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Ambivalent Encounters: Business and the Sex Markets at the China-Vietnam Borderland

Caroline Grillot & Juan Zhang

Introduction

The night is falling upon the Red River. Glittering lights, blaring music, and noise from dozens of new shops along the riverbanks in Hekou, a small border city located at the meeting point where China joins Vietnam, give the night a boisterous atmosphere. But according to locals, these buildings were not a welcome sight for their Vietnamese neighbors living across the river in Lào Cai. Their views of the river were blocked, they said, and the noise at night was too loud and disruptive--possibly construing these structures as an ominous sign of the strong Chinese presence at the border.

Indeed, since the late 1990s, the opening of Chinese border ports as Special Economic Zones attracted hundreds of thousands of entrepreneurial Chinese to migrate to the margins of China and venture into cross-border trade. At different locations along the China-Vietnam borderlands, fast-paced development projects mushroomed to stimulate bilateral economic exchange. Markets bustled as Chinese and Vietnamese traders formed dynamic economic partnerships after the re-opening of the international border following animosity in the 1980s. Remote border towns such as Hekou, situated at the southern tip of Yunnan province in Southwest China, were transformed into trading hubs as thousands of local and migrant

entrepreneurs undertook all kinds of business activities with their Vietnamese partners: import-export transactions on various scales, petty trade (*xiao'e maoyi*), hospitality services and entertainment, financial services, construction, tourism, trucking, and transportation. After just two decades of economic development and cross-border collaboration, Hekou had become one of the most active and profitable trading hubs in Yunnan province. By the end of 2013, having recovered from the global financial crisis that impaired cross-border trade for years, Hekou's import-export revenue totaled one billion US dollars, with over three million visitors either doing business at or crossing the border (*Yunnan Economic Daily* 2014).

Hekou's impressive economic success creates the impression of a productive partnership, smooth transactions, and friendly encounters. However, the trade boom at the border has in fact been established on a complex relationship between China and Vietnam, in which remnants of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Border War, cautiousness and resentment continue to cast a shadow on the ways in which people carry out their business and daily activities. While people on both sides of the border actively forge new relationships and partnerships based on the rhetoric of trust and good faith, lingering suspicions of Chinese expansionist intentions and Vietnamese cunningness render these relationships fragile and susceptible to disruption.

The modern shops by the Red River, built by the Chinese to lure in tourists, recently became a fresh source of local tension and negotiation, as described in our opening paragraph. Some of the Chinese in Hekou told us that even the Vietnamese government might have objected to the construction of these shop houses, although why they have caused such dismay has remained contestable. These local Chinese suspected that it had something to do with the territorial brawl between China and Vietnam over the Spratly Islands in recent years, and that the Vietnamese authorities were simply looking for opportunities to accuse the Chinese of violating mutual respect in relation to the shared border space. Whether the Vietnamese really demanded that the shops be demolished remains questionable, but there is little doubt that the Chinese were growing sensitive about Vietnam's shifting attitudes, as they experienced the daily

uncertainties of living at the China-Vietnam border. A most clear sign of Vietnam's recent unfriendliness was the government's imposition of restrictions on exporting iron ore, construction materials, various minerals and metals to China--commodities that were in high demand due to China's construction boom.¹ To what extent these sanctions affected the Vietnamese traders remains unclear; but for Chinese traders in Hekou, the consequences were distressing. Business slowed down, and potential investors turned away.

Rumors, imaginings, and half-baked facts circulate wildly in Hekou, rendering this small border city, which depends on cross-border trade as its main source of income, highly unpredictable and full of colorful speculation. While the cloud of uncertainty around official trade continues to linger, businesses of the night continue to operate as usual. From the busy restaurants to the shopping area and the main tourist attraction in Hekou's city centre--the infamous "Vietnamese Markets"--business transactions take place over drinks, laughter, and cajoling flirtations. The two "Vietnamese Markets" in Hekou, also known as "Vietnamese Street," are Zhongyue and Jinming Markets, which open every day until very late at night. They offer an assortment of shops on the ground floor that sell Vietnamese imported goods and delicacies, including sandals, perfume, coffee, tropical fruits, kitchen and military knives, redwood furniture, and diverse items that tease tourists' consumption impulses. The upper floors offer services more exclusively for men. Here, hundreds of young Vietnamese women, or the *Yuenan mei* (literally Vietnamese younger sisters), are ready to satisfy the private needs and curiosity of the male passers-by. For men who patronize the Vietnamese women there, this part of Vietnamese Street is hailed as a "man's paradise." Chinese businessmen often bring their male business partners and associates for a night of fun in Vietnamese Street, where they try to establish a strong bond or close a business deal. For many, the shared adventure of "sampling" different

¹ "Foreign trade development in Hekou since 'the eleventh five-year plan for national economic and social development of China' (十一五以来河口口岸对外贸易发展情况)", an internal document prepared by the Bureau of Commerce of the Hekou County government, n.d., document courtesy of Ying Hongwei.

Vietnamese women and a night of exotic pleasure in a nearby hotel room is a sure way to gain a sense of comradeship and trust quickly and economically.

In the China-Vietnam borderland uncertainties in cross-border trade can be experienced vicariously through intimate encounters with Vietnamese women, who symbolize both the precarious nature of cross-border engagement and the thrill of experimenting with illicit desires and pleasures. The sex trade in Hekou, therefore, becomes a specific site on which Chinese tourists and businessmen engage with novel markets and new bodies in Vietnam. As Chinese businessmen travel to Hekou to take advantage of the booming Sino-Vietnamese cross-border trade, their growing presence, together with their capital and influence, reconfigures the economy and practices of engagement at the frontier. They bring with them different entrepreneurial strategies, networks, and capital; they also carry along masculine desires and fantasies of the “virgin” economic terrains at the border that are waiting to be canvassed and mined. As a result of their presence and cash power, Vietnamese women have started to come to Hekou since the mid-1990s to work in the sex sector and entertain businessmen who either are single or have left their wives and families in the inland regions of China. Hekou’s sex sector has quickly flourished, together with other businesses, as it has become not only a unique local attraction but also the necessary “lubricant” that helps to soothe possible cross-border tension and friction.

Historically the relationship between China and Vietnam has been historically complex, with centuries of war and peace, dominance and resistance that have conditioned the ways in which people at the border learn to live with one another. This relationship has always been an ambivalent one, in which friendship and hostility co-exist. With the end of the Cold War, even though armed conflicts and physical violence seem to have come to a closure and peace and prosperity has been restored, we argue that the social relations experienced and practiced at the border still remain ambivalent. How the Chinese engage the Vietnamese at the border, and how their money, ideas, desires and practices are reshaping everyday practices in this zone, are played

out through the productive yet suspicious force of ambivalence. This ambivalence is embodied by the figure of the Vietnamese woman as sex worker at the border: she becomes a boundary marker that signals an “otherness” and unpredictability characteristic of cross-border encounters--a figure that is both attractive and dangerous. Her body is where Chinese businessmen and tourists can unleash their newfound masculine potency and their cash power that China’s economic take-off allows them to enjoy; but this unleashing of power and potency is often fraught with doubt and insecurity. In these sensual yet ambivalent liaisons with the Vietnamese, a prevailing and conflicting blend of trust and distrust continues to play into Chinese practices, with results that can be both disruptive and productive.

At the beginning of our fieldwork, neither of us intended sex work to be part of the original research agenda. However, it soon became clear to us that issues related to sex were an unavoidable social aspect of a place like Hekou. The sex trade was subtly yet evidently intertwined with local expressions of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and it frequently appeared in conversations about topics ranging from business to tourism, from health to crime. Sites of the sex trade were highly visible, including hotel rooms rented out by the hour, massage parlors, and certain karaoke joints. When Caroline Grillot (2010, 2012) studied issues of cross-border marriage in Hekou, it became apparent that some Vietnamese brides were involved in various occupations in Hekou before marriage, including sex work. When Juan Zhang (2011) investigated cross-border business between Chinese and Vietnamese traders, it was clear that sex was inseparable from business activities. This leads us to question the specific nature of sex work in Hekou, and its function as a means through which Chinese and Vietnamese interact with one another. In this local world, sex says a lot more about this place and how two communities relate to each other. Vietnamese sex work is a site of encounter with an Other--an encounter that provides fertile ground for business interactions as well as for anxiety and suspicion.

Recent research on grassroots encounters at the China-Vietnam border focuses largely on trade (Bonnin 2010; Turner 2010), tourism development (Y. W. Chan 2013), local livelihood

strategies (Turner and Michaud 2008), border security concerns (Fravel 2008), and large-scale migration in both directions between China and Vietnam that has resulted from rapid economic integration between China and ASEAN and explicit government strategies that incentivize migration to the margins for frontier urbanization and cross-regional cooperation (Nguyen Van Chinh 2013; Zhuang and Wang 2010). While these studies pay attention to both macro politico-economic processes and policy transitions that drive borderland transformation, and the micro-politics of everyday strategies at the local level, few have looked at intimate encounters at the border as a productive way in which local economies thrive and communities across the border interact. Sex and sex work at the border are often seen as deviance (e.g. He 2003), an ill side-effect of rapid economic development interlinked to issues of poverty, gender inequality, and abuse (e.g. Zhou and Duong 2011), or, more severely, a matter of national security, when it comes to concerns about sex trafficking and the threat of a transnational epidemic of AIDS and other STDs (e.g. Duong et al 2007). Our study departs from these views and situates erotic encounters within the dynamics of everyday practices at the border. Erotic encounters, as we will show below, bring together the intimate and the socio-political. They result from trans-border migration, rapid economic development, and the changing ways in which desire operates and reconfigures the meanings of market experimentation and consumption. The Chinese experience in Vietnamese Street is indicative of what they may also encounter in business deals. The local attitudes toward Vietnamese women symbolize a state of mind that shapes the ways in which cross-border exchange is full of attractions and surprises, doubts and cautiousness.

Hekou, a Window on the Land of Opportunity

Hekou has become an important economic gate between Yunnan province and North Vietnam, on the commercial corridor links Kunming (the capital of Yunnan) with Haiphong (the main maritime port in North Vietnam). In Hekou, twinned with Lào Cai, trade takes place day and night, including international and cross-border trade as well as various forms of smuggling.

Today, Hekou's and Lào Cai's respective strategic positions, and the expansive trade networks that operate between and around them, have become prominent features. The long history of valorizing trans-border flows as a distinctive feature of local commercial culture today legitimizes a local focus on economic development and regional economic cooperation. This borderland's strategic location--far from the interiors of both countries yet close to outside markets--makes it exceptional, as a region that is simultaneously more regulated and more freewheeling (Nyíri 2012), attractive to capital without falling out of control. Both formal and informal trade, as well as other forms of economic activity, have flourished again in this special border zone since it reopened.

In Hekou, a mixed group of wholesalers from different regions of China occupy the streets around the border gate. Chinese shopkeepers negotiate, count, and deliver their goods, while many Vietnamese women load these goods high on impressively big bicycles and ferry them toward the bridge that separates the two countries. They cover their faces and thin bodies with long clothes, masks and hats. This creates a powerful first impression: Vietnamese women are tough; they work hard; they are primarily bodies available for productive labor.

But soon after wandering in the few streets dedicated to small-scale trade, visitors will also notice that these anonymous female workers who embody the dynamics of local exchange are not the only Vietnamese women around. Walls covered with phone numbers along with explicit words (guns, drugs, loans, cars, virgins, prostitutes) suggest a very active underground economy. The obvious presence of sex shops, the unusually large number of guesthouses with hourly rental rates, and the many attractive young women wandering around the main market tease the appetite of the curious passer-by. Mentioning the hard-working female porters to locals automatically leads to discussions of those other "workers" -- those who do not need to use physical strength to make a living; or not only that.

Ambiguities of Vietnamese Women

In Hekou, young Vietnamese women who work for the local economy are often known as *Yuenan mei*. The term itself already embodies the ambiguity of Vietnamese women's identity in China's borderlands. For some, *Yuenan mei* simply designates any young Vietnamese woman, *Yuenan* meaning "Vietnam," and *mei* meaning "sister" or any younger female. However, in Hekou in particular, *Yuenan mei* is also used to name a specific category within this age group: the young Vietnamese women who work as masseuses or sex workers in Vietnamese Street and various hotels around town. Therefore, depending on context, the expression implies very different meanings, and sometimes requires a clarifying explanation. Over the years, with the development of the sex trade in Hekou, the term *Yuenan mei* has cast enough uncertainty over Vietnamese women's identity as to be understood as synonymous with "available woman."

To Hekou's dwellers and visitors, *Yuenan mei* are temporarily established in Hekou to fill the enormous market of commercial sex. And Hekou is well known (amongst men mostly) across Yunnan Province for its Vietnamese Street and the availability of many young, exotic, beautiful and cheap women. Various websites and forums on the Chinese Internet are filled with information, requests, tips and endless comments on the topic. Although there are no official statistics, locals estimate the number of Vietnamese women working as sex workers in Hekou to be in the thousands. Each brothel usually "rents" one to five girls and women, their ages ranging from around 14 to their early 30s, from one or more Vietnamese "providers." According to brothel madams and several other local informants, the women often willingly come to Hekou to make money (there is less forced prostitution than previously), stay for a few years, and then either return to Vietnam to get married and start a regular life, go to a bigger city in China to continue as sex workers, or find a suitable Chinese man as a life companion. The "turn-over" rate of these Vietnamese women is high, and it guarantees a constant supply of fresh faces.

Xiao Peng, an English teacher who has lived in Hekou for some years and has many acquaintances in various circles due to his previous activities, knows the phenomenon well:

[...] on Friday evenings, you can see many buses coming from outside, they are full of businessmen, traders-to-be and tourists. They come to Hekou to “*kaocha* (investigate)” the local economy and the opportunities that may exist for their business. Their agenda generally includes a visit to Vietnamese Street. Actually, this is what they are here for in the first place. They come from far away to get a taste and feel of what *Yuenan mei* are like.

A Zhao is the owner of one of the brothels on the upper floor of one of the Vietnamese Markets. One of the authors (Grillot) was chatting with him once, while observing the afternoon activities of his establishment, when she noticed two men who were separately wandering in front of the “hair-salons,” acting as though they were searching for something they were unlikely to find. A Zhao gave Grillot an explanation:

Hekou attracts a lot of people, including weird ones. These two are Japanese. There are a few like them in the city. They live here, for a while. Every day, they come to the market looking for newcomers. Once they notice a new girl they like, they negotiate to take her home. But they are stingy. No one appreciates them. They bargain a lot, always wanting a low price, even lower than the market rate. I personally don’t like them. They may ask the girls to do unusual things; they try to take pictures, lots of things. Even when they don’t have a specific request, they are still weird men. I don’t know why they come here.

Japanese men do not have a monopoly on living in Hekou in order to enjoy a different/more exciting sexual life with *Yuenan mei*. Although inconspicuous, there are a few other notorious long-term foreign residents in Hekou—including Western men—who visit the local sex workers. But the large majority of clients are Chinese men, and as in many other border

cities in the region, their participation in such “entertainment” is part and parcel of the development of the border trade and the recently established economic zone. It offers, just like casinos, the sense of a free zone, a “no-one-cares” land where everything is possible. The informal trade sector offers a large selection of illicit goods that are all, in one way or another, available to interested and adventurous customers. But commercial sex in Hekou looks rather different from elsewhere due to its concentration in one main spot in the city. It is very open, and it is associated with so many businesses that, according to A Zhao and Xiao Peng, commercial sex drives the city’s entire economy. A Zhao and other dwellers have repeatedly told Grillot over the years:

Restaurants, hotels, bars, taxis, and some shoe and clothes shops rely a lot on the presence of these girls to run their business. Every night, and on weekends especially, they [the sex workers] bring money into Hekou; the businesses make a lot of money!

As a result, the local police protect brothels and their owners from trouble with both nasty clients and high-level authorities. Making the city attractive to interested investors is part of their undisclosed agenda. As Xiao Peng puts it:

No one would bother to visit Hekou, and even less so to invest here, if there wasn’t some sort of reward for the effort it takes to travel down to the border. Until recently, it was a 10-hour drive from Kunming to look at ... what? The riverside? Do you really believe that people come to see a river and a small Vietnamese town and, at most, to glimpse Hanoi? *Yuenan mei* are just part of the deal.

Not unlike the Dai in Xishuangbanna in Yunnan (Hyde 2007), the Vietnamese in Hekou represent the first taste of an exotic foreign neighbor, the “must-try” attraction of a place that otherwise does not have much to offer curious eyes. In exposed spaces, such as the central streets and the ground floor of the Vietnamese markets, one can hear a new language and find exotic imported fruits, whereas in more hidden areas, such as on the upper floor of the markets, one finds more sensual and unusual “forbidden fruits.” Even though numerous karaoke parlors in the city procure the regular services of *xiaojie* (hostesses/sex workers), they do not offer the same feeling of excitement as their Vietnamese fellows who operate in other venues, because the latter represent the quintessence of the discovery of Vietnam, the realm of fantasy. For Chinese visitors at the border, Vietnam is often imagined as akin to a “minority nationality” (*shaoshu minzu*) that is dominated by (Han) China (Nyíri 2006). With exponential growth in tourism, when Chinese men come into contact with “minority” women, popular notions--such as the view that minority girls are “casual” or “loose”--often trigger erotic fantasies about how these women would respond to their masculine advances (Hyde 2001, 2007; Gladney 1994). Now, as Chinese men venture into the borderlands, this practice of eroticizing minority women continues to have a powerful effect on the ways in which Chinese men engage with women (and men) in Southeast Asia. Although most of the Vietnamese women in Hekou are ethnically Kinh, the majority group in Vietnam, in the eyes of the Chinese they are no different from the familiar Chinese “minority” women. Imagining Vietnamese women as exotic, colorful, sensual and eager to please, Chinese men cultivate a masculine sense of self as virile, modern, and dominant.

Erotic Encounters: Imagining Vietnam through Vietnamese Women

The *Yuenan mei* not only represents a seductive image of Vietnam, but she also provides a snapshot of the country’s current situation, socially and economically. Chinese men’s erotic encounters with Vietnamese women often lead them to imagine that these willing Vietnamese bodies also symbolize easy access to Vietnam. In Hekou’s Vietnamese markets, Chinese men

experiment with modern forms of “border crossing,” experiencing their sexual experiences as expressions of masculine exploration and potency. Their encounters at times consolidate a shared fantasy of China’s superiority over Vietnam, and at times challenge it.

The sex workers that can be found in Hekou’s Vietnamese Market sometimes match up with many idealized criteria of a sexual partner, as perceived by the Chinese *piaoke* [clients]: a manageable size, “white” skin, deep-set eyes with an exotic flavor, round hips and large breasts, young in age, smooth skin with no hair on arms and legs, and coming from a country which China once had a war with that is now under the influence of the Chinese economy, particularly in the northern borderlands. As China’s economic power becomes stronger, more and more goods and services, including these, are becoming affordable to average members of the Chinese working class (Zhou and Duong 2011, 7).

Through brief dialogues, shared assumptions, and widespread stories, many Chinese newcomers to Hekou assume that they can get a sense of what life is like in Vietnam by approaching a *Yuenan mei*: “There are so many Vietnamese girls ready to sell their bodies for money!” By engaging with commercial sex in Hekou, at the rate they charge, these visitors project a sense of the power of China’s currency. When madams and sex workers consider 80 Yuan per session as a fair price, this suggests that 80 Yuan (about US\$12) represents quite a sum in Vietnam.² This suggests that, in general, things in that country cost less than they would in China. *Yuenan mei* confirm by their mere presence and activity in Hekou that their country is economically disadvantaged. But from a Chinese point of view, poverty is not the only sign of their backwardness. To them, Vietnam’s economic situation also implies less exposure to what modernity brings into society: individualism, looser kinship ties, less emphasis on tradition, and more pressure on men who face considerable competition and demands. Vietnamese women,

² In comparison, a Chinese prostitute in Hekou would charge at least 200 Yuan (in 2009) for a similar service.

whether they enter the sex trade voluntarily or not, are deemed to be the main supporters of the entire family. According to their clients, madams and other well-informed Vietnamese in Hekou, these young women sell their bodies to pay for their brother's schooling, their father's health care, their husband's alcohol or drugs, and even their sisters' weddings. While such justifications tend to deny them strong personal agency and describe their wise obedience to filial piety rules, they also emphasize a sense of sacrifice worth some consideration. To many Chinese, this implies that filial piety in Vietnam still plays a role that is fading dramatically in contemporary Chinese society, but which is nevertheless highly valued by many Chinese, at a time when morality is rapidly being reconfigured and no longer provides a safety net for social relationships (Yan 2009).

Even though encounters with *Yuenan mei* may not necessarily lead to positive impressions of Vietnam's potential in terms of favorable market prospects, they still convey a sense of familiarity and a shared concern for traditional morality, even though the sexual encounters happen in an a priori, non-traditional, and less moralized context. Such perceptions remain significant enough to construct feelings of both familiarity and respectability in some Chinese clients--feelings that relate to the resistance Vietnamese interpreters and guides often show, as they reject the flirtatious advances of Chinese men visiting Hekou. Imagining *Yuenan mei* also as women who make big sacrifices in order to provide for their families, Chinese men feel that they are extending a "helping hand" that legitimizes their sexual adventures at the border, and they gain a sense of moral and economic superiority as the wealthy patrons who are powerful enough to "save" these women from misery by patronizing them. Through their consumption of *Yuenan mei*, part of the discovery routine of a foreign neighbor, Chinese businessmen and tourists search for confirmation and approval of their assumptions about Vietnam.

Those who have ventured to the upper floors of the Vietnamese markets in Hekou have experienced a sense of wildness that is unusual compared to commercial sex venues in other parts of China. Once visitors reach the last step of the stairs, they are literally grabbed before

they realize where they are. It is a great struggle for them to face the enthusiasm of dozens of young and sexy women along the balcony that runs around the building's inner courtyard, and to avoid being led into a "beauty-parlor," i.e. a brothel. One Chinese client confided to Grillot that he had the feeling of arriving in a "special [*tebie*]" space, an exotic and exciting place with different rules and expectations from those in a similar setting in China. This requires men to make adjustments to their initial agenda. If one simply wishes to peek into a mysterious and attractive place, he may have to change his mind and enjoy it further than he had initially planned. If one intends to find a suitable girl for sex, he may be surprised by the way things work there.

The rules are different: here, the client does not necessarily choose a girl; on the contrary, a girl often chooses him. She easily hugs and kisses him, while teasing him, laughing, and even touching his private parts. Hence, the potential client's agency recedes before the acted-out wildness that the unknown girls impose on him. Grillot has noticed that in many cases, Chinese men are often so surprised by such an unexpected welcome. Typically have one of two reactions: either they quickly become annoyed and reject this unusual form of solicitation, or they lower their guard and play the game. A client in one of Hekou's Vietnamese brothels commented:

They [the Vietnamese] are like children; they seem to enjoy what they do. Look at them: they're excited when they see a newcomer. This one has stolen my glasses and won't give them back until I choose her for sex. They're not like Chinese prostitutes (*xiaojie*). They make men feel at ease because they laugh and play; I think they're charming!

At least this is what the girls wish their clients to believe. But lascivious bodies, tired expressions and empty looks, as in any other commercial sex venue, reveal how much of a performance the initial encounter between a sex worker and a potential client is. The "natural" and unexpected way in which things occur in Hekou offers the illusion that meeting with

Vietnamese women is fun, easy and charming. Soon enough, though, the seduction reaches its limit. After the flattering and affectionate greetings, such as *shunai* (handsome man), *laoban* (boss), *dage* (big brother), follow the sweet talk and provocative jokes that conduce to bodily proximity. But language issues do limit the degree of actual communication.³ When women's body language and charm become the only bridge between two strangers, the interaction inevitably ends with emotionless separation, leaving one with (some) money and the other with (presumed) physical satisfaction. Nevertheless, for those who encounter Vietnamese women for the first time, the intimate and promising welcome, the degree of familiarity with Vietnam it prefigures, and the feeling of economic and nationalistic superiority it allows, contrast with similar sexual encounters with Chinese *xiaojie*. To ambitious Chinese traders in quest of easy business deals with Vietnam, preliminary sexual encounters with *Yuenan mei* offer a sign of reassurance before entering the realm of business negotiation. As a form of encouragement to develop further Sino-Vietnamese trade projects, *Yuenan mei* display a well-performed respect toward these newcomers, not only for their manhood, but also for their entrepreneurial abilities.

Longer stays, initial business experiences, and extensive interactions with borderland dwellers may moderate newcomers' initial excitement and hopeful expectations. Yet, Vietnamese femininity and well-performed respect toward these newcomers stand as a form of mediator in the establishment of business relationships. Seduction plays an obvious part in the way business partnerships are settled between the Chinese and Vietnamese. This form of interaction is perceptible not only in the sex trade. For instance, young Vietnamese women who offer, along with their language skills, a certain sense of "Vietnamese womanhood," mostly monopolize the pool of interpreters. As Chan (2013) has observed teasing and flirting with local tour guides and interpreters is often an implicit part of the "deal" during tourism and business trips. In case this

³ Vietnamese prostitutes in Hekou generally speak limited Chinese, ranging from a few words to basic conversation, due to their living environment (they live with their fellow Vietnamese and/or madams), the relatively short time they spend in Hekou, and the nature of the conversations they have with their clients.

may lead to more insistent propositions, the resistance that these young women express in their own subtle way provides Chinese men with a perception of their actual values and priorities as respectable women.

In a small city such as Hekou, Chinese traders, tourists and potential businessmen face two dimensions of Otherness in Vietnamese women, who obviously take control of the communicative aspects of these encounters with Vietnam: the respectable and the luscious. According to our informants, such a situation leads (or contributes) to a biased impression of Vietnam among Chinese visitors to Hekou. The Vietnamese man, absent from these first interactions between the two neighbors, remains in the background as a weak and unfamiliar figure, almost a crowd-extra relegated to physical work, and a silent presence in the shadow of his daughter, wife, or sister.

Anxious Desires

Like many similar markets that emerged in other countries under post-socialist reforms, Hekou's sex markets might be seen as a shadowy site of apprehension and Otherness, even as they capture the fervid imaginations of their visitors and consumers. Writing about the container markets seven kilometers outside the port city of Odessa, Ukraine, Humphrey and Skvirskaja describe such quasi-legal marketplaces as existing "in the interstices of legitimate business, in the cracks of exchange rates, on the shadowy side of cities" (2009, 62). These container markets are not grey and anonymous "non-places" that operate in the dark; they are in fact "a new type of transnational trading nexus" that "contain diasporic networks of new migrants, whole villages of local peasants turned salespeople and ethnic clusters of trust, cooperation, and hostility" (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009, 62). Likewise, Hekou's sex market can also be construed as a novel type of transnational trading nexus where intense social interactions take place. This market is where characters are judged, where local law enforcement works with brothel madams for profit, and where local gangsters seek "legitimate" venues for investment.

Over about two decades of activity, commercial sex in Hekou has inspired general assumptions about Vietnamese sex workers and their activities that local dwellers do not hesitate to share. Their viewpoint emphasizes the sense of strategy hidden beneath Vietnamese women's pleasant words, attitudes and physical features. According to the local discourse, Vietnamese women engage in sex work voluntarily--even though cases of deception have been reported--due to Vietnam's relative poverty compared to China. Moreover, they are open-minded and do not see sex work as a morally questionable way to earn money to help their families or themselves. In Vietnam, the local discourse continues, there are too many women, not enough work for everyone, and not enough potential husbands, so this surplus of young women fulfills the sex market's demands.

The women generally stay in Hekou for two or three years. This limited time does not prevent them from later becoming wives and mothers; on the contrary, here, sex work could almost be considered as an initiation into adulthood and autonomy. However, these young women's emancipation is ultimately illusory, and they remain strongly knotted to family: remittances, indebtedness, and filial obligations. Therefore, after a certain period of activity in Hekou's market, they can go back to Vietnam with enough money to build a house, find a partner and start a new life. Everyone seems to believe that they make a lot of money--that they are a "good catch" by local standards--and so will easily get married. If not, people still assert, they might remain in China after they quit sex work and try to find a Chinese husband, hiding (or not) their past and pretending (or not) that they are "virtuous women." Eventually, many men in Hekou are persuaded that Vietnamese women are sexually emancipated and that *Yuenan mei*, by extension, enjoy their activities and use their skills to deceive their Chinese clients. Some Hekou locals warn newcomers about Vietnamese sex workers who may act like ordinary women in search of an honest Chinese partner they can easily trick or later abandon. For Hekou people, then, this is the "real" agenda of Vietnamese women, which they take to stand for the agenda of Vietnamese people in general.

Rumors, life stories, hints, observations and practices colored by stereotypes breed and feed this informal discourse. Tales are collected, spread, and kept alive at the border so that newcomers receive a ready “information package” when they arrive in Hekou (and even before they come, via Internet forums and blogs on the topic). A simple inquiry using the Chinese search engine *Baidu* for “Hekou Vietnamese beauties” retrieves endless web pages on which current prices, locations, types of service, women’s ages, pictures, and so forth are available. The circumspect impression that *Yuenan mei* leave in the city seems to inform what many local Chinese traders think about Vietnamese women in general. Many reflect on their suspicions of Vietnamese people by complaining about commercial transactions or personal encounters. Xiao Sun, a trader of sewing machines, commented on his partnership with the Vietnamese:

As long as you have what they need, they will be nice to you. They will coax you with promises of quick payment, and look reliable. But once they receive the goods you send them, trouble starts, and you are confronted with payment issues. Just like Vietnamese women: they are nice to you if you can provide them with money, a home, or a kind relationship; but they will turn their back on you as soon as they see a better opportunity elsewhere, with your money in their pocket. You cannot trust Vietnamese people. They are unpredictable.

The proximity and intimacy of private sexual encounters with Vietnamese women indicate other functions and implications than the mere satisfaction of personal curiosity and physical needs. The implicit role of the Vietnamese markets in Hekou goes beyond offering a simple taste of the exotic Other; it evokes a whole image of Otherness, of what to expect, what to avoid and what to remain cautious about in Vietnam. The subtle communication that is created by frequenting Vietnamese sex workers paves the way for establishing business interactions with Vietnamese traders or clients. Sexual liaisons, in Hekou as elsewhere in China,

need to be understood as a way for businessmen to construct networks (Jeffreys 2004a, 2004b; Zheng 2009a, 2009b). It is a part of the general mechanism that allows a successful enterprise: the establishment of a cross-border trading network, rooted in a certain understanding, albeit a biased one. Interactions with *Yuenan mei* are believed to lead to the deeper understanding of Vietnamese culture and characteristics that is necessary for engaging in cross-border business--including an understanding of the power relationships that govern the provision of commercial sex.

Even though their services are cheap and their teasing attitudes overwhelmingly uninhibited, the *Yuenan mei* do not naively devote themselves to satisfying the sexual needs of their Chinese clients. They have learned how to exert a sort of control over them, at least over those regulars who undertake long-term trading activities in Hekou. As they become familiar with Hekou's particularities, and with the help of technology (regular phone calls and instant messaging) and acquaintances, the *Yuenan mei* sometimes manage to keep in touch with some clients, allowing them to sustain a relationship based on the mutual need to penetrate further the other's cultural and social realms. This tactic has sometimes led to de facto marriages or business partnerships.

Zhixiong He (2003) as well as Lei Zhou and Duong Bich Hanh (2011) have described the informal management of Hekou's Vietnamese markets. Almost a decade apart, they have revealed the control mechanisms exercised by local government over the owners of commercial sex venues, by these owners over sex workers, and finally by Chinese men--through the *Yuenan mei*--over Vietnamese men in general. Zhou and Duong describe the ambiguity of this space, shaped by Hekou's historical background:

As one of our local informants commented, "The Chinese now are rich, so it's time for us to play with women from another country, especially prostitutes from Vietnam, which we once had war with for years." *Piaoke* (customers) sometimes

seem to view themselves as “national heroes,” metaphorically engaging in a long overdue retaliation against those “foes” of the old days by “putting green hats onto their men” (meaning, in Chinese, one’s spouse having an affair with another man). (Zhou and Duong 2011, 7)

Zhou and Duong have also discussed the question of communication between Chinese clients and Vietnamese sex workers. They argue that the *Yuenan mei*’s inability to communicate with their Chinese clients through language allows them a detachment that protects, and thus empowers, them as Vietnamese women. We suggest that despite this apparently limited verbal communication, a complex interaction and understanding, rooted in seduction, occurs between them, and that this may impact the two communities they represent beyond the mere economic transaction that shapes their sexual intercourse.

In the business sphere, Chinese traders describe how some of their Vietnamese partners have similarly used seduction to attract Chinese investment in businesses that turned out to be fake and where capital was lost. Many of these traders have learned from their mistakes, which they attribute to the hidden agenda of some unscrupulous and rapacious Vietnamese entrepreneurs. For example, consider the mineral mines that were opened in the mountainous northern regions of Vietnam such as Lai Châu, thanks to Chinese investment in extraction equipment—mines that were partly controlled by local officials who were very closely tied to intermediaries. Many of Hekou’s Chinese traders who have had a disappointing experience with such projects now give a cool reception to any suggestion of a new business partnership that involves their investment and that depends on shadowy economic actors. Some associate such ventures with what might be in a *Yuenan mei*’s mind when she seduces newcomers by offering them an embodied image of their promised land.

Those Chinese traders who enjoy the company of *Yuenan mei* as part of their business activities are also those who constantly question Vietnamese trading ethics and practices. If

intimate relationships between two individuals embody the associated commercial partnership between cross-border traders, these relationships remain shaped by ambiguity. To some radical local Chinese commentators, encounters combining seduction with business even suggest the suspicious political agenda of a distrusted Vietnamese state, which they believed is deliberately restricting Chinese commercial influence in Vietnam, while still benefitting from China's investments in its economic development. To these commentators, *Yuenan mei* and unscrupulous Vietnamese traders are the covert agents of such a plan.

Rumors and stereotypes concerning the *Yuenan mei* in Hekou reflect the critical opinion that locals have of them--despite the benefits they may obtain from their activities--and reveal locals' resentment toward their inevitable, still-needed neighbor. When a former (or active) *Yuenan mei* seduces a Chinese man, engages in a relationship with him and suddenly vanishes with his money (and his child, in some cases), this is generally interpreted as a "typical" Vietnamese way of treating Chinese people: seducing, cheating, vanishing. Vietnamese women, in such accounts, are depicted as pragmatic, selfish, manipulative, heartless and shameless, always ready to move back to Vietnam with their partner's possessions. And traders describe the same process when it comes to cross-border trade agreements between Chinese wholesalers and Vietnamese retailers. Bearing in mind that women often conduct this retail trade, traders' narratives and experiences all emphasize Vietnamese people's use and abuse of lures to build pretended trustful partnerships, only to break all such agreements. Therefore, the ambiguous figure of the venal *Yuenan mei* becomes the embodiment of a "Vietnameseness" that is validated by the Vietnamese state, whose agents--the Vietnamese traders--covet China's economic success and use seduction and trust-based commercial agreements accordingly. We will not assess the validity of this perception here; but in the conclusion we will consider what the local popular discourse on neighborhood and otherness actually conveys in such a borderland context.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have charted the ambivalent terrains of desire and anxiety where Chinese men imagine and depict Vietnamese women at the China-Vietnam frontier. Their anxious desires, we argue, exemplify the lures and apprehensions that Chinese men experience in their cross-border business engagement with Vietnamese traders. Their vivid imagination of Vietnamese women's sensuality, submissiveness, and cunning tactics reflects both the temptations and traps of the post-war border marketplace, where Chinese men start to explore their own sense of being and desiring through cross-border business. We began our discussion by introducing the long history of trade and periodical conflicts between China and Vietnam. This relationship complicates these two nations' mutual perceptions. At the border itself, it is rendered all the more ambivalent because the Chinese and the Vietnamese need each other more than ever in order to achieve local economic prosperity; yet the lingering cloud of suspicion continues to play out in intimate ways.

When Chinese men come to Hekou's Vietnamese market for excitement and pleasure, their cash, and their imagination of Vietnamese eagerness and deference, together project an image of Chinese (masculine) power. By consuming the willing bodies of the Vietnamese women, they demonstrate, to themselves and their peers, a newfound economic potency and masculine desirability. But such consumption practices, and the imaginings that sustain them, are always fraught with ambiguous meanings and uncertain outcomes. In the frame of careful interactions of Chinese and Vietnamese traders at the border, thrilling erotic encounters often mask the fact that such engagements are inherently fragile and fleeting. (Dis)trust always plays an important part in cross-border connections, which proves to be both disruptive and productive: disruptive because suspicion and doubt render any form of long-term partnership superficial, if not perilous; productive because it brings heat and energy to the already inflamed fantasies of Self and Other, of border-crossing, and of the tantalizing potentials the borderlands can offer.

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