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Cross-Border Brides: Vietnamese Wives, Chinese Husbands in a Border-Area Fishing Village

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Abstract

This article traces the lives of a group of Vietnamese women driven by poverty and loss of marriageability to cross the border into China to marry men from the fishing village of Wanwei. Wanwei's location, only 25 kilometers from the border with Vietnam, enables these women to make fairly regular trips back to their native villages to visit their birth families. Yet, despite the fact that they now live in a designated Jing (ethnic Vietnamese) village, where a significant proportion of the population shares their ethnicity, their illegal residential status and recent arrival excludes them from the community of villagers who claim descent from Vietnamese immigrants in the sixteenth century. Despite the hardships these women face as a result of continuing poverty, lack of emotional intimacy in their marriages, and marginal social status, few see themselves as victims of human trafficking. Instead, most take pride in their agency and achievements.

Keywords: marriage, Vietnamese wives, Chinese husbands, transnational marriage, Wanwei

On a July morning in 2004, I did something I had not done before in the five years since I had begun to make annual trips to Wanwei: instead of going through the official border post on land, passport in hand and official documents attesting that I was going on a research trip, I crossed the border illegally, in a small boat. Although nervous, I wanted to take the route used by the women I knew in Wanwei.¹

Ten people were already waiting when I arrived at the boat dock behind a private house in Móng Cái on the banks of the Ka Long River. I dared not strike up a conversation with any of them, having been warned against doing so by the friends who had arranged my trip. Each passenger gave 100,000 VND (about US\$5) to the boat owner. Two of my fellow passengers were young women who seemed amazed by everything and looked worried, quite unlike the middle-aged woman in their company, who laughed and talked seemingly without a care. One of

the young women got seasick; the other fared better, but she looked tense and scared, especially when the boat owner stopped to talk and give money to someone near the border crossing. When the boat arrived in Wanwei, the older woman promptly led the two younger ones away. I later learned that she was a matchmaker and that her two charges, who hailed from Quảng Ninh province near the border, had gone with her to Wanwei to find husbands.

I had no intention of studying mixed marriages when I first visited Wanwei in 1999. I was then part of a team considering investigating the consequences of the creation the previous year of the Dongxing–Móng Cái Free Economic Zone. That project never got off the ground, but I became interested in the lives of the Vietnamese women I met in Wanwei who were married to Chinese fishermen. Since then, I have traveled to Wanwei at least once a year and gotten to know forty-four such women (up until 2008). I stay for extended periods, sometimes in the home of the Party Branch secretary who happens to belong to the Jing (ethnic Vietnamese) community. I have regularly attended the annual festival of the Jing community as an honored guest. I have helped my informants as they went about their household chores, worked alongside them as they cleaned and mended their husbands' fishing nets, dug in the sand for small mollusks with them, and processed jellyfish, one of the main products of Wanwei, with them; I have walked between the village and the shore, puffing behind the women as they carry heavy baskets on their heads. I have hung around the market stall where one of my informants sells produce and the small pavilion where another woman offers her services as a seamstress. We have long chats—sometimes in groups, sometimes one on one. When it is time for me to go home to Vietnam, some of the women entrust me with presents and news for their birth families. As a result, I have been given an entrée into the families and communities they left behind. In this article, I seek to give voice to this small group of women as they reflect on the challenges and opportunities of cross-border marriage.

Transnational marriages form part of the story of rural Vietnam's transformation since the 1990s. Villages have become more urbanized. As factories and industrial parks spring up, arable and relatively unpolluted land becomes scarcer, impoverishing those without the skills or opportunities to find factory work. Meanwhile, as the means of communication and transportation have expanded, so have villagers' horizons. More and more young women marry foreigners. In one of my informants' native village in Hải Phòng, the Party Branch secretary of told me that 60 percent of marriage-age women had married foreigners. In another village in

Thái Bình, the cadre in charge of cultural affairs explained, “More and more women want to go abroad, either to get married or to find work. Partly it’s because they no longer want to labor in the fields; partly it’s because they just follow the trend.” The majority of women who “marry out” go to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Korea. Some marry overseas Vietnamese in the United States or Australia, but most marry local men with no ties to Vietnam.

Transnational marriages involving Vietnamese women have received a certain amount of coverage—some scholarly, most journalistic, and some downright sensational. Both the Vietnamese and foreign press focus on numbers, in particular the number of women believed to be victims of human trafficking (“Gần 11.000” 2014).² Invariably, these women are depicted as leading miserable lives after being conned into mercenary and exploitative marriages (“Ham chồng ngoại” 2008). In both the media and the scholarly literature, the growing trend toward transnational marriages is linked to economic and social change, moral decline, new lifestyles, and gender imbalance, as well as larger issues such as globalization and urbanization (see Constable 2003; Glodava and Onizuka 1994; Nguyen and Hugo 2005 Simons 2001; Trần 2005; Tseng 2007).

Cross-border marriages form a tiny subset of this phenomenon. The Vietnamese wives of Wanwei men constitute a small portion of the total number of women who contract to marry foreign men. The fact that they have settled in a village where there is a sizable population of Vietnamese speakers distinguishes them from the women who end up in South Korea, Taiwan, or farther north in the PRC, where they are marooned in a sea of strangers whose language and customs they do not share. Living close to the border, the wives of Wanwei are able to maintain personal contact with their birth families in Vietnam.

These women’s lives as wives and mothers are also quite different from those of the Vietnamese women who make regular business trips between Móng Cái and Wanwei but do not reside there, and from those of the single girls who have recently come to work in the tourism industry. They also have very different experiences from the male guest workers who stream in from rural Vietnam to factories in Guangdong or Europe. Rather than being examples of transnational flows, the Vietnamese wives of Wanwei illustrate the experiences of individuals involved in cross-border marriages all along the China-Vietnam border, and perhaps in other borderlands as well.

Wanwei

According to Wei Xiaoming of the Guangxi Women's Union, "in 1999, an investigation in Dongxing showed that 1,269 Vietnamese women were living illegally without household registration or official registration of temporary residency; almost all were living with local men without being officially married" (see Ma 2002). Among the six thousand or so inhabitants of nearby Wanwei, a small Chinese fishing village that lies 25 kilometers from the Vietnamese border (figure 1), are some fifty Vietnamese women who have settled illegally in the last couple of decades as unofficial wives of Chinese men.³

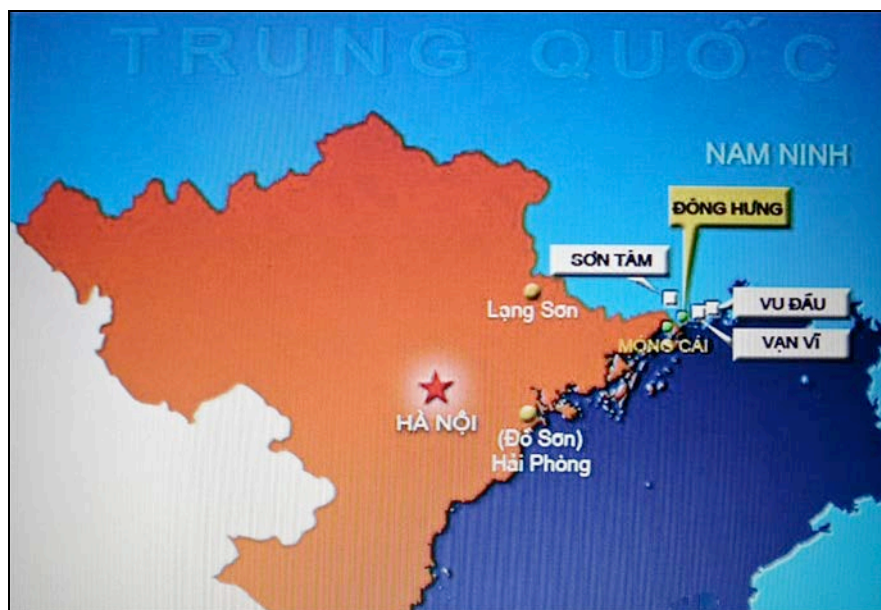


Figure 1. Map of Wanwei (V: Vạn Vĩ), Shanxin (V: Sơn Tâm), and Wutou (V: Vũ Đầu) in relation to Vietnam. *Source:* "Culture Everywhere" program, Ho Chi Minh City Television, March 17, 2006.

Together with two smaller villages, Shanxin and Wutou, Wanwei forms the Jingdao Peninsula. Originally, the villages were separate islands. In 1970, a seawall and causeways were built to connect them to one another and to other areas in Jiangping on the mainland, thereby forming the peninsula. In the past, the three islands were often objects of contestation between Vietnam and China. Their status was stabilized by the Franco-Chinese treaty of May 6, 1887, which set the Peilun River as the border between the two countries: Wanwei became part of the Chinese territory, while Móng Cái became part of Vietnam. In Wanwei, people still recite these lines: "We used to live in Vietnam; because of the French bandits, we had to become Chinese."

As a result of this history, the peninsula is home to the largest concentration of Jing. As of 2009, there were 22,517 Jing in China. Outside of Jingdao, some Jing can also be found in nearby Fangcheng, Qiuzhou, Dongxing, and a few other scattered areas in Guangxi. According to both written and oral sources, the original Jing people of Wanwei were fisherfolk from the coasts of northern and central Vietnam and from inland in the northeast who came by sea in the sixteenth century. The community compact of the village, discovered in 1953, stated: “In the third year of the Hungshun reign (1511), natives of Đồ Sơn arrived in the island and established a village with several hamlets and temples” (Jingzu jianshi bianxie zu 1984). The 36,000 Vietnamese nationals working or studying in China are not considered Jing; neither are the Vietnamese women who are married to Wanwei men and form the subject of this article.

The establishment in 1998 of a free economic zone that stretches from Dongxing in China to Móng Cái in Vietnam produced a significant change in the economy of Wanwei and the daily lives of its residents. Individual fishermen continue to sail small boats to gather fish, shellfish, and especially jellyfish, but the village’s eight fishing brigades now use larger boats that can go farther out to sea for larger catches. In the last decade these fishermen have extended their activities to Vietnamese coastal areas such as Trà Cổ, Hạ Long, and Hải Phòng. Wanwei’s beaches are also used by fishermen to throw out their nets or dig for shellfish (see figure 2). In addition, since 2004, 3,000 of Wanwei’s 7,000 hectares have been devoted to shrimp farming. Wanwei has become involved in the wholesale trade in seafood, either fresh or frozen, to Nanning, Fangcheng, Dongxing, and even Beijing.

Since the late 1980s, Wanwei has also become a tourist destination, as it has the only beach suitable for swimming in Jiangping and Dongxing. Villagers have opened guesthouses, restaurants, and rental lodgings. Thanks partly to these developments, Wanwei does not look like a typical fishing village, and it has gained a reputation as a place where it is easy to make a living. As the overall population increases, the proportion of Jing residents declines. Jing people make up 50 percent of the registered population of Wanwei; however, if the unregistered population is taken into account, the proportion of Jing residents drops to 30 percent. In the two neighboring villages of Wutou and Shanxin, the proportion of Jing residents remains high, around 80 percent.



Figure 2. People in Jingdao hauling in fishing nets at the Wanwei seaside, 2006. Photograph taken by the author.

Telling Lives

According to my research, the women who came to Wanwei as victims of traffickers constitute about 20 to 30 percent of the total number of Vietnamese wives. Some of these women were told that they would be working for high wages and then were sold into marriage; others were told that they were coming over to marry but were given false information about their prospective husbands. Very few women have come as victims of trafficking in recent years. Lý, an early victim, said: “In my time [1992], where could I find any Vietnamese here? And so I gave up. Whereas nowadays some are so formidable that if they were sold over here and didn’t like it, they would leave right away.”

By the time I met them, some of the women had been interviewed multiple times by journalists fascinated by their anomalous status, and they were dissatisfied with their experiences with the media. They told me that they were so eager to fend off journalists interested only in presenting them as victims of human trafficking that they would agree that they had been sold in marriage to foreign men, even if that was not true. They were relieved to learn that I was interested in them as individuals and wanted to know about their whole lives, not just that one aspect. Other than these unwelcome interviews, the Vietnamese wives of Wanwei had few

opportunities to talk about themselves. Some were accustomed to telling the stories of their lives along the lines of the Vietnamese *lý lịch*, personal information questionnaires that are required when registering for school, applying for a job, receiving land, or being interviewed by census takers. As with rural people whose lives do not seem to change much from day to day, the temporal milestones they used were quite vague: “at that time,” “back then,” “in the old days.” They talked about the turning points in their lives by referring to the time they left home, got married, or gave birth, or used expressions such as “when I was a girl” or “when my child was growing up” (Hershatter 2002, 59–60).

Like the low-caste women in India studied by Kirin Narayan (2004), many of the women I interviewed were unable and, in some cases, unwilling to talk freely about themselves. Hà (b. 1950) explained: “My life is quite simple. What is there to tell? I just live one day at a time.” Lan (b. 1970) offered a slightly different perspective: “My life has been hard since I was a child; why would I want to remember it?” Part of these women’s reticence stems from their refusal to provide fodder for sensation-hungry media. They also wish to deflect attention from their illegal residence in Wanwei and their equally illegal trips back to Vietnam to visit their birth families. Although their stories might seem to them not worth telling, the stories of the wives of Wanwei illuminate a variety of topics: village society and gender ideology in both Vietnam and China, cross-border lives, transnational marriages, and the economy of gifts and of emotion.⁴

Pushed Out by Poverty

Most of the Wanwei women hailed from provinces close to the Chinese border: Quảng Ninh, Hải Phòng, Hải Dương, and Thái Bình. Almost all came from large and impoverished rural families. Two sisters, Tân (b. 1968) and Hồng (b. 1971), recalled their hard lives in Thụy Anh, Thái Bình. Tân said:

There are six of us, five girls and one boy. Our mother passed away early. When she fell gravely ill, at first it was just stomach pain. She thought it was normal and only took some herbal medication. But it went on and by the time she went into the hospital it was too late because her tumor had grown. She died when my oldest sister was twenty-one, the youngest was only ten; I was seventeen at the time. My whole family did agricultural work. We carried heavy loads on our shoulders every day. When there was any free time we would run errands and hawk wares or work for hire to make extra money.

Lý (b. 1973) had a similar home situation in Kiến Thụy, Hải Phòng:

I'm the oldest. After me there are three more sisters and one brother. I should have had two brothers, but one of them died from illness at the age of six. My parents did agricultural work; later on there was not enough land to feed five children, so we also ran market errands and engaged in petty trade on the side. With a weak constitution since an early age, my father could not perform hard work or work for too long. It was mainly my mother who steered the household ship, and I was the one who helped her the most. From a young age I did all sorts of things: planting seasonal crops, single-handedly raising a few pigs, finding greens and bran and cooking them, and feeding and washing the pigs.... When there was any free time I would help my mother with market errands, sometimes running rice for bran (buying paddy rice and then selling unhusked rice), using the profit to feed the pigs, sometimes buying vegetables and greens from the hamlet to sell at the market.

Thanh (b. 1974), who hailed from Tiên Yên, Quảng Ninh, had worked as a seamstress in Móng Cái before coming to Wanwei in 2003. Her many siblings, driven by poverty, were scattered throughout the country and even abroad:

My father died when I was eight years old. My family includes eight siblings, and I am the youngest. Being poor, my siblings all dispersed to make a living. My oldest brother and one sister live in Móng Cái. Two of my sisters live in Saigon. One sister lives in Hải Phòng. Another crossed the border to Hong Kong and now lives in Canada. My mother lives with an older brother in Tiên Yên. I went to Móng Cái to live with my siblings when I was seventeen. I learned to sew and did sewing for other people.

Given their impoverished backgrounds, none of the women I interviewed had received a full education. Hà (b. 1950) does not even remember whether she had ever gone to school:

I remember only that I worked all day; never did I find myself going to school. There seemed to be some evening class that my older sisters attended. I just peeked in, and I can't recall how I got to know how to read and do basic arithmetic. My family was poor, and my parents also questioned why girls needed to study much. Just work hard. Once we got married we would be so busy with family and children, so what would be the use of studying?

Too Old to Marry

Seeking to escape their families' poverty certainly factored into the calculations of many rural women who moved to Wanwei. However, the women I interviewed offered other reasons for marrying foreigners as well, most of which had to do more with emotional needs than economic plight. While there is a growing concern in Vietnam about gender imbalance (currently, there are 112.3 men for every 100 women) ("Gender Imbalance" 2012), the

imbalance is not yet as dire as in China (where the ratio is 117 men for every 100 women). A thread running through all my informants' stories was that they were past the age when Vietnamese women, especially in the countryside, are considered desirable marriage mates. If they had remained in their home village, it would have been difficult for them to find husbands, but it would also have been difficult to remain there as single women. Hồng recounted:

When I was past twenty, my two older sisters, my older brother, and then my younger sister got married, one by one, while I myself did not receive a single marriage proposal. There were a few suitors, but they dilly-dallied, and that was that. ...Before anyone realized it, I had passed my years of eligibility. I found myself already twenty-nine or thirty. In the village, sometimes someone would point me out to their daughter and say: "Look at that girl, Hồng. If you are choosy, you'll be a spinster, too!" I was so weary of hearing that.

Thanh was twenty-nine when she arrived in Wanwei in 2003:

I don't consider myself pretty, but I'm still a tall and healthy woman. I have had some suitors but nothing came to anything.... As I got older, all my friends kept marrying and having children and so sometimes I felt sad. But look at my friends: some got married to addicts who wrecked their home, one got married to a man who, in disgust at his failure in business, turned into an alcoholic who beat up his wife and children. I got afraid at the thought of marriage. In 2001 or 2002, when I was already twenty-seven or twenty-eight, my family began to get worried. My siblings were also impatient to marry me off.

Like Thanh, the two sisters, Hồng and Tân, knew someone who did business in Wanwei, Hồng said:

At that time, there was an aunt from my father's side who used to do business in Móng Cái and Dongxing.... Every time she visited, she would tell my father that he should send some of us away to make money, since we labored so hard in the fields and yet still barely made ends meet; when would we ever become better off? Then she also talked to us siblings. She said there was good money doing jellyfish in Wanwei.... Hearing her we were rather eager, and my father also agreed; so I decided to go.

She took me to Móng Cái, and the following day we crossed over to Wanwei. How she did the paperwork I wouldn't know; I was only told to come along. It was jellyfish season [March–April], so there was much work here. She took me to a processing factory whose owners were a married Vietnamese couple in partnership with a Chinese man from Fangcheng. So I worked as a day laborer in that factory.... The work was hard, but it paid well. Back then, if you were to convert to our money it would have been over a million *dong* (nearly US\$50) already. After a few months, having saved a bit of money, I was planning to go home to ask my younger sister to come work for the next season. But right when the jellyfish season was ending and work was waning, somebody introduced me

to a seafood gatherer. I thought it would be good to earn some more money, so I stayed on. After another few months of work, my landlady introduced this guy to me. At first I hesitated, because I didn't know what he was like.... I sent word to the auntie to ask her opinion. She came to my place and told me just to marry, to get it over with. If I returned home, I would have to work in the fields again, a hard life without money. And in the countryside, women still unmarried at thirty could only hope to be a secondary wife.

Tân had her own reasons for joining her sister in Wanwei:

When I was twenty-two, I fell in love with someone living far away in a different district, but he worked in Hải Phòng. My father didn't like it, but didn't say anything, while my older siblings showed their open dislike. They said a guy who had left home like that, how could I be sure he would be faithful? We went back and forth for years and yet he had not sent someone from his family to talk to our elders.... After my older siblings exerted so much pressure for me to marry, I told him that if he were serious, he should send his family over to talk [to my father]. He kept postponing, giving plenty of reasons for doing so.... Only later did I find out that he was already living with somebody else at his workplace. After that, I got fed up and didn't want to hear any talk of marriage.... My oldest sister was so worried she went to consult a diviner and made some kind of ritual offering to a spirit medium in the district township, but things remained the same. Then I followed my older sister over here to work.

Working with jellyfish over there was hard, but couldn't compare to home. When the jellyfish season ended, I would go home, and when the season started again, I would come back here. I went back and forth like that until the third season, when someone introduced me to a marriage prospect. At the time I was exactly thirty.

A native of Lai Cách, Hải Dương, Hà arrived in Wanwei in 1988, much earlier than the other wives, after drifting about for more than a year:

Though my family was large, everybody was settled. Only I had the misfortune of being adrift since childhood. By fourteen, I had already gone to Quảng Ninh to babysit for an aunt on my father's side. After a few years the baby grew up and my aunt found another family for me to work for hire, so I kept drifting from place to place babysitting and doing domestic work.... In 1977, when I was twenty-seven, I met an ethnic Chinese in Hải Phòng—at that age, I was sure I would not be able to marry anyone back home because I was too old. This was why I agreed [to marry him]. And so I went to live with him for over a year. Two days after I gave birth to our child, he suddenly told me that he had to return to China along with other Chinese people.... Later on, I found out that, because of some kind of policy, all the ethnic Chinese were repatriated at that time. It was so hard to raise my child alone, but I was determined not to return to my home village. I always meant to find my husband once I could make some money.

After the border skirmishes between Vietnam and China in 1979, Hà felt that her husband would probably never return. She crossed the border to Hong Kong twice, in 1980 and 1983, both times unsuccessfully. She stayed in a refugee camp for sixteen days before being sent back to Vietnam and losing all her savings. In 1986, she decided to take her child to China to find her husband. After a year spent wandering in vain, she realized that her search was futile:

I endured hardships on a search without direction... I had no choice but to find my way back to Vietnam. After a few months of floundering about, I found myself here in Wanwei. At the time I didn't know what this place was; I only saw that there was the seashore, with lots of residents, and that some of them spoke Vietnamese, so I knew it was near Vietnam. So I thought to stay on to work for a while to make some money before going home. My child and I had been living here for a few months when someone introduced to me a Chinese water-buffalo trader. The intermediary said that he was a widower with two children. At the time, I was discouraged and low in spirits, and I no longer wanted to be rootless. If I could stay and live here, then it would be better than returning to my home village, where I would have no face anyway and would be a burden on my family. And so I agreed to marry him. He would be someone for my child to rely on; at least there would be a home for us to live in. But such was my rotten luck that, when I packed up to come to his home to live, I found out that he had five children; my own would make six. And there was an old mother as well! I was so scared, but what was done was done; what else could I do?

Unlike the other women, Lý was only nineteen when she left home and was tricked into marriage. "Growing up, I had many suitors. At the time, I was slim and pretty and not old and ugly like this," she said. At eighteen she fell in love with a young man in the district township, but both families vehemently opposed their marriage. Not long afterward, her family urged her to marry someone from her village. She did not like it, but, not daring to openly oppose her parents, she did everything to postpone the marriage. But one day, on her way to get apples for her mother to sell, she was raped by the man she had been promised to. She was distraught but did not want to let her family know of the rape, so she kept her bitterness to herself. At that time, she recalled, "I only wanted to die or go somewhere really far away to ease the shame and sorrow." After that, she accepted an offer by a woman to go to China for business and then was tricked into marriage.

Unsanctioned Unions

All of my informants married Han Chinese men. The men who belonged to the long-

established and generally prosperous Jing population of Wanwei preferred to seek spouses from among their own Jing community or, like the Party Branch secretary, married Han Chinese women. The newly arrived Vietnamese women entered into unions with Chinese men who were almost as poor as they were. Given the gender imbalance in China, some of these men had not managed to find a mate among Han women; others had been married, but their wives had left them. Poverty was not their only shortcoming in the marriage stakes. Hà explained:

Here, out of a hundred who married Vietnamese girls, ninety-nine have a difficult family situation. If the man is not clumsy and slow, then he is a playboy like Lý's husband. If he does not have a broken family with a brood of neglected children, then he has a raggedly poor one without house or home. If he is not handicapped, then he is an old man or a widower. You see my case: at the time I married my husband I was almost forty with an orphaned child and without any money. Who would have wanted to marry me? If I went back home to Vietnam, I would stay unmarried all my life.

Whether they had entered into their unions of their own free will or not, almost all the women moved directly into their marital homes without first having a wedding ceremony or even introducing their families. Their unions were thus unsanctioned by custom, as well as unrecognized by the law. After consulting her aunt and father, Hồng, who had originally gone to Wanwei to work, decided to marry a local man. She recounted: "At the time I just moved in; there was no wedding whatsoever. Everybody here was like that. If they were nice, then the in-laws would cook up a meal for just the members of the family; no one else would be invited."

From the husbands' perspectives, one reason not to hold a wedding ceremony was sheer lack of funds. Whatever savings they possessed had gone into paying the matchmakers, whose fees ranged from US\$5,000 to US\$10,000. Moreover, quite a few were living in Wanwei illegally, just like their wives. The women blamed this lack of an ordinarily all-important ceremony on practical circumstances. Thanh explained, "My husband did not go over there [to Vietnam] to go through a wedding, because he was afraid of our laws. Besides, we could not afford it. If you love each other, you just live together. To go through the pomp of a formal wedding and later on find out that you couldn't live together would not be a good thing." Bắc (b. 1970), who was tricked into marrying a man of seventy-one, said, "Having come here because I was poor, I just live from moment to moment. What good would a wedding be? He was old, his children were already married, and he had no money for anything."

Yet the lack of elaborate rituals witnessed by the bride's former neighbors diminished her and her family in their eyes. Weddings are not just affairs between two families, much less between two individuals. They are occasions for the whole community to share the happy event and renew ties of kinship and friendship.⁵ As Thanh's mother said, "Before other girls marry, their parents are asked for their hand in due form in front of relatives and neighbors; it's a source of pride for their families. But when my daughter went like that, I just sat crying. Still, I did not dare let her know about my feelings to keep her from feeling hurt."

Hồng and Tân's father also felt that his daughters' lack of engagement and wedding festivities caused him to lose face:

When they got married, people said they had eloped and that my family was trying to avoid spending money on festivities; neighbors did not even get a piece of sweet! I kept repeating that they had gotten married over there, that it was too far to hold the wedding back here. I said so to deflect criticism, but in my heart I shared my neighbors' feelings. It would have been so much better if they had lived closer and been able to come and go more easily. It would have been great to be able to offer a tray of areca and betel and some tea to guests. It would have been a more joyful occasion, and I would not have had to endure mean comments.

Because the women's new husbands were total strangers, "it was [only] after having moved in to live together that they would gradually find out what kind of men they had married," explained Hồng. Her own husband turned out to be sickly and needed frequent and prolonged hospitalizations. He was also somewhat slow-witted. Lý's husband, an inveterate gambler, had bankrupted his own family by the time they married. Bắc was sold into marriage to a man nearly forty years older than she. Thanh's husband had five, not two, children, as claimed by the matchmaker. Her new family also included a soon-to-be-bedridden mother-in-law who needed around-the-clock care.

Unlike many women who married overseas Vietnamese, Taiwanese, or Korean men in the belief that they would gain access to unprecedented riches and lives of leisure, the wives of poor Wanwei fishermen entertained no such delusion. They were used to hard work, even if their new work harvesting or processing jellyfish and mending nets was different from working in rice fields. They did not begrudge their husbands their poverty. Indeed, a characteristic that endeared their prospective husbands to them was that the men were "poor just like me." Hồng's husband might be sickly and slow-witted, but he was a hard worker, and that quality redeemed him in her eyes. Laziness, rather than poverty, was Lý's husband's besetting character flaw.

Besides, compared to the lives they had left behind, the women considered themselves relatively better off. Tân claimed:

We don't lack food here. If we work a lot, we get a lot; even if we don't work hard, we still have enough to live on, unlike back home where so many people do not have enough to eat. And even if we had enough there, we had to work hard all day in the fields. Seashore work is hard, too, but not as hard, and it brings in a lot more [money]. Compared to others here, we are poor; but compared to people back home, we are okay.

Intimate Strangers

Compared with other women who, having married foreign husbands, found themselves alone among total strangers, the Vietnamese wives of Wanwei had the advantage of joining a community with a leadership that is half Jing and a population whose Jing component, though diminishing, is still sizable. Jing officials provided assistance to the women, sometimes tacitly—such as overlooking their illegal residence in the village—and sometimes more proactively—as when helping them enroll their children in school or assisting them to receive medical care. Villagers also tried to ease the entry of the women into Wanwei life with advice and general friendliness, but they were unable to help them make the transition into their new status as wives of men whose language they did not share and whose habits they did not know. Yet this was the reality that defined the first months of the women's lives in Wanwei. It was in the domestic sphere that both cultural affinities and differences between Chinese and Vietnamese were highlighted. For example, rice congee, consumed every day in Wanwei, had to be cooked differently than in Vietnam, where it had also been a staple of the women's diet. Several of my informants recalled that it took a while to get used to both the preparation and the taste of this new version of a familiar dish.

The women did not minimize the difficulties of being suddenly plunged into an alien environment. In addition to having to adapt to different ways of doing things, without help or guidance from their husbands, they have to deal with demanding in-laws and sometimes hostile stepchildren. In general, they report feeling isolated and lonely because of language barriers. Bình (b. 1972) summed up their predicament: “No relatives, no friends, no acquaintances, no familiarity with this place. And yet, we've ended up here, married to men here. If that is not fate, then what is it?” Not all of the women are happy with the way fate has arranged their lives. Some have accepted their lot; others are bitter. Thanh recalled:

At the beginning, we [my husband and I] did not talk much, because I could not speak the language. He would show me by example, talking while doing so that I could follow what he tried to explain. He showed me how to cook the way he wanted his food. When he cooked, he told me to come close so I could watch and do the same next time. He spoke slowly so that I could follow. As for conjugal relations, it was difficult; sometimes, he wanted sex and I did not, but I could not explain. Or I wanted to remind him of something but could not show him how. So we just pushed on; eventually, I got used to it.

Tân, who had come to Wanwei in 1997 at the age of twenty-nine and gotten married soon after, quickly became disenchanted with her new situation:

At the beginning, everything was strange. I spoke very little Chinese, so I could not follow what my husband said. We did not understand each other, and did not know how to behave toward each other. In the early weeks, I was so fed up I kept wanting to go home. My husband did not talk much to me, since I could not understand what he said. So he would drag me to bed early and when he was done, he would fall asleep right away. But I could not sleep; instead, I would lie awake and think. I had thought that married life would be more fulfilling, but it was such a disappointment. All I wanted to do was to go back to Vietnam. But then, I gradually got used to it.

It took about six months for most of the women to learn some basic Chinese. Doing so enabled them not only to communicate in a rudimentary fashion with their husbands and new relatives but also to deal with the world outside. Once the women had conquered housework, they sought to add to their income by working outside the home. This was not something that either Han or Jing women did, or even that the Vietnamese women were expected to do. But, as Tân observed, “I’m more afraid of idleness; it makes me feel as if I have extra arms and legs. Perhaps this is because I’ve been used to working since I was small.” Thanh had a stall in the market, where she used the sewing skills she had learned in Móng Cái to mend clothes. Lý was perhaps the most energetic of the Vietnamese wives. Starting with a cart from which she sold produce, she had graduated to a fruit and vegetable stall positioned in one of the most desirable locations in the market. Her earnings had become the main source of income for her family, which included her ne’er-do-well husband, two children, and in-laws. Some women assisted their husbands in mending and cleaning nets or digging for shellfish by the shore; others worked in one of the seafood-processing factories. This outside work and extra income was a source of pride for the Wanwei women. It validated their sense of self as good managers and dynamic, proactive individuals, instead of mere household drudges.

Married with Children

Children were the primary reason both the men and the women had entered into these cross-border marriages. The men were generally eager to have children right away. This put enormous pressure on the wives. “If you did not get pregnant right away,” remembered Bình, “every in-law would wonder if there was something wrong with you.” None of the women I spoke with was able to tell her husband of her desire to wait. Thanh said, “At first I thought that I should not have a child right away and instead should concentrate on having a proper home and putting away some savings. But I did not know how to go about it, my husband was new and strange, and, on top of that, we did not share a language, so I could not discuss it with him.” Up to 80 percent of the Vietnamese wives in Wanwei had a child or were expecting one within the first year of marriage.

None of the women engaged in family planning. Since Wanwei was a designated minority community, its families were allowed two children instead of only one. Tân sighed, “I had wanted to wait until my first child was a bit older and stronger, but my husband wanted another child right away. He refused to abstain, and what could I do?” The wives did not consider going to the health center or hospital for guidance on how to prevent conception. Hồng said, “Even if I had wanted to, I would not have known where to go or how to make myself understood.” Lack of knowledge about birth control led to numerous abortions. Lý explained that she had received an IUD but did not know how to insert it, so she kept getting pregnant. Tân complained, “I used to think that if you had just given birth, you could not get pregnant. But by the time my first child was five months old, I was already three months’ pregnant with the second one. Then I realized my error, and I had an abortion; I had two in two years.”

Some of the women hid their pregnancies out of fear; others did so because they had not yet succeeded in having a son. Women bore the psychological cost of their husbands’ quest for sons. Several women secreted their second daughters away so that they could try for a son. Lý recounted that her husband and his family “were disappointed that I had given birth to a girl. His parents never held her or played with her. Occasionally my husband would ask after our daughter, but his parents very seldom did.” When she gave birth to another daughter, Lý was forced to give the baby up. The same kind of pressure was applied to Hồng, as well as to several of the other women I got to know in Wanwei. Lý and Hồng were considered fortunate for, after having given away their daughters, each was able to have a son. But they were unable to share

their abiding sense of loss with their husbands and in-laws. Lý was full of anguish: “She’s my child, I miss her so much, but I cannot see her. There’s nothing I can do; she’s become someone else’s daughter. I try not to think about it, but sometimes I dream of meeting her, and I cry.” Tân was able to keep both her daughters (but also had several abortions): “Here they value boys more than girls. I would have liked one of each, but it was not my fate. You just have to accept what comes along. When I was expecting the second child, my husband was very anxious. I’m sure his father was, too, but he never brought it up.”

Motherhood, rather than the elusive companionable conjugality, convinced the women that their destinies lay in Wanwei. At the beginning, Lý had dreamed of freeing herself from her forced marriage to a gambling addict, but she did not know anyone in Wanwei and was under strict surveillance by her husband and his family. Once she had a child, however, that surveillance eased. By then, she knew how to get back to Vietnam. It would have been relatively easy to leave Wanwei, but she no longer wanted to: “After my child was born, I just tried to forget [about leaving]; if I had not had children, I don’t know what I would have done. I’m not sure I would have stayed. But now, things are settled. I stay for my children.” I once came across Lý weeping as she confided to her friend that her husband must have lost money gambling because when he returned home, he had shouted at her and her son. When I suggested that she might want to go back to Hải Phòng for a few days, Lý retorted: “How could I leave [my son] back here? If he is unhappy, how can I be happy? Once you have a child, you’re stuck.”

Children created new challenges and frictions. Childcare was the sole responsibility of the wives, but that fact did not mean that they could care for the children in their own way. Thanh said of her husband, “He wants me to do things the way it’s done here, and I’m used to the ways things are done back home.” Every childhood illness brought out accusations of bad mothering. Lý complained, “If I give the children too much to eat, I am scolded; if they refuse to eat, I am also scolded. Whatever the children do to incur displeasure is my fault. I get so angry but I cannot talk back.” Tân reported that “the only disagreements we have are always about the children, though sometimes he gets irritated with me for nagging.” She added, “If one of my daughters does something bad and I scold her, I am berated for yelling at the girls all day long. Sometimes, I can’t stand it.” Hà, who had begun married life not only with one child of her own but also another five of her husband’s, explained, “Whether it was one of the children getting sick or doing something naughty or being rude, it was always my fault. I often got really

annoyed, but what could I say?" The consensus, in Hà's words, was that "parenting is a challenge. You have to do things the way your husband and his relatives want, but if there are problems, it's always your fault and you get yelled at."

A source of the wives' unhappiness was the men's unwillingness to allow them to teach Vietnamese to the children. Whenever the women did so, their husbands would remind them to speak Chinese to prepare the kids for school. Lý had tried to teach her children her mother tongue:

When I tried to teach the children Vietnamese by repeating new words, their grandmother or father would immediately yell out, "They don't understand; why do you insist?" Once I tried to teach my daughter a few simple sentences about eating and playing games, and my husband shouted at both of us: "You two want to exclude me from your conversations." So I did not dare pursue the lessons.

This language barrier keeps the mothers from being able to share confidences with their children and distances the children from their Vietnamese relatives. "Perhaps, after we're dead, they will cease all contact with their maternal relatives," lamented Lý.

The Wanwei husbands were neither willing to let their children go to Vietnam with their mothers, for fear that the women might not return, nor willing to accompany their wives on their occasional trips to their home villages. Lý enumerated her husband's excuses: "At the beginning he would say that the children were too young; then when they were older he said he was concerned the trip would be too arduous. When they were older, he argued that they should not interrupt their schooling. So, in the end, I was never able to take the girls home." Thanh said, "I invited my husband to come with me many times, but he refused. He'd heard that you could get arrested if you did not have papers." This fear was not entirely groundless: some of the husbands did not have proper household registration; their identification papers were either inexistent or too old. Other of the men considered visa procedures too complicated. They were poor and unused to travel; for them, border crossing was an anxiety-provoking enterprise. One of the women explained: "Tá's husband came back and said he'd been detained by the police [in Vietnam]. It struck fear into everyone." In fact, he was the only man who had been stopped, and it was for normal control procedures. But when he went back to Wanwei, he made a big deal of it, reinforcing the men's fear of Vietnamese police. As for going by boat (illegally) like their wives, this prospect scared them even more. And the men had another concern: during the border war of 1979, skirmishes between Vietnamese and Chinese had taken place in the very area that

now formed the Dongxing–Móng Cái Free Economic Zone. Ever since that time, the Chinese believed that Móng Cái residents specifically, and Vietnamese more generally, hated the Chinese. If they crossed over the border, they would surely encounter problems.

“Who does not want to bring her husband and children to visit their home village?” asked Thanh rhetorically. The men’s refusal to accompany their wives on family visits was a major source of tension between spouses. For all their expressed concerns about crossing the border, I got the impression that the men were indifferent to their in-laws’ feelings; having failed to perform the traditional wedding rituals, they were also embarrassed to meet their wives’ families. Hà’s husband was afraid that he would be reproached for taking so long to visit after marrying her. Hà complained, “I do my very best for my husband and his family and yet, he has never agreed to come along. There’s nothing I can do about it, but I am really fed up.” She expressed regret at the one-sided nature of the family relationships of the women who married into Wanwei: “Most of the women are in touch only with their husbands’ kin but not with their own kin. Having married [foreign husbands], you have to accept everything; you can’t spend your energy regretting your lot.” The refusal of the men to meet their wives’ relatives was not only a source of sadness; it also was a cause for shame. Lý explained: “Everybody wants to see what my husband looks like. Malicious people insinuate that my claim that I am a married woman and that my husband is Chinese may not be truthful, since no one has met him.”

Cross-Border Daughters

Every Vietnamese person is familiar with the adage, “When drinking water, remember the source.” This adage is, in fact, of Chinese origin, and thus the cultural value behind it is one of many shared by the Vietnamese wives and their Chinese husbands and in-laws.⁶ Yet a difference in how this shared value is interpreted might explain both the women’s eagerness to make return trips to their home villages and their husbands’ unwillingness to accompany them. In China, where village exogamy is the norm, women are expected to become part of their marital community. In practice, it has been found that they do not sever all ties with their birth families, but make occasional visits. Still, this contrasts with the practice of village endogamy in northern Vietnam, which keeps women close to their parents, both physically and emotionally.

The women of Wanwei regretted not living close enough to care for their surviving parents, especially “when the weather changes” and their elders are most likely to fall ill. Hồng

fretted:

I've never been able to do anything for him; it's my father who has supported me. But I worry that, when he is old, I will be able to go home only once every few years. It's always better for a daughter to take care of her father; a son's wife never does as good a job. I still have some sisters at home, but I worry nonetheless. This is the hardest part about marrying away.... I often worry about not being close by, not being able to discharge my obligations as a daughter. On every visit, I remind my brothers to make sure to let me know if my father becomes ill so that I can arrange to come back.

Thanh similarly said, "When I think about my mother, tears come to my eyes. My father died when I was eight, my mother raised me until I was grown, and then I left home. I'm married to a foreigner and live far away. I worry most about not being close enough to take care of her when she is old and sick and not fulfilling my duties as a daughter."

The fact that they have siblings who live close to their parents and can take good care of them does not diminish the women's sense of inadequacy, their feeling of not having properly repaid the sacrifices their parents made on their behalf while they were growing up. But the villages they left have changed, not least because so many women are marrying foreigners. Urbanization and new means of communication have altered interpretations of traditional values, including the meaning of filial piety and of children's duties toward their parents. The women's siblings expressed the new ethical understanding. Lý's sister averred:

Of course, all parents want their children to be close; if they had few children and they lived far away, it would certainly be a problem. But there are many children in my family, so it's perfectly fine for Lý to live far away. It's enough to maintain regular contact, to send back small gifts of money or presents. The most important thing is to visit once in a while and to show concern for the welfare of the old folks, to make them proud in the eyes of relatives and neighbors.

Given the women's precarious finances, visits home entail an enormous amount of planning and saving. Not only must money be set aside for the trip itself, but the women must make sure that their physical appearance and clothing do not betray their poverty. One informant laughingly said that she knew a woman was about to go on a family visit when she had her hair done. And then there are the gifts to family and neighbors. Saving for these expenses could take months or even years. The women also had to prepare themselves mentally to field awkward questions and hide their true situations and abiding worries. Still, these visits produced a boost in stature for themselves and their families in the eyes of their home community. Not all women

who returned to the village after having married in Wanwei would be able to impress relatives and neighbors, but at least, as Lý explained, they made the effort, so that their “families and siblings would not be ashamed of [them].” However, several women wistfully complained that they could not compete with those who came back from Taiwan or Korea with enough money to build many-storied houses for their parents.

Life on the Margins

The longer they live in Wanwei and adapt to its ways, the less the women feel part of the community of their birth. As one said, “I’ve even gotten used to rice gruel the way it’s cooked here.” But, as illegal immigrants, they also worry about their precarious status in Wanwei, despite the fact that the Jing and Han authorities of the village go out of their way to ignore their lack of proper papers so that they can have access to health care and education for their children. Still, the women’s continued lack of fluency in Chinese marks them as foreigners. Although they can usually count on some help from Vietnamese-speaking residents of Wanwei, they are still outsiders to this Jing community. Ironically, it is at the very times when the Jing celebrate their identity as Vietnamese that the new arrivals from Vietnam feel the most excluded.

The Jing of Wanwei have managed to preserve many of their customs. When they first settled in Wanwei in the sixteenth century, Jing people built a communal house for the guardian spirits. This communal house, which faces toward the sea, has survived the vicissitudes of time and is now considered a propitious site.

Besides the communal house, which has been restored many times over the centuries (figure 3), there are seven other shrines scattered throughout the village. Before Liberation in 1949, there was also a pagoda, which was destroyed soon thereafter. These sites collectively constitute a convenient network for the cultic practices of the Jing residents. The deities worshipped in Wanwei are those that were brought over by early Vietnamese settlers: the sea-taming White Dragon King, the Mountain God of Mt. Tản, the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh, and so on. These deities are still worshipped in Vietnam in Đồ Sơn (Hải Phòng), Trà Cổ, Vạn Ninh (Móng Cái, Quảng Ninh), and Quan Lạn (Vân Đồn, Quảng Ninh), all areas from which the Vietnamese wives hail.



Figure 3. Restored communal house in Wanwei, 2008. Photograph taken by the author.

Jing people have a rich repertoire of songs. In addition to ceremonies held in the communal house, they sing at weddings, in which songs are the main mode of interaction; they sing stories and recite poetry.⁷ Jing boys and girls also sing call-and-response songs while working by the seashore or during leisure time on the weekends (see Cheung 2011). The Hát đình (communal house singing) festival has become such a popular tourist attraction that it has been moved from the communal house to the seashore (see figures 4 and 5). But most of these cultural activities are reserved for the descendants of the original settlers, and therefore the Vietnamese wives, as new immigrants, may not participate in them except as spectators.

No longer part of their birth villages, residing illegally in Wanwei, separated by language and customs from the Han population yet not fully accepted into the community of Jing people whose language and traditions they share, these women are a far cry from the elite businessmen whose experiences of transnationality anthropologist Aiwah Ong described in *Flexible Citizenship* (1999). Indeed, it may be argued that these Wanwei women lack both legal and cultural citizenship and thus exist in a kind of limbo between different worlds. The only capital they move across borders is their own labor—both physical and emotional—as wives, mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law.



Figure 4. Communal house singing festival procession in Wanwei, 2011. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 5. Monochord performance at a festival in Wanwei, 2011. Photograph taken by the author.

Conclusion

The Vietnamese wives of Wanwei are too few to represent the totality of the experience of transnational marriage. But, difficult though their lives may be, their stories suggest that transnational marriages linking poor women to poor men across national and cultural borders are not indices merely of social failure or lack of personal agency. These women acknowledge that many of their concerns are universal, although these concerns are thrown into greater relief by the fact of their living in a strange land. If asked directly, my informants would say that “everyone has difficulties.” These women believe in fate but refuse to see themselves as victims. Whatever marginal improvement can be achieved by greater effort gives them incentive to make that effort. This philosophy seems to shape every aspect of their lives, from their work by the shore, in factories, at vegetable stalls, or in cloth-mending pavilions, to their performance of household chores, their care of in-laws, their supervision of children, and their visits home. For all the challenges the Vietnamese wives of Wanwei face on a daily basis, they comfort themselves with the thought that, compared with the life they might have continued to lead in their native villages, they are doing “okay.” They take pride in their achievements, which—though modest by objective standards—require initiative, adaptability, endurance, and enormous hard work. And it is this image of themselves, rather than an image of browbeaten victims, that they wish to present to the world.

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Notes

- 1 This article is based on my book (Nguyễn 2012). Excerpts were selected and translated by Hue-Tam Ho Tai, the guest editor of this special issue of *Cross-Currents*.
- 2 According to *Vietnamnet* (http://tintuc.timnhanh.com/kieu_bao/20070830/35A65319/, accessed August, 30, 2007), about 32,000 Vietnamese women married foreigners, mainly from South Korea, Taiwan, and China, between 2003 and 2005. Over the past ten years, about 22,000 Vietnamese women and children were sold to China (UNICEF n.d.). In the Thủy Nguyên district of Hải Phòng alone, 1,340 women have married Chinese.
- 3 This coastal zone covers about 36 kilometers of land and 42 kilometers of sea.
- 4 From among the forty-four women I’ve gotten to know since 1999, and the nineteen I interviewed at length in 2009, I have selected five to present in some detail. I have altered their names, villages of origin, and some personal details, in order to protect their

- identities.
- 5 On the importance of such ties, see “How to Marry? The Consequences of the Campaign to Reform Marriage and Weddings” (chapter 5) in Malarney (2002).
- 6 See, for example, Oxfeld (2010).
- 7 Some examples of sung stories are the *Tale of Kieu*, *Tổng Trân Cúc Hoa*, and *Lưu Bình Dương Lễ*.

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