

Representations and Regulations of Marriage Migration from Russia and Vietnam in the People's Republic of China

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Marriage migration has developed as a discursive field and a new direction of governing practices in the relations of post-Mao China with Russia and Vietnam. This article examines China's developing governing regime for international marriages from the perspective of its sovereign concerns related to border stability, population management, and national security. These concerns are considered through the analysis of material and affective processes informing and shaping the regulations and representations of marriage migration to China. This discussion not only shows how the Chinese state revises its administrative and legal terms of international marriage, but also highlights the historical, racialized, and gendered forces that shape the process. The regulatory framework of marriage migration is informed by the shifting structures of feeling shaping the contours of belonging in Chinese society. These intersecting spheres of state affective and regulatory practices signal new relations of power and inequality coalescing in China's relations with its neighbors.

Keywords: China, marriage, migration, regulations, representations, Russia, structures of feeling, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST century, the People's Republic of China (hereafter, China or PRC) became an attractive destination for foreigners in pursuit of economic interests, personal development, and wealth. The prospects and possibilities for mobility and settlement in China were set in train by the developments of the early 1990s, when military conflicts and border standoffs with neighbors gave way to greater economic openness and improved bilateral relations. Amid accelerating migration processes, China's position on marriage migration, a phenomenon that has become the most popular form of migration in East Asia, has also been changing. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, emigration of Chinese women to the West and richer East Asian countries was the dominant dynamic of marriage migration across China's borders. However, by the mid-2000s cross-border marriages to China were on the rise, becoming a common development that gradually spread into central regions and involved a greater range of countries of origin and different forms and routes of migration. More state activity in the legislative,

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administrative, and regulative areas of immigration and marriage accompanied these processes, while media and public interest in cross-border romance flourished.

In this article, we explore how marriage migration has developed as a discursive field and a new direction of governing practices in the relations of post-Mao China with Russia and Vietnam. Our concern is not purely empirical, theoretical, or comparative. Rather, our aim is to tease out how governing concerns related to China's population, border stability, and relations with neighbors, as well as the emergence of its migration regime, mutually inform each other. Our focus on marriage migration from Vietnam and Russia aims to highlight the role of historical, racial, and gendered factors in China's population governance, migration regime, and national security.

We propose an understanding of the emerging regulatory and documentary regime of managing international marriages alongside cultural tropes circulating within Chinese society and informing popular discourses and attitudes, or what we, after Raymond Williams (1978), call the structures of feeling. We treat the regulatory regime of marriage migration and collective feelings informing the governance of marriage migration as inseparable, mutually constitutive, and dynamic processes. Our focus on the Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Russian border contexts takes into account local peculiarities and specific governing practices. We set the changing positions of Chinese-Vietnamese and Chinese-Russian marriages against the background of evolving geopolitical and demographic changes, reinvented historical legacies, and collective feelings widely expressed and shared in mediatized Chinese public spheres.

By juxtaposing migration from two contrasting geopolitical neighbors, our analysis shows how China's shifting position in the global migration regime is changing in several significant ways. Firstly, mainland China has been predominately perceived and studied as a source of female marriage migration, and is subject to exclusionary and exceptional policies, particularly across the strait in Taiwan (Chao 2008; Friedman 2015a, 2015b). Our focus highlights how China has repositioned itself as an immigration-receiving society against the background of mounting concern over the skewed gender make-up of its population. Secondly, our focus on Vietnamese and Russian marriage migrants highlights how the emerging gendered immigration regime works differently across historical, racial, and socioeconomic markers. This differs from the existing scholarship on marriage migration in the region that looks at the intersection of patriarchal citizenships, nationalist ideologies, and social and reproductive rights of foreign spouses (Jones and Shen 2008; Toyota 2008; Turner 2008; Yang and Lu 2010); governmental practices of deterritorialized kinship policies in the name of national identity and unity (Freeman 2011; Friedman 2015a); globalized forms of commodification of intimate relations (Constable 2005, 2009; H-Z Wang and Chang 2002; L. Williams 2010); and the constructions of migrant (il)legalities and gendered experiences of border crossing (Friedman 2015a; Yeoh and Chee 2015; Zhang, Lu, and Yeoh 2015).

The growing literature on Chinese-foreign marriages and intimate relations has been examining these processes from the point of view of Chinese society's changing traditions, values, and norms of family lives and marriage (Jackson, Ho, and Na 2013; Jeffreys and Wang 2013; Jones 2012; Nehring and Wang 2016). The role of historical and geopolitical factors has not been closely considered. Yet, the institution of marriage speaks directly to the themes of national borders, the present and future reproduction of the nation, population governance, citizenship, and world order (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Jolly and

Ram 2001; Peterson 2017). The geopolitical undercurrents inform marriage migration's representations and regulations at the state level, while the governing practices of marriage and immigration are related to how the borders of national community and belonging are regulated and policed. By showing how marriage immigration relates structurally to citizenship and immigration laws and affectively to national discourses and particular historical reinventions, we point to how the two processes signal China's changing relations with its neighbors and its national image of itself.

Methodologically, the analysis in this article relies on the authors' ethnographic research spanning the period from 2014 to 2016 in the case of Russian-Chinese marriages and a decade-long investigation (2006–16) on the Chinese-Vietnamese border. We draw on research materials that include interviews with wives and husbands of dozens of mixed couples in both rural and urban settings, and several stays in borderlands. The analysis is also informed by a critical review of laws, administrative regulations, popular discourses, cultural representations, and historical narratives pertaining to marriage migration from Vietnam and Russia. We opt to exclude detailed ethnographic descriptions already presented in our other publications (Barabantseva and Grillot 2018; Grillot 2015, 2016a) in order to push the analysis beyond case-to-case stories from the field. Our objective is to attempt an understanding of how “collective meanings and values that are actively lived and felt” (R. Williams 1978, 132) interplay with formal laws and procedures regulating participation and citizenship in contemporary Chinese society, as well as how historical, racialized, and gendered factors feature in the mutually constitutive marriage and immigration governing regime. Our analysis is motivated by field observations of the shifts across several spheres of social-cultural-legal conditions in China and is intended as a hypothesis that, as Williams (133) posits, needs continued analytical return to available evidence.

In the first section, we set the scene for our analysis by delving into the recent Chinese official and public discourses around marriage migration as a national security matter. We situate our research focus in the scholarly debates on the infrastructure of migration and “structures of feeling,” and develop these concepts by considering the role of historical-geopolitical factors that shape them. In section two, we explore the emerging infrastructural design of marriage migration across three spheres of China's legislative activity and state policies that connect immigration, population management, and marriage to the realm of national security. In section three, we focus on changing narratives and representational tropes of Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Russian marriages since 1991 and how diverse border histories, migration trajectories, and forms of marriage across the two borders are reenacted in the dominant discourses. In the last section, we discuss selective reenactments of histories of marriage migrations to China and their contemporary entanglements with gendered and racialized norms. We argue that with immigration and marriage having become intersecting spheres of state, active cultural, historical narrative, legislative, and regulatory practices signal changing relations of power and inequality in China's national politics of belonging and in its relations with Russia and Vietnam.

MARRYING FOREIGNERS, NATIONAL SECURITY, AND STRUCTURES OF FEELING

In 2016, the topic of marriages with foreigners captured the attention of the Chinese public and media on at least two occasions. On June 8, 2016, the *East Asia*

Tribune, an allegedly Singapore-based online English news site specializing in independent journalism and reportage published a news item announcing that the Supreme People's Court of China passed legislation banning Chinese women from marrying non-Chinese men from the beginning of 2018 while not extending this ruling to Chinese men (*East Asia Tribune* 2016). Quoting one of the legislators, the site claimed that the law was passed in the name of “social harmony” to prevent the possibility of rapes by frustrated Chinese bachelors. In the following days, the news item was dismissed as a hoax by other news sites. Yet, it is important to consider the context in which the apparent news was framed, narrated, and spread, as well as reflect on the responses it generated, which indicate broader “actively lived and felt” sentiments in Chinese society (Gordon 2008, 198). When the news started circulating through WeChat,¹ consumers uninformed as to its legitimacy enthusiastically commented on the alleged court proposal, some supporting and some dismissing it. When an eminent professor from one of the top Chinese universities shared the news item with one of us, he was hesitant about its veracity but conceded nevertheless that “anything was possible in the current political climate.”² The *East Asia Tribune* article included two quotes from the representatives of a successful matchmaking business for brides from Vietnam in Fujian who worried about more competition as a result of the ban, and a representative from an English teachers firm who worried that they would lose teachers. The news item touched on the widely shared public concerns about the shortage of women of marital age and the dubious intentions of the Western English-language teachers often discussed in the Chinese media. Furthermore, considered in relation to another unbelievable but true public campaign, the hypothetical ban on interracial marriages for Chinese women could not feel any more real.

On April 15, 2016, a “Dangerous Love” (*weixian de aiqing*) campaign appeared in the residential areas of inner Beijing to commemorate the inaugural National Security Education Day on April 14 (Associated Press 2016; *China Law Translate* 2016). The poster campaign warned of the perils of a romantic relationship between Western male English teachers and Chinese girls. The visual story relates how a Western spy in the disguise of a language teacher uses a female civil servant to get access to undisclosed materials, landing the couple a term in prison. Foreign teachers of English became the target of the campaign due to the widespread perception that many male Western teachers of English in China end up marrying Chinese women, the very subject of the Singaporean hoax news. The Chinese public, accustomed to the ubiquity of state propaganda campaigns, barely noticed the “real” poster campaign, of which the public security authorities conceived and in which considerable resources had been invested (Tatlow 2016). The hoax news generated hundreds of responses within hours of being published, with many comments supporting the illusory (but in the eyes of many commentators “necessary”) ruling of the court.

These two events highlight the spectrum of collective feeling occurring along the national discourses on marriage migration to and from China when it comes to intimacy with Westerners and the feared effects of the skewed gender balance. In the age of hyperreality, where a clear distinction between fake and true news, fiction

¹WeChat, a social network and smartphone application, is one of the current main sources of information and communication for Chinese citizens.

²Fieldnotes, Nanjing, June 14, 2016.

and nonfiction, is blurred, both cultural products appealed to common sentiments while leaving space for the readers' imagination, desires, and fears to conjure a picture of the marriage migration phenomenon. The public anxiety over the "lack" of marriageable Chinese women following the decades-long family planning policy; the persistence of traditional values privileging the status of son in the family; the emigration of Chinese women for marriage to the West, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; and the "loss" of women to professional careers manifested in the public concern over "leftover women" are the other side of how marriages with foreigners are framed.³ The nature and content of these state propaganda and popular discourses show that the topic of intimate relations and marriage with foreigners is key to popular and state national security concerns about population and social stability. It is therefore important to pay attention to the changing structures of feeling in a slippery space of hyperreality where the distinction between reality and fiction is repeatedly obliterated in the interests of national security.

Recent theoretical analyses of migration emphasize the material qualities of the processes that shape the migratory journey, from regulatory and institutional frameworks to human relations. Migration in these accounts is understood from the point of view of multidimensional infrastructural design, where institutions, policies, laws, and people shape migratory trajectories (Simone 2004; Xiang and Lindquist 2014).⁴ We maintain that historical-geopolitical continuities and changes, and collective values and perceptions, should be considered alongside the analysis of interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that enable and condition mobility. Our focus on marriage migration necessitates a close look at particular historical junctures when geopolitical and socioeconomic changes enable and condition life choices. Yet, most of the recent analyses of the infrastructure of migration focus on the materiality of migratory processes and their decidedly contemporary manifestations.

The evolution of binational borders is a key infrastructural factor, and the specificities of the historical, cultural, and political contexts of the Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Russian borders have produced diverse forms of mobility and border exchanges.⁵

³The Japanese cosmetic company SK-II's advertisement that aired on Chinese media in April 2016 reignited public debates around "leftover women" in China. The documentary-style advertisement can be found online (see SK-II 2016); on the public responses generated by the ad, see *CCTV.com* (2016) and H. Chen (2016).

⁴According to Xiang and Lindquist (2014, 124), migration infrastructure relates to "the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility"; that includes five dimensions: "the commercial (recruitment intermediaries), the regulatory (state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licensing, training and other purposes), the technological (communication and transport), the humanitarian (NGOs and international), [and] the social (migrant networks)."

⁵See Shapira (2013) for a discussion of the idea of border as infrastructure of the international. The Sino-Vietnamese border historically has been more porous due to difficulties in establishing imperial and state control in the mountainous areas inhabited by ethnic groups. The Chinese border with Russia has been heavily policed and militarized since the Russian Empire made advancements in the Far East in the late nineteenth century. In the period of Chinese-Soviet socialist friendship and close relations between the two communist governments, exchanges took place through formal party channels, with minimal popular cross-border contacts happening on the ground. During the period of socialism, marriages with foreigners in both states were banned.

The porous and loosely demarcated Sino-Vietnamese border, with its closely related cultures and languages, facilitated the expansion of popular contacts and informal cross-border relations. Since the 1990s, the demand for intermediary interpreters and traders to propel the growing volumes of cross-border trade has led to romantic and pragmatic alliances and Chinese-Vietnamese families (Bélanger, Khuât, and Trần 2013; Chan 2013; Grillot 2010, 2012; Juan Zhang 2011). On the border with Russia, where, with the exception of small pockets of co-ethnics living on both sides of the border, cultural and linguistic disparities run deep, the reinvention of bilateral relations and the relaxation of entry-exit policies after border disputes were settled paved the way for educational exchanges, border trade, and business relations, sometimes leading to romantic relations and long-term engagements (Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012; Horstmann, Saxer, and Rippa 2018; Humphrey 2018; Saxer and Zhang 2016).

On the culturally related Sino-Vietnamese border, undocumented marriages among cross-border couples became the dominant trend, outnumbering registered Sino-Vietnamese marriages.⁶ A growing number of unregistered marriages—by some accounts reaching 65,000 (Liu Jifeng 2011, 64)—has led in the eyes of the Chinese state to national concern over migration control, illegal and criminal activities, and border security (Zhang Jie 2009). The Sino-Russian border, on the other hand, evolved alongside the strategic development of the Chinese Eastern Railway project (1896–1916), which is reflected in the formalized, vigilantly policed, and heavily militarized character of this border. The majority of the Russian-Chinese marriages formed in the late 1990s to early 2000s have been formally registered, but the restrictive nature of Chinese citizenship has meant that many Russian spouses have found themselves in a dependent and legally constrained status in China.

The materiality of the regulatory design of immigration through related laws, bureaucratic procedures, residence and naturalization requirements, and documents sits in close relation to shared imaginaries, memories, and desires. Their interplay manifests in particular structures of belonging informed by the ideologies and political processes codified in citizenship and nationality laws (Mai and King 2009). Recent ethnographic work on the state has drawn attention to the “nonrational” foundations of apparently rationalized state practices and objects, as well as the affective relations between people and institutional forms of statecraft (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2007, 84). Building on these analyses, we aim to show how structures of belonging that condition marriage migration in China are co-constituted by “a kind of feeling and thinking that is social and material” (R. Williams 1978, 131). We consider how these processes play out in the case of marriage migration from Vietnam and Russia, China’s neighbors with long histories of politically complex relations. Before we take a closer look at the marriage migration dynamics across China’s borders, in the next section we turn to recent developments in the governing regime of marriage migration, connecting the spheres of national security, population management, and family relations.

⁶Although culturally unregistered marriages have become more common in China, legally civil partnerships are not recognized, and it is difficult to register the birth of a child outside of marriage.

INFRASTRUCTURAL DESIGN OF AN EMERGENT PHENOMENON: REGULATING INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES

Chinese state policies have been historically informed by traditional Confucian beliefs and practices related to gender and sexuality (Hershatter 2004; Mann 2011, xix). In the contemporary context, “multiple intersecting structures of inequality”—including gender, socioeconomic, and sexual inequalities—are reinforced by the state’s withdrawal from social provisions, on the one hand, and its continued control over reproductive practices of citizens and their restriction to the legitimate space of “monogamous (heterosexual) [and registered] marriage” (Santos and Harrell 2017, 31–32) on the other. Even if these norms are internally continuously challenged by transformations in the social, cultural, and economic spheres, together with strict administrative and judicial regulations of foreign presence in China, they reflect and inform the structures of feeling towards marriages with foreigners in China.

Marriage migration, as an emergent phenomenon in China, has generated new state activity in the legal and regulative institutions and frameworks that organize, arrange, and shape it. Since 1986, when the categories of Chinese-foreign marriage and cross-border marriage were introduced, the regulatory mechanism for international marriages has been in constant formulation (Jeffreys and Wang 2013, 349; Wang Pan 2014). These changes that take place at the intersection of social (population) and private (family) spheres of governance signal the dynamics of the politics of Chinese national membership. The PRC’s official statistics only include marriages registered on the territory of China, excluding unregistered informal marriages and those registered outside of China. Chinese law recognizes three types of foreign marriages (*shewai hunyin*): marriages with overseas Chinese; with compatriots in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao; and with nationals of foreign countries (Jeffreys and Wang 2013). The majority of registered foreign marriages in the PRC between 1979 and 2010 were categorized as “cross-border marriages,” referring to marriages with compatriots in Greater China. Although Chinese women have dominated the number of the PRC’s citizens in Chinese-foreign marriages, the number of Chinese men marrying foreign women has been steadily growing since the 2000s (Farrer 2008; Wang Pan 2014, 32). An increasing number of marriages with foreigners—that is, from any country in the world, implicitly excluding ethnically Chinese foreigners—became more acceptable with changing sexual culture and loosening control over international travel (Farrer 2002; Xiang 2003). By the early 2000s, public views of international marriages shifted to a “joint venture” arrangement, with a perception that mixed couples predominately make a decision to live in China for business opportunities (Farrer 2008, 11). Marriages with Vietnamese and Russian citizens fall into the category of foreign rather than cross-border marriage, notwithstanding the geographically neighboring status, deeply intertwined borderland histories, and common socialist legacy of the countries involved. This points to ambiguous and fluid conceptions of borders in the Chinese national imaginary that privilege the role of ethno-racial ties uniting all Chinese (Billé et al. 2012).

International marriages in China are governed across three intersecting areas of the PRC’s legislative activity and state policies—marriage and family, immigration and residence of foreigners in China, and population management—with all of these being

closely related to national unity and security. Navigating the meeting points and disjunctions between these three spheres of state activity sketches out the infrastructural design of marriage migration in China. This shows how China's legislative mechanism frames the changing politics of national belonging across international, sociopolitical, and private spheres.

In the spheres of marriage and family life, China's reform-era legislation has strictly regulated population growth through family planning and control of the reproductive lives of women (Greenhalgh 2010; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). The post-Mao period has been characterized by growing concern around the deinstitutionalization of marriage in China, and a growing number of divorces (Davis 2014; Davis and Friedman 2014). The 2001 amendment of the marriage law and subsequent marriage registration regulations (*Hunyin Dengji Tiaoli*) in 2003 facilitated divorce proceedings but did not offer simplification of the marriage registration system for those who found themselves in nonstandard family arrangements with foreigners (Palmer 2007; Wang Pan 2014, 40). In 2004, the Measures for the Administration of Examination and Approval of Aliens' Permanent Residence in China specified the procedures for an application for a permanent residence permit in China, including on the basis of marriage with a Chinese national. As the number of such cross-border marriages increased (Chao 2011; M. Chen 2015), and the Chinese state welcomed stronger links with "compatriots," the procedures for mobility of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao spouses and children from the cross-border marriages were simplified. In 2010, the border-crossing Compatriot Pass or Home-Return Pass (the two English translations for *Tongxing zheng*), valid for three years, was introduced for people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao to travel and reside in China, granting them a permanent identification number (Wang Pan 2014, 40). *Tongxing zheng*, which recognizes the holder of the document as a "subject of the Chinese state" without granting full citizenship, was subsequently rolled out to regulate the status of mixed children with a foreign citizenship born to parents with a Chinese and a foreign passport. *Tongxing zheng* addresses the ambiguity arising from China's strict single citizenship norm and competing sovereign claims over overseas Chinese populations, showing the privileging of ethno-racial ties in the formulation of national membership.

The presence of foreigners in China has long been administered within a framework scarcely revised from the Maoist period (Brady 2003). The 1985 law on the Control of Exit and Entry of Aliens provided the first legal framework for regulating foreign presence in the reform era. With the acceleration of China's rise after it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, the need emerged to devise new legal and administrative tools to regulate foreigners' border crossings as well as access to domestic labor markets and residence rights. As a result, a new immigration legal framework and revised immigration policies have been in formulation since the mid-2000s (Lehmann and Leonard 2019; Liu Guofu 2011; Pieke 2012). The 2013 Entry and Exit Administration Law provided the latest regulatory framework for dealing with the "three illegalities" problem pertaining to unauthorized work, entry, and residence in China, and has created limited conditions for foreign workers (Liu Guofu 2011, 161–62; Zou 2016). In September 2013, when the new law came into force, the tourist and short-stay Visa L issued to foreign spouses of Chinese citizens in accordance with the 1985 version of the Exit-Entry law was replaced with the new "China Family Reunion Visa (Q)." Importantly, the new

law only makes provisions for extended legal work in China for those on working Visa Z, precluding family members, including spouses legally married to Chinese citizens and living in China on a family visa, from entering the labor market. The law regulates “labor” in a narrow sense of monetary exchange, placing the spheres of family and marriage outside of economic relations and limiting foreign spouses to the position of temporary family visitors. Furthermore, although there are provisions for permanent residency of foreign spouses in China, the conditions set out are very difficult to satisfy. In addition to providing a valid marriage certificate, having been married for at least five years, and being a resident in China for at least nine months each year, the applicant must also provide evidence of savings that must cover at least ten years’ living costs, a notarized house-leasing certificate or certificate of property ownership, and a resume summarizing the applicant’s educational, personal, and professional development (Liu Guofu 2011, 64).

In the sphere of immigration, China’s priority is to attract high-skilled workers to advance its economic and technological development. The state continuously revises its policy mechanisms to attract and keep this workforce. For example, in February 2016 the General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council published an opinion piece that identified the problems with the existing system granting permanent residences, in particular “unreasonable application requirements, limited applications and inadequate implementation of benefits” (General Offices 2016). It reiterated the strategic objective of “attracting and using talent from all over the world” and recommended the implementation of a more open permanent residency policy. While the document outlines a detailed proposal for systematizing and improving the regulations and administration for foreign permanent residents in China, its priority is aimed at high-skilled workers who would play an important role in serving China’s “national talent strategy.” Regarding the status of marriage migrants, the document makes provisions for “reasonable” satisfaction of their needs.

So far, “reasonable” satisfaction has not translated into granting minimal labor rights, social rights, or legal protection to marriage migrants. The document recognizes an increasing need and role for marriage migrants in Chinese society, yet their place in the society is limited to the spheres of family care and social reproduction. The emerging regulatory framework around marriage migration is predicated on a clear separation of domestic and public spheres, reserving an exclusively familial role for foreign spouses in China while their stay is regulated by the family visa. Furthermore, population governance and state concern about population quality are directly related to how marriage immigration is regulated. While the idea of a “foreign bride” (*waiji xinniàng*) offers a potential solution to the increasing shortage of women in China, the political agenda of raising China’s “population quality” is aimed at improving the general civility of the Chinese population as a whole, including education, manners, and habits (Barabantseva 2015b). A five-year temporary residence status as a wife restricted to the domestic sphere works as a probationary period before an application for full residency and labor rights could be considered and granted.

The regulation of marriage, family, and reproductive lives and citizenship entitlements are part of the evolving state infrastructure of immigration premised on valuing a skilled population and limiting foreigners’ access to China’s labor market. With the weakening of the institution of marriage in China, family relations have been

characterized by market relations and revived Confucian patriarchal norms. Faced with demographic concerns about gender imbalance, the idea of “foreign brides” redresses the national concern over a shortage of women. Against the backdrop of market and societal challenges to the family, as “the metonym of belonging in Chinese culture” (Rofel 2007, 100), “foreign brides” entered the Chinese popular imagination in the reform period as new figures of national desire and suspicion. They occupy an ambiguous status in the Chinese official and popular imaginary because of their unclear social attachments and national identity. Although they seemingly offer a necessary corrective to the skewed demographic composition of society, “foreign brides” are often seen as women who cannot be completely trusted and therefore accepted as full members of Chinese society with labor and social rights. The emerging infrastructural design of immigration prescribes them a traditional domestic, reproductive role in Chinese society.

China follows the footsteps of its Asian neighbors in upholding and reviving Confucian family norms, yet conjures different images of the desirable, affordable, and available and the less desirable foreign women along with reinvented racial, historical, and socio-economic inequalities. This emerging regulative framework that determines the societal place of foreign spouses is closely related to and defined in complex ways by historical trajectories and their legacies, sets of values and beliefs that are actively felt in Chinese society. In the next section, we turn to the discussion of how historical developments across China’s borders have shaped trajectories and forms of marriage migration from Vietnam and Russia and their official and popular representations.

REPRESENTATIONAL TROPES OF RUSSIAN-CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE-CHINESE MARRIAGES

Chinese media first started reporting on the growing number of international marriages in China in the early 1990s. Some were due to the recurrence of intra-ethnic customs in reopened borderlands, others to the increasing number of foreign men working in big Chinese cities and dating Chinese women (Farrer 2008), or to the growing network of cross-border matchmaking services. In China, as in other Asian countries where the “mail-order brides” phenomenon spread, Vietnam became known as the major source of brides. The dominant interpretive lens for these Sino-Vietnamese marriages was illegal migration and human trade. After the first generation of “Vietnamese brides” migrated to China for marriage after the Chinese-Vietnamese border reopened in 1991, Chinese authorities and international observers blamed the “import” of Vietnamese women on the obscure networks of smugglers who supplied the Chinese internal marriage market with young women from Vietnam. The presence of Vietnamese women in the Chinese social landscape has been increasingly scrutinized, but the scarce official data of the actual number of Sino-Vietnamese couples remains approximate because it is based on registered cases—a minority—or kept confidential by local authorities.

The topic of Sino-Vietnamese marriages has become both more complex and widely debated in recent years. The network of opportunist brokers that was operating in the Chinese-Vietnamese border zones in the 1990s has given rise to more organized

commercial mail-order bride services that arrange marriages all over China. Related to the growing importance of Vietnam (and by extension Southeast Asia) as an economic partner, the “Vietnamese bride” became a familiar figure in the public discourse, especially in social media, and popular culture. For example, the film *Red River*, set in Hekou in the late 1990s, depicts a commonly known story—that of an innocent young Vietnamese woman fending for herself in the turbulent world of a Chinese border town (Zhang Jiarui 2009). The film’s protagonist attracts the attention of two Chinese men while working in the sex industry at the border under her aunt’s supervision. Beyond the plot, the movie provides a depiction of the long-term relations between Chinese and Vietnamese people who make a living together in this border town, depending on each other.

Popular representations of Vietnamese women (and by extension of the Vietnamese people) are no longer informed by official historical narratives or Chinese rural communities’ lived experiences but by news, anecdotes, fantasies, and rumors spread by media reports and discussed by anonymous readers (Huang 2014; Su 2013). “Vietnamese brides” became a euphemism for cheap women, gold-diggers, and vanishing brides, and this evolution of journalistic coverage has resulted in a change of public opinion (Grillot 2012). Rather than being portrayed as victims of the unscrupulous families who purchase them, Vietnamese women have come to be regarded as opportunists coming from a poor country, a potential source of national insecurity. The victim is no longer the innocent rural Vietnamese woman vulnerable to human traffickers, but the naïve rural Chinese bachelor who invested in a bad deal, which echoes the perceptions of “Vietnamese brides” in Taiwanese media (Bélanger et al. 2013).

The noticeable presence of the topic of Russian brides in China is a later phenomenon. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Chinese media started publishing materials about the growing number of happy Russian-Chinese families in northeast China. These materials varied from short television reportages to printed news items and television dramas. Amid the growing popularity of and familiarity around the topic, the village of Sihacun in the northeast province of Heilongjiang hit the headlines as a “Russian brides village” when a series of publications between 2008 and 2012 reported that twenty-two villagers came back to China with Russian wives after working in Russia (Greenlea.ru, n.d.; Xin Wenhua Wang 2011). During a research visit to the village in the summer of 2016, however, the village representatives spoke vaguely of such couples and could not name any Russian women living there at the time. Instead, the authorities recalled that the village served as a film set for the twenty-six-episode drama *Dongbei Aiqing Gushi* (Northeast Love Story), which was filmed in the area and broadcast on Chinese television. Playing up the proximity of the two states’ long historical and close political relations, the media products capitalized on the popularity of Chinese-Russian families while conveying an image of happy, lasting, and stable Sino-Russian marriages.

After the Russian-Ukrainian conflict over Crimea and the war in the Eastern Ukraine broke out in 2014, the media coverage of Russian-Chinese marriage became more prominent and bolder. The new aspect of the media reportage was that the economic crisis and instability hitting Russia and Ukraine became a precursor for a growing number of women seeking to marry Chinese men. For example, one headline in 2014 announced that “Russian women want to become Chinese daughters-in-law” (Zhongguo Qingnian

Wang 2014); another compared the “advantages” of Russian girlfriends and Ukrainian ones (Olesen 2015; *Wukelan Huaren Zhijia* 2016). One particularly popular story storming through the Chinese Internet sphere in December 2014 detailed the happy marriage of a self-made Chinese businessman in Ukraine who made many Chinese netizens jealous of his beautiful Ukrainian wife. An animated netizen announced: “If you let Chinese people out in the world, the world will truly see the power of the Chinese people!” and “I am going to the Ukrainian Embassy this afternoon to get my visa” (Fitzgibbons 2014).

It is difficult to gauge to what extent the Chinese state favors the idea of promoting Russian-Chinese marriages, yet its implicit encouragement is noticeable. In January 2015, the National Bureau of Statistics of China published a press release on China’s economic performance in the previous year. One of the sections of the press release included data on the changing population structure of Chinese society, highlighting the then-current shortage of 33.75 million women for Chinese men. In response, the Chinese cybersphere was awash with possible solutions to the domestic “gender war.” One such publication advocated a “counterattack” to the problem with marriages to foreign women by subjecting them to a schema of a hierarchy of “foreign brides,” placing Russian women at the top (Deyi Qiufeng 2015).

Soon after, Russian-Chinese bilateral relations reached a new level when in May 2015 Xi Jinping visited Moscow for the seventieth anniversary of the Victory of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) and to formally mark the merger of two state initiatives, China’s new Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union.⁷ While foreign commentators observed that China and Russia’s bilateral relations were becoming closer than ever before, interstate media took on a new dimension of tacitly promoting Chinese-Russian marriages (Schiavenza 2015). Several weeks after Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow, a curious advertisement circulated in Russian print media, touting “the ideal formula” of mixed Russian-Chinese marriages. Originally placed in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*—the official mouthpiece of Russia’s main party United Russia—with the alleged support of China’s Ministry of Education, the advertisement offered a formula for the ideal international couple: Russian wife + Chinese husband = “ideal couple.” It summarized the qualities of a Russian wife as good-looking, educated, independent, hard-working, and giving her husband freedom. According to the ad, a Chinese husband is a caring and serious family man, leads a healthy lifestyle, and is a good handyman. Consequently, Russian media started commenting on the “unexpected” byproduct of “Putin’s turn to Asia” (Koshoibekova 2015).

State propaganda related to familial relations is ubiquitous in China. During the socialist period, the Chinese government invested significant resources in printed

⁷Sino-Russian bilateral relations reached their highest favorable level in 2008 when all territorial issues between the states were resolved. The aims of China’s One Belt One Road project, stipulated in its “Vision and Action” document, include increasing people-to-people exchanges alongside trade, integration, and greater connectivity (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). This provided a new language for cross-border matchmaking enterprises. For example, a news item in *Global Times*, China’s major official publication, referred to a matchmaking agency promoting Chinese-Russian marriages as a component of the One Belt, One Road strategy (Hu 2018).

materials to convey the party's values on all aspects of private and public life. With the opening of China, the state's efforts to shape the values of its citizenry continued. For example, James Farrer's (2008) research found that in the 1990s the Ministry of Propaganda was cautioning against a favorable portrayal of mixed marriage between Chinese women and foreign men in Shanghai, because such representations were failing Chinese masculinity. The *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* advertisement shows that the two states tacitly took on the roles of matchmaking service alongside strengthening bilateral state relations. Unlike in Vietnam, where commercial matchmaking companies thrive, the market for matchmaking between Russians and Chinese caters for the tastes of high-end bachelors and is not affordable to the average Chinese man. In the absence of a sizeable number of Chinese-Russian families, there is scope for the Chinese state media and propaganda industry to create and promote the idea of heightened popularity of such families to stir the desire among single Chinese men to find a "Russian wife."

While Russian brides feature in Chinese news as a welcome and positive development, frequently becoming characters in television dramas and entertainment programs, the majority of stories involving Vietnamese brides attract negative media coverage in the form of investigative journalism with an undercurrent of controversy and scandal. Since 2014, several nationwide media reports have exposed cases of Vietnamese women who had vanished on the same day under mysterious circumstances (*CGTN America* 2014; Zhongguo Qingnian Wang 2014). Such cases contribute to the denigration of women who already encounter difficulties as they seek a respectable position in Chinese society. The media reportages present dehistoricized and decontextualized news stories that stress the current and illegal nature of these developments.

Representations of Russian and Vietnamese women as foreign wives of Chinese husbands are further informed by dominant racial and sexual hierarchies and their role in shaping cultural perceptions of difference and foreign presence in China. Imported from the Western biological and social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century, a racialized understanding of cultural diversity has been central to how the Chinese elite and general public have viewed the organization of the world and China (Dikötter 1992). The categorization of people into different ethnic groups, fused with the Chinese imperial view of co-centric cultural circles revolving around the Han center and later theories of human evolution, has left an imprint on China's organization of its ethnic diversity, its relations with its neighbors, its growing population of foreigners, the Chinese diaspora, and its view of its role in the world. Although ethnic categorization is a product of the communist ideology, it developed from the fusion of Western colonial practices, Chinese imperial conceptions of the world, and later socialist ideals.

Vietnam and Russia, and their peoples, occupy qualitatively different places within the Chinese worldview and cultural hierarchy. Their historically neighboring statuses and shifting geographical borders are reflected in Chinese ethnic composition, which includes both Russian (*Eluosizu*) and Vietnamese (*Jingzu*) as recognized ethnic groups, granting them a certain degree of self-determination status in Chinese multiethnic society. Yet, the two states stand on opposite ends of the cultural and sexual hierarchy in China. Vietnam, and by extension the Vietnamese, as the Chinese Empire's former tribute state and therefore subordinate people, is commonly viewed as a "younger brother" and considered less advanced culturally and economically. Russia, as one of the former colonial powers that "humiliated" China along with Western powers in the

nineteenth century, until recently has been seen as an equal in terms of cultural influence, and superior in its historic-political roles as the birthplace of the first socialist state and because of its military and technological achievements. Its economic decline, combined with frequent political crises and aggressions, has shifted the bilateral power dynamic that extends to the level of human interactions on the ground.⁸ This translates to the widespread perceptions and representations of Vietnamese and Russian women in China: the “Asian” versus the “(white) Westerner” with the complexities and differences that they embody. While Vietnamese women are seen as ethnic (and underdeveloped) along with other ethnic minorities in China, Russian women are commonly presented as modern and civilized.⁹ Importantly, the growing influx of official and popular images of Vietnamese and Russian women as potential and accessible wives for Chinese bachelors dispels their perceived remoteness, making them tangible and visible figures in the Chinese social, cultural, and familial spheres (Jankowiak, Gray, and Hattman 2008, 264). Chinese traditional gender norms and mores and historical relations with neighbors play a significant role in shaping how discourses on Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Russian marriages unfold and marriage migration practices take shape in China. The twin position of the women as wives and foreigners places them in constrained social roles in Chinese society, yet at the opposite ends of the “foreign brides” hierarchy in China. Representation of foreign brides is informed by Chinese traditional family values, the heteronormative and patriarchal conventions of the government’s control over society, and collective feelings towards different kinds of foreigners.

SELECTIVE REENACTMENTS OF MARRIAGE MIGRATION HISTORIES

Media discourses of mixed marriages take place in tandem with reinvention and public celebration of the historical intimate relations across both parts of China’s borders. Selective reenactments of histories (Green 2014) and their contemporary entanglements with gendered and racialized norms coalesce with the emerging marriage migration regulatory regime. An example from northeast China is illustrative in this regard. Historically mixed Russian-Chinese marriages were a direct result of Russia’s colonial expansion into Manchuria after Russian territory expanded according to the terms of the 1860 Beijing agreement. Between the late 1890s and 1917, a large number of people moved to these parts of the Russian Empire as colonialists, settlers, or refugees. In the early 1930s, travelers to northeast China were talking about the emergence of a distinct “Eurasian type” (Sino-Russian) of Manchurian colonizer (Gamsa 2014, 48). The main characteristic of intermarriage in Manchuria, in rural and urban contexts, was defined by

⁸Although many among the political elite in Beijing see Russia as a loser for failing to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Putin and his governing style have been popular among the Chinese elite and public. In 2016, the Chinese government awarded Putin its first international peace prize (Bearak 2016), and in June 2018 Xi Jinping announced that Putin was his “best, and most intimate friend” during the “best friend” medal award ceremony (*Reuters* 2018).

⁹A visual example of this can be found in the Museum of Women and Children in Beijing: on the map of common women’s dress in China, Han and Russian are the only two images of women in nonethnic attire.

the scarcity of women in the remote areas, due to the concentration of male labor in north China and the difficult economic position of many “émigré” Russian women (48).

The tragic life of Galina Dubeeva, a descendant of one such marriage, became the symbol of the Chinese town Suifenhe on the Sino-Russian border, which built a museum in her memory. Dubeeva became celebrated as a national hero in 2003, when a Chinese journalist discovered the story of her disappearance when she was a Japanese translator sent by the People’s Liberation Army towards the end of the Second World War to negotiate with the Japanese army’s representatives. The news of this forgotten story spread quickly and was picked up by the central authorities. In 2005, a monument commemorating Dubeeva’s heroism was erected in Suifenhe. In March 2013, city authorities opened a museum in her memory, linking her personal life to Suifenhe’s growth and development and the improvement of Chinese-Russian relations. In 2015, a two-part documentary film about Dubeeva’s life was broadcast on Chinese television as part of a series of commemorative events dedicated to the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Dubeeva became a symbol of Sino-Russian friendship—an “angel of peace” (*heping tianshi*)—expressing Chinese-Russian common interests and values in memory of their victory against their common enemy. One aspect of Dubeeva’s background recurrently mentioned and emphasized in her memorialization campaign is her mixed-race ancestry. Several panels in the museum are dedicated to this unique feature of the marriage that nurtured Dubeeva’s heroic character. Dubeeva is presented as a beautiful, clever, strong-willed, and independent character, with a romantic soul. The museum panels emphasize that she spoke several languages fluently and was a talented musician and poet.

The creation of the museum and the popularization of Dubeeva’s story taps into the unfolding narrative of the close Chinese-Russian state relations that have been steadily improving since the resolution of border issues. In 2007, Hu Jintao and Vladimir Putin issued a joint statement on economic cooperation between northeast China and the Russian Far East, marking the beginning of Putin’s “turn to Asia” policy agenda. As evidence of closer bilateral relations, a number of media outlets started reporting on the growing popularity of Chinese-Russian marriages (Hessler 2016). The Suifenhe museum includes a panel with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin’s affirmations on Russian-Chinese relations, emphasizing Dubeeva’s role as a symbolic messenger of peace tying together the histories and destinies of Russia and China. The forgotten histories of Chinese-Russian intimacies and marriages are revived, mythologized, and glorified in an attempt to establish continuities with the past and stimulate closer future relations.

In contrast, the Chinese state has never depicted the history or contemporary practices of Sino-Vietnamese marriages in a manner comparable to the way Chinese-Russian marriages attract media and public interest. The phenomenon has mainly been associated with illegal activities such as prostitution, irregular work, unregistered marriages, and children born out of wedlock, as well as the inefficiency of national border control. Following debates over illegal commercial marriage migration—still allegedly happening in some mountainous areas of the Sino-Vietnamese border¹⁰—that invaded public

¹⁰For further details, see Pacific Links Foundation (n.d.).

discourse and international scholarship in the 2000s, the once categorical vision that readily classified border crossings as “illegal migration” has faded. This has recently led to the acknowledgment of the presence and growing visibility of Vietnamese marriage migration beyond the borderlands, as well as policy efforts to address the needs of the migrants and their Chinese partners and hosting communities (Shen 2014).

Until the breakout of scandals and the growing number of these marriages forced national and local authorities to address their policies on foreign population management, they were generally covered up, because they exposed the negative consequences of Chinese family planning policies. Moreover, discussions on illegal migration have been unwelcome in the uneasy Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic dialogue, as this would suggest the need for a further level of border management. The contemporary framework of illegal migration and criminality that has informed public perceptions of Chinese men’s marriages with Vietnamese women ignores their historical roots. At least five important historical-geopolitical aspects related to the colonial conquest and legacy stand among the conveniently neglected facets of Vietnamese women’s commodification and marriage arrangements: the occurrence of cross-border marriages through military conquest along the borderlands’ history; population movements and private alliances related to business partnerships (Grillot 2012); customary marriages among highland ethnic groups regardless of national boundaries (Barabantseva 2015a); contemporary commoditized forms of marriage migration within the border of China, including coerced marriage; and the overall historical legacy of slavery in both Vietnam and China (Baudrit [1943] 2008; Lessard 2009; Watson 1980).

The national resentment emerging from the negative media coverage of Vietnamese brides stirs the reemergence of Chinese nationalist discourses towards Vietnam, once the military enemy, now the challenging economic partner (Grillot 2016b, 2018). Recent history, carefully put aside by the authorities for the sake of commercial cooperation, still overshadows border people’s relations. Border Chinese residents, be they long-term dwellers or recently settled traders, often offer a critical perspective on their neighbors and commercial partners. When they recall Chinese people’s contribution to Vietnam’s war efforts against the American army, they promptly add how disappointed they had been by the ungrateful “brother” that, just a few years later, and according to Chinese official history, dispossessed its Chinese ethnic community by forcing them to flee the country and conducted military attacks against China in 1979. The evocation of the sacrifice the Chinese made for their disloyal socialist brother still registers as an ailing wound for the older generation who experienced the suffering brought about by the chaotic Cultural Revolution in the same period. The younger generation, whose family heritage and conventional education fuel various forms of resentment, is inclined to be wary of their unpredictable neighbor. They develop commercial links with Vietnam, even though they remain alert about geopolitical positions and military movements related to maritime territorial disputes and are suspicious of the Vietnamese keeping secret agendas within their business strategies. At the local level, such mutual dependency stained by mutual suspicion has created a fertile ground for ambiguous reputations among seductive Vietnamese women, who appear as the latest Vietnamese in contemporary history who would intimately and commercially take advantage of the victimized Chinese people.

The current popular and official discourses on Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Russian marriages reinvent and reinterpret their historical origins and developments through

the lens of state sovereignty, border and population control, and reenacted histories. Both official reinterpretations of histories are linked with the changing population landscape in China and the government's concerns over social order, population management, and national security. The historical accounts of these intimate arrangements are reinvented in a new light (Russian-Chinese marriages) or conveniently forgotten or ignored (in the case of the Vietnamese brides), reflecting China's deeper structures of feeling towards its neighbors, which take on new meanings and signal shifting relations of power and inequality in China's national politics of belonging.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined changing regulations and representations of marriage migration to China from Russia and Vietnam through the analysis of legal and regulatory practices towards foreigners and structures of feeling in relation to marriage migration. Our twin focus on the materiality of marriage migration and structures of feeling highlights several shifts in China. These changes take place at the intersection of marriage—as a cultural institution and basic socioeconomic unit of national reproduction, likewise a cornerstone of the Chinese traditional and hierarchical familial relations—and shifting attitudes towards and control of foreign presence in China. They are reflective of broader changes in the demographic composition of Chinese society, China's national politics of belonging, and the country's relations with its neighbors.

China's shifting economic and political role as a global power reconfigures state relations and person-to-person relations alike. The growing popularity of mixed marriages hitting the national news, Internet chat rooms, entertainment programs, and propaganda campaigns signals that societal and cultural changes are underway regarding China's growing openness to foreign presence. The Chinese state welcomes international marriage as a solution to the gender imbalance of Chinese society.

On the surface, Russian-Chinese and Chinese-Vietnamese marriages are very similar and are subject to the same infrastructural processes required for a mixed couple to obtain legitimacy in China. Yet, a closer look at the dynamics of representational tropes and reenactments of marriage migration histories reveals important differences born out of collective feelings towards Russia and Vietnam. The status of Russia as a former “great power” and the perception of its European-looking women as being of high esteem and education translate into a positive image of Russian-Chinese marriages as progressive and contributing to the realization of Chinese society's cultural and economic potential. Sino-Vietnamese marriages, by and large portrayed as inferior and illegal, are, on the other hand, reflective of the weaknesses and vestiges of traditional thinking at work in both societies.

Notwithstanding public representations, social roles envisaged for Vietnamese and Russian wives in the developing legal and administrative regulations are restricted to reproductive and caring roles within Chinese society. The institutionalized patriarchy is further complicated by racial and gender hierarchies informing the dominant representative tropes in the Chinese public sphere. The racialized body politic, with its categorization of people along the parameters of civilization, lies at the heart of the process. As new dominant narratives of marriage migration to China are created, local histories are

rediscovered, reinvented, and presented in the language and regulations shaped by national security concerns over managing and raising population quality. We therefore posit that the interrelated domains of regulations and representations of marriage migration and foreign brides in China are actively co-constituted by the structures of feeling that arise out of historical legacies and gendered and racialized collective perceptions of status differences that inform state relations.

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