
Understand Chan’s essay in terms of:
- Body
- Embodiment
- Power
- Self-made Ideas
- Sex-Tourism
- Sexuality

The definitions of these concepts can be found in the *Glossary of Terms* borrowed from:


Further considerations:
Develop an informed opinion on the following quote:

“Similarly, in ‘Culture and gender politics in China-Vietnam border tourism…’ (Chan), certain cities along the borderlands of these countries are sexual and sensual playgrounds where the boundary separating victim/victimizer dissolves, and the enchanting epic dream of many working Vietnamese women of finding love with a relatively wealthy Chinese man rarely materializes. The women continue to play their seductive games though while increasing their personal wealth and escaping the perceived torment of Vietnamese wedlock. If the borderlands are grey, Chan’s portrayal is brilliant.”

Do you agree that the boundary separating the victim/victimizer dissolves? Why or Why not?
Tourism in Southeast Asia
Challenges and New Directions

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Cultural and Gender Politics in China–Vietnam Border Tourism

Yuk Wah Chan

Introduction: The Political Space of Border and Gender

After a decade of border shutdown, the Vietnamese-Chinese borderline was reopened in 1991 following a series of diplomatic negotiations between China and Vietnam. Border tourism began to grow after that and gradually developed into one of the development strategies of the border regions in the north of Vietnam. Lao Cai, the capital town of Lao Cai province, is situated opposite the county of Hekou in the Chinese province of Yunnan across the Red River. A town devastated by the border war of 1979, Lao Cai now sees a regular flow of Chinese tourists walking over its border-crossing bridge. The Chinese tourists, with their colourful caps and tour guides holding colourful flags, brighten up the main streets and market of the small border town. They hover over the souvenir shops and snack stalls in the market and bargain fiercely with their Vietnamese hosts.

To the Vietnamese, the Chinese have been familiar neighbours for many centuries. However, the Chinese coming to Vietnam as mass tourists is a novel experience. Not only has border tourism brought about a new boom to the economy of the border regions, it has also created a social space for the interactions of the Chinese and the Vietnamese within a new trans-border political economy, and has become a locus for exercising new forms of power. This chapter analyses the political space of border and gender within the interactive space of trans-border tourism. It examines how the growth of tourism has effectively sexualized and sensualized the border with the increasing availability of wealth and the
rising economic expectations in the borderlands. Both Chinese men and Vietnamese women have been utilising different forms of capital to engage in trans-border sex games and trade.

Borders, which have become increasingly important in academic studies (see, for example, Wilson and Donnan, 1999; 1998; 1994; Ganster and Lorey, 2005; Heyman and Cunningham, 2004; Staudt and Spencer, 1998; Walker, 1999; Evans, Hutton and Eng, 2000), are often intriguingly ambiguous. The re-opened Sino-Vietnamese border is supposed to facilitate economic integration and reduce differences through cultural and technological exchanges, but it is also immediately producing new cultural and gender divides. This chapter firstly examines the prominence of Vietnamese brothels and the sexualization of the borderlands within tourism discourses and activities, which have rendered these spaces as peripheral sex ‘playgrounds’, catering to the sexual desires and economic dominance of Chinese men. Secondly, it looks into how some Vietnamese female tourism workers engage in sensual flirting and love games with Chinese men in pursuit of material gain. The abundant in-flows of travellers and tourists have provided Vietnamese women with a pool of richer males. Some women have been successfully using physical appeal to solicit the favour of Chinese men and manipulating their relations with their Chinese lovers and potential lovers through the strategic use of flirting, sex jokes, love games, and physical intimacy. Although these women have been facing moral and cultural tensions and scepticism in the local tourism community, their initiatives in transgressing the triple ‘borders’ of territory, morals and sex to look for riches have liberated them from the submissiveness of the ideal-type Vietnamese woman and the ‘bitterness’ of Vietnamese women’s fate. Rather than accepting life as it is, they take the initiative to work on their own ‘modernization’ schemes.

This chapter argues that border tourism has created a new niche accommodating the (economic and sexual) desires of both Chinese men and Vietnamese women through trans-border sexual and sensual contacts and connections. On the face of it, such connections might have suggested a new form of dominance of rich Chinese men over Vietnamese women reflecting the historical Chinese dominance over Vietnam. However, as illustrated below, the current translation of Vietnamese-Chinese contacts into trans-border gender relationships envisages more complex cultural and gender politics and accommodates the desires of borderland women who yearn for a quick step to a more modernized life.

In the last decade, with the expansion of a mobile population and intra-regional travel in Asia, there has been a great boom in Asian tourism. In 2004, Asia and the Pacific headed world tourism expansion with a growth rate of 28 per cent (WTO, 2005a), and it is estimated that China alone is going to produce 115 million outbound tourists by 2020 (quoted in Greenlees, 2005). As a new category of travellers in the global tourism space, the interactions between the Chinese tourists and the local people of the destinations add considerably to the complexity of the global
Table 10.1: Numbers of Chinese and Vietnamese Tourists in Lao Cai Province (1994–2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Vietnamese Tourists</th>
<th>Increase (%)</th>
<th>Chinese Tourists</th>
<th>Increase (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>6,400</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>9,700</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>9,300</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>16,800</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>15,700</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>33,700</td>
<td>100.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>26,300</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>63,200</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>41,800</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>98,400</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>69,300</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>163,712</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>91,200</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>112,700</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>176,316</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics from Lao Cai Commerce and Tourism Department and one of the state-owned tourist companies in Lao Cai, 2003.

human interactions and cultural transformations. The trans-border gender politics depicted here is one of the first attempts to illustrate such complexity.

Border Tourism in the New Political Economy of the Vietnam–China Borderlands

Border tourism is a special form of tourism arranged for the nationals of Vietnam and China for visiting each other's country. It is arranged with special types of border travel documents: no passports or visas are required. In the early years after the border reopening, many Chinese visitors came to Lao Cai town for a one-day visit. Since 1998, due to a relaxation of Vietnamese travel policies, Chinese tourists have been allowed to visit some interior cities in the north of Vietnam, including Hai Phong, Ha Long and Hanoi. In the past few years, Chinese tour groups visiting the south have also been increasing.

Since the advent of border tourism, the number of Chinese tourists going to Vietnam through the land border of Lao Cai has continued to rise. In 2002, the number reached 176,316 – over 40 times the number of Chinese tourists in 1995 (see Table 10.1). Chinese tourist groups are most abundant during the three Golden Holiday Weeks of China, i.e. the National Day holiday, Lunar New Year holiday, and the Labour Day holiday. In the week of National Day holiday in 2002, more than 10,000 Chinese tourists visited Vietnam through Lao Cai. Typical package tours provided by the travel agencies of Lao Cai include the following:
One-day tour in Lao Cai town
Two-day tour in Sa Pa town (a mountainous region of ethnic minorities in Lao Cai Province)
Five-day tour in the north of Vietnam (Lao Cai–Hanoi–Ha Long–Hai Phong)

According to the *Regulations on Tourism Management in Lao Cai Border Crossing Economic Zone* (PCLCP, 1999: 142–144), only travel companies with the international travel license issued by the General Department of Tourism of Vietnam are authorized to organize border travel programmes for Vietnamese and foreign tourists. All Chinese tourists who cross the Lao Cai international border have to travel in scheduled tours arranged by authorized tourist companies and should travel in groups of not less than five. Tour groups are also required to follow the instructions of Vietnamese tour guides, and are not supposed to travel without the arrangement of Vietnamese tourist agencies. Despite such written regulations, it is not uncommon to see individuals or a few business travellers who cross the border in small groups (less than five) and arrange their trips with local travel agencies with specific business purposes in mind.

In 2001, the number of travel companies in Lao Cai had expanded to over a dozen. Local people had great expectations about the development and expansion of the Chinese tourist market. However, due to a number of malpractices among some of the agencies (such as operating without formal registration and insurance), the number of registered travel companies decreased to seven after a crackdown campaign by the Lao Cai government. All the travel companies of Lao Cai had to operate in conjunction with the Hekou China International Travel Agency, which had split into seven off-shoot companies. Chinese tourists who registered with the Hekou travel agencies were packed into groups (large groups during the festive days can be as large as one to two hundred people), and handed over to the tourism companies in Lao Cai, which provided tour programmes and tour guides. Among the scheduled programmes, the one-day tour in Lao Cai and the five-day tour to the northern cities are the most popular. Although Sa Pa is an internationally well-known touristic destination, and is visited by quite a large number of Westerners every year, not many Chinese like to visit it. The Vietnamese tour operators explain that Chinese people have enough minorities to see in their own country and those in Vietnam do not differ much from those in China.

**Sexualizing the Border**

*Borderlands as Peripheral Sex ‘Playgrounds’*

Although Vietnamese travel agencies do not provide packaged sex tours, sex in the borderlands is readily available due to the presence of both Chinese and Vietnamese prostitutes in the border towns. Many tourists, both men and women, who go on a trip
to Vietnam have heard that prostitution is very common in Vietnam, and is especially cheap at the border areas. One young Chinese woman who came to Lao Cai with some friends for a half-day visit said, ‘Yes, it is common sense for us. Ask them (pointing at her male friends), all of them know about the prices. Before we cross the border, the tour guide in Hekou already talked about how cheap Vietnamese prostitutes are.’ A Chinese male tourist said, ‘There is a common saying in China: “Vietnam sacrifices one generation of young women for the well-being of the next three generations.”’

Chinese men who visit Vietnam generally hold expectations of some sort of sexual adventure. The tour guides of both of Hekou and Lao Cai will not fail to tell how Chinese male tourists are obsessed with zhao xiaojie (‘looking for misses’). ‘Among five Chinese tourist groups, four will ask us to bring them to find Vietnamese women’, Wei, a young Chinese tour guide in Hekou said to me. ‘I will say to them that I don’t know where to find Vietnamese prostitutes when I don’t want to help them. I will let the Vietnamese guide deal with them.’ A Vietnamese female tour guide said, ‘It is easy to make Chinese (male) tourists happy; they just need to eat well, sleep well, have fun and women.’ When she said this, there was a trace of contempt in her voice and on her face. A Vietnamese male tour guide said, ‘When they ask us to bring them to the red light zone (hongdengqu), we will tell them that it is not included in our scheduled programme. If they want to find women, they can go on their own, but we will not guarantee their safety.’ Despite the contempt in which some Vietnamese tour guides hold the zhao xiaojie culture of Chinese men, they will help their guests when they want to get better tips. There are also a number of tour guides as well as tour bus drivers who actually encourage the tourists to zhao xiaojie.

One of the very first experiences I had in Lao Cai was zhao xiaojie for a group of Chinese male tourists. They were part of a larger tour group which came to Vietnam to explore investment opportunities. They spent a night in Lao Cai in the hotel that was opened by an informant’s family. I was asked by the family to do some translation since the Chinese did not speak Vietnamese and the receptionists did not speak Chinese. That night, seven men from this group asked me if there were xiaojie around. A staff member of the hotel, also a close informant of mine, helped me bring the seven Chinese men to zhao xiaojie. Most of the men were enjoying some iced beer in the heat of that hot summer’s night by the roadside cafes while I and my informant went in and out of the hair and massage salons nearby. My informant asked the girls the prices of different types of sexual services. After being informed of the prices, some men in the group suggested going to a karaoke bar instead. My informant suspected that the prices might be too high for these men.

Indeed, zhao xiaojie has often been a hidden agenda of Chinese tour groups, especially of groups containing only males. Even within groups that include women, Chinese men often ask the tour guides to provide such a programme for them at night, leaving their female members at the hotel rooms to chat. One Chinese man said, ‘If
it were not for women, why did we come to Vietnam? What else is there to see here? Many Chinese tourist groups to Vietnam were arranged and financed by work units. Due to the cheap Vietnam tour costs, such tours are part of the welfare provision for workers as a form of yearly bonus. It is not unusual to see groups comprised solely of men. One such group that I observed was not interested at all in the travel programmes arranged by the travel agency. The few animated moments were the time when they flirted with some pretty restaurant waitresses. One night in Ha Long, a few members of the group asked the tour guide to bring them to zhao xiaojie.

The Vietnamese Sex Market
Although Chinese discourses have highly sexualized Vietnam and border tourism, the most openly run sex business in the borderlands is actually in Hekou, rather than in Lao Cai. It is situated in a three-storey building compound commonly known as the ‘Vietnamese market’ (cho Viet Nam in Vietnamese; Yuenan jie in Mandarin). The ground floor is lined with shops and stalls selling Vietnamese goods, while the second and third floors are full of small rooms owned by or rented to the bosses of Vietnamese prostitutes. There are usually two to three prostitutes in each of these rooms; some lying casually on the sofas, while others sit in front of the mirror painting their faces with make-up. Along the staircases leading to the upper floors of this building, one can see young Vietnamese women with heavy make-up and sexy outfits grabbing the arms of men passing by or hugging their one-night ‘hones’ in their arms.

Both Vietnamese and Chinese men come here for sex, but the majority are Chinese. I came to this market of brothels to meet Thu, a friend of an informant. Thu was a twenty-one-21-year-old woman and a newcomer. She told me that she planned to work here for a period of time until she had saved enough money to return to her village in northern Vietnam to start a small business. As a newcomer, Thu looked quite different from the other women. She did not wear heavy make-up and dressed very ordinarily. I was told that many young Vietnamese women who came to work in the market had purposes similar to those of Thu. These women were from poor Vietnamese villages and believed that working as a prostitute would be a quicker way to improve their economic status and the livelihood of their families. I also met Nga and Hien who were working as hair-washing women. Nga said that the salon was opened by her aunt and she came to help her just for the summer. Nga and Hien were both in their early twenties and they said that they were not doing any sex services. But if they did meet some Chinese men who really loved them, they would not mind marrying them even if they were a bit old, like forty. They said that in Vietnam men beat their wives quite often and that Chinese men were better than Vietnamese men in this regard.

Many of the brothels in the market were run by Vietnamese women who themselves had been prostitutes. They had become the bosses of the brothels usually after getting
a Chinese husband or a stable lover. They ran the business by hiring other Vietnamese women to work for them. Some brothels were run by Chinese men who rented rooms to Vietnamese prostitutes. There were two ways for the prostitutes to work for these bosses. New girls usually took monthly salaries (around one million VND) from the bosses, regardless of how many guests they served. They did not need to pay for rent or for meals. Those who were more experienced and had their own connections with the guests did not take salaries, but shared the money they made with their bosses.

The prices for quick sexual services varied from 30,000 to 80,000 VND (around US$2 to US$5.5). Some Vietnamese women who served their guests for the whole night might charge 200,000 to 300,000 VND. In Hekou, apart from Vietnamese prostitutes, there were also Chinese prostitutes who usually charged higher prices than their Vietnamese counterparts, from 200 to 300 RMB. They did not work in the market but at hotels and their own places. One male boss of a brothel told me that Chinese men tended to think that Chinese prostitutes were cleaner, and did not have AIDS. ‘They’re stupid to believe this’, he said. One Vietnamese informant said that Vietnamese prostitutes in Hekou knew very little about AIDS. ‘They just pray for luck since customers don’t like to use condoms.’

In both Lao Cai and Hekou, propaganda billboards on AIDS alert were displayed on the streets close to the border crossing. In the Vietnamese market in Hekou, condoms were distributed by the local health department, but not all who worked in the market were eager to get them. One brothel boss said, ‘Yes, they have free condoms for us, but we never go and get them. We don’t need them. I have a special herbal formula. It can cure any sexual disease. Only drink one packet, you can get well right away. I sell it for fifty yuan to friends. For people I don’t know, I sell it at seventy yuan.’

In one brothel room, I talked to a Chinese man from Hunan. He was sprawling on the sofa and was obviously drugged and talked in a hazy mood. There was a newly hired young Vietnamese woman in the room who was obviously in a bad mood during my visit. The Chinese man complained that the young prostitute was too stupid and did not speak any Chinese. The Hunan man said, ‘Here, everything is freer, in the interior of China, going to the prostitutes is not as free as this. Here we are free. We spend money in ways we want.’

**Discursive Estrangement of the Ideal Vietnamese Woman**

The traditional images of Vietnamese women have been embedded in emotional words such as phai chiu (have to bear it), an kho (eat bitterness), chiu kho (bear bitterness), kho qua (very bitter), qua kho (really bitter). Very often when I heard these words said by a Vietnamese woman, they were charged with intense feelings and immediate sympathy was expected. The images of Vietnamese women being faithful wives, dutiful
daughters and devoted mothers in a male-dominated society have been consistently recorded by scholars (Barry, 1996; Gammeltoft, 2001; Pettus, 2003; Luong, 2003b). The themes of self-sacrifice, industriousness, physical and mental endurance dominate the everyday discourse of Vietnamese women; they are said to be particularly apt at adapting to harsh environments and will sacrifice their happiness for the well-being of the family. Historical heroine figures, such as the Trung sisters who resisted the Chinese invaders, have often been glorified for their courageous and selfless patriotism. During the socialist period in the 1960s and 1970s, state promotion of the ideal of femininity extended women’s responsibility from the sphere of the family to the wider context of national production and defence (Gammeltoft, 2001: 272). Not only were women obliged to follow the traditional Confucian moral model, they were also supposed to take up the ‘all-capable, all-responsible’ role under the socialist teaching of ‘Five Goods’ and ‘Three Great Responsibilities’ (Pettus, 2003: 37–50). Such a woman, the ideal Vietnamese woman, is destined not to live for herself, but to display a heroic femininity under the shadow of the father, the husband, the son, as well as the Nation.

Like China, Vietnam for centuries has absorbed Confucian values, thus, in theory, the submissiveness and subordination of Vietnamese women should be as institutionalized as those of Chinese women within the Confucian gender ideology. Some Vietnamese women have even taken it for granted that they have become the sole upholders of Confucian values. A twenty-one-year-old female university student said to me, ‘Do you know we Vietnamese women have the principles called tam tong tu duc (three submissions and four morals)? We are not free to do what we like.’ In this young woman’s mind, Hong Kong Chinese women like me or Chinese women in mainland China are not as engaged in keeping traditional values as the Vietnamese.

Because of the intense physical and emotional burden that Vietnamese women have to bear, physical weakness and pains (like headaches, stomach aches, and dizziness) are common health problems among them (Gammeltoft, 2001). Besides physical pains, they also suffer from a psychological inadequacy that has to be addressed through alternative channels. Although the life goal of many Vietnamese women is to have a caring husband and happy family, the reality does not always allow such a dream to come true. Vietnamese women are often put in the predicament of living in an unfulfilling reality. As O’Harrow (1995: 170–174) has explained this oppression has made them seek private space where they secretly yearn for a dream lover. However, there is a persistent gap between the ideal lover and the real husband. For married women, such a dream and gap have occasionally been connected with their taking lovers. And since their society operates more on shame than on guilt, extra-marital affairs will be accepted as long as they are kept secret.

Social and economic changes often bring changes to women’s traditional roles and they impact on gender relationships. In an age of globalization and an open economy,
Tourism in Southeast Asia

Vietnam has found itself engaged in rapid socio-cultural and gender transformations. Urban Vietnamese women, especially those working in the commercial sector, are pioneers in bringing changes to the society and family since the market in the age of globalization has been lifting women from their traditional roles and morals (Pettus, 2003: 175–205). Thriving trade and commerce in the Vietnam–China borderlands have also freed many women from domestic constraints and made them more independent and self-reliant (Xie, 2000: 326). Urban women are said to be particularly troubled with the existential struggle between self and family, and husband and lover. Yearnings for true love and demands for sex no longer flow silently within a woman’s mind, but are discussed more openly among women and in publications (Phan and Pham, 2003). More women are now trapped between ‘traditional concepts of love and marriage and modern standards of sexual behaviour’ (Phan and Pham, 2003: 216).

Gender relationships and women’s social and cultural roles are products of socio-economic relations. In the border town of Lao Cai, the traditional image of Vietnamese women keeping to the principles of self-sacrifice and submissiveness can no longer be directly applied to many young women who take the border as a new space for extending personal space and power. The growing economy has led many to believe that chances for obtaining riches and modern life are freely available at the borderlands. One young woman who came from the village of Nam Dinh to work in a commerce and tourism company opened by a relative said, ‘I have never seen so much money in my life. There are a lot of people, a lot of money and chances.’ In the post-reform era, while Vietnamese social and government sectors have been looking to China for technology, capital and knowledge, women in the borderlands also look to China for lovers and husbands, as they believe that China has a bigger pool of richer men. Border tourism brings in Chinese men, more importantly rich businessmen, and sustains some women’s fantasies for the improvement of their economic life.

Sensualizing the Border

Pretty Women’s Strategies in the Borderlands

Being young and pretty are personal assets in the borderland tourism industry. It is also believed that female tour guides with pretty faces and lovely voices can get good tips from the tourists. In Lao Cai, the state-owned travel agencies do not allow female tour guides to go on long trips. Long tours to Hanoi and Ha Long are deemed to be too hard and dangerous for young women. However, for private companies, pretty young women on the contrary are seen as a company asset, and are assigned to work on long tours. It is believed that Chinese men like to have the company of young female tour guides.

During the long bus trips (around ten hours) from Lao Cai to Hanoi, tour guides entertain the tourists with singing and joke-telling, including telling sexual jokes.
One of those I heard went like this: A young girl was advised by her mother to take care of herself. When a man wanted to touch her breast, she had to say aloud ‘Don’t’. When a man touched her bottom, she should cry out loud ‘Stop’. The problem was that the mother had not told the girl what to say when she was touched in both places, so she kept on crying out ‘Don’t stop’. Sex jokes like this were repeatedly used to entertain guests on the long and tiring bus trips, irrespective of whether there were only men on the journeys or men in the company of female tourists. I never heard people complaining about these jokes. Some very young female guides who were too shy to tell sex jokes would just keep singing to entertain their guests. There were also tour guides who did not seem to be enthusiastic to please their guests.

Some female tour guides used flirting games to elicit bigger tips from the men. These included certain levels of physical intimacy, like playful hugs and touches. A gentle voice and sweet smiles would also be used to impress targeted men on the trips. Innocence, gentleness and subservient attitudes would be strategically displayed in order to arouse the sympathy of the guests, and to fulfil the stereotyped images of Vietnamese females constructed by travel brochures and agencies. Some male Chinese tourists were particularly excited to talk to Vietnamese women who had soft voices and who spoke not particularly fluent Mandarin. Mispronounced words and wrongly placed accents were often sources of fun and jokes, and the Chinese men enjoyed them.

Some female tourist guides enjoyed the opportunities provided to them by their job to make acquaintances with relatively rich Chinese men. Linh, a beautiful twenty-one-year-old tour guide, had been working as a guide since she was eighteen. With three years of experience, she had already been considered as a senior tour guide in the locality. Linh’s work provided her with many opportunities to get to know Chinese men from different provinces of China and of different backgrounds. Linh was skilful at making a good impression on her male guests. She had a good sense of humour and many Chinese men liked her since she could express herself humbly and often in a soft voice in the presence of the Chinese men. She would keep contact with some of her male guests for a while to see how the relationships could be developed. She called these Chinese men ‘big brothers’ (dage in Mandarin; anh in Vietnamese), who would sometimes send her gifts. With good tips and commissions from a trip, Linh bought herself new bags, shoes and hats from Hanoi, and adorned herself with fashionable earrings and necklaces.

Besides large tour groups, there are also small groups of business travellers or individual businessmen who go to Vietnam to explore investment and trade opportunities. These are called business tourists, who need special arrangements with the tour company for securing experienced tour guides. Sometimes female tour guides accompany such individual tourists, or small groups. Ha was a twenty-six-year-old female staff member of a travel and trading company. She often accompanied individual or a few business travellers to Hanoi and other parts of Vietnam. Being
able to speak different Chinese dialects and always dressing up in a sexy fashion, she insinuated herself into many a Chinese man's favour. One man said to me that he liked Ha because, like him, she could speak a little bit of Cantonese. Ha was particularly good at playing flirting games with the Chinese men and she enjoyed keeping a handful of Chinese boyfriends in different cities and towns in China. One of her favourite pastimes was writing love letters to these lovers, who would in turn call her up once in a while. She asked me a few times to write love letters for her since her Chinese was not good enough to express her feelings. These letters were often filled with kitsch expressions of love, exaggeration and lies.

Ha and her colleagues also enjoyed sending and receiving flirting messages through their mobile phones. In Lao Cai, Chinese mobile phone numbers could still work in places near the border-crossing. Many Vietnamese tourism workers and traders possess Vietnamese as well as Chinese mobile phone numbers. The use of mobile phones has provided much convenience for trans-border business and trade, and has also promoted trans-border sensual exchanges. Short messages sent by Ha and her colleagues to men in China often included addresses like 'Do you miss me', 'Do you love me', 'I miss you', 'I really want to see you'. To Ha, Chinese lovers and wooers were personal assets. She received gifts and money from them. Among her lovers, one paid for her mobile phone bills, another bought her clothes and cosmetics. She believed that these two men really cared for her; otherwise they would not pay for her.

Sending and receiving short mobile phone messages across the border have become popular pastimes of local young people in the borderlands and are part of the courtship rituals played out between Chinese men and Vietnamese women. Translating love messages from Chinese to Vietnamese for my Vietnamese female informants was part of my leisure activities in the field. The convenience provided by mobile phones and the increased accessibility of trans-border contacts through phone messages have in fact facilitated more frequent communication between the people of the two sides. It is something that both the Chinese and the Vietnamese have never enjoyed before. Apart from enhancing business contacts, the new technology has also promoted cross-border contacts between men and women who are willing to be involved in the newly created trans-border romance and sensual lies.

Power and Sex within the Tourism Business

Although there were seven different travel agencies in Hekou in 2003, all of them were under the influence of a small number of key figures in the Hekou international travel agencies and tourism officialdom. In order to ensure good business, all Lao Cai travel companies were obliged to maintain close and co-operative relations with these powerful Chinese men. Within the Lao Cai tourism community, there was
speculation about some travel agencies using the sexuality of young female staff to obtain and maintain such good relations. Rumours also ran that the female managers of two travel companies in Lao Cai were in fact ban gai (girlfriends) of these Chinese tourism bosses. The term ban gai in Vietnamese conveys rather vague meanings. It means a wide range of relationships, from female close friends to lovers, and it may or may not imply a sexual relationship. Although the term implies some kind of intimacy, such intimacy does not necessarily lead to serious relationships as the term nguoi yeu (lover) does. Nguoi yeu implies more stable and committed relationships. Whether being nguoi yeu or ban gai of the Chinese tourism bosses (most of them are already married), such relationships are seen as pragmatic and economically oriented.

The two young female managers mentioned above were considered the most successful tourism managers during my field research in 2003. They received most tour groups every month. During the Chinese New Year in 2003, they received as many as 800 tourists in a day. On the surface, their success was due to the low prices they offered. But within local tourism circles, most workers believed that they had kept ‘special’ relationships with the ‘big guys’ of the Hekou tourism companies. One middle-aged female travel agency manager commented, ‘I am different from those young women. They worked for me before and learned how to run a tourism business from me. I am old already. They are still young. They know how to keep good relations with those Chinese men. All Chinese men are promiscuous. They like to travel on to women’s bodies!’

Because of their special power and positions in the borderland tourism business, it was obvious that these Chinese tourism bosses were in dominant position with regards to the control of both the tourism business and trans-border sex games. It is not hard for them to get a handful of ban gai and nguoi yeu across the border. A number of Vietnamese women, on the other hand, were willing to play a part in such games in order to have access to the resources (business and power) offered by such intimate relationships.

Indeed, it was not only Vietnamese female tourism workers who had to take a subordinate position to these Chinese men, but all travel agencies in Lao Cai had to please them from time to time with gifts and bribes. Popular gifts included mobile phones, alcohol, cigarettes, dried meat, dogmeat, seafood, and envelopes of money. Every time these men crossed the border to visit Lao Cai’s tourism agencies, it was understood that a free lunch and free drinks should be offered to them, and bags of gifts would be presented after lunch. One informant said to me that he hated entertaining these big guys. Because of their greediness, the profits of his company were gradually being eaten away. ‘Out of one million [VND] we make, 500,000 will be used for buying gifts for them!’ One tourist guide grumbled that he was often ordered by the manager to take these Chinese men for drinks. One strategy to avoid them was to ‘disappear’ before they reached the office.
Confronting the Gender Space in the Borderlands

Dominance and Submissiveness

Despite the higher economic status of Chinese men, the encounters of men and women in trans-border love and sex games and the cultural politics displayed in such interaction cannot be sufficiently explained by rigidly applying the concepts of male dominance and female submissiveness. To do this risks losing sight of the more diverse social dynamics of gender relationships in the borderlands. Both the Chinese men and the Vietnamese women have taken the initiative to venture into the trans-border sex and love adventures, and have made use of their different capitals to play such games (Bourdieu, 1977). While Chinese men make use of their economic power (to buy gifts and pay for the women), Vietnamese women make use of their physical and sexual appeal. The big guys of the Hekou tourism industry might have been commanding a more dominant position over the Vietnamese tourism workers. The Chinese men who engaged in flirting and sexual games with Vietnamese women were, however, not always playing the dominant role. On the contrary, some of them were being ordered around by their Vietnamese lovers, and made to spend for them.

Some of these Vietnamese sweet-hearts were skilful in utilizing their physical capital, and were good at manipulating their relationships with Chinese lovers for personal gain. They knew well that a good-looking face and a good body were their primary capital. Sweet smiles and a gentle voice always helped in seducing men. Feminine subservient attitudes and innocence, rather than being the essence of the virtues of Vietnamese women, were used for strategic display to solicit the favours of Chinese men. Impetuous SMS love messages and love letters with different narrative styles and choices of words also helped keep a variety of trans-border lovers and potential lovers.

The many flirting games that occur between Chinese men and Vietnamese women at the borderlands have indeed become a source of fun for both men and women. I argue that the trans-border gender relationship examined here, instead of fitting into a dogmatic model of male dominance and female subordination, is actually a transnational geo-cultural locus addressing and accommodating the desires, whether sexual or economic, of both Vietnamese women and Chinese men. Such a site of desires is created within the new trans-border political economy of the reopened border. It has bred particular courtship and flirting rituals: making new acquaintances, obtaining contact numbers, sending short SMS messages on the phone and writing love letters, and has opened new niches for women to extend their personal spaces. Without such cross-border connections, life might have been open to fewer choices, particularly for the Vietnamese women who were eager to find quick ways to enhance their economic status.

To these young women, the traditional feminine images of self-sacrifice and submissiveness, and the ‘bitter’ discourses that dominate Vietnamese women’s daily experiences no longer make sense to them. They have been taking initiatives in extending personal space and linkages across the border. While transgressing the
Vietnamese–Chinese borderline to connect to and access Chinese riches, these women are at the same time transgressing the old tales of the tragic Vietnamese heroine and the ‘bitter’ discourses that overshadow Vietnamese women’s wretched fate.

**The Dialectics of Sex Gossip**

Vietnamese social morality generally disapproves of the promiscuous behaviour of women. In fact, the deeds of the women who solicit material benefits through their intimacy with tourists and men across the border have created gossip and rumours within tourism social circles. The idle talk in these social circles was filled with gossip-sharing and stories about the ‘misdeeds’ of others, especially women. Common topics included identifying women who had promiscuous relationships with Chinese men; estimating how much these women earned from their sexual transactions; commenting on the new necklaces or handbags of these women. One female tour guide said, ‘Look at that woman, her purse is always full of millions of VND. She likes to show off. I hate looking at her face.’ Having said that, this tour guide assured me that she would not show her disaffection directly to the woman. ‘When we meet each other, we still say hello to each other. We never go out together, but there is no conflict on the surface.’

Since no one was going to prove all the gossip and rumours, they remained in the social space of idle talk, providing juicy and imaginative details of the lives of others. On the one hand, it was an autonomous space for people to channel discontent against the disruption of social morals. On the other hand, it allowed much free space for people to work on the stories over time. In some cases, creative versions and sympathetic views were produced. In a later period of my field research, I began to hear some of these. One of them was like this. She [the female manager of a travel agency] was a beautiful woman and had married a young local official. She had been a good wife and a role model for other young women, until her husband became more and more violent and often beat her up when he was drunk. The woman finally divorced the man and her character had since changed. She was good-looking, so many Chinese men liked her.

A number of anthropologists have analyzed the social roles and functions of gossip. Gluckman (1963) sees in gossip a mode of integrating social groups by suppressing conflicts, asserting social values and creating bonds and boundaries. Firth (1967: 142) stresses that gossip and rumour have not just negative social functions, but serve ‘as a social instrument, helping groups or individuals to gain their ends’. Handelman (1973) sees gossip as information management, and Campbell (1964) asserts that it contains social realities and helps people to form particular worldviews. Both Merry (1984: 295) and Bergmann (1993) argue that gossip is a form of social control; Bergmann specifically highlights the paradoxical structure of gossip as a social form of ‘discreet indiscretion’. Turner’s (1993) study of urban rumour finds that it can be a form of political resistance used by weaker groups. White (2000) distinguishes
historical memory from gossip. Farrer (2002) analyzes the functions of idle talk in a Shanghai old neighborhood and finds that gossip contains information of different sorts as well as the standards and the expectations of sexual morality, particularly those of young women. In a recent article, Amster analyzes the relationship between gossip and social interaction among the Kelabit of Sarawak, and finds that gossip and discourses about gossip are critical factors in understanding ‘Kelabit experiences of sociocultural change and engagements with modernity’ (2004: 98). Stewart and Strathern (2004: 29; 203) treat gossip and rumour as a kind of witchcraft causing people harm. Although gossip and rumours operate outside the formal mechanisms of social control, they are significant elements of social processes and their source of power lies in the network of informal communication that runs parallel to formal social structures; and thus should be a focus of social and political analysis.

In the borderlands of Vietnam, gossip acts as a social thermometer to judge misdeeds and sieve discontent at improper behaviour. However, gossip and rumour are not static. Through time they undergo metamorphosis and different gossip versions can be generated. The social space of gossip is indeed an elastic space containing the impacts of corrupt behaviour within processes of accelerating economic aspiration and social change. As the re-opened border has raised people's expectations for economic betterment, both men and women alike take this space as a channel for promoting their economic status. The sexual strategies used by some women in attaining such goals, though they play havoc with Vietnamese feminine morality and gender ideologies, are not hard to understand. The clash between moral expectations and economic pragmatism is further down-played within the elastic space of idle talk with creative versions of rumour and sympathetic views. In other words, the dialectical space of gossip helps bridge the social and moral dilemmas caused by current cross-border gender encounters.

**Conclusion: Accessible Modernity and Distanced Dreams**

One evening, I was with Linh in Hekou, waiting to meet other friends in the town for a night drink. Linh told me that she and her colleagues once in a while talked about the possibility of marrying Chinese men. To them, China represents a brighter and richer future. While strolling aimlessly with me on the well-lit road along the bank of the border river, Linh said, ‘Chinese women are more confident and happier than Vietnamese women. They do not work as much as women in Vietnam. Many of them just play mahjong all day long, their husbands cook for them. In China [she means Hekou], lights are brighter, streets are wider, people seem happier.’ Hekou was the only place in China that Linh had been to; her experiences in Hekou fed and summarized her images of China as well as modernity. Like Linh, Phuong and Ha were also among those who saw China and Chinese men as channels to link them to a more modern life. Ha once said, ‘Although I love my country, China is a better place to live. China is more developed than Vietnam and has a higher and better social culture. Vietnamese men are not good. They like to drink alcohol and beat their
wives. Chinese men are gentler, but they like to have a few wives. Chinese women are rude and talk loudly . . . but they are happier than Vietnamese women.'

Modernity is not a static concept, nor can it be represented by the experiences of modernized and developed countries, especially those of the West. While different Asian places are now carrying out their modernization trajectories, the notions of modernity are often subject to an on-going negotiation of the local people within their globalizing social contexts, and to myriad experiences and discourses, including gender discourses, locally articulated. A number of theorists have argued for the study of alternative forms of and the diversity of modernity (Kahn, 2001; Appadurai, 1996; Breckenridge, 1994; Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995; Miller, 1995; Parameshwar-Gaonkar, 1999). Rather than opting for universal principles and notions of modernity, these scholars stress the particularity of modern experiences. As Kahn argues, the modernity of a place is inevitably ‘contaminated’ by its cultural and historical conditions, and the meanings of the modern are particularistic (2001: 658).

The aspirations for modernity and a better material life which have emerged among young women in the borderlands and the changing trans-border gender relationships mentioned above are the result of a ten-year development process since the revival of trans-border contacts and in the context of economic differences between post-reform China and Vietnam. While trans-border marriage and romantic affairs are not new to the residents of the border regions, the present trans-border love- and sex-games have been particularly invested with local people’s desire for economic gain and their imagination of development and a modern life, as some Vietnamese women see Chinese men as a channel to cross over the borders of poverty into an imagined land of prosperity. These games also involve more long-distance communication through mobile phone technology. For these women, China is just across the border river, accessible in a couple of minutes, but the traditional model of the ideal woman has become a distanced dream. Not only is it hardly achievable, it is also against the will and life choices of many young urban women who find the ‘bitter’ life of a submissive woman highly undesirable.

I have characterized the revival of contacts and interaction in the Vietnamese-Chinese borderlands in terms of the sexualization and sensualization of the border. Due to the economic differences between Chinese men and Vietnamese women, not only are there a number of Vietnamese women working as prostitutes catering to Chinese men, but the re-opened border has also created a new niche for these men and women to engage voluntarily in cross-border love and sex games. Border tourism and trans-border connections have therefore enshrined different sites and provided a means for the realization of the desires of both Chinese men and Vietnamese women.

Notes

1 The theme of domestic violence is commonplace in Vietnam (see Le, 1996; Johnson, 1996).

2 One US dollar is roughly equivalent to fifteen thousand Vietnamese dong (VND).