

# Cross-border Marriage in Mountainous Provinces of Vietnam at Present

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**Abstract:** The paper presents an explanation for cross-border marriage from the perspective of ethnic culture and its impacts on management of social development (a case study in the Vietnam-China and Vietnam-Laos border areas). The phenomenon of cross-border marriage takes place quite popularly in border areas, especially in the densely populated locations near the borderline. Since ethnic culture is always preserved via marriages and marriage-related relationships, it is less impacted by national territorial factors. In the current context of globalization and development, cross-border marriage results in new problems for social development management, particularly in border areas.

**Key words:** Cross-border marriage; culture; social development; ethnic.

## 1. The concept of cross-border marriage

Cross-border marriage is a social phenomenon that takes places in the territorial areas defined by boundaries between nations, regions, or territories. Cross-border marriage always occurs, when residence communities share a common lifestyle and an original culture as well as when they are together impacted by the process of development. Research works on cross-border marriage cannot but mention the cultural aspect, because culture is the origin of all family and marital relationships. Vice versa, all family and marital relationships are the basic and typical elements for ethnic culture. In the current context of international integration and development, cross-border marriage is surely influenced by development factors. It is, therefore, necessary to have a broader and more comprehensive view in doing research on cross-border marriage.

The concept of cross-border marriage emphasizes the boundaries involved with the geographical territory, the State, races, social strata, sex, and culture within the country of destination. Those boundaries are set up by the States and other social

actors, aiming at differentiating between “this country” and “other countries” (Shan Yang & Melody Chia, 2010: 157-178). Thus, the concept of border in the cross-border marriage sometimes can be seen as the boundary of geographical territories, but sometimes it can be seen as the boundary of cultures or social strata. Cross-border marriage is both an ending and a beginning as well – the beginning for other endings. In other words, the issue to be studied involved with this type of marriage is whether people get married for the purpose of migration or they just think about getting married after migration (William Lucy, 2010). “Culture in border areas almost extends beyond the limits set by the State as well as geographical and territorial boundaries”. Culture does not

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only connect people and institutions within a country, but it also connects them with those in other countries” (Hastings Donnan & Thomas Wilson, 1999).

From the anthropological perspective, cross-border marriages are completely inevitable, as the ethnic culture covers the entire area without being limited by geographical boundaries. At that time, the boundaries are just significant administratively. Ethnic culture is viewed as a solid foundation for marriages between ethnic communities in border areas. Since the ethnic culture is hardly divided by the national boundary, marriages and visits are done frequently in daily life. It is, consequently, rather common that Vietnamese women get married with Chinese or Laotian men. In general, transnational marriages are just normal in areas of Vietnam – China and Vietnam – Laos borders. Those marriages not only stem from economic demands, but they also stem from the need of selecting appropriate partners. According to Caroline Grillot, the economic factor is not sufficient enough to give an explanation for cross-border marriage. Usually, geographical boundaries are not so powerful as social boundaries; and, the way people interact each other as well as the way they evaluate, build, show, and identify themselves different from other groups of people causes influence on their choices and their living state, especially for those in border areas. In the areas of Vietnam – China border, the two factors, including poverty and demographic, cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of why Vietnamese women get married with Chinese men. People in the areas along the borderline between the two countries are obviously influenced by images, symbols and rumors about each other (Caroline Grillot, 2012: 125-137).

According to some demographers, the local cultural boundary always extends

beyond the territorial boundary of a nation (Matthew H Amster, 2005, No.15: 131-150). Transcultural marriage is a term used to indicate marriages of people from different cultures or ethnic groups, or from the same culture or ethnic group but living in two different countries. This term emphasizes the cross-border feature of those marriages, which makes them different from other types of marriage. Although people in many other types of marriage may have to overcome geographical constraints, but they don't have to get over the national border. According to this definition, the concept of cross-border marriage is understood as marriage between people from different countries that may or may not share a boundary (William Lucy, 2010).

In a research work of Hastings Donan, culture always gets over the State limits and territorial borders. Cultural globalization, international economic and political integration, and the end of the Cold War have led to the opening of borders and the looseness of the State control, which used to restrict the transfer of human, commodity, capital funds, and ideas in the past. Territorial borders no longer undertake their inherent functions, or at least they are not effective in all aspects (Hastings Donnan & Thomas Wilson, 1999). Lenore Lyons & Michele Ford (2008) carried out a research work on cross-border marriage between Singaporean men and Indonesian women in the Riau Islands. In reality, women in Riau islands do not have a marital certificate, but they still live in the islands, so they are not deprived of citizen rights. However, the Singaporean husbands can hardly sponsor their wives for Singaporean citizenship. As a result, the Indonesian women are restricted within the territory of Indonesia, due to the strict immigration policy of Singapore. Obviously, political and territorial borders cannot prevent social

interaction and exchange between people in border areas. Thus, culture in the border areas almost extends beyond the geographical and territorial limits. Culture does not only connect people and institutions within a country together, but it also connects them with those in other countries (Hastings Donnan & Thomas Wilson, 1999). From another perspective, cross-border marriage can take place within a community or between communities. Marriages within a community are the marriages between those, who come from the same original culture or the same original community of kinship (William Lucy, 2010). Inter-community marriage takes place between those, who come from different cultures or different communities of kinship (William Lucy, 2010).

Caroline Grillot argues that many Vietnamese women become liberated from their previous life, after they get married with Chinese men. They break the community rules and traditional conceptions on the husband's power and the wife's compliance. She even considers Chinese men as perfect husbands for Vietnamese women in border areas, since they have the same cultural characteristics but they are more open-minded owing to the process of modernization in China.

Marriage is a social and cultural phenomenon that plays the role in reproduction of population and improvement of living quality as well as national stabilization and development. Marriage is not only a form of sex combination, but it also shows ethnic cultural aspects. It is always influenced by cultures and social institutions; it is closely linked with and impacted by many factors such as economic, political, and religious conditions as well as kinship relationships, family, and ideology of the ethnic group/community in evolution and development. In each society, marriage helps to set up relationships between members in family

and clan. In addition, it helps to set up economic, political and cultural relations between different communities.

## **2. Cross-border marriage: A case study in Vietnam – Laos border areas**

According to the findings of a fieldwork survey conducted in 4 provinces, including Quang Ninh, Lang Son, Cao Bang, and Nghe An, which represent areas along Vietnam – China and Vietnam – Laos borders, the area of ethnic culture covers both sides of the borderline. Habitation areas of ethnic minorities show a close attachment and friendliness in the ties of kinship as well as community relationships between ethnic groups in both sides of the borderline. It is an important factor for cross-border marriage. In the border areas, therefore, cross-border marriages within the same ethnic group (ethnically internal marriage) or between different ethnic groups (inter-ethnic marriage) are relatively common. Some types of such marriages can be generalized as below:

- Ethnically internal marriage: This type of marriage is very common for ethnic groups that live in both sides of the border, as people have a close relationship with each other, in terms of living activities and family relations. For the areas along Vietnam – China border, there are a lot of ethnic groups that have cross-border marriage with those of the same ethnic groups in the other country; for example, people of Tay (Tày) and Nung (Nùng) ethnic minorities in Vietnam get married with people of Choang ethnic minority in China; or, people of Dao, Hmong (H'mông), Ha Nhi (Hà Nhi), and Lo Lo (Lô Lô) ethnic minorities in Vietnam get married with people of Yi ethnic minority in China. Similarly, Thai (Thái), Kho Mu (Khơ Mú), Hmong people (in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An provinces) and Chut (Chút), Bru-Van Kieu (Bru-Vân

Kiêu), Giè Trieng (Giè Triêng) people etc. (in Ha Tinh Province and other areas due south) live rather densely in both sides of Vietnam – Laos border; they therefore often pay cross-border visits and have a close relationship with each other. Since they have the same original culture, they share common customs, means of livelihood, festivals, and rituals in marriage and family. Owing to such close ethnic relationships, marriage and family relationships are easily set up; young people of marriageable age have favorable conditions to choose a cross-border spouse of the same ethnic group.

- Inter-ethnic marriage among people living in border areas: It is a marriage between a person from one ethnic group with a person from a different ethnic group that inhabits the same border area. One of the most striking features for residence communities along the border is that many ethnic groups have lived together in the same area for a long time in history. There are, of course, cultural exchange and influence between ethnic groups in the same residence or the same cultural area. In terms of marital and family relationships, some ethnic groups such as Tay, Nung, and Thai traditionally shared marital relationships. In the meanwhile, some other ethnic groups such as Hmong, Dao, Ha Nhi, and Lolo rarely set up a marital relationship with other ethnic groups; they mainly had

ethnically internal marriages. For the past 10 years, however, they have had more and more inter-ethnic marriages, especially among those who live in the same area. Generally, inter-ethnic marriages in the border areas result from activities of community cultural and economic exchange among ethnic groups. Recently, there are more and more women of ethnic minorities as well as Kinh women getting married with Chinese men over the border.

Regarding to ethnic composition in the marital relationship in the border areas, a survey on 1,078 households in Vietnam – China and Vietnam – Laos border areas reveals that people of the ethnic groups that traditionally had only ethnically internal marriages, such as Hmong and Dao, rarely have a marriage with people from other ethnic groups at present. In the area of Vietnam – Laos border, there are few Hmong people getting married with Thai people. In the area of Vietnam – China border, there are also few Hmong people getting married with Kinh people; they very rarely get married with people of other ethnic groups. In the meanwhile, people of some other ethnic groups such as Tay, Nung, and Thai tend to accept easily a marriage with people from different ethnic groups. Particularly, there are more and Thai, Tay, Nung, and San Chay (Sán Chay) people getting married with Kinh people (See Table 1).

**Table 1:** Ethnic Composition of the First Respondent and the Relationship with the Second Respondent in Family

Ethnicity of the second respondent			Ethnicity of the first respondent							Total	
			Kinh	Tay	Nung	Thai	Hmong	Dao	San Chay		Other
Kinh	Relationship with the first respondent	Wife/husband	112	18	3	2			2	1	138
		Son/daughter	20	0	0	0			0	0	20
		Son/daughter in law	1	0	0	0			0	0	1

		Grand-children	1	0	0	0			0	0	1
		Father/mother	1	0	0	0			0	0	1
	Total		135	18	3	2			2	1	161
Tay	Relationship with the first respondent	Wife/husband	5	220	40			2	3	1	271
		Son/daughter	0	34	0			0	0	0	34
		Son/daughter in law	0	4	0			0	0	0	4
		Grand-children	0	2	2			0	0	0	4
	Total		5	260	42			2	3	1	313
Nùng	Relationship with the first respondent	Wife/husband		32	198						230
		Son/daughter		4	51						55
		Son/daughter in law		0	2						2
		Grand-children		0	2						2
	Father/mother		0	4							4
Total			36	257							293
Thai	Relationship with the first respondent	Wife/husband	4			152					156
		Son/daughter	0			7					7
		Grand-children	0			1					1
Total		4			160						164
H'mong	Relationship with the first respondent	Husband/wife				1	92				93
		Son/daughter				0	5				5
Total					1	97					98
Dao	Relationship with the first respondent	Wife/husband						20			20
		Son/daughter						2			2
Total								22			22

Source: The Fieldwork Survey of the Research Project “Cross-border Marriage with Social Development” in 2014.

According to the survey results, almost all couples in the sample got married with the same ethnic people; the number of those who got married with different ethnic people (for example, a Tay person got married with a Kinh, Nung or Dao person; a Nung person got married with a Kinh or Tay person) makes up a little proportion. For the recent years, the number of ethnic minority people getting married with Kinh people has been increasingly higher. Inter-ethnic marriage between ethnic minorities is common just for some certain ethnic groups such as those of the Tay – Thai language branch. For the ethnic minorities in the Hmong – Dao language branch, they do not tend to get married with different ethnic people.

Regarding to marriage with foreigners

(Chinese), most of such marriages took place in the border area among some ethnic communities such as Hmong, Dao, Nung, and San Chay; and, they just got married with the same ethnic people over the border. Recently, there have been some marriages, in which they got married with Han or other ethnic people in China.

Because of living near the borderline, ethnic minorities in the both sides share the same culture, customs and they often contact and visit each other. Owing to the traditional customs, therefore, they have opportunities to meet their spouse and get a cross-border marriage afterwards. In reality, they mainly get married with those of the same ethnic group or those of the ethnic groups that have a similar level of culture (See Table 2).

**Table 2:** Spousal Meeting Dituations of Respondents by Ethnicity

Spousal meeting situation of the household head	Ethnicity of the household head								Total
	Kinh	Tay	Nung	Thai	Hmong	Dao	San Chay	Other	
To visit/ help acquaintances	2	3	1	7	6	0	0	0	19
	1.4%	9%	3%	4.3%	6.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%
To travel/ go shopping	38	62	51	40	46	4	4	5	250
	25.9%	19.2%	16.8%	24.4%	47.4%	16.7%	50.0%	45.5%	23.2%
To do business/do hired work	25	41	88	12	9	1	1	2	179
	17.0%	12.7%	28.9%	7.3%	9.3%	4.2%	12.5%	18.2%	16.6%
Cultural exchange/ festivals	4	4	5	1	4	0	0	0	18
	2.7%	1.2%	1.6%	0.6%	4.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%
Via introduction/ matchmaking	21	126	85	12	11	18	0	0	273
	14.3%	39.0%	28.0%	7.3%	11.3%	75.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.3%
Kidnapping/ trafficking	3	12	14	3	1	0	0	0	33
	2.0%	3.7%	4.6%	1.8%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%
Fellow villagers/ schoolmates	53	56	41	87	18	0	3	4	262
	36.1%	17.3%	13.5%	53.0%	18.6%	0.0%	37.5%	36.4%	24.3%
Other	1	11	11	2	2	1	0	0	28
	0.7%	3.4%	3.6%	1.2%	2.1%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Don't know	0	8	8	0	0	0	0	0	16
	0.0%	2.5%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%
Total	147	323	304	164	97	24	8	11	1078
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: The Fieldwork Survey of the Research Project “Cross-border Marriage with Social Development” in 2014.

The survey shows that Tay, Nung, and Dao people mainly got married, owing to matchmaking (making up 25.3%, of which: Dao 75%; Tay 39%; and Nung 28%). In the meanwhile, the proportion of those, who met the spouse when going out or going to the market, is high for Hmong and San Chay people (47.4%). In addition, the number of those, who were fellow villagers/schoolmates of their spouse or who met the spouse when doing business/ working as a hired laborer, accounts for a relatively high proportion (24.3% and 16.6% respectively). According to the traditional customs of some ethnic groups such as Tay, Nung, Dao, and San Chay, it is very common that parents make an arrangement for their children's marriage via matchmakers. The survey data on ethnic groups in the border area reflect clearly cultural characteristics of each ethnic group. For Tay, Nung, Dao, San Diu, and San Chay people in the area of Vietnam – China border, matchmakers play an important role in arranging marriages. Not only marriages in the border area, but also cross-border marriages bear clearly the matchmaking custom. In many cases, matchmakers are those, who got married with foreigners (Chinese) many years ago; when they are paying a visit to the home village, they play the role of a matchmaker for present marriages. In general, couples voluntarily agree with the arrangement made by the parents and matchmakers. In the area of Vietnam – Laos border, however, people mainly make acquaintance of each other, when they are travelling, going to the market, or visiting relatives; they also make friends with

introduction from fellow villagers.

Being asked about the aspiration for a future spouse, most of respondents affirm that they prefer to get married with someone from the same ethnic group. It is seen as a good choice (79.9%), even when the spouse is a person who lives beyond the border; whereas, those who prefer to get married with someone from a different ethnic group just make up 17%.

### **3. Cross-border marriage in the current context of integration and development**

In the current context of international integration and development, marriage is impacted by many additional factors involved with globalization and integration, in addition to traditional ones. The previous patterns of culture and social relations have been changing due to cultural integration and globalization. Although traditional marriage characteristics will not change completely, there are now certain impacts relating to political and socio-economic issues. In the area of ethnic minorities especially, changes in marriage have been influenced much by factors involved with ethnic culture and traditional beliefs. The marriage changing process is greatly impacted by social issues and it is getting increasingly more complicated, particularly in the area of the mainland border, where a part of population has a close linkage with the same ethnic groups as well as other ethnic groups over the border.

Situations that lead to marriage have been also changing a lot. Apart from the traditional forms of introduction, socio-economic activities have caused a lot of impacts on cross-border marriages at the

time of the opening policy and international integration. Other activities, such as: to travel for hired work and to do business, have created opportunities for people to get acquainted and have a cross-border marriage (with an overseas spouse of the same ethnic group or of a different ethnic group as well). Exploiting the need of getting married among a part of foreign men, malefactors have carried out illegal activities to do trafficking in women. This does not only happen to women and girls in the border areas, especially near Vietnam – China border, but it also tends to happen widely to those in Northern mountainous areas and further in the Central and Southern provinces as well.

The phenomenon of getting married with the same ethnic people beyond the border took place in history, but it has been getting more complicated in the context of globalization and international integration. Marriages results from various activities between communities of the same ethnic group in the two sides of the border such as exchange, business, relative visit etc. To get married with cross-border people of the same ethnic group is seen as a tradition that started a long time ago. Thus, they think they do not need to get a marital certificate; they just come to cohabit with each other according to their ethnic customs (it is just necessary to get the consent and the witnessing from family members and those, who have high prestige in the community). Many married couples are not fully aware of the importance of the legal marital registration and certificate; they, therefore, do not come to the local authorities for

marital registration. Besides, most of them are of ethnic minorities, so their understanding still remains limited. In the meanwhile, the procedures for marriages with foreign factors are complicated, which require a lot of documents. Consequently, they feel “afraid” to make the marital registration. This has led to more difficulties in implementing favorable policies for households of ethnic minorities in the border area, especially the poverty reduction, education, and healthcare policies. For almost all “cross-border” marriages, especially in the areas of Vietnam – China and Vietnam – Laos borders, it is quite common that they do not make a marital registration at the local authorities. Many couples have children and share property, but they are not bound to each other by any legal regulations from both countries. This results in difficulties for social management in the border areas. Apart from voluntary marriages that stem from historical and cultural conditions of ethnic groups, some criminals have taken advantages of cross-border marriages to do trafficking in women and girls for the past few years. Since a lot of the same ethnic communities inhabit both sides of the borderline, the criminals make corrupt use of the ethnic customs and culture to take people over the border for the purpose of making illicit profits.

Cross-border marriage bears assertively the ethnic cultural characteristics. The ethnic cultural boundary is different from the national territorial boundary; cross-border marriages therefore always take place, in the past and the present as well. Research works have shown the relationship between cultures and cross-border marriages. They

affirm that ethnic culture is an underlying reason for cross-border marriages; at the same time, cross-border marriages are influenced a lot by cultural factors.

It is easily recognized that cross-border marriages in Vietnam mountainous provinces still bear the stamp of ethnic culture at the present and they are always affected greatly by traditional customs. The forms of the same ethnic marriage and inter-ethnic marriage existed a long time ago in history and they are now still maintained. Although cross-border marriage is strongly impacted by globalization and integration at the present, ethnic particularities are surely preserved. In the meanwhile, cross-border marriage has resulted in many social problems, such as marital management, legal support, forced-marriage crime, and trafficking in women etc

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