

Falling Leaves, Unrooted Lives: Media Use, Power Asymmetries, and the Cross-cultural Adaptation of Vietnamese Brides in China

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Abstract: The increasing flow of marriage migration from Vietnam to China has drawn scholarly attention to the figure of the Vietnamese bride, women whose lives are suspended between two nations, cultures, and systems of belonging. While prior studies have examined their economic adaptation and social identity, less is known about how their everyday media practices shape and are shaped by underlying power asymmetries. Through a year-long ethnographic study in Daxin County, Guangxi, including in-depth interviews with 12 Vietnamese brides, this paper explores how media serve as both a resource for and a constraint on cross-cultural adaptation. We introduce the twin lenses of strategic and affective media engagement to analyze how these women navigate the double bind of host-society exclusion and home-society stigma. Findings reveal that media use not only facilitates linguistic acquisition, social networking, and identity re-articulation but also reinforces structural marginalization through digital divides and symbolic violence. The study identifies three distinct patterns of media engagement: strategic integration, affective preservation, and resistant appropriation. By framing media practice within a hierarchy of citizenship and cultural power, this research contributes to a critical reappraisal of cross-cultural communication, one that situates technology within the geopolitics of intimacy and the political economy of marriage migration. The findings challenge linear models of migrant adaptation and call for more nuanced understanding of digital agency within constrained circumstances.

Keywords: Media engagement; Cross-cultural adaptation; Vietnamese brides; Strategic and affective practice; China-Vietnam borderlands



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Introduction

“My phone is the only place where I can be both Vietnamese and not an outsider.” This reflection from a 29-year-old Vietnamese bride in Guangxi encapsulates the paradoxical role of media in the lives of cross-border marriage migrants. Over the past three decades, the rising tide of cross-border marriages between Vietnamese women and Chinese men has reshaped demographic and social landscapes in China’s southern borderlands, embodying what Constable (2005, p. 10) terms “spatial hypergamy”, which refers to a gendered mobility pattern where women from economically marginalized regions marry into households in more developed economies. In Daxin County, Guangxi, a region sharing a 40-kilometer border with Vietnam, Vietnamese brides have become a highly visible yet socially peripheral group, their

membership in both host communities and home societies remaining partial, contested, and perpetually negotiated.

This phenomenon unfolds amid a context of structural inequality: demographic imbalances and rural male marriage squeezes in China, paired with regional economic disparities and informal kinship networks bridging the China-Vietnam border, have normalized commercialized matchmaking processes that often reduce marital relations to transactional arrangements (Peng Y. 2018). Most Vietnamese brides arrive with limited Mandarin proficiency and minimal exposure to local customs, rendering media an indispensable tool for daily navigation. However, their media practices remain insufficiently explored as they oscillate between assimilationist demands and the need for cultural continuity, particularly when these practices intersect with power asymmetries embedded

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within state policies, patriarchal norms, and the governance of digital platforms.

This gap is notable given the growing scholarly focus on migration and digital media. Existing studies highlight how transnational migrants use media to maintain homeland ties and facilitate integration ([Harpaz & Mateos, 2019](#)), while others document how migrant women deploy subtle tactics, what Scott ([1990](#)) terms “hidden transcripts”, to resist familial control ([Shen, 2008](#); [Wang, 2001](#)). However, these works often adopt an instrumental lens, neglecting the contradictory ways media simultaneously empower and constrain, or fail to account for the unique geopolitical and cultural dynamics of Sino-Vietnamese marriage migration. Moreover, existing research on cross-border marriage primarily centers on economic motivations and legal precarities ([Kim & Kilkey, 2018](#)), sidelining the role of media in shaping everyday experiences of belonging.

This paper addresses this gap by investigating how Vietnamese brides in rural China engage with media amid structural constraint. We introduce the twin concepts of strategic and affective media engagement to analyze their responses to “double stigmatization”: they are racialized as cultural outsiders in China while being framed as “traitors” or “materialists” in Vietnamese public discourse ([Chiu & Yeoh, 2021](#)). Drawing on Giddens’ structuration theory and a critical media engagement perspective, we examine how media practices both reproduce and resist power asymmetries, and how these women navigate the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation.

This study focuses on Daxin County for two key reasons. First, the region’s high concentration of Vietnamese brides (accounting for approximately 15% of local marriages) and long-standing cross-border ties provide a rich context for exploring media’s role in adaptation. Second, the coexistence of traditional kinship networks and digital platforms in the region allows for analysis of how old and new communication infrastructures intersect to shape migrant experiences. Through a year-long ethnography involving 12 in-depth interviews and participatory observation, we pose three core research questions:

- RQ1.** How do Vietnamese brides engage with media strategically to secure social resources, legal recognition, and cultural legitimacy in China?
- RQ2.** In what ways do affective attachments to Vietnam shape their digital practices, and how do these practices negotiate domestic and transnational power dynamics?
- RQ3.** What patterns of media engagement emerge from these negotiations, and how do they reflect the tension between agency and structural constraint?

By centering the voices of Vietnamese brides, this research contributes to debates on media, migration, and identity, while challenging Western-centric models of transnational media use. It also offers insights for policymakers seeking to

support marriage migrants in an era of digital connectivity and globalized intimacy.

Literature Review

Media, migration, and the paradox of agency

Research on migration and digital media has long emphasized a dual role: media as a tool for maintaining transnational ties and as a resource for host-society integration ([Harpaz & Mateos, 2019](#)). For migrant women, in particular, digital platforms offer spaces to alleviate homesickness, sustain familial bonds, and mitigate the uncertainty of new environments ([Fortier, 2017](#)). However, these practices are not without contradiction. State-led initiatives, such as adaptation classes for foreign brides, often position media as disciplinary instruments, framing digital literacy as a means to assimilate migrant women into normative roles as “dutiful wives” and “modern citizens” ([Sara Liao, 2019](#)).

This paradox reflects broader tensions in scholarship on migrant agency. On one hand, scholars highlight how migrant women use media to exercise tactical resistance: forming secret networks to share grievances, curating online personas to counter stereotypes, and leveraging digital tools to access labor rights ([Scott, 1990](#); [Dymess & Sepúlveda, 2020](#)). On the other hand, critical scholars point out that media platforms themselves are embedded with power structures, including algorithmic bias, linguistic hierarchies and geopolitical constraints, which exacerbate marginalization. ([van Dijck, 2013](#)). For example, Chinese platforms like WeChat and Douyin prioritize Mandarin content and national narratives, while accessing Vietnamese platforms like Zalo often requires VPNs, imposing additional digital labor on migrants ([Nguyen et al., 2023](#)).

These dynamics are amplified in the context of cross-border marriage migration in Asia, where citizenship regimes rooted in *jus sanguinis* and patriarchal family structures place migrant women in legally ambiguous positions ([Chiu & Yeoh, 2023](#)). Existing studies on Vietnamese brides in Taiwan and South Korea document how media use becomes a site of negotiation: women may use local platforms to comply with familial expectations while clandestinely accessing homeland media to preserve cultural identity. Yet, these works rarely explore the interplay of infrastructural, algorithmic, and patriarchal power in shaping media practices—a gap this study addresses.

Double stigmatization and the politics of belonging

Cross-border marriage migrants face a unique form of “double stigmatization” that shapes their media engagement. In host societies, they are often racialized as cultural outsiders, with their loyalty and cultural competence questioned ([Kim & Kilkey, 2018](#)). In home societies, they may be stigmatized as “abandoning” their culture for economic gain, framed as threats to national identity. This dual othering is compounded by the commercialized nature of cross-border matchmaking, which reduces their agency to transactional choices and reinforces stereotypes of passivity.

Scholars have noted how migrant women navigate this double bind through identity work, but few have linked this to media practice. Fortier (2017) argues that affective attachments to homeland media constitute a form of “affective citizenship,” allowing migrants to maintain a sense of belonging amid displacement. Harpaz and Mateos (2019) complement this with the concept of “strategic citizenship,” where migrants leverage media to accumulate cultural capital and secure social acceptance. Our twin concepts of strategic and affective media engagement build on these insights, framing them as overlapping, dynamic practices that respond to intersecting hierarchies of citizenship, cultural prestige, and familial authority.

De-westernizing the study of transnational media use

Existing research on migrant media use is predominantly rooted in Western contexts, where liberal citizenship regimes and open digital infrastructures shape engagement patterns (Harpaz & Mateos, 2019). In non-Western contexts, however, state control over digital platforms, patriarchal family structures, and economic disparities produce distinct dynamics. For example, in Latin America, scholars have documented how market-driven media initiatives frame women’s empowerment through consumption, while neglecting structural inequality (Verónica Schild, 2015). In Asia, studies on soap operas and social media suggest that media are often mobilized to reinforce national identity and gender norms, rather than challenge them.

This study contributes to de-Westernizing the field by focusing on Sino-Vietnamese marriage migration, a context where state power, platform governance, and patriarchal norms intersect in unique ways. By examining how Vietnamese brides navigate survival within China’s digital ecosystem, we offer fresh insights into the constraints and possibilities of digital agency within constrained environments.

Study Context and Methodological Approach

Research site: Daxin county, Guangxi

Daxin County, located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, is a key site for Sino-Vietnamese cross-border marriages, shaped by its geographic proximity to Vietnam, regional economic disparities, and informal kinship networks. Over the past decade, local government records indicate that approximately 15% of marital unions in the county involve Vietnamese brides, with numbers rising due to intensified cross-border economic ties. Marriages are typically arranged through informal matchmakers, former Vietnamese immigrants or local relatives, characterized by rapid matchmaking with minimal pre-marital interaction. Most brides arrive with limited Mandarin proficiency and little exposure to local customs, making media central to their daily adaptation.

Data collection

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach, grounded in twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork (June 2023–May 2024). Data sources include in-depth interviews with 12 Vietnamese brides and participatory observation in community spaces, households, and online environments. Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure heterogeneity across age (19–50 years), duration of residence (under 5 years to over 20 years), educational background (primary to university level), and socioeconomic status (Table 1). All participants resided in Daxin County and had entered marriages with Chinese men through either broker-facilitated or kinship-mediated arrangements.

Semi-structured interviews (60–120 minutes) were conducted in Mandarin or Vietnamese with bilingual interpreters, focusing on daily media routines, platform preferences (WeChat, Douyin, Zalo, etc.), communication patterns with Vietnamese and Chinese networks, and experiences of inclusion/exclusion. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software, with iterative coding to identify themes related to media agency, structural constraint, and affective practice. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality, and location details were generalized.

Participatory observation complemented interview data: the research team accompanied participants to community events, household gatherings, and online interactions, documenting how media use intersects with daily life. This approach fostered “situated empathy” (Chiu, Yeoh, 2023), centering participants as experts in their lived experiences while critically engaging with structural forces.

Data analysis

Analysis drew on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) to explore how media practices are shaped by—and reshape—social structures (gender norms, immigration policies, platform algorithms). We also employed comparative thematic analysis (Charmaz, 2006) to identify patterns of media engagement across participants, contrasting interview data with observational field notes to triangulate findings. Special attention was paid to how participants navigated platform-specific features (e.g., WeChat groups, Douyin algorithms) and technical barriers (e.g., VPN use for Vietnamese platforms), and how these practices reflected negotiations of power (Table 1).

Findings: Navigating Double Stigmatization Through Media

Strategic media engagement: Calculative assimilation and symbolic capital

Strategic media engagement emerged as a core practice for securing social acceptance and resources, reflecting what we term “calculative agency”, defined as deliberate efforts to accumulate cultural and social capital through digital tools. For linguistic acquisition, participants leveraged Douyin as a “self-directed language laboratory,” focusing on colloquial speech rather than formal Mandarin. XLY (29), a secondary

Table 1 | Key Demographic Information of In-Depth Interviewees

No.	Code	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Years in China
1	PSY	43	Primary	Farming	Over 10 years
2	ZQQ	48	Junior High	Farming	Over 10 years
3	HYY	34	Primary	Office Worker	Over 10 years
4	LKS	21	Junior secondary	Freelancer	Under 5 years
5	NTT	50	Primary	Farming	Over 10 years
6	NM	38	Primary	Office worker	Under 10 years
7	ZZW	39	Primary	Farming	Over 10 years
8	XLY	29	Secondary school	Civil servant	Over 10 years
9	ZK	28	Primary	Freelancer	Less 10 years
10	CXF	19	High school	Dropped out	Less 5 years
11	RZL	27	High school	Office worker	Less 10 years
12	XJY	50	Primary	Farming	Over 20 years

school graduate, explained: “I watch short videos of Chinese families cooking, chatting, even arguing. I repeat the phrases and practice the tones. It’s like having a window into how people really talk, not just textbook language.” This aligns with Nguyen’s (2023) concept of “linguistic shadowing,” a tactic to reduce accent bias and integrate into local discourse.

Participants also curated social media personas to counter stereotypes of “perpetual foreigners,” engaging in “performative assimilation” (Scott, 1990) as a means to present themselves as dutiful wives and community members. HYY (34), a mother of two, joined seven local WeChat parenting groups to learn Chinese child-rearing norms and demonstrate commitment to “raising children the Chinese way.” XLH (29) described curating her WeChat Moments to “only share photos of me cooking Chinese dishes, helping my husband in the fields, or celebrating Chinese festivals—never anything about missing Vietnam.” This self-censorship was a strategic choice to deflect suspicion and assert belonging, particularly among in-laws and neighbors.

Notably, strategic engagement correlated with length of residence: women living in China for over a decade (e.g., XJY, 50) were more likely to prioritize Chinese platforms, viewing media as a tool for socioeconomic advancement. XJY, who had resided in China for 20 years, stated: “I only use Chinese apps now—WeChat for neighbors, Douyin for recipes, Meituan for shopping. To be part of this community, you have to think and act Chinese, even online.” Yet, this assimilation came at a psychological cost: several participants reported “affective dissonance”—the strain of suppressing cultural attachments to maintain a strategic facade. One woman confessed: “Sometimes I feel like I’m erasing myself to be accepted. But what choice do I have? My children’s future is here.”

Affective media engagement: Emotional lifelines and transnational bonds

In contrast, affective media engagement centered on preserving cultural identity and emotional connection to Vietnam, functioning as “emotional lifelines” amid displacement. All participants used Zalo or Facebook (via VPN) to maintain daily contact with family, while consuming Vietnamese dramas, music, and vlogs to sustain cultural continuity. For newer arrivals like CXF (19), who struggled with intense homesick-

ness, this was non-negotiable: “I spend hours every day watching Vietnamese variety shows on YouTube and talking to my family via Zalo. It’s the only thing that keeps me from feeling completely lost.”

These practices created “affective sanctuaries”, digital spaces where participants could escape Hochschild’s (1983) “emotional labor” and express their authentic selves. NM (38), who lived in a mountainous village, shared: “At night, I watch Vietnamese dramas and cry without judgment. It’s my secret therapy.” However, such engagement often sparked domestic conflict, as husbands and in-laws interpreted frequent Vietnam-focused media use as “disloyalty” or “failure to adapt.” CXF (19) recounted how her husband monitored her Zalo messages, forcing her to use coded language and delete chat histories. This reflects how media use becomes a site of negotiation over belonging, with transnational ties policed as threats to familial authority (Shen, 2008).

Affective engagement also required technical workarounds: participants developed “digital border-crossing skills,” using multiple VPNs to access geographically restricted content and switching between Chinese and Vietnamese platforms. One woman explained: “I use one VPN for Facebook, another for Zalo, then switch to WeChat for daily life. It’s exhausting, but necessary to stay connected to who I am.” This digital labor underscored the emotional and technical burdens of maintaining transnational identity in a constrained media environment.

Resistant appropriation: Media as tools of collective agency

Beyond assimilation and emotional solace, participants employed “resistant appropriation”, a practice of adapting Chinese platforms to challenge marginalization and build community. Drawing on Scott’s (1990) “hidden transcripts,” women formed private WeChat groups with fellow Vietnamese brides to share grievances and strategies. ZZW (39) organized a clandestine network to address underpayment in local farms: “We use WeChat to share job information and negotiate wages together—alone, we have no power, but as a group, we can push back.”

Others used Douyin to subvert stereotypes, posting videos of themselves succeeding in local businesses to refute narra-

tives of passivity. RZL (27), who ran a small grocery store, explained: “I post videos of myself managing the store, talking to customers in Mandarin. It shows I’m not just a ‘Vietnamese bride’—I’m a business owner.” These practices created “third spaces” (Bhabha, 1994), hybrid digital environments where participants blended Vietnamese and Chinese cultural elements to craft new forms of identity. One woman described teaching Chinese neighbors Vietnamese recipes via WeChat while sharing Chinese parenting tips with Vietnamese friends, creating a “digital kinship” network (Dymess & Sepúlveda, 2020) that transcended national boundaries.

Yet, resistant practices operated within strict limits. Participants self-censored to avoid retaliation, keeping groups small and private. ZZW warned: “We have to be careful—if our groups get too visible, people might complain to the village committee. We’re like a digital family, but we can’t let anyone outside in.” This caution reflects the structural constraints of their environment, where even subtle resistance carries risks of social sanction or familial conflict.

Power geometries in digital space: Infrastructural, algorithmic, and patriarchal control

Vietnamese brides’ media practices are embedded in what Massey (1994) terms “power geometries”—overlapping systems of state, platform, and familial power that shape digital engagement. Three interconnected dimensions of power emerged from our analysis, highlighting the paradox of media as both enabling and constraining.

First, infrastructural power manifested in digital inequality: brides from low-income households relied on outdated smartphones and limited data plans, restricting access to video calls and data-intensive content. Those in remote villages faced erratic internet service, exacerbating isolation. NM (38) noted, “When the weather is bad, the internet disappears. I can’t even send a simple message to my family, let alone see their faces.” This “algorithmic violence” (Hanping Feng) reproduces socioeconomic marginalization, limiting participants’ ability to accumulate “digital capital” (Bourdieu)—the skills and resources needed for full digital participation.

Second, algorithmic power shaped content access through platform biases. Chinese platforms like WeChat and Douyin prioritize Mandarin content and national narratives, creating “algorithmic enclosure,” a filtered reality that marginalizes transnational identities. RZL (27) expressed frustration: “Even when I follow Vietnamese accounts, the platform shows me mostly Chinese content. It’s like it wants me to forget where I came from.” This discursive exclusion (van Dijk) devalues Vietnamese linguistic capital, enforcing symbolic violence (Bourdieu) by framing Chinese culture as dominant.

Third, patriarchal power regulated media use within households, operating through subtle social pressure rather than overt censorship. Participants engaged in “anticipatory compliance”—modifying behavior to avoid conflict. ZQQ (48) explained: “I only call my family when my husband is at work and my mother-in-law is napping. No questions, no suspicious looks.” This internalization of disciplinary gazes (Gillian Rose) reflects the “patriarchal bargain” (feminist scholars), a dy-

namic where women negotiate within gendered hierarchies and sometimes reinforce them through adaptive strategies.

Together, these power structures create “double power geometries,” a layered system where global digital infrastructures, national platform policies, and intimate family dynamics intersect to shape contradictory media experiences. Participants’ “calibrated navigation” of this terrain—balancing strategic assimilation, affective preservation, and resistant appropriation—reflects their agency within constraint.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examines how Vietnamese brides in China navigate cross-cultural adaptation through media, revealing a complex interplay of agency and structural constraint. The three identified patterns of media engagement, namely strategic integration, affective preservation, and resistant appropriation, illustrate that digital tools are neither inherently empowering nor constraining; instead, they serve as contested terrains for negotiating belonging.

Theoretically, this research contributes to two key debates. First, it extends scholarship on migration and media by developing the twin concepts of strategic and affective engagement, moving beyond instrumentalist frameworks to capture the emotional and political dimensions of digital practice. By framing media use within power geometries of citizenship, culture, and patriarchy, we highlight how marginalized groups navigate contradictory demands in constrained environments. Second, it advances de-Westernization efforts by centering Sino-Vietnamese marriage migration, offering a non-Western case that challenges assumptions about digital agency rooted in liberal democratic contexts. Unlike Western migrants, who may use media to claim citizenship rights, Vietnamese brides deploy media as a “safe” form of resistance—low-risk, clandestine, and adaptive to state and familial control.

Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers and support organizations. Digital literacy programs should acknowledge both strategic and affective needs, teaching technical skills while validating cultural continuity. Platform designers could incorporate multilingual features and reduce algorithmic bias to accommodate transnational lives. Community initiatives—such as peer mentorship networks led by long-resident brides—could foster safe spaces for sharing media strategies and addressing discrimination.

Limitations of this study include its focus on one county, limiting generalizability, and its emphasis on brides’ experiences (excluding husbands’ and in-laws’ perspectives). Future research could explore regional variations, track media practices over time, and examine how commercial marriage intermediaries shape digital expectations. Longitudinal studies would also illuminate how media use evolves with residency duration and generational shifts.

The metaphor of “falling leaves, unrooted lives” captures the duality of these women’s experiences: media allows them to “put down roots” in China through strategic engagement while remaining “tethered” to Vietnam via affective practice. Their precise, adept, invisible and enduring navigation

demonstrates their capacity for autonomous action amid global inequality, national regulation and intimate geopolitics. In the end, their media practices reveal a profound truth: belonging is not a fixed state, but an ongoing negotiation, one click, one video, one secret chat at a time.

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