnamese women in Hekou’s crowd is an illustration. There, *Yuenan mei* generally indicates a Vietnamese prostitute. However, this same term can also designate *any* young Vietnamese woman, depending on the topic and context of conversation (this is also the case with the ambivalent Chinese term *xiaojie*). Here, the ambiguity of the reference term indicates the difficulty in distinguishing the real personality, activity, and intention of these persons. Using the term implies that each of these *Yuenan mei* could potentially be, or be understood as, one of “those” *Yuenan mei*, and it creates a confusion in the discourse.

In Hekou, economic dependence defines the relationship that Chinese locals maintain with their Vietnamese female neighbors. The use and exploitation of the other in a climate of impunity, the economic power that allows for deception and abuse, and the belief in an unlimited availability of similar individuals all work together to maintain a genuine inequality between Chinese and Vietnamese. This translates into an approach toward individuals that regards them as abstract, laboring bodies regarded for their physical abilities, the social tools they can become for creating a network of economic exchange, and disregard for their assumed moral values and character. Overall, the temporary and/or dominating nature of the relationships established between some Chinese men and their Vietnamese domestic or business partners emphasizes the objectification of Vietnamese women’s bodies: used or abused, once they become a burden and if there is no intention to formalize a de facto marriage, these bodies are simply ceded to others or abandoned to themselves. These bodies’ difficulties, the result of their involvement with Chinese men, remain denied in the sense that they attract no special concern.
But power is not the only relevant perspective for analyzing the reasons why these relationships, shaped by social representations, continue. Indeed, in discourse as in practice, the real distinction can be blurred by the many counterexamples that Hekou's society offers for its newcomers to discover.

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ABSTRACT
As emblems of otherness in a space devoted to commercial and human exchanges and dedicated to mercantilism, Vietnamese women who cross the border and now live in areas bordering China have quickly come to represent their country—in the eyes of Chinese people—as a figure of marginal femininity. Observed, dated, used but rarely understood in a linguistic and cultural sense, it is their strong, sensual, and docile bodies that are primarily considered. Contradictory and accommodating images emerge and then expand in the discourses, portraying these women as submissive spouses, tireless workers, prostitutes, manipulators, heartless pragmatists, devoted companions, and ambiguous merchants. This article explores how, between perception and experience, these women's availability, in every sense of the term, makes them both attractive and suspicious, and how their alliances with Chinese men crystallizes the social atmosphere of a border city like Hekou.

KEYWORDS: Vietnamese women, cross-border marriage, social representations, prostitution, stigmatization, embodiment

Notes
1. During months of rather conventional ethnographic fieldwork, I repeatedly overheard various interlocutors in Hekou making particular comments about Vietnamese people in general and Vietnamese women in particular. Most
dialogues between us were not shaped as formal interviews. They were mainly
daily chats and occasional focused conversations. Hence, in most cases, I have
neither provided the precise time of each informant’s quote nor the identity of
the individual making the general statement when it was just representative of
the local public discourse.

2. Michel de Certeau, _L’Invention du quotidien [The Practice of Everyday Life],_

Frontier” (doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University, 2010).

4. Sandra C. Taylor, _Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Hồ Chí Minh and
the Revolution_ (Kansas City: Modern War Studies, University Press of
Kansas, 1999).

5. Christine M. Pothier, “Propagandist Representation of Vietnamese Women:

6. Thu-huê Nguyện-vô, “The Body Wage: Materialism Reification of
Vietnamese Women Workers,” _Gender, Place and Culture_ 13, no. 3
(June 2006): 271.

92–123.

8. Đổi Mới [Renovation] designates the economic reform period that started in

9. Evans Grant, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng, eds., _Where China
Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Regions_ (New

10. However, these patterns are currently changing and recent media reports
establish the frequency and importance of Vietnamese male illegal labor
migration into China. See “Influx of Illegal Chinese workers, an open secret in
Vietnam,” http://www.eurtimehes.org/articles/news/265027/influx-of-illegal-

11. On “internal orientalism,” see Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism
in China,” _Modern China_ 23, no. 1 (January 1997): 69–98. Also see Gladney,
“Representing Nationality.”

12. Sandra Teresa Hyde, _Eating Spring Rice: The Cultural Politics of Aids in
Southern China_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 114.

13. A similar policy has been implemented in Hà Nội, creating a social crisis
amongst those, mostly women, who make a living from street selling. The
“Street Vendors Exhibition,” held at the Vietnam Women’s Museum during the
spring 2009, displayed the results but also the issues emerging from the
implementation of such rules.

15. On this point, after I witnessed for several mornings the same scene and asked about this tax, several Chinese informants asserted that there was nothing official about it. The collectors are wearing a badge and the “one/two yuan” payment looks compulsory. Vietnamese people who are reluctant to pay still submit for fear of seeing their border-pass confiscated. However, there is apparently no official policy behind this, and it could be labeled as a kind of racket, organized by unidentified individuals with the laxity or consent of Chinese Customs. I was also told that this has been implemented in response to a similar racket that Vietnamese Customs had also started with Chinese traders who travel to Vietnam. I had no way to verify this by consulting official documents during my fieldwork. To my informants, this tax was just another routine but anecdotal example of the way local authorities take advantage of Vietnamese migrants, and it illustrates openly staged corruption.

16. Listening to the comments that Chinese observers make on the spot when asked why they watch the “run,” one gets the feeling that the enthusiasm of Vietnamese traders coming in to Hekou gives them some satisfaction. It is important to note that this scene usually happens minutes after the raising of the Chinese flag while listening to the national anthem.


19. This would be the subject of a further analysis of Chinese and Vietnamese mutual representations, which I do not attempt in this article.


21. What I have not included here is that there are informal networks on the Chinese internet that abound with information on all kinds of tourism activities in Hekou.

22. Here I distinguish between sexual tourism and sexual consumption. Among men who visit local brothels are also regular clients such as migrant workers or local dwellers who generally search directly for sexual services once they know the routine.

23. Recently, the term *luohan* [boss] tends to replace *gege*.

24. Women also compose part of the clientele. They come for a massage or, most often, to get their nails done. Some of the girls offer both massages and nail care.

25. Here, a lack of accurate data prevents me from further elaboration. Practices may be very different from discourses and since my initial research was not directly related to prostitution, I have not collected more precise figures.

27. This is the Chinese term used in Hekou to designate Vietnamese sex workers. It literally means “Vietnamese younger sister” (*Yuenan* means Vietnam; hence the capitalization).

28. Around thirty to fifty yuan.

29. Vocabulary related to prostitution is very rich. Nowadays, the most common colloquial term for sex worker is *xiaojie*, which literally means “miss” as in an unmarried woman. See Pascale Coulette, *Dire la Prostitution en Chine. Terminologie et discours d’hier à aujourd’hui* [Saying Prostitution in China: Terminology and Discourses From Yesterday to Today] (Paris: Recherches Asiatiques, 1’Harmattan, 2004).


31. Some well-informed Hekou economical actors and some pimps estimate the monthly incomes of Vietnamese prostitutes to reach up to several thousand yuan.


41. Officially in China, if an unwed woman gets pregnant, she generally faces limited choices. She can opt for abortion, give birth but abandon her child or give her child away for adoption, or, when possible, register her marriage with the father or any man before her due date. In the practice, especially in rural areas, she might hide to pursue her pregnancy in a place where she would not be controlled by the family-planning authorities and reappear later with her newborn. She then faces a fine if she wants to register her child and be able to provide him with social welfare and the same basic rights as other legitimate children.

42. Thao and her Chinese partner are not registered as a married couple.

43. The actual hukou or hukou ben is the document testifying the status of individuals and families.

44. Họ khai is the Vietnamese equivalent of the Chinese hukou.

45. In some families, one child is registered in China while the other is registered in Vietnam. In this case, children’s rights are protected and each parent is guaranteed some parental rights on at least one of their offspring. This is an example of some possible administrative manipulations. See also Luo Liuning and Long Yao, “Zhongguo-Dongmeng jiagou xia Xinan Bianjing Kuaguo Hunyin Zinü de Shehuihuá” [Socialization of Children from Transnational Marriage in South-West China Frontier], Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Sciences) 28, no. 1 (January 2008): 33–37.

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