



Geopolitics of Sino-Vietnamese Mail Order Brides

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The past 10 years have witnessed a rapid increase in the intra-Asia flow of cross-border marriage migration. While increasing neo-liberal globalisation, the opening of borders and the improvement of transport infrastructure between nations, have brought some gains through increasing trade, these have also facilitated an inhuman form of population movement, heightened the demand for cheap labour and exacerbated people smuggling and women and child

trafficking, not only in the least developed countries.

Unauthorized entry and trans-national marriages in Sino-Vietnamese border areas represents a unique example as there are many natural and convenient ways for border crossing and for the development of sophisticated and insidious business involving the most vulnerable population groups, such as women and children from rural areas.

Communist neighbours Vietnam and China share a mountainous, remote border stretching 1,463 kilometres, marked primarily by the Nam Thi river, with six provinces on the Vietnamese side (Lai Chau, Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Quang Ninh) and two provinces on the Chinese side (Yunnan and Guaxi).

Globally, and also regionally, China is recognised as a sending country for human trafficking, but in relation to Vietnam, China has become the major receiving country. There are several reasons encouraging Sino-Vietnamese marriages.

Firstly, young residents in the border communities have many opportunities to meet each other, facilitated by a similar culture and dialects, kinship networks and trans-border and ethnic identities. Based on a survey by the Institute of Labour and Social Sciences, only 7% of these foreign marriages were for love. A considerable portion of these bi-national couples were introduced by people in their kinship networks, particularly in Guangxi, Dongxing, Longzhou County, Jingxi County and Fangchengang.

Secondly, marriage by abduction has also been recorded in the Sino-Vietnamese border regions of China. According to the 2013 statistics reported by the UN Inter-Agency Programme on Human Trafficking in the Mekong Area, Vietnamese authorities discovered 507 cases of selling people across the borders involving 679 objects and 982 victims, an increase of both the number of people and cases over 2012.

Reasons behind Sino-Vietnamese Marriages

Often undocumented trans-national marriages have alleviated the crisis of sex-ratio imbalance in the border regions of South-west China and this seems to be the primary reason why these unregistered marriages have been treated permissively.

Since the 1980s, the imbalanced sex-ratio has been much higher in China than in Vietnam. The sharp rise in sex-ratios of all ages resulted from the persistent and strong preference for sons. Under China's One Child Policy introduced in 1979, parents tended to have a son rather than a daughter.

In most rural areas, sex-selective abortions have led to a huge surplus of men and consequent marriage market imbalance in China. According to the Government Inspectorate statistics in the first quarter of 2013 for Kien Giang province, 13 of the 15 administrative units showed that more than 1,000 women had been married to foreigners, but only about 17% of the marriages were properly registered. As in previous years, the number of women and children being trafficked northward to China increased in 2013, reaching 70 percent of the total victims.

Interestingly, the lenient attitude of some Chinese border cities toward undocumented marriage extends to bride kidnapping. Indeed, in a border village, the residents do not necessarily oppose forced marriage by bride kidnapping and more surprisingly, no one will report the incidents.

It would in any case be difficult to conceive the activity of human trafficking in a village. If someone were to inform the wife buyer for the sake of justice, he/she would be blamed by his/her neighbours and other locals, which would damage his/her reputation and interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, it seems that in some rural areas the anti-trafficking actions launched by the Chinese Government had not been supported effectively by local communities.

Aside from local – un-reported cases of bride trafficking – the high cost involved for the Chinese authorities to control marriages is another factor.

Prohibiting marriages with Vietnamese will give rise to lots of social problems. Border regions that have too many unmarried single men can be vulnerable to social instability.

Cross-border marriage is among others a strategy for families in disadvantageous conditions for an upward social mobility – the hyper gamy principle – and material considerations by the families and brides and bridegrooms.

Commercialization

Vietnam's mail-order bride business is booming, fuelled by surging demand from Chinese unmarried men. Though international marriage agencies are officially illegal, loopholes in China have allowed the "industry" to flourish.

Commercial marriage migration, commonly defined the Mail-Order Brides (MOB) phenomenon, have received attention over the past few decades from the women involved as well as from official immigration policies. Initiated in China in 2009, the use of the Internet sites, newspapers, and the searching for a "Vietnamese bride tour" has grown significantly in 2013.

In addition to advertisements such as "A Vietnamese bride for \$5,000, virginity guaranteed, delivery within 90 days, if runs away within a year, get another one for free", certain websites even hold drawings offering prizes consisting of free wife-seeking trips to Vietnam. For a group purchase price of 30,000 to 40,000 yuan (USD4,727-6,303), an attractive Vietnamese bride aged between 18 and 25 can be "bought" from a marriage agency based in Yunnan Province, which regularly posts online advertisements.

The true nature of these marriage brokerage services was revealed when investigations showed that many Chinese men, through these websites, went to Vietnam to recruit Vietnamese brides not for themselves, but in order to "exchange" these women to others for commission.

The agency, *ynxn1314.com*, is registered as a Chinese dating service in the Yunnan's provincial capital Kunming. It organizes group tours to Vietnam for single Chinese men and arranges dates for them with Vietnamese women selected from a catalogue as a possible mate for marriage. The cost of the tour includes travel expenses, translation services, gifts for the women's families and the wedding ceremony.

Bilateral and International Actions

In 2013, the government of Vietnam issued Decree No. 110/2013/ND-CP stipulating sanctions for administrative violations in the fields of marriage and family. The highest administrative penalties for acts such as brokering sham marriages for immigration purposes, profiteering marriage registrations,

sexual abuse, and labour exploitation are 20 million to 30 million Vietnamese Dong (equivalent to USD 940-1410).

Programme 130 and the National Plan of Action Programme 130 is the Vietnamese government's crosscutting response to human trafficking. Programme 130 grew from the United Nations Mekong Region Projects' Initiative which centrally co-ordinates anti-trafficking efforts in the Mekong region of South East Asia. This process is facilitated by the UNIAP through the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative on Trafficking (COMMIT). In fact, COMMIT helps co-ordinate the crosscutting response under Programme 130, with Vietnamese government departments working in partnerships with international organisations, NGOs and donors.

Despite the efforts of the Vietnamese Government and of the bilateral and multilateral cooperation in anti-trafficking to identify, to document and to register the cases, the figures draw only a portion of the dramatic phenomenon: many cases are unreported, undiscovered by law enforcement agencies, or simply were not considered human trafficking.

It is paramount importance to establish a multilevel cooperation approach between the two countries in order to raise awareness and educate communities on the issues concerning the commercial use of human beings, particularly women and children, as well as developing and strengthening international, regional and national legal frameworks and supporting women victims returning from abroad through rehabilitation programmes and post-trauma training programmes.

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