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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

The Fringes of Conjuality

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

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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

door

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geboren te Semur-en-Auxois, Frankrijk

Abstract

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

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

This thesis, grounded in peoples' experiences and perceptions, chooses a different perspective. It questions the determinism of state policies and the reductive view of human trafficking by arguing that the phenomenon of cross-border marriage is ultimately embedded in the articulation of various social issues that have recently emerged in both China and Vietnam. Competition over wealth amongst the Chinese population and internal migrations have increased social inequality. In the meantime, commodification of social relationships, and changes in conjugality values and expectations have altered gender positions. These various factors have excluded some individuals from the marriage market and relegate them to the fringes of both societies. To some extent, such a new social context has driven them to develop survival strategies, and consequently to adjust their marital practices in order to fit their challenging environment. The thesis shows how contemporary social values shared by mixed couples' hosting communities and revealed in a stereotyping social discourse on Otherness eventually lead many of involved individuals to face new challenges and stigmatisation once married, regardless of the circumstances within which they initially met.

The key argument of this thesis is that cross-border marriages in this region are practiced as an alternative pattern to normative conjugality that intend to serve as a springboard for excluded people who pursue social recognition. This objective is rarely achieved for new forms of stigmatization emerge from this marriage pattern. This thesis contributes to existing scholarship on cross-border marriages by highlighting how social marginality may impact the development of alternative patterns of conjugality, particularly in spaces that are perceived as chaotic.