

A Study of Vietnamese Cross-Border Migration into Guangxi Province, China

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Abstract—The Sino-Vietnamese border formally took shape during the Song Dynasty, but the origin of the border crossing phenomenon between the two countries is somewhat harder to verify. Despite the demarcation of a political border, the denizens of the border areas retain a common language and ethnicity. Those moving between the two countries have played a role in promoting exchanges and communication across the border. For historical and practical reasons these people continue to move between Guangxi and Vietnam today. Cross border marriage is common and alongside migrant workers and farmers crossing to sell their produce, constitutes the main reason for border crossing between Guangxi and Vietnam. This paper, through field research on the border area, tries to realistically present cross-border scenarios in the region and analyze the purpose and characteristics of current cross-border group behavior. Current cross-border movement is characterized by the uni-directional and local nature of the crossings, and the ease of communication between this population. In fact, although cross-border groups are driven by economic interests, the vast majority of migrants have not derived significant economic benefits from their migration. This issue is particularly evident in cross-border marriage and family relations. The livelihood of Vietnamese women married to men from villages near the border in Guangxi generally does not significantly improve after marriage. Vietnamese brides are ineligible for Chinese social security because their marriages have not taken place through legal channels. Meanwhile, many Vietnamese women have already lived in China for a considerable period of time, leading the Vietnamese government to revoke their citizenship, which results in a lack of clarity over their nationality.

Keywords—*Guangxi-Vietnam border, cross-border, cross-border marriage, Vietnamese women*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region is located on the southwest border of China. Within Guangxi itself, there are three cities located particularly close to the Vietnamese provinces of Quang Ninh, Lang Son, Cao Bang and Ha Giang. Due to the historical absence of a formal border prior to the Song Dynasty, part of northern Vietnam was once under Chinese rule-the temporal origin of cross-border activities on the Sino-Vietnamese Guangxi border is difficult to verify. The Sino-Vietnamese border was formed in the Song Dynasty when Vietnam became an independent country. Logically, therefore, research into activities along the border should begin at this point. Specifically, when a legally binding treaty, signed after the Sino-French war in the 19th century, first established the

Sino-Vietnamese border. However, until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government took a relaxed approach to manage the border between Guangxi and Vietnam. Overall, official and political border never stop people crossing it for trade, marriage, work and commute.

II. CURRENT REASONS FOR CROSSING THE GUANGXI- VIETNAM BORDER

The most recent stint of border demarcation work carried out by the Chinese and Vietnamese governments concluded in 2001. The region is mountainous, with mountain peaks themselves providing a topographical basis for much of the border. A commonly used method for drawing the boundary was to extend a line from the apex of the hill that cut the mountain in two, with each side of the mountain resting in different countries. Despite this demarcation of official border posts, cross-border movement between Guangxi and Vietnam has continued, largely due to the local population using both official checkpoints and small mountain passes. In order to reflect this reality, my study focused on cross-border activity using a sample of border villages (A, B, C, D, and E) in 'City X' of Guangxi. Through field research, I try to realistically present the situation in the border area between Guangxi and Vietnam, and explore the current reasons for and characteristics of cross-border group behavior.

A. For marriage

Cross-border marriage between China and Vietnam is a folk tradition stemming from ancient times to the present. The border is home to a large number of people from the Zhuang ethnicity, who belong to the same ethnic group as inhabits the northern part of Vietnam - separated only by mountains and small streams. The formal border that came into being after the Song Dynasty separated the Zhuang people between the two countries. Nonetheless, since then, these people have continued to migrate back and forth. The Zhuang people, moving southward to Vietnam, split to form the Dai and Yi ethnicities, while some ethnically Kinh people migrated northward into China, to Dongxing City in Guangxi Province. Many years later, these people continue to share a common language, identity, and a tradition of ancestor worship. Likewise, those who moved southward to Vietnam have retained Chinese cultures and traditions.

A visit by this author to a Chinese-Vietnamese family in China found that the Vietnamese daughter-in-law used the Zhuang dialect to communicate with her neighbors in the border villages of Guangxi. Very few migrants have learned even the basics of standard Mandarin since arriving in China. To form long-term cross-border marriages, the border people of the two countries rely on familiar terrain, complemented by a common language and customs.

Women from the Guangxi side of the border often see marriage into a relatively wealthy family or migration to work in China's larger cities as routes by which to escape rural poverty. This outflow of women from area is compounded by the unwillingness of women from elsewhere in China to marry into impoverished border regions. This has made it difficult for men from the area to find a wife. Field investigations by this author revealed that the dowry paid by men from Guangxi border area for a wife from their own village is typically 20-30 thousand Chinese Yuan, whereas the dowry for a Vietnamese wife is far lower - generally under 10 thousand Chinese Yuan. As a result, poorer Chinese men are more inclined to marry Vietnamese women. Economic constraints combined with a lack of formal education, legal awareness, and access to information on formal marriage registration mean that this kind of marriage is common.

B. Crossing the border for work

This refers to short-term trips to work within the border area. In response to labor shortages on the Guangxi side of the border, Vietnamese people cross the border to work, harvesting sugar cane, planting rice and so on. A general lack of peasant labor in Guangxi is one of the reasons for this phenomenon. A number of the workforces go to coastal cities to work, leaving the old, the weak, and children at home. They only come back to their hometown during the Spring Festival, once a year. Chinese government subsidies also encourage this phenomenon, leading Guangxi villagers to employ Vietnamese peasants to work on the fields, rather than doing the work themselves. Villagers on the Guangxi side receive a variety of poverty alleviation subsidies, ranging from several hundred to one thousand Yuan every month. For recipients, this means a certain income without working on anything. Peasants prefer to pay Vietnamese villagers to work on the land than do it themselves. Furthermore, Vietnam's cheap workforce has a competitive advantage over Chinese labor.

Peasants told the author that, for example, when they plant fruit seedlings, usually they need to dig a dozen pits, each pit 60 cm wide and 60 cm deep, per acre of land. Chinese workers get paid 20 Yuan for each one, whereas Vietnamese workers only charge 2 Yuan for each one. Vietnamese women who have married Chinese villagers often recommend their relatives in Vietnam to do the job. The typical income of Vietnamese villagers along the border is some 3000 Yuan per year. If they harvest sugar cane in China, they will likely earn an income of 2500-3500 Yuan per month. All of the above reasons have led to the present situation with plenty of Vietnamese people working in agriculture on the Guangxi side of the border.

C. For selling agricultural produce

Observation along the border by this author provided further insight, revealing how Vietnamese peasants travel across the border by mountain trails and check points from their homes into Chinese market towns and villages. They then to sell their agricultural produce, such as pigs, rice, frozen products, and other commodities. Each village has its own dates each month for holding the local market. This kind of selling agricultural produce would also happen at somewhere far from the usual markets. Those produce will be driven to other cities of China for selling.

III. FEATURES OF THOSE PEOPLE CROSSING THE BORDER

A. Uni-directional movement

Field research by the author found that the main direction of border crossing is from Vietnam to China, owing to various economic reasons. The north of Vietnam is mountainous and its economic growth is relatively slower than that of rural Guangxi on the other side of the border. People crossing the border are primarily do so in order to improve their economic situation. Relatively low levels of education and legal awareness, including of national borders, are contributory factors for continued migration in the region. Besides, this kind of crossing the border is hard for the authorities to collect data, particular in for those crossing via mountain trails, which increase the potential that would cause security problems to the villages at the both side of the border.

B. Staying in Guangxi after crossing the border

After crossing the border Vietnamese people often remain in Guangxi Province to take on work, get married or sell agricultural produce. However, those coming over the border to work on the fields usually come to China in the morning and return to Vietnam in the afternoon. Those who have married Chinese villagers more rarely return to their hometown, generally staying in the border area. Some of these people have their Vietnamese nationality revoked as a result of not returning to Vietnam.

C. Ease of communication between Vietnamese migrants and Guangxi locals

Historical developments have led to the division of people living in the border region between two countries. Vietnamese villagers in the border area not only speak standard Vietnamese, but also speak their own local dialect – the same as villagers on the Guangxi side. Indeed, Vietnamese daughters-in-law that this author met in the course of field research communicate with Guangxi locals in this dialect. In fact, some migrants, who have already lived in China for several years, learn to speak standard Mandarin. This ease of communication, combined with a range of similar customs, such as similar modes of dress, encourage the constant movement across the border.

D. Those people crossing the border getting along with the locals harmoniously

This particularly refers to the Vietnamese daughters-in-law. They share similar worship, language and custom with the

Chinese local villagers, other than character reasons, which lower the risk of having arguments with neighbors. This also reflects that Vietnamese women influenced by Confucian culture are willing to listen to and not to resist their husbands, which extends to their interaction with neighbors. Not only the Vietnamese brides but also the Vietnamese crossing the border can get along well with the locals in general.

IV. CONCLUSION

Despite the early formation of a border separating this group of people, they still regularly cross the border for marriage and other practical reasons, largely moving via mountain passes. Through field research in the region, this author found that most of those crossing the border, especially those in cross-border marriages, do not significantly benefit from crossing over.

A. Vietnamese daughters-in-law failed to obtain Chinese National welfare

Vietnamese daughters-in-law generally hope to improve their financial situation through marriage into Guangxi families. However, the economic status of their husbands is generally below the average level of their village, falling short of Vietnamese migrants initial expectations. Thus, they have moved from one impoverished situation in to another. The difficulties of obtaining a Chinese 'hukou' (household registration) have plagued the Vietnamese women for years. Research by the author found that both the Chinese and the Vietnamese people in the border area had a very limited understanding of how to legally register a marriage. The only practical method for them is to have an informal, traditional wedding. This, however, means that Vietnamese women cannot be included in the household registration system, making their marriages and very status in China illegal. These Vietnamese women cannot enjoy the same welfare benefits that their husband's families in the Guangxi border area do. Nor are they eligible to be allocated land. They are also ineligible for localised subsidies aimed at villagers living within 3km of the border, namely healthcare funding and medical reimbursements. As they cannot enjoy medical welfare, when Vietnamese daughters-in-law fall unwell, their families must shoulder the burden of hospital fees, further impoverishing them.

B. Vietnamese daughters-in-law failed to obtain Chinese legal marriage registration

Marriage, for those with the awareness of modern legal registration procedures, is further complicated by expense. Chinese- Vietnamese families generally cannot afford the expense of registering a legal marriage in China. The procedures, which include obtaining an identity certificate and passport for both parties, normally cost over ten thousand Yuan, factoring in transportation and accommodation. This is a key contributor to families' deciding to eschew marriage registration. For Vietnamese brides in China, this factor, combined with the revocation of their nationality, and lack of a Chinese identify card, makes it is difficult for them to find formal employment in order to improve their financial situation.

C. Cross-border marriages is a favor to a stabilized local community

Nonetheless, cross-border marriages help to stabilize the local community. The author found that many reasons, including poverty and an unbalanced ratio of men to women, have led to a surplus of unmarried men on the Guangxi side of the border area. This is compounded by the aim of many local women to escape poverty by marrying into wealthy families or moving to industrialized cities to work. Despite difficulties, Vietnamese women are readily accepted into the local area by poor men seeking wives, assisted by tradition and the same mother tongue, customs, and methods of worship.

D. Approaches to resolving Vietnamese brides' identity dilemma

Therefore, owing in large part to the relatively low level of education and economic development in the area, local authorities on both sides of the border should simplify the procedures for marriage registration, raise awareness among the community of how to register marriage, lower the price of obtaining marriage certificates, and formalize existing marriages. Doing so would be a positive step in helping Vietnamese daughters-in-law resolve the problems surrounding their identity in China and integrate them into the local community.

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